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What is comprehension and why is it important?

Comprehension is about understanding authors' messages and responding to these messages in a range of ways. Supported by proficient decoding and fluency, comprehension affords readers increased knowledge about the world. In fact, Hirsch (2003), Keene and Zimmerman (2013) & Walsh (2003) advocate that continually developing vocabulary and background knowledge grows comprehension at an exponential rate, that is, the more that is already known, the more readily readers are able to acquire new knowledge. Students need to have a diverse range of understandings, knowledge, and skills in order to comprehend what is read and it cannot be assumed that accurately naming words guarantee they have secure comprehension (Billman, Hilden, & Halladay, 2009; Miller, 2014; Opitz, Rubin, & Erikson, 2011; Scull, 2010; Woolley, 2011). The capacity to understand what is read is very much influenced by interest, motivation and self-image (Gill, 2008). Key also may be whether texts are prescribed or self-selected and the text type, for example, fiction or non-fiction. In addition, students should be reading a range of texts about different topics as well as reading multiple texts about the same topic (Gelzheiser, Hallgren-Flynn, Connors, & Scanlon, 2014). Further, Stead (2014, p. 491) makes the point that there ought to be more texts read that offer students the opportunity to "argue, persuade, instruct, and respond." Students need to engage in reading practices that reflect what adult readers do, that is, to think about what has been read, to talk with others, and as a formative learning process, to record their thinking about texts in meaningful and literary ways because reading is inherently a social process (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013; Miller, 2014). Schmoker (2007) makes the point that educators should avoid assigning pseudo-reading comprehension tasks (designing new book covers, making murals and other art and craft activities) at the expense of having students engage in meaningful discussions about what has been read (Gillet, Temple, Temple, & Crawford, 2012; Hoyt, Davis, Olson, & Boswell, 2011). To be avoided is immediate questioning (oral or written) once students have finished reading as this narrows students' responses. In fact, Gill (2008) asserts that teachers undertake way more testing of comprehension than teaching of comprehension strategies. Preferable is the opportunity for students to provide an unassisted retell of what was read and understood. However, if an unassisted retell suggests limited comprehension then teachers would go on to ask

both lower-order and higher-order questions to elicit understandings. Related to this, Allington (2012, p. 129) suggests that it is possible teachers "have too often confused remembering with understanding. We have focused on recitation of texts, not thoughtful consideration and discussion of texts." However, Kintsch (1998 in Reutzel & Cooter, 2011, p. 276) points out "readers can remember a text without learning from it and they can learn from a text without remembering much about it."

Links with reading

Oral language. Listening to teachers read aloud and participating in conversations about texts is an important first step on the way to becoming a reader. Once students are able to read connected texts they need to be taught increasingly sophisticated speaking skills so that they can meaningfully engage in discussions (Communication Trust, 2013).

Vocabulary. Knowing the meaning of many words supports comprehension because readers do not need to stop as often to seek clarification (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Reading widely and often provides continued access to new words while words that are not immediately familiar can be problem-solved by drawing on known strategies. It is highly likely that students who do not have an increasing vocabulary will find that curriculum demands outstrip their capacity to process what is expected to be read and understood (Newkirk, 2013/2014).

Letter-sound and word knowledge. Secure decoding and high-frequency sight word knowledge takes away processing demands at the letter and word level so readers are free to focus on meaning (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013).

Fluency. The ability to automatically and successfully name words (accuracy), read using a smooth and flowing style (rate), and with attention to phrasing, intonation, stress and punctuation (prosody) is indicative that students are reading with understanding (Hasbrouck, 2006).

Factors that influence comprehension development

1. Allocating instructional time to teach comprehension strategies that later become automatic skills (Conley & Wise, 2011; McLaughlin, 2010; Serravallo, 2010).

