

Comprehension Instruction: Intentional, Explicit, Focused

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Good Comprehenders: What We Know From Research	
Core Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Connections • Determine Importance • Visualize • Question • Infer (includes Prediction), Summarize • Synthesize • Use Schema • Self-Monitor Understanding • Use Fix-Up Strategies
Behaviors of Good Comprehenders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are active • Set goals • Evaluate whether the text and their reading of it is meeting their goals • Look over the text • Notice the text's structure • Read selectively • Adjust reading to their purpose and the style of text • Read some things carefully while skimming others • Build and revise meaning as they read • Think about characteristics and intentions of the author • Try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text • Evaluate the text's quality and value • Respond intellectually and emotionally • Read different kinds of text differently • Process text before, during, and after reading

(Adapted from the work of Nell Duke and Julia Reynolds, from *Spotlight on Comprehension* by Linda Hoyt, Heinemann, 2005)

The goal of reading is comprehension. In constructing sensory images in our minds, developing questions as we read, determining importance or making an inference, we lift ourselves beyond rote level “decoding” and enter a space where reading represents thought and understanding—a place where reading is purposeful, thought provoking, and often entertaining. To create an atmosphere in which comprehension thrives and learners expect meaning to occur, we must give comprehension our attention, then ensure that comprehension instruction is intentional, explicit, and focused.

To accomplish this, it is essential to...

- know the research on best practices for comprehension instruction.
- ensure that children are reading selections that invite and support comprehension.
- dedicate time for reading and comprehension instruction.
- scaffold extended, transferable experiences with comprehension strategies.
- support self-reflection.

Know the Research

Research has identified a group of strategies as being key for achieving full understanding as we read (Pearson and Duke, 2002). These strategies include: Making Connections, Determining Importance, Visualizing, Questioning, Inferring (includes Prediction), Summarizing, Synthesizing, Using Schema, Self-Monitoring Understanding, and Fix-Up Strategies. These strategies are interactive, flexible, and can be generalized to any text, including mathematics.

Research has also shown that it isn't enough for readers to be able to identify and use these strategies in isolation. Learners need to see these strategies as flexible tools they can apply consciously in combination with other comprehension-seeking behaviors. With this in mind, a reflective “comprehender” might skim and scan a selection, set goals for reading, and then make a conscious decision to determine importance by placing sticky notes on the most important parts of the selection. Thoughtful readers make decisions about the way they will approach a text and the strategies they will consciously apply to extract meaning.

Provide Reading Selections that Invite and Support Comprehension

Text selection is important. Beautiful, thought-provoking books invite deeper thinking. They invite laughter. They invite questioning, and they invite the reader to respond. When reading materials are well-written and are supported by powerful visual images, comprehension is supported and lifted. In an era when both fiction and nonfiction children's literature has reached new heights in excellence, why not give our learners the best and the most beautiful literacy experience possible? High-quality, high-interest texts serve as models of language and literary form that mentor student thinking, entice students as writers, and invite deep comprehension. There is no time for the mediocre or the boring if comprehension and accelerated learning are the goals.

For comprehension to flourish, learners must have texts that *they can read and understand*. We need to ensure that our students read books at a comfortable reading level so they can think beyond the words and delve into the deeper meanings. Brain research reminds us that when reading materials are overly challenging, students become bogged down by decoding and are less able to focus on comprehension. This is especially true for struggling students who need books that are both a comfortable reading level and an invitation to deeper thought (Allington, 2005).

Dedicate Time for Reading and Comprehension Instruction

Quality comprehension instruction deserves a presence in the learning day. Olympic athletes, musicians, and artists all devote extensive time to their craft. They spend countless hours practicing, working with coaches, and fine tuning. They are highly focused on improving, and they use explicit feedback from coaches or teachers to continue their quest for excellence. If we are to lift comprehension instruction to the highest possible levels, we must give it adequate time in the learning day, time for children to focus on reading extensively and intensively in a broad range of formats and genre, time for teachers to offer explicit demonstrations in comprehension strategy use across each area of the curriculum, time for learners to

become conscious and reflective about their use of the strategy, time for readers to intentionally apply comprehension strategies in a wide range of texts and settings.

Scaffold Extended Experience with Each Strategy

The Gradual Release of Responsibility model offers a research-based scaffold for introduction and application of comprehension strategies. This model is supported by brain research and fits naturally with the way we learn to ride a bike, play golf, or shoot baskets on the court. The Gradual Release of Responsibility model for comprehension often includes Modeling, Guided Practice, Independent Practice, Reflection, and Extension of the Learning.

Modeling: To launch the cycle, the teacher *demonstrates* or *models* the comprehension strategy through a “Think-Aloud” with the goal of making strategy use as transparent to the learners as possible. It is ideal if this occurs in a Read-Aloud setting where students are not burdened by the written text and can focus very clearly on the strategy itself. While the teacher models, student observe. They do not contribute ideas; they listen and watch.

Guided Practice: *Guided practice* is provided as the second step. Now, the students are invited to participate. They talk with partners and attempt to use the target strategy while the teacher is there to guide, to coach, and to reteach as needed. Guided practice often begins during Shared Reading in which students are invited to “Think Along” about the comprehension strategy. Then, guided practice crosses over into other settings. Interactive Reading with partners provides an ideal opportunity to try the strategy with the support of a partner in a “Think Together.” As partners navigate a selection, they support one another with the reading of the text and in discussing application of the strategy. Interactive Reading involves learners reading and thinking together to gain control over the target comprehension strategy. Small-Group Strategic Reading also offers a fertile environment for guided practice as students perform a “Think on My Own” with the strategy. During the small-group time, the teacher can reteach the strategy if needed, make links to the Think-Aloud demonstration, and assess learners’ level of understanding of the strategy.

Independent Practice: Readers need to enter independent reading with the explicit goal of applying the comprehension strategy while thinking alone and independently navigating a text. Independent readers benefit from placing sticky notes in the text to mark places where the strategy was used or writing down reflections about the strategy in a graphic organizer.

Reflection: Readers need time at the end of independent reading to *reflect* on the strategy. They need to consider: How did the strategy help them as readers? What might they do to improve their use of the strategy? In what other contexts might the strategy be used? When learners bring their behavior with text to a conscious level where they can analyze it, understand it, and become a deliberate participant in their own growth, they are taking control of their own comprehension in a vitally important way. If partners are given a few minutes at the end of independent reading to meet and share the points where a target strategy was used or consider ways to improve their use of the strategy, they synthesize understanding and increase the likelihood that the strategy will be personalized and retained.

Extension of the Learning: The ultimate test of learning is the ability to generalize a strategy and apply it in many contexts. With this in mind, we can intentionally and explicitly scaffold transfer to other contexts by showing learners how to use the strategy in science, social studies, and math. This conscious and deliberate transfer of the strategy across curricular areas and genre shows students the ultimate power of the comprehension tool.

A Comprehension Tool Belt

Every reader deserves to have a Comprehension Tool Belt banging and clanging with tools for getting the most out of their reading. The tools on the belt can be added gradually through explicit teacher modeling, intentional transfer across many kinds of texts, and focused reflection that involves the reader as an empowered, strategic thinker. When there is intentional balance between word knowledge and comprehension instruction, readers wield a comprehension tool belt bristling with strategies that help guide them into a literacy of thoughtfulness.

References

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