Spotlight on Comprehension
Building a Literacy of Thoughtfulness

LINDA HOYT
with other leading experts
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Dear Reader

Welcome to Spotlight on Comprehension! The voices you hear in this book represent passion about teaching, deep knowledge of the teaching and learning process, and a commitment to the unending learning journey that professional educators undertake in their effort to bring the highest-quality instruction to children.

The authors represented in this book invite you to share with them a belief that quality instruction is always “under construction” as we strive to reach greater levels of expertise in our efforts to best support learners. It is both our obligation and our challenge to never stop learning professionally... to never stop seeing children as the center of our work... and to resist being fearful of growth and change. The authors of this book share a belief that no one set of practices, no one set of materials will meet the needs of all children. We believe that it is the knowledgeable teacher who makes the difference.

As you enter this book, we invite you to interact with our thinking, ask questions of the authors, yourself, and your colleagues... to wonder with us how we might bring all learners to a place where the goals of thoughtful reflection and deep understanding are built and nurtured.

This book is organized to support book study groups or individual teachers working independently. The sections can be read in any order that suits you or your book study partners. Each article includes a “Meet the Author” section that presents the author’s background and spotlights a “Focus Quote.” The end of each article will support continued reflection through the Key Questions and the array of “tools” that are provided for your consideration. The Key Questions could be used for personal reflection as you consider your own practices and reflect upon the unique learning needs of your students and the curriculum of your district. If you are part of a book study group, the Key Questions might be used to stimulate discussion and dialogue about current practices and enticements for new practice offered in each article. The “tools” are a resource that you might consider as stimulus for writing on plain paper, as an idea that you could modify to fit your own thinking, or as reproducibles that are ready to use.

As you weave your way through the articles, it is our sincere hope that, in addition to new perspectives, you will also find affirmations for your current practices... Isn’t it powerful to learn that other educators have found the same or similar practices to empower readers?
These articles, while spotlighting comprehension and the environments that support deeper thinking, are not meant to represent everything there is to know about reading comprehension. Rather, they are a tapestry of relevant classroom research, effective instructional strategies, and opportunities for you to extend and refine your professional understandings.

There is no need to read these articles in order. You are encouraged to weave in and out of the sections, selecting articles and tools of interest to you and then making your own connections to the comprehension instruction you strive to create for your students.

Welcome to Spotlight on Comprehension. A world of possibility awaits.
Learning from Comprehension Research
Critical Understandings to Guide Our Practices

NELL K. DUKE AND JULIA MOORHEAD REYNOLDS

MEET THE AUTHORS

**Nell K. Duke** is an associate professor of teacher education and learning, technology, and culture at Michigan State University. Her work focuses on early literacy development, especially the development of informational literacies in young children, comprehension teaching and learning in early schooling, approaches to addressing the needs of struggling reader-writers, and issues of equity in literacy education. She is co-author of the book *Reading and Writing Informational Text in the Primary Grades: Research-based Practices* (Scholastic, 2003).

**Julia Moorhead Reynolds** is a doctoral student from Michigan State University and she works at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is a former high school English teacher and a language arts curriculum coordinator. Her research interests include secondary literacy, comprehension, and content-area literacy.

FOCUS QUOTES

Comprehension instruction and instruction in word recognition and decoding can occur side by side, and even work synergistically.

Research on comprehension should guide the changes in instruction to improve reading comprehension of students throughout schooling.
Can you remember reading something that made you stop because you were so unclear about what was written on the page? All of us have become confused when reading at one time or another, possibly even resorting to giving up, feeling frustrated, and putting the passage down. Also, can you remember reading something that made you jump into the pages, being able to visualize the characters, the setting, and the emotions? Hopefully, there have been times when we could easily understand what we have read, even to the point of embracing it. What is it about comprehension that has enabled us to construct meaning while reading, and also to realize when meaning breaks down? How did we come to learn about this? Research on comprehension sheds light on these and other critical questions. In this chapter we summarize seven critical understandings from research on comprehension.

1. What Good Readers Do When They Read

Research has shown that good readers are active readers. From the outset, they have clear goals in mind for their reading. They constantly evaluate whether the text, and their reading of it, is meeting their goals. Good readers typically look over the text before they read, noting such things as the structure of the text and text sections that might be most relevant to their reading goals. As they read, good readers frequently make predictions about what is to come. They read selectively, continually making decisions about their reading—what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to re-read, and so on. Good readers construct, revise, and question the meanings they make as they read. They draw upon, compare, and integrate their prior knowledge with material in the text. For instance, they think about the authors of the text, their style, beliefs, intentions, and historical milieu. They monitor their understanding of the text, making adjustments in their reading as necessary. Good readers try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text, and they deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed. They evaluate the text’s quality and value, and react to the text in a range of ways, both intellectually and emotionally. Good readers read different kinds of text differently. For example, when reading narrative, good readers attend closely to the setting and characters; when reading expository text, these readers frequently construct and revise summaries of what they have read. For good readers, text processing occurs not only during reading as we have traditionally defined it, but also during short breaks taken during reading, even before the reading has commenced, and even after the reading has ceased. Comprehension is a consuming, continuous, and complex activity, but one that, for good readers, is both satisfying and productive. (Adapted from Duke and Pearson 2002.)
2. The Importance of Related Skills and Dispositions

