

# READING COMPREHENSION

## What Every Teacher Needs to Know

*Maureen McLaughlin*

As reading teachers, we share the common goal of teaching students to become active, strategic readers who successfully comprehend text. Of course, to teach students to be successful readers, we need to know what comprehension is, how it works, and how we can help our students to comprehend what they read.

In this article, the essentials of reading comprehension are examined. Questions explored include: What is reading comprehension? What is the role of good readers? What is the role of influential teachers? Why are motivation and engagement so integral to comprehension? What are examples of comprehension strategies? Why is explicit instruction so important? How are vocabulary and comprehension related? Why should students be reading multiple types and levels of text? Why should we integrate multiple representations of thinking into our teaching? How can we assess students' comprehension? How can we and our students comprehend at deeper levels?

The responses to these queries are presented through 10 teaching principles, each of which is briefly detailed. They begin with a discussion of the nature of reading comprehension. Then the focus shifts to the roles of teachers and students in the comprehension process. Next, comprehension-related teaching issues are delineated. Finally, the discussion centers on comprehending at deeper levels.

### **Principle 1: Base Your Understanding of Comprehension on the Social Constructivist Nature of Reading**

Today's reading researchers suggest that comprehension is a multifaceted process. Factors such as constructivist beliefs, influential teachers, active readers, text, and type of instruction play important roles in the construction of meaning. This is a marked change from the 1970s, when Durkin (1978) reported that little if any comprehension instruction occurred in classrooms.

In current thinking, reading comprehension is viewed as:

the construction of meaning of a written or spoken communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message in a particular communicative context. Note: The presumption here is that meaning resides in the intentional problem-solving, thinking processes of the interpreter during such an interchange, that the content of meaning is influenced by that person's prior knowledge and experience, and that the message so constructed by the receiver may or may not be congruent with the message sent. (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 39)

In summary, meaning is constructed when readers make connections between what they know (prior knowledge) and what they are reading (the text). Duke and Pearson (2002) further noted that

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"Comprehension is a consuming, continuous, and complex activity, but one that, for good readers, is both satisfying and productive" (p. 206).

In reading comprehension, constructivism is reflected in schema-based learning development, which suggests that learning takes place when new information is integrated with what is already known. The more prior knowledge and experience readers have with a particular topic, the easier it is for them to make connections between what they are learning and what they know (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Pearson, 1984). The social constructivist nature of comprehension suggests that readers refine their understanding by negotiating meaning with others. This typically occurs through discussion. Engaging students in such discussion promotes active engagement in constructing meaning from a text (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). The social nature of constructing meaning reflects Vygotsky's (1978) principle of social mediation.

## **Principle 2: Understand Students' Roles in the Reading Comprehension Process**

Much of what we know about comprehension is based on studies of good readers. These students actively participate in reading. They have

clear goals and constantly monitor the relation between the goals they have set and the text they are reading (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2000). These readers use a repertoire of comprehension strategies to facilitate the construction of meaning. Researchers believe that using such strategies helps students become metacognitive readers, who can think about and monitor their own thinking while reading (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Roehler & Duffy, 1984).

Good readers read both narrative and expository texts and know how to figure out unfamiliar words. They use their knowledge of text structure to efficiently and strategically process text (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). These students also

spontaneously generate questions at different points in the reading process for a variety of reasons. They are problem solvers who have the ability to discover new information on their own.

Good readers read widely, monitor their understanding, and negotiate meaning. They know when they are constructing meaning and when they are not. When comprehension breaks down because of lack of background information, difficulty of words, or unfamiliar text structure, good readers know and use a variety of "fix up" strategies. These include rereading, changing the pace of reading, using context clues, and cross-checking cueing systems. These readers are able to select the appropriate strategies and consistently focus on making sense of text.

## **Principle 3: Be an Influential Teacher**

Influential teachers are highly valued participants in the reading process. They know the importance of every student comprehending successfully. In fact, the International Reading Association (2000) reported that it is



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the teacher's knowledge that makes a difference in student achievement. The teacher's role in the reading process is to create experiences and environments that introduce, nurture, or extend students' abilities to engage with text. This requires that teachers use explicit instruction, which includes modeling, scaffolding, facilitating, and participating (Au & Raphael, 1998). Both reading researchers and professional organizations have delineated the characteristics of influential reading teachers (International Reading Association, 2000; Ruddell, 1995, 2004). The following descriptors of such reading teachers integrate their ideas.

