

Why Doesn't It Make Sense?

Comprehension is a complex, problem-solving process

(A successful) ... reader can read a variety of materials with ease and interest, can read for varying purposes, and can read with comprehension even when the material is neither easy to understand nor intrinsically interesting ... Proficient readers ... are capable of acquiring new knowledge and understanding new concepts, are capable of applying textual information appropriately and are capable of being engaged in the reading process and reflecting on what is being read.

(p. xiii, RAND Report, commissioned by the US Department of Education)

Comprehension lies in what learners say, what is read to them, and what they read and write; learners should know that all literacy acts involve comprehension".

(Clay, 1998, By Different Paths to Common Outcomes, p. 217)

A strategic reader coordinates a set of strategies flexibly and changes the way the strategies are applied when necessary.

Throughout the reading world there is widespread agreement that the development of comprehension is the goal of teaching of reading – there is however little consistency of practice in schools nor agreement as to what constitutes effective teaching of comprehension. One of the challenges is that comprehension and comprehension instruction typically have been studied separately (Pressley 2000). Just as we advocate for balance in literacy instruction there needs to be balance in the teaching of comprehension.

Thirty years ago Durkin's (1978) research caught the attention of the educational community when she found that in upper elementary classrooms in the United States comprehension was not being taught. What was happening under the name of comprehension instruction was a "read and quiz" type approach with questions focusing on literal interpretation. Teachers were not teaching students strategies to use while reading to deepen comprehension. For the last 10 years adolescent literacy has been a "hot topic," both educationally and politically. Once again the focus was on comprehension as the concern grew over the numbers of students graduating high school without the literacy skills to cope in the world beyond school. The Common Core State Standards attempt to address this with the emphasis on students comprehending increasingly complex texts. The standards alone will have little impact unless we accept that what we

are currently doing in the name of comprehension teaching is not sufficient for the future and accept that we need to teach in profoundly different ways.

Learning to comprehend is a long-term developmental process beginning early in life. Comprehending is more than something we do when we read - students have been making sense of their world from a very early age. It is what children do when talking with someone, listening to someone reading aloud or watching television. Comprehension is not something that occurs once a student has learned to decode. All teachers should expect that even beginning readers will understand what they are reading. When we think about literacy learning as a social process, we are talking about children constructing meaning within social interactions - this begins at birth and continues through life.

Reading Comprehension Is a Problem Solving Process

Comprehension is the ability to understand, reflect on, and learn from text; it is the reason for reading. If readers can identify the words but do not understand what they are reading, they have not achieved the goal of reading comprehension.

When readers comprehend, they connect, integrate, interpret, critique, infer, analyze, and evaluate ideas in texts.

Comprehension is striving to process text beyond word-level to get to the big

Comprehension strategies are specific, learned procedures that foster active, competent, self-regulated, and intentional reading. Classroom teachers implement comprehension strategy instruction by demonstrating, modeling, or guiding their use during reading the text.

*Trabasso and Bouchard, 2002
quoted in Block and Pressley 2002
page 177*

Somewhere along the way we confused comprehension with question answering.

Allington and Weber 1993

picture. It involves negotiating the layers of meaning not only in the readers' heads but in the mind of the author in order to "create" meaning from, and reach a deeper level of understanding of, texts.

The ease with which fluent readers make meaning belies the complex process that is taking place. Proficient readers have a range of comprehension strategies they use in an integrated way, yet are able to deliberately apply specific strategies to deepen their comprehension, particularly when reading challenging texts (Pressley 2002).

Key Comprehension Strategies

While there are six main comprehension strategies it is not intended that these be taught or used singly. For example, good readers do not rely on prediction alone to help them understand a text; they use multiple strategies. The use of any particular strategy, or strategies, depends on context and situation.

Predicting

Fluent readers use relevant prior knowledge to predict when reading, forming hypotheses about what might occur next. When reading, they bring knowledge from life experiences and knowledge about the text, and form predictions. This is an ongoing process of predicting, conforming or adjusting predictions as they read.

Questioning

Proficient readers actively and strategically engage with texts by asking questions to:

- Focus their reading
- Delve more deeply into the text
- Clarify meaning and
- Critically reflect on what they have read

It is through asking meaningful questions that readers learn to monitor their comprehension. Proficient readers recognize when they are losing meaning, whether it be at the word, sentence, or text level, and are able to ask questions about what strategies they need to use to help them comprehend (Block and Pressley 2003).

Young readers need explicit instruction in developing questioning strategies to both actively construct meaning and to monitor their comprehension. Equally important is the need for them to be shown the types of questions that will help with comprehension in each discipline area.