Comprehension entails a complex web of skills and dispositions. Basic understandings entailed include concepts of print (the direction in which print is read, parts of a book, etc.), phonemic awareness (the understanding that the speech stream is composed of phonemes), the alphabetic principle (that these sounds or phonemes map onto letters), and graphophonic knowledge (specific sound-letter relationships). Skilled word recognition and decoding and fluent reading are critical in comprehension, and indeed, problems in these areas are a common cause of comprehension difficulties (Duke, Pressley, and Hilden 2004, Pressley 2000). Importantly, however, research does not suggest that these things should be in place before comprehension instruction occurs. On the contrary, comprehension instruction and instruction in word recognition and decoding can occur side by side, and even work synergistically (Pearson and Duke 2002, Pressley and Wharton-McDonald 2002, Stahl 2004).

The Link Between Vocabulary and Comprehension

Special note should be made of the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. This relationship is unparalleled in strength and importance. One’s knowledge of vocabulary relevant to a text is integrally related to comprehension of that text. Overall vocabulary knowledge is an excellent predictor of how strong a comprehender one is, and vice versa. And most importantly, at least some approaches to teaching vocabulary result not only in gains in vocabulary but in gains in comprehension as well. (See Beck and McKeown 1991, Blachowicz and Fisher 2000 for reviews.)

Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Good vocabulary instruction includes at its base a great deal of time spent reading and rich conversations about text. Good vocabulary instruction focuses on important words, and usually involves teaching conceptually related words rather than individual words unrelated to one another. The maxim to “relate the new to the known” is highly applicable in vocabulary instruction—students must make connections between words they already know and words they are learning. Exposure to words multiple times in multiple meaningful contexts is important. And most elusively, but perhaps most importantly, good vocabulary instruction raises word consciousness (Graves and Watts-Taffe 2002). Students think about words as words, notice when they hear or read words they don’t know, and remember when they hear or read words they’ve just recently learned. They have an interest in words, in playing with words, in multiple meanings of words. This picture of good vocabulary instruction could not contrast more sharply with the classroom in which students are handed a list of unrelated words, write the dictionary definition, and use the word in a sentence. That kind of vocabulary instruction does not
appear to work. (For further reading about effective vocabulary instruction, see Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2002, Blachowicz and Fisher 2001, Stahl 1999.)

Reader Engagement

Many dispositions are integrally related to comprehension as well. For example, the disposition to read like a writer (and write like a reader) likely leads to stronger comprehension (Shanahan 1988). And being motivated and engaged in reading is absolutely central. As John Guthrie and Allan Wigfield (2000) remind us:

Within a given school at a given time, some students are intent on reading and writing to understand. They focus on text meaning and avoid distractions. These engaged readers exchange ideas and interpretations of text with peers. Their devotion to reading spans across time, transfers to a variety of genre, and culminates in valued learning outcomes. In contrast, disengaged readers are inactive and inert. They tend to avoid reading and minimize effort. Rarely do they enjoy reading during free time or become absorbed in literature. (403)

Studies of exemplary teachers indicate that there are myriad things they do to promote literacy engagement in classrooms (Pressley et al. 2003). There are also specific instructional approaches, tested in research, designed to promote comprehension and engagement (Guthrie, Wigfield, and Perencevich 2004).

3. The Importance of Volume Reading

No one ever improved at playing the piano without practicing on a piano. Athletes do not make better basketball shots, hit more home runs, or score more hockey goals without practicing. The same goes for comprehension. Students need to read often and practice the comprehension skills and strategies that they are learning in real contexts. And reading provides benefits well beyond an opportunity to practice. Through reading, students learn new words and encounter new meanings or connotations for previously known words. As students read they also learn more about text itself—text structures, authors, devices, and so on. And through reading, students are able to learn about the world around them; for example, learning about what is happening in the world through events recounted in newspapers or developing a deeper understanding of an issue by reading multiple sources and points of view. Indeed, wide reading is associated with greater vocabulary, textual knowledge, and world knowledge (Stanovich and Cunningham 1993). And, of course, greater vocabulary, textual knowledge, and world knowledge enable stronger comprehension. For example, research indicates that good comprehenders have stronger knowledge of text structures than do poor
comprehenders (e.g., Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth 1980). The student who does not read often and widely will almost surely stagnate in comprehension development.

