



2 Strategies to Help ELs Increase Reading Comprehension

by [Thu H. Tran](#)

Language learning can be fun and motivating when learners can understand what they hear and read. However, it can also be annoying or frustrating when learners have to struggle to make sense of the input. Listening and reading are two primary sources of information for students to improve their language skills. As a language teacher, how many times have you found that your students were not able to fully or correctly understand the reading passage they just read?

Although we know there is no magic method of helping learners to drastically and instantly increase their reading comprehension ability, we are always looking for ways to help our students comprehend what they read better and more accurately. I personally have used different kinds of reading textbooks and a variety of activities in reading classes—and here is what I’ve learned: The key to helping students better understand what they read is using activities that enable them to interact with the target text in ways that give them a better understanding.

Grabe (2009) listed eight strategies that have been found to be effective in helping students to better understand reading passages. In this article, I focus on discussing only two of the strategies: Using graphic organizers and identifying structures of reading texts. For each strategy, I provide viable activities that can be used to help students gain a deeper comprehension of reading passages.

1. Using Graphic Organizers

One strategy to assist students in making sense of what they read is providing them with opportunities to use graphic organizers to convey the ideas presented in the text. In addition to using words to convey ideas, students can use graphics (diagrams, pictures, or charts) to convey them.

Why It Works

The revised Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) suggested using interpretation as an activity to help students increase comprehension of knowledge. Asking students to transfer the ideas conveyed in written prose into a graphic organizer is similar to interpreting: Instead of

translating from one language into another language, converting ideas in a written text into a graphic organizer is interpreting ideas from one method of information presentation to another.

Because most people receive visual information better, giving students opportunities to examine the text, find out the main ideas, and present them in a graphic organizer is enabling them to understand the text at a deeper level. Like developing a summary, students have to pay close attention to the content of the text to ensure that they have a thorough understanding prior to presenting the information in a graphic organizer. Graphic organizers also foster student creativity via visual data presentation and organization; conveying textual information is akin to creating art, because one piece of written prose can be presented in various forms:

- a chart, such as pie, line, bar, or flow chart
- a simple diagram with lines to illustrate the relationship of ideas
- pictures with captions to give further information

If you're just starting out with graphic organizers, give students a variety of ways one sample text can be presented using graphic organizers. When students have become familiar and more confident with graphic organizers, they can create their own.

Classroom Activity

Give students a passage describing [the three components of persuasion as indicated by Aristotle](#) (though any passage that provides varied information will work). Have them read the passage very carefully, and explain that they will use a graphic organizer of their own preference to convey the information provided in the passage.

Instead of asking students comprehension questions to determine if and how much they understand the passage, this activity ensures a deeper understanding of the text, because they must understand it clearly prior to attempting to convey it in a visual manner.

The end product of each student will vary. One may use a picture with a caption to illustrate each of the three components of persuasion. Another may include main ideas of each component in one of three simple circles. Students may also use a pie chart divided into three sections presenting each of the three components of persuasion they have read in the passage, briefly describing important information regarding each component of persuasion inside each section within the chart. The ways of presenting the information can be as varied as your number of students. See an example in Figure 1.

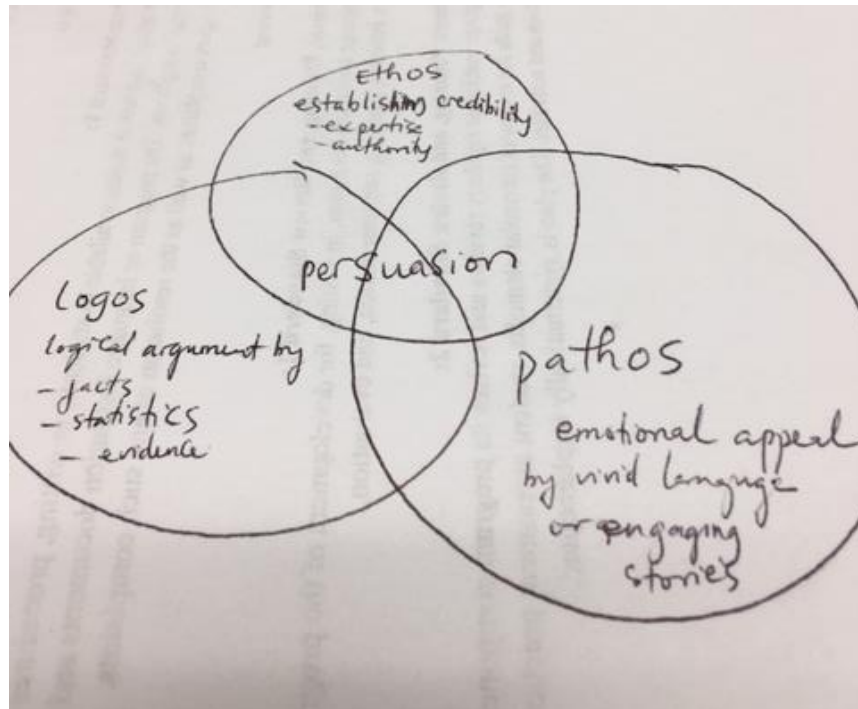


Figure 1. Venn diagram example.

