

Developing Comprehension Skills

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Comprehension is a Fundamental Purpose of Reading

From beginning readers who struggle to decode print to skilled readers with fluent skills, understanding the meaning motivates readers to interpret and analyze the text. What is comprehension? It includes making sense of words, connecting ideas between text and prior knowledge, constructing and negotiating meaning in discussions with others, and much more. Comprehension in this context is difficult to define because it involves so many aspects of thinking. According to Kintsch (1998), readers have two tasks. One is constructing a "text model" of the literal meaning of words as they read, and the other is building a broader representation, or "situation model," of the meaning implied by the text. Skilled readers learn to decode words automatically so they can devote time and thinking to these two kinds of constructive activities.

Foundations for Comprehension

How do children learn to comprehend text? The answer is slowly during K-6 school years, with lots of practice reading a wide variety of texts,



and with explicit teaching about comprehension (Adams, Treiman, & Pressley, 1998). Here are five important foundations.

1. *Conceptual knowledge.*

Children need familiarity with the topics they read and some understanding of the main concepts in narrative and expository texts. For example, children in K-1 who understand the ideas in narrative picture books, such as the story plot and characters' thoughts, develop

good reading comprehension one to two years later (Paris & Paris, 2003).

2. *Language skills.* Effective oral language skills, both expressive and receptive, predict later reading comprehension. For example, children with good vocabulary skills who understand many words in text have better reading comprehension (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

3. *Text features.* Beginning readers need to know how titles, pictures, captions, and headings relate to the meaning of text. They develop concepts about print, concepts about genres, and concepts about text structures that help them construct meaning from different types of text (Duke, 2004).

4. *Strategies.* Comprehending text requires readers to use a variety of strategies such as

making and checking predictions, asking and answering questions, looking back in text to monitor understanding, and occasionally stopping to paraphrase or summarize the important information (Block & Pressley, 2002).

5. *Fluent decoding.* Comprehension is difficult when children focus all their energy and cognitive resources on saying the words correctly. Comprehension is easier when decoding is automatic so young readers must learn to recognize words quickly and accurately (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

Explicit Instruction

Research has shown that teachers who model and explain effective comprehension strategies help students become strategic readers (Almasi, 2003; Pressley, 2002). The National Reading Panel (2000) identified many important strategies including: monitoring comprehension, using graphic organizers, answering questions, generating questions, recognizing text structures, and summarizing. These can be taught at every grade from K-12. One key is for teachers to demonstrate how to use the strategies as they read, perhaps by thinking aloud and modeling them, or perhaps by asking students to explain how they use strategies. A second key is to generate metacognitive discussions so students will talk about how they think and how they comprehend text. These discussions can occur simultaneously with discussions of the content in sessions of Ask the Author, Book Clubs, or Author's Chair. Discussions should promote connections between text-text, text-self, and text-world. A third key is to place more responsibility on students to apply strategies independently through scaffolded teaching and coaching them to be strategic readers. Students need to know what strategies to use, how to apply them, and why they are useful in order to become self-regulated learners (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991). Strategies are especially important

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for struggling readers who may not recruit and apply strategies effectively (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001)

Assessment Reinforces Instruction

Assessment is a natural complement to good instruction. Teachers can assess comprehension through informal observation and questions. The questions should be challenging so that children construct implied and conceptual meaning as well as literal meaning. Reasoning about text meaning and making text-based connections can be observed in children's retellings, summaries, and writing in response to reading. These informal observations can be used to diagnose children's developing comprehension skills. More formal measures of progress can be obtained through periodic tests, but it is important to include multiple response formats, such as multiple-choice tests, constructed responses, and writing. The goal of assessment is to encourage accurate comprehension and thorough learning (Paris, 2002).

Conclusions

Reading comprehension requires complex thinking, specific strategies, and motivated reading. Just like other reading skills, comprehension takes years to become fluent and automatic. Teachers can assess children's comprehension with questions, tests, writing, and discussions to diagnose strengths and weaknesses. Research has shown that when teachers provide instruction on specific strategies to monitor and repair comprehension, it improves children's reading achievement (Carlisle & Rice, 2002). Expert teachers embed strategy instruction in guided reading, informal assessments, and discussions about content so that students learn to construct, analyze, and extend the meaning of texts whenever they read.

Biography

Scott Paris is a Professor of Psychology and Education at the University of Michigan where he is currently the Chair of the Graduate Program in Psychology. His reading research has focused on children's strategic reading, metacognition, self-regulated learning, and assessments of comprehension. He has created educational materials to help children acquire reading strategies and has worked extensively with teachers to design instruction and assessment that promote literacy learning. Professor Paris has published ten books and written more than 100 book chapters and research articles. He has twice received the Dean's Award for Outstanding Undergraduate teaching, and is a recipient of the University of Michigan Amoco Foundation Faculty Award for Distinguished Teaching.

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