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Reading Comprehension

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Introduction

Reading comprehension is part of a rich and meaning-filled life. Without comprehension, the act of reading is a fruitless endeavor. Comprehension is frequently required for academic, social, and career success, as well as for personal satisfaction. Students need to be able to understand what they read to open the door to new ideas and concepts within any topic or discipline.

Yet, there are a variety of reasons that reading comprehension can be challenging. Without sufficient knowledge of the language structures and concepts, comprehension is limited. Difficulty with decoding and fluency can inhibit comprehension because the reader's energy has been spent on producing the phonemes associated with the symbols on the page so as to generate coherent words and sentences. When comprehension breaks down, adaptive readers apply strategies to shore up the meaning that they are making (e.g., rereading a portion of the text). Oftentimes, these strategies need to be explicitly taught to students who typically struggle to comprehend, including students with disabilities. This brief explores the meaning of reading comprehension as well as the need for explicit instruction and individually tailored approaches.

What It Is

Reading comprehension is a reader's interaction with ideas in a text and understanding of the world. It includes processes that use print, language, concepts, ideas, a reader's and others' knowledge, experiences, worldviews, and purposes to make meaning.

Fundamentally, **reading comprehension involves the text, the reader, and the context of reading** (Pearson & Cervetti, 2015). Each of these pieces plays an important role in the process: The text contains information that is used to make meaning, and the reader makes sense of the text by first constructing several alternative meanings of it and then determining which is most plausible, given their existing knowledge about the topic. This is what Kintsch (1998) calls the construction-integration model. In this way, the reader knowingly and unknowingly makes new connections and comparisons or asks questions about how the text fits or doesn't fit in his or her existing schema. The context shapes the extent to which ideas are considered, including the nature of the activity in which comprehension takes place (e.g., whether the reader talks with others about the text), the purposes for reading, or the extent to which a reader is encouraged to critically analyze a text in relation to his or her understanding of the social world.

Culture plays a central role in comprehension, not only with respect to the content or topic of the text, but also with respect to the ways in which language mediates our understanding of the social world. Culture be-

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comes especially important when we consider comprehension in schools as an activity embedded with complex systems of rules for engagement, ways of talking and knowing, and a community of learners whose knowledge is valued. The text should be a tool for making meaning and not just an object (Boelé, 2016; Engeström, 1991), as reading comprehension is the construction of meaning in a sense-making process. In this process, students use the text, along with their larger understandings of the content and of their worlds, as evidence to support their claims and engage in reasoned discussion with others.

What It Looks Like

Have you ever watched a toddler look through a picture book? Even at this early age, children begin to engage in reading comprehension processes as they make connections between their lives and the texts they encounter. When reading *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown, 2-year-old James would point out of the window to the moon and say, "Moon!" And, when outside at night, he would see the moon and say, "Goodnight, moon." John, at 18 months, would look through the pictures of a sign language book and imitate the babies who were making the signs. He also signed alongside his parents, who repeatedly used sign language when communicating with him, whether it was while reading the book or engaging in day-to-day activities in meaningful contexts (e.g., asking for "more"). This helped to reinforce John's understanding of the words and concepts presented in the book. Although these very young boys were not yet breaking the alphabetic code of symbols and words so as to comprehend what they read, they displayed some foundational principles of comprehension in creating meaning by linking their understanding of language and print to the world around them.

How we conceptualize something often depends upon how we measure it. This idea certainly rings true for reading comprehension. Typically, it is measured on tests by think-alouds, retells, and summaries, or in a question/answer format. Retells are usually longer than summaries and are not necessarily valid progress-monitoring measures (Reed & Vaughn, 2012). Think-alouds provide insights into students' thinking as they read. Summaries require students to identify importance; synthesize information; reduce lists to bigger, superordinate categorical words; and eliminate irrelevant information. Similarly, asking students to identify or state a main idea is often a way to know whether students comprehend what they read. Multiple-choice and short-answer questions can target literal and inferential comprehension processes.

There are other ways to make inferences about (i.e., to assess) a child's ability to comprehend a text beyond these. For example, students might read a video game manual and apply it to playing the game. Students might practice for a job interview with questions related to content they would likely encounter on the job. They might also read student government speeches at their school and then discuss what they believe their peers to be arguing, what they agree with, what they disagree with, and what they would add. Authentic assessments and performance tasks are helpful ways to consider more holistic and contextualized portraits of students as readers. Ultimately, reading comprehension not only looks like answering questions correctly or writing a perfectly synthesized summary, but also involves application and evaluation of the text. To really know "what it looks like," teachers need to consider multiple measures in a variety of formats (Klingner, 2004).

