

Developing Reading Comprehension

1. Vocabulary and Background Knowledge

All of the research reports used to develop this framework view reading as a meaning-making, constructive process. Reading is defined as a process in which information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader act together to produce meaning. Even simple beginning reading texts make demands on readers' backgrounds of experience. Unless readers have some relevant experiences to bring to a text, they are unlikely to be able to construct its meaning. The richer a reader's background, the greater his or her potential for reading comprehension.

Background knowledge and vocabulary are closely related. A child's vocabulary is the set of labels he or she uses for the varied background knowledge she or he possesses. The word *farm*, for example, is a label or summary term for all the experiences, real and vicarious, that the child has had with farms.

Vocabulary knowledge and reading achievement are reciprocally related. The child with the richer vocabulary is the child who engages in wider and more frequent reading. However, the reading of texts, either in school or at home, contributes to a child's vocabulary development. Vocabulary development also takes place when teachers directly teach word meanings.

Research-based reading materials should be designed so that children are taught the relevant vocabulary and background knowledge they need for reading a selection, should develop vocabulary and background knowledge for the broad reading they will do in school subjects and beyond, and should stimulate an interest in reading that will result in wide, frequent independent reading. The following quotations support these conclusions:

- **1985 - Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson**

“Several studies indicate that using instructional time to build background knowledge pays dividends in reading comprehension.” (p. 50)

Research-based reading materials should be designed so that children are taught the relevant vocabulary and background knowledge they need for reading...

Vocabulary and Background Knowledge (continued)

“Useful approaches to building background knowledge prior to a reading lesson focus on the concepts that will be central to understanding the upcoming story, concepts that children either do not possess or may not think of without prompting.” (p. 50)

- **1998 - Snow, Burns, & Griffin**

“Kindergarten instruction should be designed to stimulate verbal interaction to instruct vocabulary and encourage talk about books.” (p. 323)

“Vocabulary - ... While research shows some benefit of direct instruction on vocabulary development, it also finds that vocabulary growth is heavily influenced by the amount and variety of material children read... the power of home and school reading for vocabulary building are strongly influenced by the support and encouragement that students are given for attending to and learning about new words as they read.” (p. 17)

“Every opportunity should be taken to extend and enrich children’s background knowledge and understandings in every way possible, for the ultimate significance and memorability of any word or text depends on whether children possess the background knowledge and conceptual sophistication to understand its meaning.” (p. 219)

“Written text places high demands on vocabulary knowledge. Even the words used in children’s books are more rare than those used in adult conversations and prime time television. Learning new concepts and words that encode them is essential to comprehension development.” (p. 217)

“Vocabulary instruction generally does result in measurable increase in students’ specific words knowledge.” (p. 217)

“An important source of word knowledge is exposure to print and independent reading. As noted above, books introduce more rare words than conversation and television do. So educational approaches that encourage children to read more both in school and out should increase their word knowledge and reading comprehension.” (p. 218)

- **1998 - Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris**

“Exposure to lots of text, including children’s independent reading and read- alouds by teachers, improves comprehension achievement, vocabulary growth, and learning English as a second language.”
(Topic 5, p. 3)

- **1998 - Learning First Alliance**

“A key predictor of successful reading comprehension is background knowledge. Children need knowledge and understanding of their own world in order to make sense of what they read.” (p. 11)

“Teachers should help children actively explore the meaning of new words and concepts.” (p. 11)

“Children’s vocabularies can be built by teaching specific words that appear in students’ texts, giving students opportunities to use these words in a variety of contexts, and teaching students dictionary skills. We want students to pay attention to and like words. While research shows some benefit of direct instruction on vocabulary development, it also finds that vocabulary growth is heavily influenced by the amount or variety of material children read.” (p. 17)

2. Strategic Reading

Children from the beginning stages of reading must be taught to be strategic as they read. This instruction should include such things as teaching readers to set a purpose, activate prior knowledge and develop key concept vocabulary, make predictions, monitor their reading, pose questions about their reading, summarize, create graphic organizers, and so forth. This instruction should also include opportunities to talk about the texts they are reading and the strategies they are using.

