Reading comprehension

In a nutshell

- Reading comprehension, the ability to understand what you are reading and reading for understanding, is the most important educational goal at school.
- Important background factors for reading comprehension are decoding, reading fluency, linguistic and listening comprehension, vocabulary, working memory, and metacognition skills.
- Metacognition is an awareness of one's thinking processes and an understanding of the patterns behind them. Metacognition is the foundation for other reading comprehension strategies.
- Knowledge of the content and context of the text aids reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension Skills

Reading comprehension is the ability to understand what you are reading. Text comprehension allows readers to gain meaning from what they are reading and use the information gained from the text to gain more knowledge or enjoy the text. Having exceptional reading comprehension skills allows readers to enjoy what they are reading since they can easily understand a writer's message. Reading comprehension is an active process where readers interact with the text before, during, and after reading.

There are several reading comprehension skills that every reader needs to have. These skills are important to help a reader comprehend what they are reading. According to the Simple View of Reading (SVR), reading comprehension is the product of the efficient decoding ability to read isolated words — quickly, accurately, and silently — and linguistic comprehension[1]Gough, P.B. & Tunmer, W.E. (1986). Decoding, Reading, and Reading Disability. Remedial and Special Education, 7, 6-10.. The relation between decoding and linguistic comprehension implies that it is the interaction between the two that is important, since when there is no linguistic comprehension or decoding skill, then there is no reading comprehension. To learn accurate word decoding skills, we need to practise phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, and to support linguistic and listening comprehension of oral language, we need to enrich our vocabulary. Automaticity in decoding leads to fluent reading, which frees up resources that can then be allocated to comprehension. A number of studies has shown the contribution of these skills to reading comprehension across languages. Also, working memory, metacognitive skills to monitor one's reading, background knowledge concerning the content, sentence construction, and cohesion of the text have been linked to good reading comprehension.

Decoding

Written language is a code with symbols (letters) to represent sounds (phonemes). Therefore, decoding is dependent on phonemic awareness, which allows readers to familiarise themselves with individual sounds that make up words. Understanding the correlation between a letter or a group of letters and their sounds is key towards decoding words. It is important to learn the correspondences between letters and sounds when learning to read. The phonological processing system's main role is to analyse and manipulate the sound structures of words. An efficient decoding ability entails reading isolated words quickly, accurately, and silently.

Reading Fluency

Fluency is a very important skill for good reading comprehension as it improves the rate at which readers can read and understand text. Reading fluency is the speed, accuracy, and prosody that a person uses when reading a text. The speed relates to how fast a person can read, while accuracy refers to how correctly each word in the text is read. Prosody is the expression with which a person reads. This includes the pitch, timing, and stress that a person brings to a text. Therefore, fluent readers can read fast and smoothly without a lot of errors.

Linguistic and Listening Comprehension

Once printed text is decoded, the reader applies the same mechanisms used in understanding its spoken equivalent. Linguistic comprehension is the process of interpreting spoken words, sentences, and discourse. Although the SVR model uses linguistic comprehension as the component term to predict reading comprehension, it is commonly defined as listening comprehension. Relevant parameters for linguistic comprehension are the semantics, syntax, and morphology of the oral language or text.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the ability to understand the meaning of words (receptive vocabulary) and use the words orally and in writing (expressive vocabulary). For readers to comprehend what they are reading, they need to understand the meaning of most of the individual words in a text. Readers need to have a wide vocabulary base in order to comprehend a text effectively. Vocabulary can be learned through instruction from teachers and through day-to-day life experiences.

Memory

Working memory allows the reader to retain the information gained and utilise it to build knowledge and gain meaning from the text and is therefore important background skill of reading comprehension.

Metacognitive Skills

Metacognition is monitoring and control of though — thinking about thinking. Metacognition is the foundation for other reading comprehension strategies. Proficient readers continually monitor their own thoughts, controlling their experience with the text and enhancing their understanding. Metacognition deals with the capacity to self-monitor, self-assess, and self-evaluate in order to identify and correct any difficulties in comprehension.

