

Reading Comprehension - Do they get what they are reading?

By Bernadette McLean for PATOSS conference 2019



Setting the scene

“When skilled readers read and understand text, many cognitive and linguistic processes operate concurrently and automatically in synchrony”.

L. Ehri

The Emergence of Word Reading in Beginning Reading



Why read?

The benefits of reading are universally extolled. Long gone is the belief that reading would just make us lazy and our memories would deteriorate. In Plato's 'Phaedrus' mention is made that writing will induce forgetfulness; putting trust in writing will lead to less exercise of memory. Nowadays, we are much more inclined to consider that reading is a powerful way of gaining knowledge as well as bestowing other positive gains, such as it being a tool for creating empathy, a means of increasing endorphins and even a Yale study in 2016 suggesting that readers live longer.

Once readers know how to decode we must ensure that they understand what they are reading. It is possible to build comprehension skills in a structured sequential way that is suitable for dyslexics and poor knowledge comprehenders. To comprehend the reader needs vocabulary and language knowledge, of the context and subject matter, and thinking and reasoning skills.

Growth of knowledge about how reading works

We now know much more about reading acquisition and this body of knowledge feeds into what educators can make use of in the classroom. Much of this is made accessible in books such as Dehaene's 'Reading in the Brain' (2010) where he lists the following key points:

- The teaching of reading must be performed at a young age, when this circuit is maximally plastic. In adults, learning (in illiterates) or recovery (in patients with alexia) can occur but with reduced efficiency. When skilled readers read and understand text, many cognitive and linguistic processes operate concurrently and automatically in synchrony. L Ehri 'The Emergence of Word Reading in Beginning Reading'
- Although writing is a recent cultural invention and shows a large degree of cultural variation, reading acquisition is not.
- We are able to read because we inherit from evolution an efficient object recognition system with enough plasticity to learn new shapes and the relevant connections to link them to existing language areas
- We all learn to read with a similar brain system.
- In 'Efficient Learning for the Poor' - Insights from the Frontier of Cognitive Neuroscience 2006 Helen Abadzi states that the ingredients necessary to produce fluent reading include the following:
 - teach sound-letter correspondences, starting with the smallest units possible in a language.
 - use language games to raise awareness of individual sounds and the start and end of words.
 - teach reading in a known language to take advantage of the word superiority effect.
 - give lots of practice and feedback, and ask each child to read aloud for one minute every day.
 - provide textbooks, particularly for home study.
 - devote most of the class hours in grades 1–2 to reading and math and use time well.
 - teach vocabulary so that children can comprehend as speed increases.



By the end of grade 1, children should “crack the code” and read haltingly.

By the end of grade 2, children should read frequent words with the speed of about a word per second, though they may stumble upon unknown words.

Their intonation should be appropriate to meaning of the text, indicating that they are maintaining sentences in their working memory and are making the adjustments required by the meaning.

Interesting stories in simple language are likely to help struggling students persevere.

Particular aspects of this will link into the development of reading comprehension such as speed, fluency and choice of reading material.

Models of reading and the place of comprehension The Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer 1986) has been around, if not widely known about, for over 30 years and provides a simple but not simplistic overview of reading. The formula $R = D \times C$ (Reading = Decoding times x Comprehension) is an explanation, for while a reader may be good at decoding or reading, both are necessary if he wishes to become a good reader. It also shows clearly that dyslexic readers may be quite different in their reading habits from other poor readers.

The Rimmelhart model offers a more detailed analysis of the components of decoding and comprehension and its breakdown of the components of comprehension that is the basis for TRC (Target Reading Comprehension) (McLean and Wood) which was developed to address the particular areas where readers may be experiencing problems.

Target Reading Comprehension

The activities in this book move in a structured way from words, to phrases, to sentences before longer pieces of writing are tackled. It is not a programme as such but teachers are provided with examples of how to break comprehension down into small manageable steps. It offers activities that can be carried out through talking and listening if readers are not ready to read.

Reading comprehension is dependent on the same skills as listening comprehension, and is dependent on vocabulary knowledge, subject and context knowledge, and higher order thinking skills such as reasoning and inference which are applied to the interpretation of both spoken language and written text. A competent reader should be able to comprehend in written form what they can comprehend in spoken form.



Other ways of boosting language and reasoning skills are presented, but prominence is given to enhancing metacognitive skills including a checklist for teachers to use and a Reader's Toolkit for the reader to use to help detect where problems lie and thus signpost strategies that can be used. Many of the activities consist of turning the written text into a different format thus compelling the reader to interact and understand. The reciprocity of reading and writing activities is implicit emphasising that writers work to transfer information in their 'brains' to the brains of their readers as explained and marvelled at by Briony in Ian Mc Ewan's 'Atonement':

... a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unravelled. You saw the word castle, and it was there, seen from some distance, with woods in high summer spread before it, the air bluish and soft with smoke rising from the blacksmith's forge, and a cobbled road twisting away the green shade...

Our knowledge of the brain is still in its early stages; the complexity of reading is unappreciated by many for whom it is an automatic activity. The brain develops as it reads and develops many characteristics as a result. It is important that we continue to teach reading in a manner that is paced and structured so that these qualities can continue to grow.

Reading List

Dehaene, Stanislas, Reading in the Brain, Penguin, 2010

Hempenstall, Kerry, Read about It Scientific Evidence for Effective Teaching of Reading, Research report 11 The Centre for Independent Studies. 2016

Kilpatrick, David A, Essentials of Assessing, Preventing and Overcoming Reading Difficulties, Wiley 2015

McLean B and **Wood R**, Target Reading Comprehension, Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre, 2013

Rose, Jim, The future doesn't have to be like the past NFER, 2016

Seidenberg, Mark, Language at the speed of Light: How we read, why so many can't and what can be done about it, Basic Books, 2017

Stuart, Morag and Stainthorpe, Rhona. Reading Development and Teaching, Sage, 2016

Details

Bernadette McLean

Independent Consultant

Former Principal of Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre

Chief examiner for the OCR Level 5 and 7 dyslexia courses.

Co-author of: Target Reading Comprehension

bernadetteclean86@gmail.com

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