

# Reading Comprehension: What is it and how to Develop it?

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## Abstract

Reading is an important contributor to learning outcomes. Reading abilities have to be developed in students. Reading Comprehension is an important part of reading ability. The paper traces the history of reading comprehension to highlight its complexities. It then provides a few suggestions for improving reading skills in students.

## Introduction

Reading is important for school learning. Effective reading helps in higher achievement levels. If students do not read effectively, it has far-reaching consequences, such as low levels of learning outcomes (Zakariya, 2015), affects mathematical problem-solving abilities (Ozsoy, Kuruyer & Cakiroglu, 2015), and is related to low rates of college enrolment (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). The findings of ASER (2018) that 44.2 percent of class 5 students cannot read beyond the Class 2 level textbooks underlines the need to emphasize developing reading abilities. Reading comprehension is the core of effective reading. An understanding of reading comprehension and how it can be increased therefore becomes critical.

## What is Reading Comprehension?

Reading involves an understanding of the written or printed words and symbols and creating specific meaning besides decoding. Thorndike (1917/1971) refers to reading as a process of reasoning. Effective and purposeful reading works at two levels. The first level involves code-breaking and the second level is the comprehension and is influenced by why the reader is reading the text. Most readers generally reach the process of code-breaking, however, many have problems with comprehension due to inappropriate reading. Moreover, the tasks in comprehension differ according to the situation. For example, reading an "Exit" sign, or a text, or a comic, or abstract ideas make different demands on the reader. Effective comprehension depends on reader's understanding these demands.

## Evolving an Understanding of Reading Comprehension

The history of reading comprehension unfolds multiple layers of this concept. Its history has been discussed by several scholars (Ahuja & Ahuja, 1991; Pearson, 1985; Pearson & Cervetti, 2017). According to Pearson & Cervetti (2017), reading comprehension became a "fact of everyday classroom instruction" (p. 12) in the 1980s. It dominated curricular instruction for 15 years (from 1975 to 1990). From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, it took a backseat because of curricular politics. It made a comeback with curricular and assessment reforms brought by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Broadly speaking, the history of reading comprehension is divided into four periods:

1. Precognitive revolution period (roughly the first 75 years of the 20th century)
2. Cognitive revolution period covering a period of 15 years, from 1975 to 1990.
3. Shift away from the schema theory—re-contextualisation of reading comprehension (from the 1990s to mid-2000).
4. Shift back to the schema theory covering a period of curricular and assessment reforms ushered in by the Common Core State Standards, up to 2010.

There is however considerable overlap between these periods.

### **Pre-Cognitive Revolution Period**

During the oral tradition period from the 17th to the 19th centuries, reading emphasized the purity of pronunciation and accuracy in rendering the hymns. The

emphasis was on text memorization, and reading comprehension did not find any place in instruction.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Edmund Burke Huey (as cited in Pearson & Cervetti, 2017) and Edward Thorndike (ibid) tried to understand the cognitive processes involved in reading. Huey argued that the hallmark of an expert reading is sense-making rather than a rendition of the text. Thorndike defined reading as reasoning, suggesting that reading is made up of several components. These observations were precursory to the 1970s constructivist view of reading comprehension.

Then came the Basal Reading period which lasted up to the 1970s. The early Basal readers (from the 1860s to 1960s) stressed phonemic awareness and decoding. The readers assumed that when decoding skills are acquired and practised, reading comprehension would take care of itself. Later Basal readers (produced between 1965 to 1973) took a different approach to reading comprehension. These used sight words and the whole word approach. These basal readers assumed that comprehension is developed by teaching reading skills (like connecting to background knowledge, making predictions based on the picture and title of the story, verifying the prediction after the story is read) separately.

### **Cognitive Revolution in the 1970s**

The cognitive revolution highlighted the complexity of reading comprehension. Two components of the concept were identified - the characteristics of the text and the reader's nature of knowledge. The text characteristics explained reading comprehension as the readers understanding of the text structure and its

organization. The nature of knowledge saw reading comprehension as a dynamic process of continuously revising text meaning and integrating it with the schema. The reader was important in this view. This view encouraged teachers to link the text to the prior knowledge of the reader (including their socio-cultural background), called the schemata. The schema theory was important for it raised critical questions on meaning: where did meaning reside? In the text, or in the author's mind, or the reader's mind, or in the interaction between the reader and the text? The schema theory privileged the idea that meaning emerged from the interaction between the reader and the text.