Teachers should be sure to use reading assessments in accordance with the purpose stated by the developers of the assessments. For example, oral reading fluency probes are intended for progress monitoring and do not provide teachers with comprehensive or diagnostic information about their students' specific reading comprehension abilities. Although these curriculum-based measures have strong associations with overall reading achievement (Reschly, Busch, Betts, Deno, & Long, 2009), they reveal only whether an intervention is necessary, not which intervention to use.

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Benefits

Reading comprehension is important to achieve for not only success in school, but also everyday life activities and interests. Readers engage in comprehension in many facets of life, including in their careers. Comprehension is an important step to being able to engage critically with the world; it is a necessary part of citizenry to engage personally, politically, productively, and relationally with one's community.

What the Research Says

1. Difficulty with basic reading processes, like decoding and fluency, can lead to difficulty with comprehension.
2. It is possible for a reader to read fluently and not comprehend the text.
3. It is possible for a reader to not read fluently and still comprehend the text.
4. Strategy instruction is an effective method for improving comprehension.
5. Modeling and extensive feedback are necessary to help students apply strategies.
6. Vocabulary knowledge is important for reading comprehension.
7. Understanding narrative texts is somewhat different from understanding expository texts.
   a. For narrative texts, teach story grammar and structure.
   b. For expository texts, teach expository text features and structure.
8. Especially for struggling readers, it is important to explicitly teach comprehension skills, including the following:
   a. Self-monitoring
   b. Metacognitive strategies (e.g., "Did that part of the passage make sense?")
   c. Reader-generated questions
   d. Recognition of story structure (e.g., the setting and characters are introduced in the beginning of a story)
   e. Recognition of text features (e.g., an expository text structure in a problem-solution format)
   f. Summarization
9. Use a variety of tools, including the following:
   a. Use graphic and semantic organizers.
   b. Ask questions during instruction.
10. Teach reading comprehension along with decoding and fluency, regardless of mastery level.
11. Encourage discussion about the text. Ask leveled questions. Keep in mind that the quality of student talk is more important than quantity of it.
12. Build and activate background knowledge.
13. Preteach novel concepts and vocabulary.
14. Comprehension is not separate from the other components of reading, including decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and language structures and functions.
15. Positive results from interventions for reading comprehension may take longer to achieve than positive results from interventions for other literacy-related skills, such as reading fluency.

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Examples of Reading Comprehension Approaches

- Multicomponent strategy models: collaborative strategic reading, reciprocal teaching, transactional strategies instruction
- Peer-assisted learning strategies, classwide peer tutoring
- Question-answer relationships
- Language experience approach
- Main idea strategies
- Thematic vocabulary instruction
- Morphemic awareness
- Dialogic reading
- Questioning the author
- Philosophy for children
- Instructional conversations
- Text structure
- Text enhancements
- The use of texts and cultural practices familiar to students for literacy development: kuwentos, testimonios, dictados, privilege oral traditions by having students record and transcribe family stories
- Repeated readings
- Reader's theater
- Morphemic approaches to vocabulary development
- Social stories
- Social narratives
- Social-emotional approaches: social-emotional learning foundations; 4 Rs program: reading, writing, respect, and resolution

Vocabulary and Comprehension

Thematic Vocabulary Instruction

Children and adults learn new vocabulary words best in context and when repeated. Context involves more than just using the word in a sentence; it involves facial expressions, gestures, intonation, cultural meanings, physical and situational surroundings, and more. When a word is heard or read in a variety of contexts on multiple occasions, it is likely to be more richly understood. This kind of learning is incremental, with understanding of the nuances of a word's meaning developing over time (McKeown & Beck, 2011).

