

Reading comprehension strategies

Recent research has emphasised that there are some things we can do before, during and after reading which help readers to read in active, purposeful and meaningful ways. These include prediction, asking questions, visualising, and summarizing to equip readers to read more efficiently and with understanding. These are called comprehension strategies. Young learners can be taught to use a variety of these strategies so that they are able to comprehend what they read. Most often readers use a combination of two or more of these Reading Comprehension Strategies during a single reading session. Within recent research the effectiveness of these comprehension strategies for supporting the processes of reading with understanding has been established. Since large numbers of children in our country are not reading with understanding, we need to reflect on ways in which we can use these strategies within our contexts.

Before reading

Set a purpose for reading

Before children begin to read help them to think why they are reading this text. Each child needs to be clear about the purpose for each reading. This helps them to engage with the text with greater interest and attentiveness. Initially teachers will need to set a purpose and state it clearly for the children, so that gradually, over time children learn to set their own purpose. It is important for children to be aware that a reader's purpose decides how the text is read.

Preview the Text (use the text structure)

The children are guided to look at the title, pictures, table of contents, diagrams; captions under pictures, headings, bold-faced print, key words and other graphics before the actual reading begins. This is particularly useful while reading expository texts, as it gives a sense of the text before reading it. Young children learn that going through the text structure helps them to know the subject matter. It may also help to them to broadly locate different information in the text. In the case of a story, familiarity with the story structure or pictures aids in the retelling.

Activate background knowledge

A reader constructs meaning actively during the reading by connecting the written words to their prior experience and knowledge. Begin by explaining how it helps to build understanding when we connect what we are reading about with what we already know. Encourage children to think about what they already know about the content that they will read about as well as about the about the different words and their meanings. To activate background knowledge teachers need to ask children questions like: "what do you know about ...", "What does this remind you of?" or "Have you come across this word earlier? "What do you thinkmeans?"

Such a discussion or brain storming before the reading helps children to understand. Also children who do not have background knowledge about a particular topic listen to others and acquire knowledge (build schemas) which will help them to understand the text being read.

Predict

Ask children to think what might happen in the story, what words may be used, or what information the text might contain. Later, as they read encourage them to confirm if their prediction was correct or not. This is a useful strategy for getting children to read attentively.

Ask questions

Encourage children to look at the title, the cover page and pictures and think of all the questions that come to their mind? They can note these and then look for answers as they read later on.

During reading

Study words and cross-check their meanings

Encourage children to identify unfamiliar or difficult words while reading individually or in pairs. They can be asked to underline these lightly with pencil. Next, they are helped to study the underlined words carefully and use strategies like sounding out the different word parts and then blending these parts together to read aloud or decode the whole word. They may also use their knowledge of sounds and symbols to decode the word. With practice the children need to be able to do this automatically and fluently. Fluency in decoding is essential for comprehension.

In addition, children need to arrive at the meaning of unknown word by using clues such as other words in the sentence to make a guess. They can be shown how to cross check their meaning by asking questions like "Does this word look right, sound right, and make sense?". The important thing is for the children to be actively involved in this entire process of problem solving for decoding and identifying the meaning of unknown words. Teachers may want to get children identify unfamiliar / difficult words before the actual reading.

Predict and confirm

From time to time while reading the children are encouraged to stop and ask "What do I expect to read about next?", "What do I think will happen next?", "Did that make sense?", or "Am I finding the answers to my questions about this topic?" As they read children try and confirm their earlier predictions to figure out which were correct and which were not. This helps to generate a greater interest in the text so that readers read more attentively.

Visualise.

While reading aloud a text to the children in the class a teacher can talk about the mental pictures or images that form in her head. Children can then be asked to share the mental pictures that have formed in their heads. They can even draw pictures of what they see in their minds eye and compare them with each other's pictures. Children can also be asked to share the feelings and emotions that they experience. Such visualising helps children to make deeper connections with what they are reading about. Children can be asked to use their different sense while visualising. Visualising can be used effectively with literary texts such as stories or poems or picture books.

Monitor reading - Skip, read on, and go back

To improve children's reading with comprehension, it is important to teach them to monitor as they read, so that they ask themselves consistently, "Is what I am reading making sense?"



Children need to learn that they can do something when text seems not to make sense. They can try sounding out an unclear word again or rereading the part of a text that seems confusing. When problems are detected, students should know that they need to reprocess (e.g., by attempting to sound out problematic words again or rereading). Sometimes when problems occur they can skip an unfamiliar word and read to the end of the sentence or paragraph, thinking about what would make sense. Then, go back to the beginning of a sentence or paragraph and reread to try to figure out the word. When they still do not understand a text, they need to know that they can seek clarification by asking a more proficient peer or the teacher. To monitor their reading readers need to learn to stop from time to time during the reading and think about what has happened in the story or what information has been given in the text, so far.

Connect background knowledge to the Information in the text

During the reading, particularly in a lengthy text, the teacher may stop at some points and ask children to think about what the text reminds them of. They may be asked to think of what they already know about the subject or story or to think of the ways in which the text that they are reading is similar to what they already know or have experienced and how it is different. Connecting in these personalised ways gives greater meaning to the text for each reader. Gradually, through practice the children begin to use this strategy on their own.

Think about explicit and implicit Information (make inferences)

Guide the children to think about what information is given directly. Also guide them to think about what they know from reading that is not directly stated in words such as how a character's actions show feelings or why things may have happened based on the clues the author gave. This helps young readers to go beyond the text and arrive at inferences which add to the meaning. For example, in the following two sentences:

It was very wet. Many people were carrying umbrellas.

Even though the text does not directly state it, a comprehending reader is able to *infer* from the given text that it is raining.

After Reading

Retell

Children are asked to repeat to someone in their own words what they have read or write about what happened in the story, including characters, plot, and important events. If they read a nonfiction piece, they can review what information was presented.

Summarize

Readers need to learn to identify the most important ideas in the text and put them in their own words. While summarizing readers will need to eliminate unnecessary information and put together just the main points.

Use a graphic organizer

At the end of a reading provide a story map, biography wheel, Venn diagram, a semantic map or a flow chart or other visual ways for children to show what was included in what they have just read.



Draw conclusions

Children can be asked to think about what predictions they had made before and during reading. And then look back and think about what they have read. They can consider if their questions were answered or if their predictions were correct.

Reread

Children can be asked to reread the text or a section of the text to understand it better.

Discuss and respond

Encourage children to talk with someone about what they have read. They can also be encouraged to ask each other questions, and to look back at the book to defend their responses or opinions.

Write or draw to respond to the text supports understanding

Readers may write about what they have read, expressing their response i.e. what the text made them think of ; how it made them feel; which were the bits they related to and which were the bits they did not like or were unclear. While responding readers are free to express their opinions and relate the text to their individual thoughts, ideas and experiences. In the case of information text they may want to write about what they learned or in what way was the text different to what they already knew. In the case of both literary and information texts the readers need to be encouraged to connect the text to their personal experiences, thoughts and feelings so that they make inner connections with the text, and absorb and understand it. Post reading responses can be made through writing or drawing or performances.