This instruction in comprehension strategies should include teacher modeling of how to construct the meaning of a selection, how to overcome obstacles to understanding, and how to evaluate the information in a text against what he or she already knows about the topic the text addresses. Children need to be taught how to apply comprehension strategies to a wide variety of texts, including texts dealing with content areas such as science, social studies, math, art, music, and so forth.

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As noted earlier in this document, reading comprehension directly builds on the oral language and listening skills a student possesses. In the beginning stages of reading, children need to be taught to strategically listen to selections that the teacher reads aloud.

Well-developed, research-based instructional materials should provide systematic instruction from the beginning of learning to read which focuses on the processes, skills, and strategies needed to become an effective comprehender. The following quotations from the research syntheses support these conclusions:

- **1967 - Chall**

“...I emphasize... strongly that I recommend a code emphasis only as a beginning reading method—and that I do *not* recommend ignoring reading-for-meaning practice.” (p. 307)

- **1985 - Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson**

“Teachers must instruct students in strategies for extracting and organizing critical information from text.” (p. 71)

“Similarly, comprehending information in textbooks is easier if students are instructed in strategies that cause them to focus their attention on the relevant information, synthesize the information, and integrate it with what they already know.” (pp. 71-72)

“Direct instruction in comprehension means explaining the steps in a thought process that gives birth to comprehension. It may mean that the teacher models a strategy by thinking aloud about how he or she is going about understanding a passage.”

- **1998 - Snow, Burns, & Griffin**

“Throughout the early grades, reading curricula should include explicit instruction on strategies such as summarizing the main idea, predicting events and outcomes of upcoming text, drawing inferences, and monitoring for coherence and misunderstandings. This instruction can take place while adults read to students or when students read themselves.”

“Conceptual knowledge and comprehension strategies should be regularly assessed in the classroom, permitting timely and effective instructional responses where difficulty or delay is apparent.” (p. 323)

- **1998 - Learning First Alliance**

“**Reading Comprehension...**Children need to learn reading strategies known to enhance comprehension and retention. For example, ...scan and predict, ...Look for characters, settings, problems, and problem solutions ...to summarize main ideas, ...to monitor their own understanding, ...to make charts, webs, outlines ..., generate questions... finding main ideas, starting with simple paragraphs and going to more complex material.” (pp. 16-17)

“Writing skills and comprehension skills should also be taught from the earliest grades.” (p. 5)

“**Strategies for reading comprehension.** Learning to read is not a linear process. Students do not need to learn to decode before they can learn to comprehend. Both skills should be taught at the same time from the earliest stages of reading instruction.” (p. 14)

- **1998 - Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris**

“Teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies improves children’s comprehension of new texts and topics. Teachers support their students’ strategic reading through lessons that attend explicitly to how to think while reading.” (Topic 5, p. 4)

“The basic comprehension strategies that children build on oral language skills in kindergarten and first grade become more complex in second grade and beyond. As topics and text structures become less familiar and the goal of reading shifts from understanding familiar ideas to acquiring new information, students must develop strategies for texts that extend beyond their own knowledge base.” (Topic 5, p. 1)

“Comprehension monitoring (thinking about what one has read) is at the heart of successful reading for beginning readers.” (Topic 5, p. 1)

“In kindergarten and first grade, teachers promote a stance of ‘thinking while reading’ through the questions they ask about books read aloud and together.” (Topic 5, p. 2)

“Just plain reading provides students with occasions to hone their comprehension strategies.” (Topic 5, p. 3)

Strategic Reading (continued)

“Teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies improves children’s comprehension of new text and topics.” (Topic 5, p. 4)

“Children’s comprehension of texts and topics, as well as their repertoires of strategies, grow as a result of conversations about text.” (Topic 5, p. 4)