Traditional approaches to vocabulary instruction, such as looking up the definition of a word in a dictionary and using the word in a sentence, are ineffective, even if the students encounter these words in texts they read, as opposed to on an isolated list. Simply explaining the meaning of a word from a story read aloud, even if it is done in repeated readings, does not provide enough encounters of the word in a great enough variety of contexts for a deep understanding of the word to develop. Therefore, several principles and activities to encourage a

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variety of contexts are necessary for vocabulary development, which ultimately leads to increased comprehension:

- **Begin young**. As children learn vocabulary from the time they are born, it is important to begin incorporating systematic vocabulary instruction into the primary grades.
- **Choose Tier 2 words**. Words can be divided into tiers according to their frequency of use. Tier 1 words include words typically found in everyday conversational language (e.g., *girl, toy, jump, dirty*). Tier 2 words can be used across domains (e.g., *decrease, versatile, treacherous*). Tier 3 words are rarely used in someone's vocabulary and are specific to a certain domain. They may be conceptually difficult (e.g., *imperial, metabolize*), but they may also be familiar and used in a particular domain (e.g., *guitar* is used in the domain of music).
- **Choose words according to a loose theme**. For example, in a collaboration theme, the teacher might choose words such as *alliance, deliberate, objective, dissonance*, and *tenacity*.
- **Use multimodal and multisensory activities**. See below for examples.

The following is an example of how to teach vocabulary from *The Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night*.

Day 1: Introduction

Let's start with the word *strife.* (Show the word card when introducing the word.)

In the story, the fox and his wife cut up the goose for dinner without any strife. That means they did not have any trouble or difficulty cutting up the goose. The goose did not fight back.

When you experience strife, you are struggling or fighting or having trouble doing something.

Let's say that word again: *strife*.

Let's think about having strife. I will say some things and if you think it is an example of strife, say, "Strife." If not, say, "No."

Arguing with your sister (*strife*)

Petting a calm kitten (*no*)

Chasing away a coyote who wants to eat your chickens (*strife*)

(After each response, ask students to explain their response—ask why. Then, continue with the other selected words.)

Day 2: Vocabulary Review and Practice

Review With Questions

We learned some new words yesterday. These words are *strife*, *dangling*, and *shrill*. (Show the appropriate word card when reviewing each word.)

I will ask you some questions to review these words. (The first question about each word asks students to choose between definitions, so that it's not just about memorization. The second question asks students to reason and make connections to the word.)

Does strife mean you are excited or that you are having trouble doing something?

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When might you experience strife, when your little brother takes away the toy you are playing with or when you are playing by yourself? (Ask why.)

(Create questions like these for the other vocabulary words.)

Situations and Examples

(In this activity, students are asked to explain contexts that contain the target words. Show the card for each word.)

Think about the word *shrill*. If you were at a basketball game, the referee's whistle might sound shrill. Can you think of something else that might sound shrill?

(Create questions like these for the other vocabulary words.)

Day 3: Vocabulary Practice With Words

Actions With Words

(In this activity, students respond physically to the words.)

Let's think about the word *dangling*. Pretend that you are the fox carrying the goose. What would it look like if the goose's legs were dangling? What would it look like if your legs were dangling from a chair?

(Create action response opportunities for the other words.)

Yes-No

I have come up with some sentences that make sense and some that don't make sense. You decide. If you think it makes sense, everybody say, "Yes." If it doesn't make sense, say "No."

(Show the card for each word.)

Before it fell from the stem, the strawberry was dangling. (*yes*—ask why)

Marci felt strife as she enjoyed a good book. (*no*—ask why)

The soft rain sounded shrill on the ground. (*no*—ask why)

Day 4: Vocabulary Practice With Words

Idea Substitution

I will read a sentence that has something to do with one of your vocabulary words. Then I want you to tell me which new word the sentence has to do with.

(Show cards for each set of words.)

We are using *shrill* and *strife*.

Carol had trouble getting along with other kids. What goes with that sentence, *shrill* or *strife*? (*strife*)

Good. She felt strife because she couldn't get along with other kids.

(Continue with other examples like this one.)

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Day 5: Vocabulary Review

I will ask you some questions to review the words we've learned this week. (Show word cards.)

Does *strife* mean having trouble or having fun?

Does *dangling* mean stiff and straight or hanging loose?

Does *shrill* mean soft and low or high-pitched?

Fluency and Comprehension

Repeated Readings

Repeated readings offer students opportunities to become familiar with the language and content of a text. By reading passages multiple times aloud, students develop word recognition and fluency, which provides a rich context for addressing comprehension. Reading repeatedly can mean reading a connected text multiple times or using reader's theater, word walls, or flash cards. This approach is most effective for students whose reading difficulties are rooted in decoding processes.