Influential reading teachers do the following:

- Believe that all children can learn
- Differentiate instruction and know that motivation and multiple kinds of text are essential elements of teaching and learning
- Understand that reading is a social constructivist process that functions best in authentic situations
- Teach in print-rich, concept-rich environments
- Have in-depth knowledge of various aspects of literacy, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening
- Provide myriad opportunities for students to read, write, and discuss
- Teach for a variety of purposes, using diverse methods, materials, and grouping patterns to focus

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on individual needs, interests, and learning styles

- Understand the skills and strategies good readers use and can teach students how to use them
- Use the information gleaned from formative assessments to increase understanding of individual student's strengths and needs
- Monitor student learning and adjust teaching as needed to ensure the success of all learners

### **Principle 4: Motivate and Engage Students**

Motivation is a key factor in comprehension. Gambrell (1996) suggested that "classroom cultures that foster reading motivation are characterized by a teacher who is a reading model, a book-rich classroom environment, opportunities for choice, familiarity with books, and literacy-related incentives that reflect the value of reading" (p. 20). Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni (1996) noted that highly motivated readers read for a wide variety of reasons, including curiosity, involvement, social interchange, and emotional satisfaction.

The engagement perspective on reading integrates cognitive, motivational, and social aspects of reading (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999). Engaged learners achieve because they want to understand, they possess intrinsic motivation for interacting with text, they use cognitive skills to understand, and they share knowledge by talking with

teachers and peers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Engaged readers read widely for enjoyment and have positive attitudes about reading.

Engaged readers transact with text and construct understandings based on connections between prior knowledge and new information. Baker and Wigfield (1999) noted that "engaged readers are motivated to read for different purposes, use knowledge gained from previous experience to generate new understandings, and participate in meaningful social interactions around reading" (p. 453). Guthrie and Humenick (2004) further noted that goals for reading, interest in the topic, and choices about what to read and how to respond to reading contribute to the reader's motivation and engagement. Gambrell (2011) suggested that students who are highly motivated to read will choose to read and continue to read over time.

### **Principle 5: Teach Reading Comprehension Strategies**

Using a repertoire of reading comprehension strategies enhances readers' reasoning (Duke, Pressley, & Hilden, 2004; Paris & Paris, 2007; Pressley, 2006). Comprehension strategies vary to some degree by publication, but an example of a typical listing are those taught in Guided Comprehension. Guided Comprehension is a context in which students learn and use comprehension strategies in a variety of settings in which multiple levels and types of text are used (McLaughlin & Allen, 2009). The strategies taught in Guided Comprehension include the following:

- Previewing—Activating prior knowledge, predicting, and setting purposes for reading
- Self-questioning—Generating questions to guide reading

*"Research supports that the explicit instruction of comprehension strategies increases students' comprehension."*

- Making connections—Relating reading to self, text, and others
- Visualizing—Creating mental pictures of text while reading
- Knowing how words work—Understanding words through strategic vocabulary development, including the use of graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic cueing systems
- Monitoring—Asking “Does this make sense?” and adapting strategic processes to accommodate the response
- Summarizing—Synthesizing important ideas
- Evaluating—Making judgments about text content and the author’s craft

Research supports that the explicit instruction of comprehension strategies increases students' comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Research further suggests that comprehension strategy instruction should begin in the primary grades (Hilden & Pressley, 2002; McLaughlin, 2003).

Explicit instruction typically involves a multiple-step process, during which teachers gradually release responsibility to students. McLaughlin and Allen

(2009) recommended a framework for explicit strategy instruction that involves five steps: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect.

When using explicit instruction, teachers introduce the text and encourage students to activate their prior knowledge, make connections, and set purposes for reading. Explicit instruction involves directly teaching students, often through a multiple-step process that promotes scaffolding. Typically, there is a great deal of teacher support in the earlier steps, followed by a gradual release of responsibility to the students in the later steps.