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2. **Teaching all comprehension strategies in the early years at school.** Teachers of younger students would logically model strategies during shared reading and later have students apply these strategies during guided reading sessions when reading texts at their own reading stage/level. Subsequent teachers would go on to strengthen these strategies by having students read increasingly more complex texts (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). Also, comprehension strategies are not necessarily learned in a linear way so teachers would reasonably not expect full and deep understanding and application before moving onto introducing another strategy. What does matter is revisiting and refining these strategies across time (Himmele, Himmele, & Potter, 2014). This then highlights the logic of reporting what was achieved as information is passed onto subsequent teachers.
3. **Systematic and explicit instruction** through demonstration (modelling), guided practice and multiple opportunities for independent practice with process feedback. While sometimes variously named, strategies to be taught include: *Connecting with prior knowledge, Predicting, Getting the main idea/Determining importance, Visualising, Summarising, Synthesising, Monitoring and Clarifying, Inferring and Questioning* (Bayetto, 2013; Wexler, Reed, Mitchell, Doyle, & Clancy, 2014).
4. **Intention.** Students need to know why they are reading a text and what they will be asked to do after they have read it.
5. **Word recognition.** Effortless word recognition frees readers to focus on understanding what is read. If texts are too difficult, even after teacher scaffolding, they should be replaced with other texts that will give more satisfactory reading experiences.
6. **Text types.** Comprehension strategies need to be taught and applied when reading both fiction and non-fiction as text types place different demands on readers (Hammond & Nessel, 2011; Opitz, Rubin, & Erikson, 2011). Yopp & Yopp (2006, p. 37), along with numerous other writers, maintain that there should be MUCH more reading of non-fiction texts as they “provide answers to children’s questions about their world and build background knowledge crucial to text comprehension.”
7. **Text layout.** Print and digital texts can place varying demands on readers and there is no guarantee that students will move seamlessly across these demands without explicit instruction as to how to manage features unique to texts, for example, immediate access to dictionary meanings when reading e-books can be an asset if meanings can be understood (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).
8. **Metacognition.** Students who do not self-monitor may read words without stopping to think whether they understand. If this continues, the very students who most need positive reading experiences may be the ones who give up because they don’t ‘get it’. Predictably there are diverse readers in any classroom ranging from those who realise when they have stopped understanding and successfully deal with it through to other readers who don’t understand that they are meant to comprehend what is being read (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Ford & Opitz, 2011; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007). Afflerbach, Cho, Kim, Crassas, & Doyle, (2013, p. 440) make the point that “successful readers are *metacognitive*. They plan their reading in relation to specific goals, and they monitor and evaluate their reading as it progresses.”
9. **Oral and silent reading.** Hiebert, Samuels, & Rasinski (2012) remind teachers that when students orally read they most often have scaffolded support from a listener but when reading silently they are on their own, meaning that they need to have the stamina to stay with the task AND be able to self-monitor their comprehension. In fact, when replicating and endorsing the efficacy of prior research Prior, Fenwick, Saunders, Ouellette, O’Quinn, & Harvey (2011, p. 189) found that “an oral reading advantage for comprehension was found for students in first through fifth grades” and that while grade six was a transitional phase it was only in grade seven that silent reading afforded more assured comprehension. They go on to recommend that silent reading should not be the sole practice in middle and upper primary classrooms.
10. **Generalisation.** Students’ capacity to select, generalise and apply their comprehension skills are essential as no one strategy will always work for all reading needs. Harvey and Goudvis (2013, p. 433) make the point that “having a nodding acquaintance with a few strategies is not enough. Students must know when, why, and how to use them.” When asked by teachers, students should be able to name what comprehension strategies they used when reading and why they were successful (Palinscar & Schutz, 2011; Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke, Pearson, Schatschneider, & Torgesen, 2010).
11. **Reading texts at students’ cognitive level.** Landrigan & Mulligan (n. d.) make the point that just because

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students can name most of the words in some texts does not mean that they should be reading them. They go on to say “These books, although engaging, may be difficult...to fully grasp because of sophisticated themes; characters who are at different stages of life; and unfamiliar settings or time periods” (unpaginated).

Instructional approaches (general)

1. **Pre-reading.** Model what independent and successful readers do as they get ready to read, for example, they read the blurb, glance through the text, and anticipate what they will be reading.
2. **During reading.** Teach students HOW to monitor their understanding as they are reading (Afflerbach, Cho, Kim, Crassas, & Doyle, 2013).
3. **After reading.** Have students talk with others about what has been read or write responses to interesting questions about their texts.
4. At every year level, read aloud a balance of fiction and non-fiction to students. Not all texts might be read in full (There is nothing like tantalising expectation!) and the same text may be re-read on another occasion with a different intention in mind, for example, with a focus on a particular character or point of view. Also, consider reading texts by the same author so that students’ desire to read a text that was read aloud may be re-directed while they wait for access.

Connecting to prior knowledge

Please note. When reading non-fiction it may be more efficient to supply background knowledge so students have correct information rather than spend time responding to confusions (Wexler, Reed, Mitchell, Doyle, & Clancy, 2014).

1. Model the language used when thinking about what is already known about a topic/theme. *This title reminds me of.... Let me tell you about a book I read about this topic. When I read those words/this section it reminded me of.... What do I know about the author/topic /text type that will help me understand what I am about to read? The author writes about the same topics so this text will probably be about...*
2. Fiction. Read texts where connections can be made with what is already known. *This text is about heroes. What heroes do you know about?*
3. Non-fiction. Read thematically linked texts that build on a topic that is already familiar. This process

broadens vocabulary and develops deeper content knowledge and comprehension (Gelzheiser, Hallgren-Flynn, Connors, & Scanlon, 2014).

4. Have students notate/place a paper strip in a text where it reminds them of something they already know. When finished reading have them talk with a partner about what was identified.
5. Before reading pose a question and ask students to write for two minutes about their views. Have them share their thinking. Now read the text and later compare what they wrote with what the author stated.

