



Reading Comprehension

Facts For Teachers

- Reading comprehension is “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Snow, 2002). This definition of reading comprehension emphasizes both what the author has written in the text and what the reader brings to the text in terms of background knowledge and the ability to think and interpret about what the author has written.
- Reading comprehension is affected by the student’s ability to access, or read, the text. No matter how well a student is able to think about what the author has written, if he/she is not able to read the words accurately and fluently, reading comprehension is affected. Therefore, the ability to think about text is dependent upon such skills as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and vocabulary development.
- The National Reading Panel (NRP) found that students benefit from direct comprehension strategy instruction. A “strategy” is an intentional action that a reader takes to help better understand or remember what is being read. Comprehension strategies and teaching strategies are not the same! Answering questions on a worksheet after reading a selection, or practicing skills such as sequencing or drawing conclusions does not constitute comprehension “strategy” instruction. Strategy instruction involves teaching students how to “think” during reading to improve their understanding of text.
- In a report prepared for the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, a panel of experts found the following strategies effective in improving reading comprehension:

Activating Prior Knowledge/Predicting
Questioning
Visualization
Monitoring, Clarifying, or Fixing-up
Drawing Inferences
Summarizing/Retelling

- Comprehension strategy instruction should be taught using a variety of text. Strategy instruction has been typically taught using literature and narrative text; however, students are not often generalizing the strategies to expository text (e.g. science and social studies text).
- Providing an explanation of the what the strategy is and how to apply the strategy while reading is critical.
- The NRP found the “reciprocal teaching approach” to be an excellent way to teach strategy instruction. Reciprocal teaching shows students how to used prediction, questioning, clarification and summarization to help understand text. This approach involves the gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student (I do– we do– you do). Video demonstrations of this strategy can be found on either Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org) or teachertube.
- The goal of comprehension strategy instruction is for the student to be able to apply a strategy independently while reading text.



Comprehension Strategies

1. Activating Prior Knowledge/ Predicting

Good readers use what they already know to help make sense of what they are reading. They also use their knowledge to make predictions about the text and then verify their predictions as they continue to read.

To activate prior knowledge teachers can: brainstorm ideas regarding the title, encourage discussions about the topic, use semantic maps prior to and during reading, develop questions to be answered during reading, and use visual aids. Help the students to make connections to their lives and past experiences.

2. Questioning

Good readers ask questions before, during and after reading.

To help students learn how to ask questions during reading: prompt students to ask both “surface” and “under the surface” questions. Examples of under the surface questions include: “What is the author trying to say?”

3. Visualizing

Good readers form mental images or pictures in their mind as they are reading the text.

Teachers can help students form mental images by: Stopping periodically at parts in a story while reading text aloud to the class to share mental images (e.g. “After reading this paragraph, I am picturing in my mind....”). Encouraging students to draw scenes can also help students understand that making “movies in their minds” while reading helps with understanding.

4. Monitoring, Clarifying, and Fixing Up

Good readers know when they are struggling understanding the text and are able to apply strategies to help them understand. Good readers re-read text, restate in their own words what is happening, read sentences before and after confusing parts to help with clarification, and use context or visual cues to help them understand.

Teachers can help students learn these strategies by: While reading text aloud to students, provide a think-aloud during a part of confusing text (e.g. “um, I’m not sure what this means, I’m going to re-read....”). Having students restate sections of text in their own words and check for their own understanding of what they are reading are good strategies in improving reading comprehension.

5. Drawing Inferences

Good readers can “read between the lines”. They can take what is written on the page and combine it with what they know to draw conclusions about the text.

Teachers can help students learn to draw inferences by: Teaching students to identify key words and make predictions based on those words and using a “question/inference” graphic organizer.

6. Summarizing/Retelling

Good readers are able to identify the main idea of the text and restate it in their own words.

Teachers can help students summarize by: Providing direct modeling of how to summarize text and plenty of opportunities to practice the skill.

