

Foundations for Reading Comprehension

Comprehension is a fundamental purpose of reading

Comprehension includes making sense of words, connecting ideas between different parts of a text as well as between the text and a reader's prior knowledge. It also includes engaging in conversations about word meanings; sharing experiences related to texts; listening attentively and various ways of consciously, actively and thoughtfully engaging readers with different texts so that they are able to actively build a deeper involvement and understanding of what they read.

How do children learn to comprehend text?

They learn slowly through lots of practice of reading a wide variety of texts, and with explicit teaching about comprehension (Adams, Treiman, & Pressley).

Five important foundations for building comprehension

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, very young children in preschool or Grade 1 who understand the ideas that they read about or listen to in narrative picture books, have been found to develop good reading comprehension one to two years later (Paris & Paris, 2003). If students do not have conceptual knowledge or prior experience related to print or to the subject matter which they are going to read about then it is important to build this knowledge before the actual reading begins so that the reading activity is meaningful and the children are able to comprehend. Conceptual knowledge is also called knowledge of the world. Research has found that children who have poor knowledge of the world are likely to become poor readers.

2. Language skills.

Effective oral language skills, both expressive and receptive have been found to influence reading comprehension. For example, children with good vocabulary skills who use many words to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings both in the spoken and written forms and who are also able understand many words in the text have better reading comprehension. (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

3. Fluent decoding.

Word recognition skills matter in comprehension. Research has clearly shown that students cannot understand texts if they cannot read the words. Before they can read the words, they have to be aware of the letters and the sounds represented by letters so that sounding out and blending of sounds can occur to pronounce words. Once pronounced, the good reader notices whether the word as recognized makes sense in the sentence and the text context being read and, if it does not, takes another look at the word to check if it might have been misread. Reading educators have paid enormous attention to the development of children's word-recognition

skills because they recognize that such skills are critical to the development of skilled comprehenders (Pressley 2000).

One of the most striking characteristics of skilled reading is that the reading of words is fluent. In other words the sounding out of words becomes automatic and does not require extra attention. This is important because reading i.e. both decoding and comprehension, takes place in and depends on short-term memory, and short-term capacity is very limited. The typical reader can only hold approximately seven pieces of information in mind at any one time. If that student is not fluent in word recognition, or if he or she is still sounding out words, much short-term capacity is consumed by decoding. The non fluent reader is thinking about the sounds of the individual letters and letter combinations while trying to blend them. When that is the case, there is not much capacity left for comprehension, either of the individual words being read or for understanding the sentences, paragraphs, or whole text being read. In contrast, because the fluent reader dedicates little capacity to word recognition, most of his or her capacity is available for comprehension. (Pressley,2002). Building word recognition skills and fluency is therefore a precursor to comprehension. The children need to be actively and meaningfully engaged in lots of actual reading, and also be provided with opportunities for letter and word level processing which equip them to become active and fluent decoders. **Making lots of time available to young readers to read a variety of texts is therefore essential for building fluency with comprehension.**

4. Strategies.

Comprehending text requires readers to use a variety of strategies such as setting a clear purpose for the reading; making and checking predictions; asking and answering questions in their head during the reading; looking back in the text to monitor understanding; connecting with related experience and occasionally stopping to paraphrase or summarize the important information (Block & Pressley, 2002). These strategies help the reader to engage more deeply and thoughtfully with the text. Different strategies are used before, during and after reading. Teachers may also identify strategies which build comprehension at the word level or at the text level, depending upon the reading level and specific needs of the readers.

5. Text features

Beginning readers need to know how titles, pictures, captions, headings, sub headings and key words relate to the meaning of text. They need to be helped to develop concepts about print, concepts about genres, and concepts about text structures that help them construct meaning from different types of text (Duke, 2004). In the case of narrative texts like stories, building awareness of story structures has been found to assist readers to engage better with the reading and also improves retelling.

Adapted from: Developing Comprehension Skills by Dr. Scott Paris; Meta cognition and self regulated cognition by Michael Pressley (2002) and Comprehension instruction by Michael Pressley (2000)