Predicting

1. Model how to look at the text and visuals on the front and back cover and throughout the text. *What is it likely to be about?*
2. Read the text title. Have the students predict five-ten words (no prepositions or conjunctions) they believe will be in the text. *Let’s see if you’re correct!*
3. Use lead statements to help focus students’ thinking. *I think it is about... because...*
4. Stop partway through reading and ask for predictions about what may be coming up. Write predictions on the page/board and later highlight those that were correct.
5. Fiction. Stop at a crucial stage and ask students how they would solve the problem. *What do you think X will do now?*

Getting the main idea/determining importance

1. Project text onto a board and model how to identify key words that suggest the main idea. Explain why they are the important words.
2. Write three sentences about a text on the board and, after reading, ask students to nominate the sentence that best describes the main idea.
3. Have students stop partway through reading. *What main idea does the author want you to know?*
4. Main idea sorts. Distribute sentences from the text and have students classify the sentences as being either the main or supporting ideas.
5. Have students make a statement. *The important main idea is....The headings and sub-headings are showing what the author thinks is important.*

Visualising

1. Model how to visualise. *These words make me think it looks like....This word tells me it smelled.... The sounds would be...because it says here that...*

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2. Read part of a text to students and have them draw what they 'saw'.
3. "Give students a piece of paper divided into four. Read one quarter of a text to students, stop and ask them to draw in the first box their image so far. Read the next quarter of the text and ask them to draw the image they saw in that section and so on. *"Did your images change as I read?"* (Bayetto, 2013, p. 117).
4. "Read a single sentence from a text. *I'd like you to imagine the sentence and draw it. What can you see in your mind? After you have drawn the sentence I will show you the picture the author used*" (Bayetto, 2013, p. 117).
5. Poems often have strong descriptions. Read poems aloud and ask students to discuss what the words led them to 'see'.

Summarising

1. Model how to pinpoint the main idea, give a few other key points, and then finish by giving a brief description of the author's conclusion.
2. Sand-timer Summary. Ask students to give their summary before the sand runs out (Please note: Sand-timers come in different timed varieties).
3. Have students use a favourite song to sing their summary.
4. "Give students 4-6 counters and ask them to place the counters only on phrases/sentences of a text that summarise it" (Bayetto, 2013, p. 118).
5. "Give Me Five. Have students use just five sentences to summarise a text" (Bayetto, 2013, p. 118).

Synthesising

1. Model how to synthesise. *What do I take from reading this text? What did this text mean? What do I think now?*
2. Relate synthesising to content areas (Miller, 2013). *We are synthesising our learning about "...how growth and survival of living things are affected by the physical conditions of their environment"* (ACARA, 2012, unpaginated).
3. "Read a non-fiction text where students already have some prior knowledge about the topic. *What do you now know that built on what you already knew?*" (Bayetto, 2013, p. 119).
4. After reading, have students suggest alternative text titles that would align with the author's intention.
5. Read non-fiction texts about the same topic/issue. *What do you now think about...?*

6. Timer. When the timer sounds ask students to turn and tell their partner the 'gist' (essence) of what they have just read.

Monitoring and clarifying

1. "Relate each strategy to a traffic sign (e.g., stop sign-stop reading and try to restate in your own words what is happening in the text; U-turn-reread parts of the text that do not make sense" (Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke, Pearson, Schatschneider, & Torgesen, 2010, p. 12).
2. Have students place three sticky notes/slips of paper in the early, middle, and later part of their text. *When you come to the sticky notes/slips of paper, stop reading and ask yourself whether you understand what you have just read. What could you do if you do not understand?*
3. Model how to monitor and clarify understanding. *I get it. I better read that part again because I didn't get it. I'm not sure what is going on. The author is saying that.... This text is hard to read: I need to change it. I'll turn the headings into questions and look for information to answer them.*

Inferring

1. Use a document camera to project a wordless picture book onto the board and talk through what can be inferred from the visuals. *I am looking at the character's face/body language and inferring that s/he feels....* Discuss with students that how visuals are inferred and interpreted is dependent on an individual's background knowledge (Lysaker, & Miller, 2012; Serafini, 2014; Stahl, 2014).
2. "Listen while I read what the character said. How do you think s/he feels?" (Bayetto, 2013, p. 121).
3. Read a text aloud to students where some words will be unfamiliar. *How might we infer their meaning?*
4. "Give students a page divided into two columns. In the left-hand column write 'Facts' and in the right-hand column write 'Inferences.' *Read the first page of the text and record one fact written by the author in the left-hand column and in the right-hand column record what you infer*" (Bayetto, 2013, p. 121).
5. Before reading, nominate a character and ask students to be ready to infer and provide evidence about how the character feels.

Questioning

1. Model the types of questions a reader might ask when reading (about the author, words, content).

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2. Prior to reading a non-fiction text invite students to ask questions they have about the topic.
3. What three questions do you have about what you just read? *Why do these questions interest you?*
4. Use 5W prompt cards (who, where, when, why, what) to nudge thinking and reflection.
5. "Give students small slips of paper with 'I wonder' written at the top. As they reach a part in the text where they have a question they should write their question on the slip of paper. *When you have finished reading please sort your slips of paper into two piles- 'Questions answered' and 'Questions unanswered'"* (Bayetto, 2013, p. 122).

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