Enhancing Students’ Reading Comprehension

You are probably aware that reading is a complex process. Yet, teachers are dismayed on a daily basis when their students read material earmarked for their curriculum and demonstrate little or no comprehension of what they read.

The extensive research over the years indicates there are at least five features which are essential components to include in your classroom to help your students comprehend and learn. (Fielding & Pearson, 1994, Allington, 2002, and Rose, 2001). These features are:

1. giving background and connecting to students’ prior knowledge;
2. providing a strong vocabulary program;
3. setting aside ample opportunity for actual reading and writing in the classroom;
4. allowing time for students to talk about the reading; and
5. incorporating teacher directed instruction and modeling of reading/thinking strategies.

1. Connecting to Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge is defined as all of an individual’s previous learning and experiences. Research tells us that learning is enhanced when new information is integrated with the learner’s existing knowledge (Rumelhart, 1980, Adams & Bertram, 1980). The connection between an individual’s prior knowledge and reading comprehension has been clearly demonstrated over time (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, & Goetz, 1977).

There are two kinds of prior knowledge for you to consider. One is text-specific knowledge, such as how the writing is organized, and the second is topic-specific knowledge. (Cooper, 1993). Topic-specific knowledge is knowledge about the information to be read and includes key concepts and vocabulary.

Providing background knowledge can be direct, such as a field trip, experiment, or examination of an object; or indirect when students view a video, watch a demonstration, read information, or participate in a discussion. Good readers draw on their prior knowledge and experience to increase understanding, so when you teach students how to connect to the text, you are giving them a tool to better understand what they are reading (Christen & Murphy, 1991). Here are a few useful methods for activating background:

2. Word connection: When you hear the words infection, pathogen, bacteria and virus, what do you think of?
3. Call to mind: Tell me what you know about ________.
4. ABC Brainstorming (Santa, et. al., 2004)
   In this technique, students write the alphabet down the side of a sheet of notebook paper and brainstorm terms associated with the topic that begin with each letter of the alphabet. If you’re working with young children, you can use chart paper and let the group brainstorm while you write their responses.
5. Think-Aloud (Davey, 1983)
In this procedure, you read aloud and talk through your thought processes, in essence, modeling for students how you connect your prior knowledge to the text. For example, you might say: *This reminds me of...*, *This makes me think of...*.

2. **Strong Vocabulary Program**

Vocabulary is not the act of correct pronunciation but, rather, the possession of a broad base of word meanings, which is a basic component of comprehension. To increase comprehension and learning, you need to institute a strong vocabulary acquisition program where new words are directly taught and reinforced.

In order to truly learn new words, students must be immersed in words in meaningful ways and through repeated exposure to those words. (Stahl, 1986, Pressley, 2000, Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). There are many methods to include in a vocabulary program including the following:

**Concept of Definition (Word Map) (Schwartz & Raphael, 1985)**

A map uses three essential questions: What is it? (Category) What is it like? (Properties) and What are some examples? (Illustrations).

![Diagram](image.png)

**Word sorts**

When students categorize, they are actively analyzing, comparing and contrasting. Bear, et. al (2004) recommend word sorts for every level of learner. To focus on word meaning, begin by giving students the categories and allowing them to sort the vocabulary words (closed sort). As students understand the process, present only the words and have students determine the categories (open sort).

For example: math students might sort the following terms: $\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{3}{4}, .25, .50, .75, 1, 5, 10,$
3. Time for Actual Reading and Writing

Research by Anderson, et. al (1985) concluded that the amount of time students spent in school engaged in independent reading was positively related to reading achievement. What students need is ample time for actual text reading. Research does not give us suggestions on how much time we should allocate, but Fielding and Pearson (1994) recommend that the time for actual classroom reading should be more than that which is given to learning about reading or talking/writing about what was read.

