Comprehension and General Knowledge at the Primary Level

Instructional Goal: The child will develop comprehension skills and strategies that will enhance his/her ability to construct the meaning of and learn from texts heard or read.

This session may be recorded

What Does it Mean to Comprehend a Text?

Sam walked slowly on the way to school.
She was worried about today’s math test.
While walking, she wondered how she could help her students understand place value more effectively.

Levels of Comprehension

Literal
• Information is stated directly in the text.
• Sam walked slowly.

Inferential
• Information is acquired by "reading between the lines."
• Sam was sad.

Critical
• Information is evaluated relative to what it means to the reader and the intentions, expertise, and/or perspective of the author.
  • The “Sam” passage was written to trick the reader.

Video (4:14) Johnny Appleseed
(Fourth Grade, 1-1 Intervention, May)

Critical Literacy and Digital Technologies

Critical literacy is especially important with regard to information on the internet.
• Anyone can publish on the Internet, so
• The reader must judge the reliability and authenticity of information found on the internet.
What Highly Proficient Readers do to Comprehend Text
(as summarized by Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, p. 60)

"Proficient" Readers

- Have clear purposes and constantly evaluate whether they are accomplishing them.
- Often read selectively, making decisions about how to allocate their time and attention.
- Use their prior knowledge to construct meaning from/with the text.


"Proficient" Readers

- Think ahead to what might come next in the text.
- Monitor their understanding of the text, making adjustments in their reading or thinking as needed.
- Try to fill in gaps or inconsistencies in a text so that the text makes sense.
- Ask themselves questions as they read.

When reading informational text, proficient readers also:
- Construct summaries of what they are reading.
- Pay attention to the organization or structure of the text, both overall and for particular sections.

Video (4:07) Students reading about the Titanic (and wondering why the author is telling the end of the story near the beginning of the book). (Second Grade, Small Group, June)

Factors Influencing Comprehension

In order to comprehend text, what must the reader know and be able to do?

General abilities and attitudes that influence comprehension:

- General language abilities.
- Accurate and automatic identification of most of the words in the text.
- Engagement in the reading process.
- General knowledge, schemas, and topic specific knowledge, familiarity with text structure.
Factors Influencing Comprehension: General Language

**Vocabulary** - knowledge of word meanings

**Syntax** - understanding how words are put together to form meaningful sentences.

**Pragmatics** - the social use of language – there are ways to say things that are appropriate in certain social contexts but not others.

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Factors Influencing Comprehension: Accurate and Automatic Word Identification

If students are attending too much to word identification, they cannot attend to meaning. Fluency is necessary but not sufficient for comprehension.

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Factors Influencing Comprehension: Active Engagement with Text

Making sense of what we read or hear is not a simple thing. Comprehension is a complex process.

We can teach children (and adults) to be more active in their comprehension attempts.

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Factors Influencing Comprehension: Knowledge

Knowledge (meaningful information) is stored in memory in networks of connected facts and concepts.

**Schema** – A knowledge structure that
- Organizes large amounts of information into a meaningful system
- Develops through experience
- Guides interpretation of subsequent experience
  - Example: Eating at a Restaurant

**Video** (1:17) *A Fine St. Patrick’s Day*,
(Second Grade, Whole Class, March)

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Factors Influencing Comprehension: Knowledge

Interpretation of text relies on several kinds of knowledge:
- World knowledge
- Schema
- Knowledge of how texts are structured
- Topic specific knowledge

**Video** (3:08) *Fairy Story*
(Second Grade, 1-1 conference, June)

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A complex interaction takes place between what the reader already knows and what is presented in the text.

What one learns from a text depends:
- to an extent, on what one already knows and what one expects the text to say.
- on how actively one thinks about the text before, during, and after reading or listening to it.
In June, Dinean General John Moats left Alteria, Umberland for Anthan, South Costain. The Gamrians wanted to separate the New Daris colonies so that they would not be able to help each other. Moats planned to attack from the north, and General Selnick would attack from the south. They hoped to trap the Cooperative Army in between. The orders did not reach General Selnick in time, however, and he did not move his army into position. The plan failed.

Name the two sides of the conflict.