Steps:

1. The teacher chooses a short passage that interests students.
2. Students listen to the passage, whether it is a recording or it is read by a teacher or peer.
3. Students read the passage three to five times, but no more than that in a single lesson to prevent boredom.
4. The teacher uses a monitoring system to help students keep track of their reading and accuracy rate (i.e., figuring out how many correct words per minute they read). The teacher should frequently monitor each student's progress and use recorded versions to assess students after the lesson if need be.
5. The teacher incorporates comprehension questions and activities to ensure that students are actively constructing meaning as they read and not just attending to their oral production.

First, students can work independently, or they can read with partners or in small groups. With partners, one student reads the passage aloud to serve as a model, and then the less fluent reader practices the passage with help from the peer as needed. In small groups, the teacher reads portions of the passage as a model, and then the students echo chorally. Then, the teacher and students read the whole text together. Finally, students can practice reading the passage individually.

Language Experience Approach

The language experience approach uses students' own language and experiences to help develop their literacy skills, including fluency and reading comprehension. In a small group, students tell about a shared experience, such as a field trip, class experience, observation of an interesting object or phenomenon, etc. The teacher then documents what the students say. This written account becomes the text that is used for applying reading skills.

Steps:

1. Students collectively describe an experience they shared in any context. This process of listening and speaking helps students to develop language use and knowledge, which is important to reading comprehension.

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2. As students talk, the teacher writes their account of the experience, as closely as possible to how they have dictated it. This procedure helps students to make connections between oral and written language.
3. The teacher reads the text aloud, modeling fluency and prosody (i.e., expression) for students. Then, students and the teacher read the text chorally multiple times.
4. The text is then a resource for teaching word recognition strategies (e.g., developing morphological awareness with affixes) and text structure, and it provides opportunities for practicing reading comprehension strategies (e.g., student-generated questions about the text).

Dialogue and Comprehension

Instructional Conversations

Instructional conversations are a model for structuring classroom talk. They work to extend students' language use by promoting student responses to each other so that each student statement adds to or challenges what has already been said. The teacher plays a strategic facilitator role, knowing when to probe, question, prompt, explain, clarify, or stay quiet. Importantly, the teacher works to structure a line of thinking with strong student engagement (Goldenberg, 1992).

Steps:

1. The teacher first organizes the classroom so that it is conducive to conversation among the students.
2. Before the lesson, the teacher identifies a clear academic objective, toward which the dialogue is guided. That goal is shared with the students to maintain a focus.
3. When facilitating the discussion, the teacher does the following:
   a. Monitors the distribution of talk to ensure that students talk at a higher rate than the teacher and that there is an equitable balance across the students, while still allowing for self-initiated speaking turns
   b. Weaves a thematic focus of text or of concepts into the discussion
   c. Activates background knowledge and experience
   d. Provides explicit teaching along with exploration
   e. Asks few known-answer questions
   f. Promotes complex language (e.g., "Tell me more," and "What do you mean by that?")
   g. Restates and expands students' words to model complex language, so long as it is in line with the ideas presented
   h. Elicits justification and reasoning from students for their statements (e.g., "How do you know that?")
   i. Encourages students to respond to each other to build a connected discourse
   j. Clarifies misunderstandings, when necessary. It may be the case that other students might help each other clear up incorrect information or interpretations. These conversations promote language and reasoning, as opposed to the acquisition of "correct" knowledge, so the teacher should be somewhat comfortable with allowing students to explore various ideas, even if they are misunderstandings.
4. Teachers and students evaluate whether their conversation met the academic goal presented at the beginning of the lesson.

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Strategy Instruction and Comprehension

Main Idea and Summarization Instruction

Teaching students to identify the main idea or to generate a summary is a common approach to teaching reading comprehension. Yet teachers often do not know how to teach the main idea beyond just asking, “What’s the big idea?” There are several ways teachers can guide students to get the main idea of a section of text.

Approach 1: Generate a main idea. Students first identify the subject, or the most important who/what of the section. Next, students identify the action, or the most important information about the subject. Then, they combine both into a sentence.

Approach 2: Identify a main idea. Students select the main idea from a list of separate sentences. Then, they work toward identifying a sentence that represents the main idea from a paragraph or longer section of text.

When teaching students to either generate or identify a main idea, or even a summary of text, be thoughtful about the text you are using. Students may first need a text about a topic that is familiar, written at a relatively easy level. As they improve in their abilities, they can advance to more difficult texts. Also be sure that the texts you select have a main idea. Yes, it is possible for texts to be written with no coherence, or connection, between sentences. These texts might be a list of isolated facts, much like entries in an encyclopedia.