Think Aloud

There is a large body of research to support thinking aloud as a key comprehension strategy. Simply put, it is when readers recognize and talk out loud through the process that is occurring in their head (metacognition), as they read. Readers who think meta-cognitively can monitor their own thinking processes, adjust their thinking to achieve clearer comprehension, and use that adjustment for any future refinement in making meaning as they read.

Think-aloud has been shown to improve students' comprehension both when students engage in the practice during reading and also when teachers routinely use Think-aloud while reading to students (Duke and Pearson, 2002).

Using Text Structures and Features

Text structure is the organization or framework of the text and the text features are the elements of the writing that accompany each text type, such as the language (tense, vocabulary, participants, signal words for time and order) and the type of supports, such as the artwork (illustrations, photographs, diagrams, graphs), and aids to organization or language (contents, index, headings, glossary, references).

Texts become easier to comprehend when readers know the structural shape of a text. There is evidence that suggests that readers who attend to the structure of texts learn more about the content even while attending to the structure. They are able to identify the features of each text type and therefore predict how to read more effectively (Duke & Pearson 2002).

Visualizing

Using visualizing techniques involves readers engaging directly with text to envisage, imagine and 'see' in the mind's eye images from that text. The research on

imagery and reading comprehension is based on the theory that mental imagery is a knowledge representation system that readers can use in organizing, integrating, and retrieving information from written text. It activates the use of all the senses: seeing, feeling, smelling, touching and tasting.

Visual representation involves using graphic organizers and other visual displays to represent the text, to communicate information and to show relationships beyond the use of words. Teaching students to use systematic visual graphs in order to organize ideas will benefit readers in improving comprehension.

Summarizing

When summarizing, readers reduce a text to its bare essentials by understanding and putting what they have read into their own words. We summarize constantly as we read, sorting out significant ideas and events and other bits and pieces of information. Summarizing provides a shortened version of another's text that includes all of the main points of the original, but reduces the detail of the original text by pulling it back to its essence.

Summarizing is not an easy thing to do. It is one of the hardest strategies for students to grasp and therefore one of the hardest strategies to teach.

Balanced Comprehension Instruction

While we have been advocating for a balanced approach to teaching reading for over forty years, we have only recently begun to suggest comprehension instruction should also be *balanced*. By this we mean that good comprehension instruction includes both explicit instruction in specific comprehension strategies and the provision of ample time and opportunity for reading, writing, and discussion of text. Successful learning and teaching of comprehension involves a shift in responsibility from teacher to student

with new learning introduced in the most supportive setting. In a balanced program there will be a range of instructional practices offering students varying degrees of teacher support. Effective teachers of comprehension:

- Routinely and explicitly demonstrate how proficient readers make meaning of texts

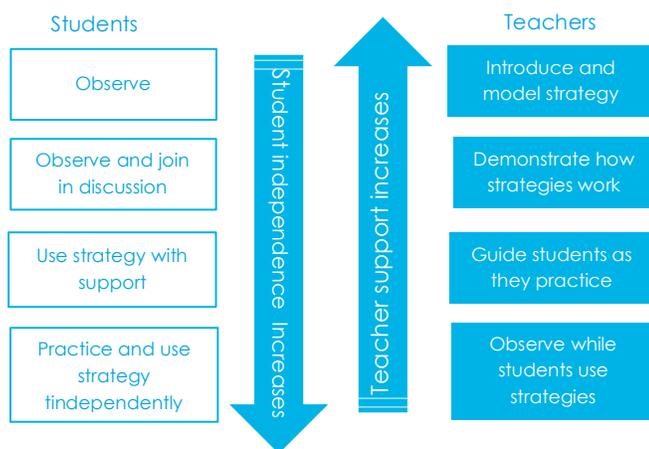
Readers need support in moving from individual strategies to discussions of text and combined strategies or comprehension routines. These routines are an integrated set of strategies or practices that can be applied regularly to any text. Reciprocal reading is an example of such a routine.

A Supportive Classroom Context

It is not enough just to offer good instruction. The learning environment needs to be supportive and encourage risk taking. In a classroom that supports comprehension learning students will:

- Help students develop a language for talking about comprehension. Students and teachers need a shared language to talk about the types of thinking associated with classroom tasks and about literacy strategies and thinking strategies.
- Provide purposeful and engaging opportunities where students tackle more complex texts. Engaged readers work on unlocking the text; they find strategies to help them read it because they want to understand it. Help students understand that arriving at insights is worth the struggle.