Who were some of the individuals influential in planning the attack?

Why did the plan fail?

In June 1777, British General John Burgoyne left Quebec, Canada for Albany, New York. The British wanted to separate the New England colonies so that they would not be able to help each other. Burgoyne planned to attack from the north, and General Howe would attack from the south. They hoped to trap the Continental Army in between. The orders did not reach General Howe in time, however, and he did not move his army into position. The plan failed.

Name the two sides of the conflict.

Who were some of the individuals influential in planning the attack?

Why did the plan fail?


Example from the Primary Level

As you read the story on the next few slides, identify the knowledge needed to comprehend the story.

- World knowledge
- Schema
- Knowledge of how texts are structured
- Topic specific knowledge
Discussion of “Where Is the Queen?”

What would a child need to know in order to fully comprehend this story?

- World knowledge
- Schema
- Knowledge of how texts are structured
- Topic specific knowledge

Knowledge That Would Influence Comprehension of Where’s the Queen?

- Text Structure: Fairy tale, narrative
- General Knowledge: Preparing for a party
- Schemas: Kings, queens, castles
- Topic specific information: Knowledge of what happens at a ball (dancing, eating, etc.)

Consider the Knowledge Sources Accessed in Interpreting this Text

Jane was invited to Jack’s birthday party.
She wondered if he would like a kite.
She went to her room and shook her piggy bank.
It made no sound.

(Oakhill, 1994)

How Do Knowledge Structures and Schemas Develop?

Gradually
- therefore, early experiences and instruction are critical to later comprehension

Through multiple exposures
- therefore, themes that provide repeated exposure foster knowledge development

Through engagement with information-rich texts

Video (2:55) Austin the Hero
(First Grade, Whole Class, March)
Instruction to Promote Comprehension

- Instruction needs to go beyond helping children comprehend a particular text at a particular point in time.
- Instruction needs to help children develop ways of thinking about texts that will enhance comprehension of texts encountered in the future.

The Importance of a Strategic Approach to Reading Comprehension

Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies has been found to improve reading comprehension among students in the middle elementary grades and beyond.

Conversations focused on the content of texts being read may be at least as useful in promoting comprehension as a comprehension strategy focused approach.

(McKeown, Beck & Blake, 2009)

The Importance of a Strategic Approach to Reading Comprehension

The effects of teaching comprehension strategies in the primary grades have not been extensively evaluated, but…

- Modeling and encouraging the kind of thinking supported by comprehension strategies represents another way of actively engaging primary grade children in making sense of text.

Video (4:04) The Triple Creek Dam Affair,
Modeling comprehension strategies during a read aloud. (Second Grade, Whole Class, May)

The Importance of a Strategic Approach to Reading Comprehension

An emphasis should be placed on modeling and interacting with students around a text, rather than on checking to see if they understand what they have just read (or have had read to them).

Strategy: Activating Prior Knowledge

What it involves:
- Thinking about what one already knows about a topic or concept.

Why it is useful:
- Reader "makes sense" more easily if he has already thought about the topic.
- Uses the readers’ existing schema.
- Encourages the reader to clear up discrepancies.

Video (1:30) A Fine St. Patrick’s Day,
Using prior knowledge to make predictions. (Second Grade, Whole Class, March)
Strategy: Prediction

What it involves:
- Anticipating what will occur in the text and then checking to see whether the prediction matches the events in the text.

Why it is useful:
- Integrate prior knowledge to make predictions
- Make and check predictions
- Sustain interest and engagement with the text

Video (0:56) Cuddly Dudley
(First Grade, Whole Class, January)

Strategy: Visualization

What it involves:
- Imagining what events in the text would look like if illustrated or made into a movie.

Why it is useful:
- In order to construct a visual image one must attend to the text in an active way, modifying the images as the text unfolds.

Modeling a visualization strategy
Video (2:28) The Turkey Girl
(Kindergarten, Whole Class, May)

Strategy: Summarization

What it involves:
- Retelling the events, using an organizational structure such as a sequence or story grammar.

Why it is useful:
- It is assumed that practice with summarizing will lead readers to use the summarization structures to guide their thinking as they read.