For example, when teaching students to summarize, teachers may begin by explaining and demonstrating summarizing. In the explanation step, the strategies and an example application would be described and discussed. When teaching summarizing, a Draw and Write Retelling could be the strategy application. In the demonstration step, a think-aloud (Davey, 1983) would

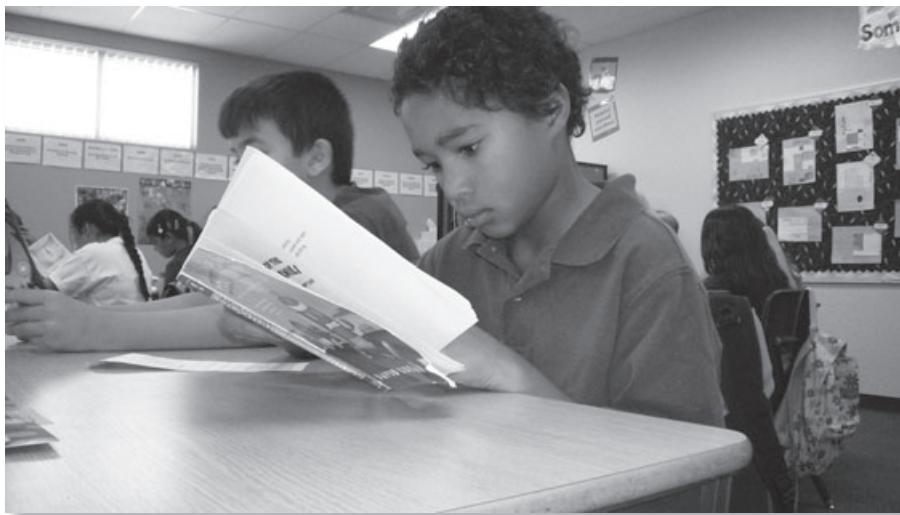
be used to share teachers' thought processes as the strategies are modeled. At this point, teachers would provide full support to students. In the next step, teachers would guide students as they summarize in small groups or with partners. In this stage, teachers would offer support as needed. Finally, teachers would encourage students to practice summarizing independently. At this point, teachers would provide little or no support. As the teachers move from full support to providing support as needed to providing little or no support, students take on more and more responsibility. As Pearson and Hoffman (2011) noted,

Teachers who teach reading in this way are using what we have come to call the *gradual release of responsibility* (from teacher to student) for helping readers become independent and self-sufficient readers—readers who know when and whether they have understood a text, and, if they haven’t, what to do to fix things. (pp. 32–33)

During explicit instruction, teachers purposefully interact with students



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and take an active role in their acquisition of strategies by explaining, demonstrating, and guiding (Dahl & Farnan, 1998; McLaughlin, 2010, 2011; Roehler & Duffy, 1984). Explicitly teaching comprehension strategies affords teachers opportunities to monitor students in various stages of learning. As they observe students gaining competence in using strategies, teachers gradually release responsibility for learning to the students, who apply the strategies independently in their everyday reading after practicing them in a variety of settings. This knowledge provides further insights into students' progress, interests, and abilities that can often be used to differentiate further instruction. Differentiation enables us to accommodate the diversity of students' needs and create multiple pathways to learning during comprehension instruction (Tyner & Green, 2009).

### **Principle 6: Foster the Development and Use of Vocabulary**

Vocabulary development and instruction have strong ties to reading comprehension. As the National Reading Panel (2000) noted, "Reading

comprehension is a complex, cognitive process that cannot be understood without a clear description of the role that vocabulary development and vocabulary instruction play in the understanding of what has been read" (p. 13). Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) supported this view, observing, "Learning new concepts and words that encode them is essential to comprehension development" (p. 217).

Harris and Hodges (1995) described students' ever-growing knowledge of words and their meanings as *vocabulary development*. They note that vocabulary development also refers to the teaching–learning processes that lead to such growth. Vocabulary development is influenced by the amount and variety of text students read (Baumann & Kame'enui, 1991; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Snow et al.,

1998). Teacher read-alouds, which offer students access to a variety of levels of text, also contribute to this process (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998).

Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, and Watts-Taffe (2006) suggested that effective vocabulary instruction is characterized by the following:

- An environment that fosters word consciousness—"the awareness of and interest in learning and using new words and becoming more skillful and precise in word usage" (Graves and Watts-Taffe, 2002, p. 144)
- Students who actively participate in the process
- Instruction that integrates vocabulary with the curriculum and word learning throughout the day and across subject areas
- Instruction that provides both definitional and contextual information
- Teachers who provide multiple exposures to words
- Teachers who provide numerous, ongoing opportunities to use the words

Baumann and Kame'enui (1991) suggested that explicit instruction of vocabulary and learning from context should be balanced. The instruction should be meaningful to students, include words from students' reading, and focus on a variety of strategies for determining the meanings of

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unfamiliar words (Blachowicz & Lee, 1991). Another important aspect of such teaching is making connections between the vocabulary and students' background knowledge.