As many teachers have found, simply saying, Read chapter 5, is not effective in getting students to read independently. Two strategies that can enhance independent reading time and also ensure that students get the most out of their reading assignments are the Directed Reading Activity (Betts, 1946) and the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1969). When used correctly, these strategies can successfully guide your students to higher levels of comprehension. The additional strategies which follow can also enhance reading performance in the classroom:

**Read and Say Something** (Short, Harste, & Burke (1996)
Students are given an opportunity to construct meaning and work with a partner. Here’s how it works:
- Assign students a partner
- Students read an assigned portion of the selection
- When finished, they turn to their partner and “say something” about what they just read.
  Things to say include: make a prediction, ask a question, clarify, make a comment or make a connection. It’s best to give sentence starters such as, I predict that... Why did...
  This is confusing because... This is really saying... This reminds me of...
- You assign more text to read and the process is repeated.
- After the selection is completed, conduct a whole-class discussion on the reading.

**Reading Teams**
Students are assigned to a team of 3 or 4 students and take turns reading the selection aloud to their team. You should structure the reading by telling students how many lines/paragraphs each person is to read aloud.

**Reading Response Logs**
There are many examples of response logs in the literature. One generic model, adapted from Tovani (2004) is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Response Log</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Page _____ to page _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary (4-6 sentences). Retell what you read about.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Response (5-8 sentences).

**Possible ways to begin a response:**
This connects to my life in this way…
I wonder…
_______ is important because…
I don’t understand…
I predict that …
My favorite part so far is…
This is confusing because….

Questions in my head as I was reading this:

Here are three of the many available web sites that offer free downloads of reading logs:
http://www.countryclipart.com/ReadingLogs/readinglogs.htm
http://edhelper.com/teachers/reading_log.htm
http://www.abcteach.com/directory/basics/reading/reading_logs

4. Time for Student Talk

If you really want students to participate in a discussion, then you can’t just say: *Go talk about your reading.* The traditional Q&A with the teacher asking all the questions is not the type of discussion we’re after either. The goal here is a natural type of conversation.

Fostering good discussions means you must see yourself as a member of the group rather than as the director. In this sense, you are not the inquisitor but an equal member who is interested in discussing ideas, hypotheses, problems and strategies.

You should provide prompts for students to help them in their discussions. Prompts also can be given as preparation for the discussion and can help guide the students to meaningful responses.

*What’s the author’s message?*
*Describe the (characters, procedure, discovery, etc)*
*What’s your opinion of…? Why do you hold that opinion?*
*Compare __________ with __________.*
*What’s important to remember from the reading?*
*What does the author mean when he writes…*

5. Direct Instruction in Reading Skills

Effective teachers routinely offer direct, specific demonstrations of useful reading strategies and model the thinking processes that skilled readers use. These teachers do not say “Watch me” and
then assign a worksheet to practice. Rather, effective teachers use a direct instruction approach that includes using think-alouds as they explicitly model the strategy and then provide opportunities for students to practice the strategy with teacher support. (Allington, 2002)

Reading comprehension strategies may already be incorporated in your curriculum. If not, you can select from those listed below.

- Comparison/contrast
- Cause and effect
- Sequencing
- Main idea and supporting details
- Character analysis
- Literary elements (characters, plot, climax, resolution, etc.)
- Point of view
- Text Structure
- Reading graphic aids
- Inferencing
- Drawing Conclusions
- Predicting/Hypothesizing

A Supportive Environment

If you want your students to comprehend what they read and hear, you will need to provide a classroom environment that supports comprehension. More importantly, we have to stop thinking of reading instruction as only occurring in the primary or intermediate elementary years or only in reading classes.

Some experts suggest that the textbook will be an outmoded artifact as the computer becomes a major teaching tool. Reading comprehension and thinking skills, whether used with a paper-bound text or a computer screen, are still the same skills. In fact, the ability to discriminate relevant information from the irrelevant is even more critical with students’ use of the Internet. So, whether you use the paper version or the flat screen, one of your major tasks will be to support your students’ reading comprehension by incorporating the five aspects described here.
References


Christen, W. L. & Murphy, T. J. 1991. Increasing comprehension by activating prior knowledge. ERIC Digest. ED328885