The following are strategies or considerations when the above approaches are ineffective:

1. Teach the processes of synthesis:
   a. Have students categorize words on index cards into word trees or concept pyramids. (For an example, see below.)
   b. Practice reducing lists of words or ideas from a paragraph to one word or phrase.
   c. Teach students to cross out repeated information and unimportant details.
   d. Use the highlighting strategy:
      i. Write four possible main idea statements for a section of text: one that includes only one detail, one that includes two or more details, one that synthesizes most but not all of the text, and one that synthesizes the section.
      ii. Choose a color to correspond to each statement.
      iii. Teach students to highlight or underline parts of the text that relate to the statement.
      iv. Students should see that one statement has minimal text highlighted, the others have some of the text highlighted, and the best statement has most or all of the text highlighted.

Text and Concept Pyramid for Tips to Care for the Earth

> There are many ways that each and every person can help conserve Earth’s limited natural resources. The first thing to remember is to recycle. If you don’t recycle already, it’s not too late to start. Recycle things like soda cans, tin cans, plastic containers, plastic bags, and newspapers. When recycling something like computer paper, make sure you’ve used both sides of the paper before recycling it. On a similar note, it is important to remember not to waste paper products. Use things like paper plates and napkins sparingly, choosing real dishware and cloth napkins whenever possible.

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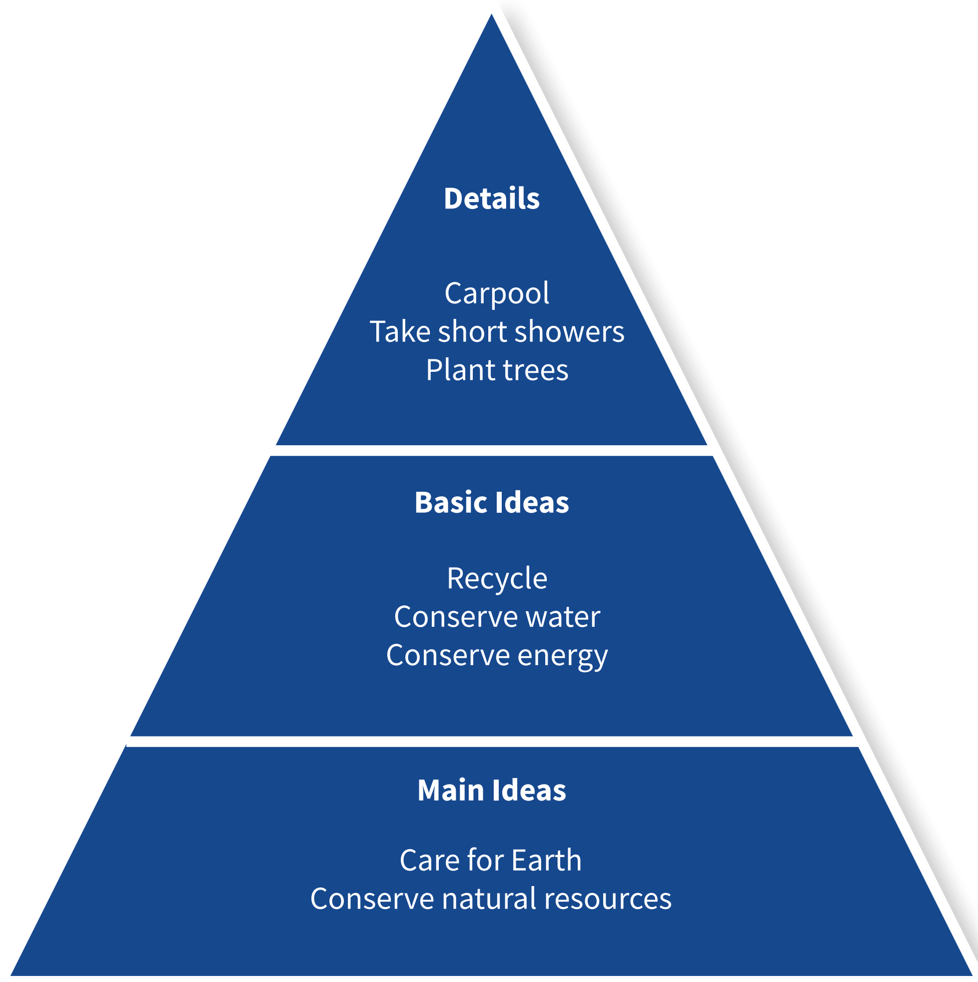
To conserve energy, be conscientious about turning off lights and electronic equipment. Walk, ride your bike, or carpool as much as you can in order to save gas and limit air pollution. To conserve water, take brief showers and don't leave the water running while you brush your teeth. Water your lawn in the morning or evening, or allow nature to water your lawn altogether.