Video (1:10) The Chalk Box Kid, Discussing the problem in the story. (Second Grade, Small Group, June)

Strategy: Questioning

What it involves:
- asking questions about the text content and/or questions directed to the author (e.g., "I wonder why...", "Why didn't he...", "How come...")

Why it is useful:
- The reader will read text with an eye toward answering those questions.

Video (2:12) The Chalk Box Kid
Students share the questions they had as they read the story. (Second, Grade, Small Group, June)

Strategy: Making Connections

What it involves:
- Text-to-self connections
- Text-to-text connections
- Text-to-world connections

Why it is useful:
- A text-to-self connection may engage the reader and help the reader to understand the characters' feelings and actions.
- A text-to-text connection may provide knowledge to foster understanding of the new text and support predictions.
- A text-to-world connection may help the reader to understand more abstract concepts through connection to known events.

Video (.56) Text-to-Self connections – Thunder Cake
(Second Grade, Whole Class, May)

Strategy: Comprehension Monitoring

What it involves:
- Noticing whether what one is reading makes sense and, if not, taking steps to clarify the points of confusion.

Why it is useful:
- This strategy involves all of the others discussed so far. It emphasizes the need for the reader to do some repair when comprehension breaks down.

Video: (4:00) Before reading, a second grade teacher prepares her students for the kind of thinking they can be doing as they read. (Second Grade, Whole Class, May)

Teaching for Comprehension across Instructional Contexts

Comprehension strategy instruction can be addressed across a variety of instructional contexts:
- Interactive Read Aloud
- Shared Reading
- Supported Reading
- Independent Reading

The goal is to build student independence through gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student.

Teaching for Comprehension across Instructional Contexts

Across instructional contexts, teachers strive to:
- Select texts deliberately!
- Vary genre so that readers can learn to comprehend different genre.
- Insure that the text’s topic and complexity is appropriate for the instructional context.
- Choose texts that allow readers to develop knowledge.
  - Informational text
  - A series of texts related to one topic

Interactive Read Aloud: Purposes

Teachers use Interactive Read-Alouds to:
- Model ways to actively engage in analyzing and reacting to text (doing what “proficient” readers do).
- Model specific comprehension strategies.
- Encourage children to ask the kinds of questions that will promote active comprehension.

Read alouds provide the opportunity for students to access and comprehend texts that they could not read independently.

Interactive Read Aloud: General Characteristics

The teacher reads a book or other text to the class or group and engages the students in discussions of the text before, during and after reading.

In a truly interactive read aloud, the children can ask clarifying questions when they become confused about what is happening in the text or are uncertain about the meaning of a word.

Video (7:32) (26:47) An Octopus is Amazing (First Grade, Whole Class, March)

Video (0:44) Asking questions during a read aloud (Kindergarten, Whole Class, June)

Research on Read Alouds

Children in classrooms that had daily read alouds showed greater:
- vocabulary gains
- comprehension of new stories they heard
- decoding ability
- familiarity with literary language

The greatest benefits occurred when students were active participants before, during and after listening to the text.
Shared Reading: Purposes

- Promotes engagement in reading
- Promotes familiarity with text features and organization
- Fosters fluency and thus may enhance comprehension

Shared Reading: Characteristics

- First, the teacher reads the text aloud - she may model strategy use at this time
- Students react to and discuss the text
- Students chorally re-read the text with the teacher and/or each other
- Re-reading may be repeated with peers or independently

Supported Reading: Purposes

Reading with small groups of students, or with individual students provides the teacher with opportunities to:
- Interact with the child at precise moments when the use of a particular comprehension strategy might be applied
- Notice and support a child’s efforts to make sense of a text by re-reading and reading ahead

Supported Reading: Characteristics

The teacher engages students in conversations about books they are reading via questions and comments that utilize the comprehension strategies which have been taught.

Teachers gradually reduce the level of support as students assume responsibility for constructing meaning.

Supported Reading: Characteristics

During supported reading, teachers can scaffold comprehension by building general knowledge.

