



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Comprehension*

“Children who have been provoked to reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own questions are the ones most likely to learn to learn.”
— Maxine Greene, 1988

WHAT IS COMPREHENSION?

The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) defines reading comprehension as “a cognitive process that integrates complex skills and cannot be understood without examining the critical roles of vocabulary learning and instruction on its development.” The panel goes on to emphasize that “active interactive strategic processes are critically necessary to the development of reading comprehension” (p. 4-1). Durkin (1993) refers to comprehension as the “essence of reading” while Hodges (1999) claims that reading is the result of three elements: “predicting what is anticipated in the context, confirming the prediction, and integrating the information into a schematic bank” (p. 1). *The Literacy Dictionary* (1995) lists five definitions, including one suggesting that “meaning resides in the intentional problem-solving, thinking processes of the interpreter” (p. 39). Louise Rosenblatt (1976) would support this definition, arguing that “the reader counts for at least as much as the book or poem itself” (p. v).

It is clear from the myriad of definitions that reading comprehension is a highly complex process which integrates multiple strategies used by the reader to create meaning from the text. The process is aided by the reader’s prior knowledge and personal experiences, vocabulary knowledge, and independent use of reading strategies. Working together, these factors enhance the reader’s ability to comprehend text.

WHY IS COMPREHENSION IMPORTANT?

Without comprehension, the act of reading is reduced to the mechanics of phonics and phonemic awareness used to pronounce a series of unrelated words on a page. Without comprehension, meaning never occurs. The ability to comprehend text and construct meaning from the text are essential skills vital to successful participation in our information focused society. Ultimately, the goal of all reading instruction is comprehension.

RESEARCH REVIEW

Research indicates that comprehension is improved when students receive explicit vocabulary and reading strategy instruction. Students also benefit from instruction in cooperative learning strategies. Additionally, research suggests that teachers benefit from professional development focused on training teachers how to teach specific comprehension strategies (NICHD, 2000).

Comprehension is improved when students demonstrate a solid understanding of the vocabulary used in the text. While phonics and phonemic awareness are necessary to help students decode words, research indicates that unless the word already exists in the student’s oral vocabulary, comprehension may be impeded. It appears that “oral vocabulary is a key to learning to make the transition from oral

to written forms” (NICHD, 2000, p. 4-3). Harvey and Goudvis (2000) explain that reading is a process of decoding and making meaning (p. 5). Thus, when students encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in text, they utilize their phonics and phonemic awareness skills to “hear” the word in their head, but they also need to activate prior knowledge of the word in order to translate the sound of the word into meaning.

Proficient readers recognize when meaning breaks down and apply specific strategies as needed. Teaching students to identify when meaning breaks down during the reading process and providing them with direct instruction on specific reading strategies to compensate for the breakdown becomes essential to helping students reach comprehension (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; NICHD, 2000).

Expert teachers introduce strategies, explain their purpose, model their use, and provide time for students to practice strategies until the students use them independently. With practice and support, students will begin to monitor their own comprehension and use strategies in independent reading. Self-monitoring strategies can be taught in the primary grades with additional strategies added to the students’ repertoire as the students begin to independently self-monitor (Schwartz, 2002).

In addition, research supports the need to provide professional development designed to inform teachers about how to prepare students for comprehension by introducing the text and purpose for reading, modeling the thinking process as it applies to reading, encouraging students to ask and answer questions, and providing multiple opportunities for students to actively engage in the comprehension process (NICHD, 2000, p. 4).

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT COMPREHENSION

In general, students benefit from direct instruction of reading strategies (Beers, 2003, Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; NRP, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Langer, 1995). The following are some suggested strategies.

Activating prior knowledge: When students are provided opportunities to link their own experiences and knowledge to new information, they are better able to comprehend text. Students need direct instruction about how to make connections between the text and themselves, the world, and other texts. Additionally, teachers need to provide information which activates the students’ prior knowledge when introducing the text. Beers (2003) refers to this as “frontloading meaning.” Incorporating anticipation guides and K-W-L charts (What I know, What I want to know, and What I learned) are two strategies that help students activate prior knowledge and provide a purpose for reading.

Asking and answering questions: Teaching students how to ask questions before, during, and after reading also improves comprehension. Too often teachers assign text and instruct students to answer the questions at the end of the section. Students can be taught how to construct questions that “clarify meaning; speculate about text yet to be read; determine an author’s intent, style, content, or format; locate a specific answer in the text or consider rhetorical questions inspired by the text” (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997, p. 119).

Visualizing: Visualizing text is the process of creating pictures in our minds of what is taking place on the page. Helping students incorporate strategies that create pictures of text will help improve comprehension. There is even evidence to support the theory that visualizing is part of the process of inferring (Harvey & Goudvis,

2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997).

Modeling visualization strategies and providing students opportunities to create visual images of text and discuss the images they see in their minds as they read helps students develop comprehension.

Organizing text information: Students who are able to organize text information comprehend text more clearly than do students who cannot. Graphic organizers are useful in helping students comprehend text by identifying relationships between ideas, determining sequence, and developing concepts. They provide a visual means for the students to organize text as well as providing structure for determining meaning from text. Graphic organizers can take the form of charts, graphs, pictures, or other graphics that help students organize information. Story frames are useful tools in helping students read narrative text, while two-column note charts focus on cause-and-effect or problem-solution and are beneficial for expository text (Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2003). Again, it is important that the teacher utilize the graphic organizer in such a way as to encourage active participation. It helps when the teacher verbalizes relationships, allows for student discussion and input, and helps students make inferences and predictions (Merkley & Jefferies, 2000).

Understanding text structure: As students progress from kindergarten through high school, they are subjected to more complex reading and differing text types. Students benefit when teachers show them how to read different text types. Teaching students how to use textual clues such as headers, subtitles, bold letters, etc., helps students to better comprehend the text. Additionally,

helping students identify transitional words can provide students with clues to help them interpret text (Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2003).

Summarizing text: Students often have difficulty deciding what is important in text and putting it in their own words. Modeling summarization in class and providing students with opportunities to summarize are important comprehension activities. One activity is to divide the text into chunks and have groups of students work together to summarize each chunk. Another is to teach underlining strategies by placing text on the overhead and modeling how to underline (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999).

Participating in cooperative learning: Students benefit from cooperative activities by sharing ideas and strategies to help each other comprehend the text (NICHHD, 2000). Group activities reinforce listening skills and allow students to share strategies. Flexible grouping designed around individual student reading and strategy levels, dependent on the specific task at hand is preferred (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

SUMMARY

The act of reading requires students to incorporate a myriad of strategies in order to comprehend text. Students can be taught these strategies and should be provided time to practice the strategies until they become part of an internalized system of response to text. Effective teachers are able to identify the strategies that will most benefit their students, model those strategies, provide guided practice of the strategies, and encourage student independence.

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