



Reading Comprehension: More Than Just Strategies

The Multifaceted Nature of Reading Comprehension

“Learning to read well is a long-term developmental process. At the end point, the proficient adult reader can read a variety of materials with ease and interest, can read with varying purposes, and can read with comprehension even when the material is neither easy to understand nor intrinsically interesting” (Snow, 2002).

There are many factors that enhance or undermine comprehension. Comprehension occurs as a consequence of the interaction between the reader, the text that

is being read, the specific task the reader is trying to accomplish, and the context or circumstances under which the reading is done (see Figure 1). This brief is designed to assist teachers in understanding these factors and in making instructional decisions as they relate to comprehending text.

The Reader: Factors That Influence Comprehension

- Decoding skills
- Experience (Background Knowledge)
- Reasoning ability
- Interests
- Motivation

The reader must be able to decode printed text in order to comprehend. Strong phonology and decoding skills built to automaticity (fluency) form the basis upon which a reader comprehends what is being read. Without automaticity at these basic levels, a reader will continue to struggle.

A reader’s life experiences, including depth of oral language and verbal interaction, as well as knowledge of the world, impact the level of connections and reasoning made from what is being read. Further, motivation is promoted when readers are successful in their efforts to understand, feel they are gaining knowledge, and find enjoyment in the experience of reading to learn.

In the early grades, teachers can build listening comprehension through reading aloud. This gives students an opportunity to hear and process more complex language and offers exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary. When discussion about what has been read is included, students have the opportunity to develop and use expressive language skills and make connections to their own experiences.

Teachers can facilitate development of phonology, decoding skills, and oral language by using resources available on the Pennsylvania Standards Aligned System website (www.pdesas.org).

The Text: Factors That Influence Comprehension

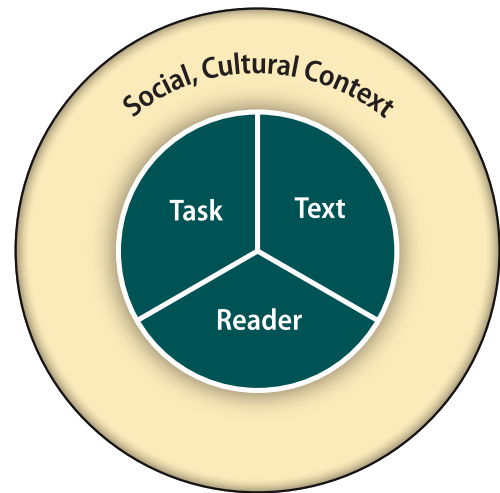
- Genre
- Layout of text
- Precision of the words that express underlying ideas
- Clarity of the words
- Reader “friendliness”
- Readability
- Text cohesion (i.e., a common meaning thread that holds a text together)

The text genre and the physical layout of the text itself can facilitate or interfere with comprehension. A writer’s attention to choosing words precisely in order to clearly communicate ideas can make a considerable impact on how well a reader understands the ideas that are being communicated. If the reader has a deep knowledge of the meanings of those words chosen, comprehension will be richer.

The number and familiarity of ideas being communicated in the text contribute to the difficulty or ease of understanding as well. If the ideas being communicated are unknown to the reader, comprehension will not occur without support. Also, if there are many ideas included in a text that are not well-known, that text will be more complicated for a reader to understand. For example, a person who has played baseball for three years might have a better understanding of words like “run,” “hit,” and “sacrifice” when reading text about baseball and, in turn, read that text with deeper comprehension than someone who has never been to a baseball game.

Sentence structure and complexity makes some sentences more difficult to understand than others. Embedded clauses, the distance of a referent from what is being referred to (e.g., *his* idea, *strongly supported it*), figures of speech and grammatical forms have a strong

Figure 1. This conceptual model conveys the complexity, interactive, and multifaceted nature of reading comprehension.



(Snow, 2002)

influence on readability and reader “friendliness,” and as a result, on how well a reader comprehends. A cohesive text gives the reader the ability to make more connections to what is already known and to ideas within the text as it is read, contributing to better comprehension than a text that does not have that common cohesive thread to tie ideas together.

Teachers must provide direct instruction of difficult text features by building skills or scaffolding their instruction by engaging students in activities such as working through a difficult text together, or drawing attention to text features to build cohesion within a less than ideal text.

Teachers can scaffold tasks by:

- Previewing the text and/or vocabulary
- Shortening a task
- Giving choice
- Adding structure and feedback
- Partner-reading and choral-reading

Materials and resources for instruction and scaffolding can be found on the Pennsylvania Standards Aligned System website at www.pde.sas.org.

No comprehension strategy is powerful enough to compensate for the inability to read the words!

– Dr. Joe Torgeson

The Task: Factors That Influence Comprehension

- Purpose
- Importance
- Relevance
- Clarity
- Expected outcome

If the task is viewed as unimportant, irrelevant, or impossible to understand, then reading is likely to be superficial and comprehension is likely to suffer. Teachers must deliberately consider what their intended expectation for the reader will be when assigning a reading task.

Teachers may need to ask themselves these questions:

- Is the text to be read superficially or deeply?
- Is the purpose of the reading to gain information, to be entertained, to be moved emotionally, or to follow directions?
- Is the reading task imposed or self-selected?

The Context: Factors That Influence Comprehension

- Social environment
- Intellectual environment
- Physical environment

The context is the environment in which the reader, the text, and the task interact. The context affects the independence with which the reader will be able to comprehend the text that is read. In addition to the factors discussed above, the following questions are intended to guide the instructional process:

- Is there assistance available if something is not understood?
- Is there support for persisting through challenging text?
- Is there an expectation that deep comprehension will occur?
- Are there time constraints?
- Are there competing distractions?
- Is reading a social or individual experience?
- Can ideas be shared and enjoyed with others?

The social, intellectual, or physical environment in which reading takes place will influence how deeply and intentionally a person reads. Home, community, and social contexts help determine whether students will become good readers. If a text is not making sense, does the reader know where to find help to clarify meaning?

There needs to be sufficient support for a reader to persist through a challenging text, especially if the expectation is that deep comprehension will occur. Time pressures and distractions add to the degree of need for support for the reader. For many readers, time for collaboration and sharing ideas after reading is supportive and contributes to deeper comprehension.

Research-Supported Strategies

When strategies are used, it is helpful to remember that they can be taught through explicit instruction and are better used in bundles and across the content areas and grades. Research-supported strategies include:

- Comprehension monitoring
- Graphic and semantic organizers
- Prediction
- Question-answering
- Question generation
- Visual imagery
- Story structure
- Summarization

Further information about research supported strategies can be found at www.pdesas.org under the “Materials and Resources” and “Interventions” tabs.

Resources

National Institute for Literacy. (2001). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read*. Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy. [Online]. Available: <https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/PRFbooklet.pdf>

Pennsylvania Standards Aligned System. [Online]. Available: www.pdesas.org

Snow, C. E. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. RAND Corp.: Santa Monica, CA. [Online]. Available: www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1465.pdf

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Tom Wolf, Governor