Planting trees is also an excellent way to help the environment, and it's a fun activity to do with friends. Finally, take care not to litter and to pick up litter whenever you see it. These and many other small efforts like them will certainly make a big difference in the life of our planet and provider, Mother Earth.



2. Teach students to determine importance by asking themselves the following questions:
   a. How does this idea fit with the rest of the text I am reading?
   b. Does this idea make sense, given what I already know about the topic?
   c. What is my purpose for reading? And does this idea help me to reach that goal?

   Sometimes, details are important to the overall meaning of the text and should be included in the summary. Main ideas and details are neither dichotomous, nor mutually exclusive. In fact, a detail in one context might be a main idea in another. For example, the statement, "Ninety-seven percent of Earth's water is salt water" is the main idea in a passage about fresh water scarcity, but it is a detail in a passage about Earth.

3. Try to use authentic contexts when teaching students to summarize, including the following.

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Summarization Types and Examples

Purpose for Reading	Use of Summary	Example
Replicate the information	For assessment	Traditional summary
Learn content	To remember important information for future learning	Creating an Earth Day conservation campaign
Apply content	To identify important concepts to be applied to some kind of problem-solving situation	Texts about how to create urban food gardens
Evaluate a position	To respond to the author's arguments.	In a debate, students read each other's arguments
Learn content	Communicate learning with others for purpose of collaboration.	Expert groups on a particular topic
Enjoyment	Share that enjoyment with others	Publish an online book review on Edmoto

Question-Answer Relationships

By generating their own questions, students can assume the role of the teacher and thus consider various levels of comprehension. They pose various levels of questions and then discuss the questions and answers with their peers (Raphael, 1986). The questions include four types:

- **Right there (literal):** The answer to the question can be found directly, or right there, in the text.
- **Think and search (synthesis):** The answer to the question requires a combination of two or more ideas from the text.
- **Author and you (inference):** Answering the question requires that the student use his or her background knowledge to understand the author's meaning.
- **On my own (interpretation):** The question invites the responders to consider their own reactions and meanings ascribed to the text.

Multicomponent Strategy Models

Some comprehension models combine multiple reading strategies to incorporate the many processes involved in comprehension. Collaborative Strategic Reading (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996), built upon ideas from Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), is one such model. It is also a peer-mediated model. See also the brief in this series on peer supports.

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Implications for Practice

1. Provide direct instruction of reading comprehension strategies. Be sure to explain why the strategy is important and when and why it should be used.
2. Model strategies, typically by thinking aloud.
3. Within guided practice, provide explicit feedback until the student has demonstrated mastery using the strategy before moving to independent practice.
4. Be intentional about helping students transfer their strategies across a variety of contexts.
5. Teach students about text structure.
6. Remember that multiple facets of literacy contribute to reading comprehension, including decoding, vocabulary, and fluency.
7. Language, culture, and experience also contribute to reading comprehension.
8. Capitalize on what the student knows to build reading comprehension, whether it is home language(s), culture, interest, experiences, or values.
9. Allow students to access text via audiobooks when students are reading far below grade level. This instructional practice allows students to learn and implement texts that they may not be able to access by decoding print independently.

Conclusion

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive, social, and cultural process, even when one is reading alone. It involves an interaction between the text, the reader, and the context. When comprehension is challenging for a student, a teacher should consider instructional adjustments for all three components. Multiple types of assessments can provide a holistic picture of a student's strengths and difficulties. It is important to consider that several facets of the reading process contribute to comprehension, including vocabulary, fluency, and language. Students may need a combination of approaches that work together to increase comprehension abilities. Approaches that help students to comprehend include teaching them text structure, providing them with strategies that they can apply across contexts to learn content, and building upon their cultural and linguistic repertoires. Comprehension should be not only about getting the "right" answer, but also about a process that encourages students to engage in sense-making, reasoning, and using a variety of sources of evidence to support their claims.

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