A Gradual Release of Responsibility



- Demonstrate how strategies work in shared reading
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss texts, and develop appropriate language for meaningful talk
- Support or guide students as they practice strategies demonstrated
- Provide daily opportunities for students to independently practice strategies in authentic contexts
- Encourage students to self-reflect and goal set

While it may be necessary to introduce the strategies individually, teachers need to keep in mind that strategic readers coordinate a set of strategies flexibly and change the way the strategies are applied when necessary. When introducing specific strategies, other strategies should also be referenced, modeled, and encouraged throughout the process.

- Provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively on reading complex texts. Small group guided or close readings give students opportunities to negotiate meaning, defend their opinions and support these with textual evidence. Comprehension routines such as reciprocal teaching provide frameworks in which students apply and discuss the comprehension strategies as they read and comprehend challenging texts
- Establish a purpose for reading to help students understand that texts are constructed for a range of intentions and situations. Without a clear purpose for reading, students' interactions with a text may be unfocused and

Strategy teaching becomes meaningless if it results in the whole class putting little stickies through their books in places where they visualized or made an inference or a connection but with no idea why they have done this, or how the strategies can help them read better. Strategies can't be taught in isolation: when we read, we are integrating many at once. Older kids really need support to do this.

–Literacy Consultant New York 2002

- haphazard. Students need a clear idea of why they are reading; what information they need to find; where, in the text, they are likely to find this information; and what they will do with the information when they find it.
- Have students keep learning logs where they track their use of comprehension strategies.

The Role of Text-Based Discussions

Purposeful dialogue (variously called exploratory talk, conversation, or discourse), both between teacher and student and the student and other students, is important in deepening comprehension. In small group interactions this occurs as the group works with the teacher (a “more expert other”) and as they explore deeper meanings in texts and share interpretations and responses. Focused discussion in reciprocal reading, for example, including the sensitive use of questioning and prompting, will enhance comprehension and critical awareness. Talking about strategies and about what they do as readers builds learners’ metacognitive awareness and their ability to self-regulate (Dowhower, 1999; Clay, 1998; Spiegel, 1998; Braunger and Lewis, 1998; Tierney, 1998; Cazden, 2001; Cambourne, 2000; Allington and Johnston, 2002; Allington, 2002; Learning Media, 1996).

The comprehension strategies that students are using need to be assessed and monitored throughout the year. It is important to know what level and types of text they can read with understanding and what strategies they are using to make meaning. In Middle and High schools it is not just the ELA teacher who needs to monitor students’ comprehension, content area teachers need to know if their students are able to “independently read with comprehension” the texts used in their courses. A student who easily

comprehends the texts used in ELA may struggle with texts in Science or History. The teacher needs to gather and record evidence from a range of sources to establish whether the student is effectively using comprehension strategies to deepen their comprehension of texts. When teachers assign reading they need to know whether students:

- Modify and/or broaden their thinking because of the text;
- Adjust how they are thinking about the content based on the type of text.

Teachers build valuable knowledge of their students’ comprehension through observation, interviews and conversations. They do this by:

- Gathering information about the students’ comprehension of texts and discussing this with the student
- Clarifying the strategies students are using and ensuring the student is becoming aware of how to control these in a flexible way
- Identifying and discussing problems or obstacles to comprehension that the teacher may not have been aware of
- Providing specific and personal feedback
- Agreeing on goals for further learning.

Conferences, interviews and conversations can be held with individual students or with small groups. They are more effective when the focus is on an agreed goal.

Conferring with students as they are engaged in reading challenging texts provides the most useful information on students’ comprehension and the strategies they are using. During conferences teachers prompt, or question students while they are reading to

ascertain whether they are transferring their knowledge and skills and applying them in new contexts to improve or deepen their comprehension as they read, respond to, and think critically about texts.

Conclusion

The volume of print and range of text types that students will be asked to read across the disciplines as they move through school, requires them to be skillful and critical readers. Accurate decoding and a literal understanding, while important, will not be adequate for today’s literacy demands. To help our students successfully meet the challenges of their world, we want them to confidently engage with and think critically about the texts they interact with. Students need to have a range of comprehension strategies they can apply confidently and flexibly to a diverse range of texts.

Learners who struggle with comprehension possess inefficient strategies and use them inflexibly. They are usually unaware of what good comprehensive readers do and need to be shown how and when to apply a small repertoire of comprehension strategies. Providing students with explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can be an effective way to help them overcome difficulties in understanding texts (Graham & Bellert, 2004). The more explicit the comprehension strategy and self-regulatory instruction, the higher the likelihood that the learner will make significant gains in comprehension (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). As learners become more competent and confident of their comprehension, the less support they require from the teacher (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

For a long time now the focus has been on decoding and word recognition because that was believed to be the bottleneck in the meaning-making process (Pressley 2002). The focus now needs to shift to comprehension.

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