2. Identifying Text Structures

Another strategy to enable students to better understand a reading passage is to have them identify the structure of the text. There are several common text structures used in academic writing:

- *Chronological sequence*: Text is organized in the order in which events take place.
- *Problem-solution*: Problems are presented before solutions are offered.
- *Cause-effect*: The cause and the effects of an issue are discussed.
- *Comparison-contrast*: Similarities and differences of something are pointed out.
- *Description*: A topic or thing is described in detail.

You can learn more about each structure on the [National Education Association website](#). To make recognizing text structures easier for students in the initial stage, introduce these common text structures. Provide them with examples of each pattern of textual organization so that they have some concrete examples to rely on. In learning this strategy (and the various possible text structures), students will have at their disposal a variety of ways to present written information, and this awareness will be of tremendous help to learners when they write.

Why It Works

When you instruct students to identify the structure of a text, they must examine the text closely to identify all sorts of information they might otherwise gloss over:

- main ideas

- supporting details
- the way (and order) main ideas and supporting details are presented
- organizational patterns
- author's tone or voice

Through this close examination, they'll have to understand the text in order to identify the organization of it.

When students practice this strategy frequently, they are gradually trained to more easily and quickly understand the organization of text and recognize the target text structure. This strategy can be beneficial for students both in reading and writing. You can provide lower level students with a frame of the structure to fill out. (See ereadingworksheets.com for a great worksheet with text structure frames.) As students get more comfortable and familiar with the strategy, they can develop their own ways to show the text structure.

Classroom Activities

Finding Signal Words

One activity to give students a good sense of text structures is to locate and highlight signal words that may provide readers with the relationship of the adjacent paragraphs, such as the following:

- *first, second, and third* (sequence)
- *because of, as a result of, or therefore* (cause/effect)
- *contrary to, in contrast, unlike, or however* (comparison/contrast)
- *in particular, specifically, for instance, or as an example* (description)

It is also useful for students to pay attention to titles, section headers, and subheaders if they are available. After they highlight the signal words and section headers in a particular text, have them decide what text structure is in use; if there is disagreement among students, have them debate on who is right and why.

Margin Notes

Another activity is to have students write brief notes related to text structure on the left side of the text as they read individually. For example, when asked to read an article about proposals to eliminate all student loan debt in the United States, students should be able to identify the introduction, where the topic of student loan debt forgiveness is stated, as well as the paragraphs where specific proposals and their advantages and disadvantages are discussed. After they've made their margin notes, ask students to compare the structure they've identified and discuss with a partner to see if they agree or disagree.

SQ3R

SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, and review) can be useful steps for students to follow in their attempt to identify a text structure. (Learn more about SQ3R on this [Virginia Tech website](#).)

Survey. Prior to reading the target text, students can survey the text by skimming it to locate the title or section headers to get an overall preview.

Question. As they survey the text, students are encouraged to formulate questions about the text they are about to read.

Read. As students read the text, they need to actively engage with it by concentrating on the message conveyed in the text. After each section, students can pause to ensure they comprehend the ideas conveyed.

Recite. To help students fully emerge in the reading process, they can recite what they've read by quickly rereading the whole text, or a section if necessary, to gain a better understanding of what has been read. Reciting is an active approach to processing information obtained since the beginning of the text by looking back to ensure that they are able to comprehend and recall the information.

Review. Finally, after reading the text, students can mentally visualize what they read. Reviewing includes quickly reading the text again to gain a big picture of the text and identify the structure in which the text is organized.

Tying It All Together

All three of these strategies can be used individually or in tandem to help students obtain a more thorough understanding of passages they read. For instance, you can provide students with various patterns of text organization and then ask them to match the passages with patterns.

An excellent website that provides worksheets for students and teachers to work on text structure and text organizational patterns is [E Reading Worksheets](#). The worksheets, designed for varying grade levels, are available free of charge, and they can be used as tools for students to understand reading passages via activities to identify text structures and use graphic organizers.

When students understand what they read well, they are more likely to enjoy reading—and language learning can gradually become more pleasurable.

References

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