The schema theory gave rise to the notion of two kinds of knowledge— declarative (knowing that) and procedural (knowing how). An implication of this distinction was the focus on procedural knowledge in reading comprehension. Classroom instruction consisted of teaching various strategies to enhance comprehension. Some of these strategies are summarize the text, predict the purpose of the text (to provide information, to entertain, to persuade), connect to prior knowledge, note-taking, SQ3R strategies (survey, questioning, read, recite/recall, and review), the OK4R method (Overview, Key terms, Read, Recall, Reflect and Review) and so on.

Metacognition was another way of understanding reading comprehension. There were two strands to the metacognitive understanding. According to the first strand, readers develop tacit and explicit strategies for remembering. The second strand emphasized the actual strategies readers use to monitor, evaluate, and repair their comprehension of the text.

### **Shift Away From Schema Approach: 1990s to Mid-2000**

The aftermath of the 1983 report of *A Nation at Risk* was the achievement testing and standards-based education reform. Assessment findings showed a decline in Reading and Math scores and rampant functional illiteracy. The poor learning outcomes were attributed to the belief that constructivist pedagogies did not pay adequate attention to the basic skills (read decoding skills). This period saw reading wars between the whole word approach and the phonics approach and the phonics approach was a winner with reading policies arguing for 'back to basics'. The National Reading Panel, formed in 1997 identified phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension as focus areas for effective reading instructions. The reading program was later incorporated into *No Child Left Behind* in 2001. The momentum of reading as a meaning-making process diminished in this period.

### **Shift Towards a Modified Schema Approach (up to 2010)**

Until 2010, the impetus for redefining reading comprehension was provided by the curricular and assessment reforms ushered in by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Reading and writing were subsumed under literacy. The view of comprehension changed from the dominant schema theory to mental models. The mental models saw comprehension as a dynamic process, sensitive to shifts in the focus of comprehension. For instance, while reading a mystery story, readers may have a hypothesis that character A is the antagonist. As they read further, the focus of their comprehension shifts to character B, likely to be an anti-protagonist. Other

theories such as cognitive flexibility theory, situated cognition, readers response theory, and so on also contributed to the modified schema approach. These theories argued for an expanded notion of the context.

To conclude, the history of reading comprehension shows a shift from a relatively undifferentiated ability to looking at ways comprehension is affected by contexts, purposes and content areas.

The history of reading comprehension suggested to the practitioners' several ways of improving comprehension. Some of these are suggested in the next section.

## **Suggested Ways of Improving Reading Comprehension**

### **Teach Skimming and Scanning Skills of Reading**

Skimming and scanning are advanced reading skills. Skimming is reading rapidly to get the gist of a passage. It is developed by reading vertically rather than horizontally. Scanning is a close reading of any text to answer specific questions. Scanning a text becomes easier if the reader has already skimmed it. Together, they enhance reading comprehension. The teachers have to provide opportunities for developing these skills.

### **Teach Reading Strategies**

Reading comprehension can be improved by skilling readers through strategies. One such strategy is the OK4R method (Overview, Key terms, Read, Recall, Reflect and Review), developed by Pauk (1974). The OK4R method does not advocate reading a text from beginning to

end. Instead, it advocates reading for long-term remembering. This strategy assumes reading to be an interactive process between the text and the reader, and involves monitoring comprehension to construct meaning

- a. Overview: Take about five minutes to read the introductory and summary paragraphs of a text. Then read the sub-headings or topic sentences and their sequence to get an overall understanding of the content.
- b. Key Ideas: Identify the key ideas and distinguish them from secondary ideas or supporting materials. Change headings into questions by inserting words such as "what", "how", "who", "why", "when".
- c. Read: Read the lines or paragraphs to answer questions such as "what", "who", "how", etc., and see how supporting materials clarify or prove key points. Do not try to read too quickly at this stage.
- d. Recall: After reading, test your memory and understanding. Try to enunciate or write down the main points. Then make a summary or go back and underline or highlight the main points.

- e. Reflect: Think about what has been read. Connect it to your experience or prior knowledge.
- f. Review: At regular intervals, review the text by re-reading the notes.

Studying from school textbooks does not usually help in developing reading skills. Students learning to read should enjoy the material they are reading. The reading material should neither be too easy nor too difficult. It should be chosen according to the reading proficiency of the students and their interests. Further, students who are learning to lead should have access to reading material with big prints. The library plays an important role in developing reading abilities in students by providing appropriate and suitable reading materials.

Finally, the role of a teacher is also critical in developing the skills of reading comprehension in a learner. The teacher should use various strategies and a wide variety of texts, such as narrative, descriptive, persuasive, and procedural, to teach reading skills. It is also suggested that the school time-table have a dedicated reading period which can be taught jointly by the librarian and the class teachers.

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