4. The Potential in Discussion of Text
Discussion of text clearly has the potential to deepen comprehension (Gaskins et al. 1993, Van den Branden 2000). In fact, simply asking students questions about what they read, and creating situations in which students ask each other questions about what they read, has been shown to improve comprehension (Duke and Pearson 2002). A caution here, however. It is critical to ask a range of questions, including many higher level questions—questions that get at important content or issues, that do not have an answer right there in the text, that do not have just one answer in any case.

Think Alouds
Another important form of talk about text is the think aloud. Through think alouds, teachers model their thought processes (Davey 1983, Olshavsky 1976–77), showing students, through oral presentation, what is going on in their (the teacher’s) mind while reading. Students can also engage in think alouds with one another or by themselves. This can spark interesting discussion, as students begin to think aloud to each other and talk about their thinking.

Instructional Conversations
Some specific approaches to structuring and conducting discussion of text have been tested in previous research. One approach shown to improve comprehension (not just of the texts discussed but of future texts to be read) is instructional conversations (Goldenberg 1993, Saunders and Goldenberg 1999).

Discussion is planned in advance In this approach, teachers plan discussions in advance: selecting a text, identifying a thematic focus of the discussion, anticipating possible difficulties students may have (for example a lack of relevant background knowledge), and considering ways to address them, (thinking through directions the conversation may take, and contemplating possible ways of following up the discussion). The discussion itself then has a thematic focus, involves activating relevant background schemata, and includes, as needed, direct teaching and modeling by the teacher of knowledge or strategies that might aid comprehension. The teacher works to promote complex language and expression, for example, by recasting students’ contributions or asking students to elaborate on their statements.

Questions to encourage connections and explanations In this approach, few questions are asked in which the answer is simple and already known. Many questions are asked that require students to connect their prior
knowledge to the reading or to explain the basis of their statements (e.g., “What makes you say that?”). Teacher and student build upon one another’s contributions to the discussion, though the teacher also works to maintain a thematic focus and coherence of the discussion.

**Connected discourse** The result with this approach is connected discourse rather than the old pattern in which the teacher asks a question, a student responds, the teacher evaluates the response, a teacher asks a new, unrelated question, the student responds, the teacher evaluates, and so on (known as the I–R–E (Initiation–Response–Evaluation) pattern; Cazden 1988). The atmosphere for Instructional Conversations is described as “challenging but nonthreatening” (Goldenberg 1993). Instructional Conversations are the kinds of rich conversations about text that many of us revel in.

**5. The Effectiveness of Explicit Instruction in Comprehension Strategies**

Perhaps the most critical understanding about building comprehension is the effectiveness of explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. Study after study has revealed that explicitly teaching students even one strategy for comprehending text can improve their comprehension (National Reading Panel 2000, Pearson et al. 1992, Pressley 2000). Lists of which strategies are worth teaching, with respect to research-proven gains in comprehension, vary somewhat, but usually include:

- generating questions
- thinking aloud
- monitoring comprehension and adjusting reading as needed
- attending to and uncovering text structure
- activating and applying relevant background knowledge, including making predictions
- drawing inferences
- constructing visual representations
- summarizing (Duke and Pearson 2002)

Many studies of these strategies include the following components in their instructional model:

1. An explicit description of the strategy, including when and how it should be used
2. Teacher and/or student modeling of the strategy in action
3. Collaborative use of the strategy in action (e.g., students and teacher making and justifying predictions together)
4. Guided practice using the strategy
5. Independent use of the strategy (Duke and Pearson 2002)
This reflects a gradual release of responsibility model, in which the teacher increasingly hands over control for use of the strategy to the student (Pearson and Gallagher 1983). Of course, one cycles through this release of responsibility over and over as texts become more difficult, new genres or situations are encountered, and so on.

6. The Particular Value of Multiple Strategy Instruction

As much as we have emphasized the impact of teaching even a single comprehension strategy, it seems that teaching multiple comprehension strategies simultaneously is particularly powerful (Duke and Pearson 2002, National Reading Panel 2000, Pressley 2000), including for students with learning disabilities (Gersten et al. 2001). One multiple strategy instruction approach is Collaborative Strategic Reading (Klingner and Vaughn 1999). In this approach, which draws from past work on reciprocal teaching and on cooperative learning, students work in small, cooperative groups while applying four comprehension strategies: Preview (think about what they already know, predict what the passage might be about), “Click and Clunk” (monitor comprehension, use fix-up strategies as needed), Get the Gist (glean and restate the most important idea), and Wrap-Up (summarize, ask questions). Students in the group have specific roles, such as leader, clunk expert, gist expert, and encourager, to assist in application of the strategies and, of course, understanding the text. Cue cards may be used to remind students of strategies, such as a clunk card that says: “Reread the sentences before and after the clunk looking for cues” or a student leader cue card that says: “Did everyone understand what we read? If you did not, write your clunks in your learning log.” Students also complete learning logs before and after reading; this can both support their comprehension as well as provide valuable assessment information to the teacher. This approach has been tested in several studies and is shown to be effective at improving comprehension in upper-grades students. (See Vaughn, Klingner, and Bryant 2001 for a review of research on this approach; see Klingner et al. 2001, for a book on implementing the approach; see Duke and Bennett-Armistead 2003 for a discussion of use of this approach with primary grade students.)