Video (4:00) Animal Feet
(First Grade, Small Group, Spring)

Video (2:50) Look Closer
(First Grade, Small Group, Spring)

Independent Reading: Purpose

The goal of all reading instruction is that children will actively construct meaning from text while reading independently.
Independent Reading: Characteristics

Teachers need to gradually move children toward independence by:
• Initially explicitly guiding children’s thinking in preparing them to read silently.
• Gradually withdrawing teacher supports for thinking and encouraging student responsibility for meaning making.

Fostering Comprehension Before, During and After…

• Interactive Read Aloud
• Shared Reading
• Supported Reading
• Independent Reading

Before Reading the Text, the Discussion/Thinking includes:
• Previewing the text
• Making predictions about what the text will be about
• Setting a purpose

Example: Before Reading
Setting a purpose for reading – “read to find out…”
Video (1:03) The Mysterious Tadpole
(First Grade, Whole Class, March)
Making predictions before reading – “What do you think this book is going to be about?”
Video (0:56) Cuddly Dudley
(First Grade, Whole Class, January)
Preparing students for independent reading
Video (4:00) (Second Grade, Whole Class, June)

During Reading of the Text, the Discussion/Thinking includes:
Spontaneous discussions of the ideas that occur in the text
• Discussion is not totally under control of the teacher.
Discussions of how predictions compare to events in the text.
Freedom to talk and ask questions is important to the development of comprehension.

Collaboration versus Interrogation

Comprehension “instruction” in schools often looks more like interrogation or testing than it looks like instruction.
Comprehension of interesting texts is rewarding.
• Try not to make it a job.
• It is the reason we read.
Examples: During Reading

Video (3:24) Cuddly Dudley. Students make predictions and react to a story during read aloud. (First Grade, Whole Class, January)

Video (2:13) Henry and Mudge. During a one-on-one conference, a student shares his thinking about a book he is reading. (Second Grade, 1-1 Conference, June)

During Reading, Teacher Comments Promote Comprehension

• I notice…
• I wonder…
• This reminds me of…
• I’m thinking…
• I remember…
• I can’t wait to see…
• If I were the author…

Examples: During Reading

The teacher scaffolds comprehension and fosters strategic problem solving and engagement.

Video (2:35) The Turkey Girl. A kindergarten teacher introduces a challenging text for read aloud.

Video (1:17) The Turkey Girl. During read aloud, the teacher helps the children to make text-to-text connections Cinderella.

Both videos: (Kindergarten, Whole Class, May)

During Reading, Questions Promote Comprehension

• Can you find evidence in the text to answer your question?
• What are you thinking right now?
• Does this remind you of another book we’ve read (about this topic? by this author?)

Questions related to motivation/feelings:
• “How do you think the Turkey Girl is feeling?”
• “How would you feel if that happened to you?”

After Reading the Text, the Discussion/Thinking includes:

• How predictions compared to what the author wrote in the text.
• Whether the purposes that were set were accomplished.
• Reactions to the characters, events, information in the text.

Examples: After Reading

Discussion (after a read aloud)
Video (2:12) The Triple Creek Dam Affair
(Second Grade, Whole Class, May)

Connections (after independent reading)
Video (2:34) Henry and Mudge
(Second Grade, Whole Class, June)

Retelling (after shared reading)
Video (4:12) Mrs. Wishy Washy
(Kindergarten, Whole Class, Winter)
After Reading, Questions Promote Comprehension

Recall Questions – “Do you remember…?”
Open-Ended Questions – “How did that happen?”
Who, What, Where, and Why …
Did You Ever…

Teaching to Promote Comprehension - Summary

General abilities and attitudes that influence comprehension:
• General language abilities.
• Accurate and automatic identification of most of the words in the text.
• Engagement in the reading process.
• General knowledge, schemas, and topic specific knowledge, familiarity with text structure.

Teaching to Promote Comprehension - Summary

Engagement in the reading process is promoted by:
• Modeling a variety of comprehension strategies.
• Encouraging open discussions of texts read.
• Thinking through texts collaboratively.
• Modeling enthusiasm and interest in the texts.

Teaching to Promote Comprehension - Summary

Knowledge development is promoted through:
• Reading thematically related, information rich text.
• Scaffolding children’s understanding of information rich texts.

End of Comprehension and General Knowledge