Metacognition, or the act of thinking about thinking, is a self-regulatory process centered on managing your own thinking. But, in order to do this, you will also need to call upon your executive functions. Our **executive functions** are those self-regulatory actions that allow us to manage time, plan, focus attention, and handle multiple tasks in order to successfully achieve a goal. Self-regulated learners use the metacognitive process to select, monitor and evaluate their approach to a task. Thus, our EF and metacognitive skills function separately but are interdependent.

Background Knowledge

To effectively comprehend text, readers need to be able to refer to the knowledge they already have as they read. Knowledge of the context of words and the text aids reading comprehension. Readers should also be able to reason and derive meaning from a text even when the meaning is not clearly stated.

Sentence Construction and Cohesion

Readers need to understand how sentences are built by understanding some basic grammar rules and how the ideas within sentences connect. This allows them to effectively comprehend the meaning from long texts and passages while connecting the different ideas in a written piece. Take note that sentence construction generally differs from language to language.

How to Teach Reading Comprehension

Teaching reading comprehension is crucial in developing the reading skills of students. There are several strategies that teachers can use to teach it. They include, for example, text factors, visualisation, reciprocal teaching, instructional conversations, and partner reading.

Text Factors

Text factors are aspects of a text that, when identified, allow a reader to understand a written text easily. Genre is an example of a text factor. Texts can be categorised under various genres, including folktales, poetry, biographies, and historical fiction, among others. Each genre has its own characteristics regarding sentence structure. Teachers can teach students to identify text factors in texts, which will

help them to comprehend texts easily.

Visualisation

Visualisation involves the formation of a mental image when reading a particular text. By creating mental images about the text being read, the reader will comprehend the text better. Teachers can teach their students to visualise by asking questions that engage their senses (hearing, seeing, smell, and touch) as they read.

Instructional Conversations

Allowing students to engage in guided conversations or discussions about a particular text promotes critical and aesthetic thinking, which enhances their thinking capacity in regard to the text. Group discussions also allow students to come up with new ideas and questions, which in turn improve their reading comprehension.

Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching teaches students to predict, clarify, summarise, and ask questions about some parts of a text. By using the tools taught in reciprocal teaching, students will develop and strengthen their reading comprehension skills on their own. For a detailed explanation with examples on the application of the reciprocal teaching approach, see this video clip: ([Source: Youtube](#))

Partner reading is a teaching strategy designed for pairs in which a student and his or her partner are each assigned a book to read. Once they are done, they are supposed to generate questions for their partner based on the book they have read. The two students will then swap the books and read them out loud to each other and later ask each other the questions they generated. By using this strategy, students will develop their fluency in reading and improve their reading comprehension skills.

Steps of Teaching Reading Comprehension

Teaching reading comprehension involves three main steps: pre-reading activities, during reading activities, and post-reading activities.

Pre-Reading Activities

Pre-reading activities are activities that prepare readers for what they are about to read. These activities allow the students to reflect on what they already know and allow them to predict what they will read. Pre-reading activities are also important as they help create a reason for reading and improve vocabulary so that students can improve fluency when reading. Examples include guiding learners to brainstorm about the picture and discussing the topic/title to be read, among others.

During Reading Activities

During reading activities are activities that aid students in focusing on particular aspects of the text so that they can understand it better. The objectives of these activities are to help the students confirm the predictions they made during the pre-reading stage and to gather and organise information from the text they are reading.

Post-Reading Activities

Post-reading activities help students to further understand a text after reading. These activities allow students to critically analyse what they have already read to ensure that they can comprehend the text. An example of a post-reading activity is to discuss some vocabulary items from a passage or the content of the text.

References

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Research briefs

[Examining the Simple View of Reading in a Transparent Orthography: A Longitudinal Study from Kindergarten to Grade 3](#)

[RESOLV: Readers' Representation of Reading Contexts and Tasks](#)

[A Review on the Important Role of Vocabulary Knowledge in Reading Comprehension Performance](#)

[Reading Comprehension: Core Components and Processes](#)

[Activation of Background Knowledge for Inference Making: Effects on Reading Comprehension](#)

[Word Knowledge in a Theory of Reading Comprehension](#)

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