To infuse vocabulary across curriculums, Blachowicz, Fisher, and Watts-Taffe (2011) suggested that teachers do the following:

- Ensure the classroom is full of accountable talk, listening, reading and writing.
  - Intentionally teach individual words.
  - Build and strengthen students' word learning strategies and understanding of the generative word elements, such as roots and affixes.
  - Develop word consciousness by introducing categories of word relations.
  - Use technology to make word investigations more rewarding.
- (pp. 215–216)

### **Principle 7: Provide Students With a Variety of Types and Levels of Text**

Students benefit from engaging daily with multiple types and levels of text. Experience in reading multiple genres provides students with knowledge of numerous text structures and improves their text-driven processing (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). Transacting with a wide variety of genres—including biography, historical fiction, legends, poetry, articles, and brochures—enhances students' motivation and increases their comprehension (Gambrell, 2001). When leveled text is being used, teachers scaffold learning experiences, and students receive varying levels of support, depending on the purpose of the reading and the instructional setting.

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We provide independent-level or easy text when students are working on their own in literacy centers or routines or practicing oral reading fluency. Students can read texts at this level with no teacher support. We use instructional level text or "just right" text when students are engaged in teacher-guided small groups, such as guided reading. Students can read text at this level with some assistance from the teacher. We do not encourage students to read frustration-level text on their own, but we can share texts at more challenging levels in several ways, including teacher read-aloud, cross-age reading experiences, and books on CD.

Although students read text at multiple levels for different purposes, they are continuously provided with opportunities to read increasingly complex text. Examples of this can be seen as students' reading abilities increase and they move to groups reading higher level texts during teacher-guided small-group instruction.

It is important to note that student interest plays a role in text selection. To determine individual interests, teachers can invite students to complete interest inventories, literacy histories, or interviews with cross-age partners. The information gleaned from these activities can be used when selecting new books for classroom, school, and community libraries, as well as when recommending book titles to parents.

### **Principle 8: Encourage Students to Use Multiple Modes of Representing Thinking**

We may often ask our students to provide either an oral or written response, because those typically are the most frequently used response modes. Oral and written responses are fine, but we also need to offer students alternative modes of response—including sketching, dramatizing, singing, and "hands-on" activities, such as creating projects.

Because we do not all learn in the same way, the same instructional environment, methods, and resources are effective for some learners and ineffective for others (Burke & Dunn, 2003). Offering students opportunities to express their thoughts through multiple modes of representation allows them to choose their strength modalities when expressing their ideas. Although offering multiple modes of response is motivational for all students, it is particularly beneficial for struggling readers.

### **Principle 9: Embed Formative Assessments in Your Everyday Teaching**

Formative assessment captures students' performance as they engage in the process of learning. It has the ability to afford insights into students' understandings at any given point in the learning experience. Formative

*"Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text."*

assessment is viewed not as an add-on, but rather as a natural component of teaching and learning.

Formative assessments can be used in a variety of instructional settings. This includes scaffolded learning experiences in which students have varying degrees of teacher support. Assessing in this context captures the students' emerging abilities and provides insights that may not be gleaned from independent settings (Minick, 1987). Examples of formative assessments include teacher observation of student reading and discussion, informal written responses, and strategy applications, such as Bookmark Technique (McLaughlin, 2011), the Concept of Definition Map (Schwartz & Raphael, 1985), and the K-W-L (Ogle, 1986). Formative assessment presents a natural, viable, and continuous means for teachers to learn about what students understand. It occurs every day and provides quality information about student learning that can be used to inform and differentiate instruction. Formative assessment is distinctive because it occurs not after learning, but rather within the process of teaching and learning.

### Principle 10: Teach Students to Comprehend at Deeper Levels

Current thinking about reading suggests that we should also teach our students to comprehend at deeper levels—levels that require readers to understand

beyond the information on the printed page or screen and critically analyze the author's message (Luke & Freebody, 1999; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, 2011). In *critical literacy*, an approach that promotes deeper comprehension, readers move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. These readers ponder what the author wants them to believe, take action, and promote fairness between people. Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity. It addresses issues of power and promotes reflection, action, and transformation (Freire, 1970).

Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to understand such issues as why the author wrote about a particular topic, why he or she wrote from a particular perspective, and why some ideas about the topic were included and others were not. Becoming critically literate means that we do not passively accept information imparted by others, but rather that we question the source of

the ideas, examine who is represented and who is marginalized, and then take action.

Reading from this perspective requires both the ability and the deliberate inclination to think critically about—to analyze and evaluate—the power relationship that exists between the reader and the author—to know that even though the author has the power to create and present the message, readers have the power and the right to be text critics: to read, question, and analyze the author's message. Understanding this power relationship is the essence of critical literacy.

The role of the teacher in initiating and developing critical literacy is multifaceted. It begins with personal understanding and use of critical literacy and extends to teaching students about critical literacy, modeling reading from a critical stance in everyday teaching and learning experiences, and providing students with access to a variety of texts that represent critical literacy. Examples of books that represent critical literacy are featured in the Table.

**Table Trade Books on Topics That Represent Critical Literacy**

- Anderson, M.T. (2002). *Feed*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.
- Bunting, E. (1994). *Smoky night*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Bunting, E. (2006). *One green apple*. New York: Clarion.
- Cronin, D. (2000). *Click, clack, moo: Cows that type*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Elliott, L.M. (2001). *Under a war-torn sky*. New York: Hyperion.
- Fenner, F. (1991). *Randall's wall*. New York: Simon and Schuster Children's Publishers.
- Gold, A.L. (2000). *A special fate: Chiune Sugihara: Hero of the Holocaust*. New York: Scholastic.
- Grimes, N. (2002). *Talkin' about Bessie*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hesse, K. (2004). *The cats of Krasinski Square*. New York: Scholastic.
- Kelly, J. (2011). *The evolution of Calpurnia Tate*. New York: Square Fish.
- Matas, C. (2001). *The war within: A novel of The Civil War*. New York: Aladdin.
- Myers, W.D. (2001). *Monster*. New York: Amistad.
- Silverstein, S. (1964). *The giving tree*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Winter, J. (2008). *Wangari's trees of peace: A true story from Africa*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
- Woodson, J. (2001). *The other side*. New York: Putnam.
- Yolen, J. (1996). *Encounter*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.

When examining the teacher's role, it is important to note that neither teachers nor students can just "become critical." It is a process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, 2011). This includes developing theoretical, research, and pedagogical repertoires; changing with time and circumstance; engaging in self-critical practices; and remaining open to possibilities (Comber, 2001). The teacher's role in helping students to become critically aware begins with personal understanding of and engagement in critical literacy.

Once the teacher has become critically aware, teaching students to read from a critical stance should be a natural process that occurs over time. The teacher might explain what it means to be critically aware and then demonstrate it by using a read-aloud and a think-aloud. During this process, the teacher would provide a critical perspective that questions and challenges the text. She may use questions such as: Whose viewpoint is expressed? Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted? What action might you take based on what you have learned? After the teacher explains and demonstrates, students—in pairs or small groups—offer responses as the teacher guides their reading and as they practice reading from a critical stance. As a final step, the teacher and the students reflect on what they know about being critically aware and how it helped them to understand the text at deeper levels. This typically leads to discussions of actions the students may take and how they can continue to read from a critical stance.

Students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of comprehending text at deeper levels. They understand that the information

presented in texts, magazines, newspapers, song lyrics, and websites has been authored from a particular perspective for a particular purpose. They know that meaning is "grounded in the social, political, cultural and historic contexts of the reading event" (Serafini, 2003). The goal is for readers to become text critics in everyday life—to naturally comprehend information sources from a critical stance. As Pearson (2001) suggested, comprehension is not enough. It must have a critical edge.

## Final Thoughts

Doing everything we can to help our students comprehend is a noble goal—one in which I hope we will all choose to engage. Our efforts will take us far beyond the 10 principles. Our teaching will require perseverance, some flexibility, a bit of humor, and a lot of caring, but in the end, we will have the wonderfully rewarding experience of observing our students comprehending to their greatest potentials. That will be quite a moment—particularly because we will know that it was the teacher who made the difference.

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