7. The Importance of Authenticity

Relatively recent research suggests the importance of authenticity in developing comprehension. Briefly, as defined by Purcell-Gates and Duke (not yet published), authentic literacy events replicate or reflect reading and writing purposes and texts outside of a schooling context. For example, in authentic literacy events with informational text, students read not solely for the purpose of learning to read and write or satisfying a teacher’s requirement, but because they actually want or need to know something—the reason people
read informational text outside of schools. Students write informational text
not simply to complete a report and hand it in to the teacher, but because
they have information to convey to someone who wants or needs to know
that information. Texts involved in authentic literacy events are rarely
worksheets, textbooks, or short passages followed by multiple choice ques-
tions, but rather actual trade books, pamphlets, letters, magazine articles,
and other types of texts commonly found outside of schools. In one study,
teachers who included more authentic literacy events with informational
and procedural text in science had students who showed more growth in
comprehension (and writing) (Purcell-Gates and Duke, not yet published).

Teachers used many strategies to establish authentic literacy events. For
each event, they would use hands-on experiences to elicit children’s questions
about a topic, then setting the purpose for their reading and writing to an-
swer these questions. Or they would establish outside audiences for children’s
writing—the class down the hall, pen pals, a community group, a local mu-
seum or nature center, and so on.

**Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI)**
One research-tested instructional approach that lends itself to authentic liter-
acy events is Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) (e.g., Guthrie,
Wigfield, and Perencevich 2004). CORI centers on a conceptual theme in
science, which is usually a big idea or universal concept. Students are engaged
in hands-on experiences related to this theme, and also consult a wide variety
of interesting, often student-selected texts. Students work in groups toward
conceptual goals; for example, one group of students might work to learn
about wetland habitats and to share what they’ve learned with another group
of students (perhaps one working on desert habitats, who would in turn
share what they’ve learned). Students are explicitly taught comprehension
strategies, but it is done while meeting their conceptual goals. For example,
they might be taught a summarizing strategy to help in summarizing material
for their presentation. Evaluation of students focuses on the comprehension,
conceptual knowledge, as well as their engagement.

**Looking to the Future**
We believe that these seven critical understandings from research on compre-
hension should be reflected in every classroom, in every content area, and
with students of all ages. But we worry that they are not, and even recent re-
search provides reason for our worry (Pressley and Wharton-McDonald
2002). You are reading this book, which suggests this is probably not the case
in your classroom, but outside of your own classroom, how many students
are still handed worksheets with literal questions to answer after reading a
passage? How many discussions about text mirror the I-R-E format? How
many teachers still give students a list of words on Monday to memorize and
to spit back definitions on Friday? Comprehension is too important for us to continue ineffective practices. Comprehension is too important for us to neglect the practices that research has shown to be effective. Research on comprehension should guide the changes in instruction to improve the comprehension of students throughout schooling.

References


Chapter 2
Learning from Comprehension Research

- National Reading Panel. 2000. “Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups.” Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. NIH Publication No. 00–4754.


**KEY QUESTIONS**

1. Of the seven critical understandings, which do you see reflected in things you are already doing in your classroom? Which need more attention?

2. Consider trying one of the instructional approaches identified in this chapter, such as Collaborative Strategic Reading or CORI, during a unit of study in your classroom. What happens? How do students respond? What type of feedback do they give you based on their experience?

3. What do you do with vocabulary instruction? Consider ramping up your vocabulary instruction and/or trying some new things. What could you do to enhance or further enhance word consciousness in your classroom?

4. Authentic literacy events appear to have an impact on comprehension. How might we ensure more authenticity with real purposes and real resources for our students?

5. Focus on the discussions you have with your students. Are the discussions teacher dominated (possibly even reflecting the I-R-E pattern)? Or do your students take a more active role in the discussions?
What Good Readers Do

• Are active
• Set goals
• Evaluate whether the text and their reading of it is meeting their goals
• Look over the text
• Notice the text’s structure
• Make predictions
• Read selectively
• Adjust reading to their purpose and the style of text
• Read some things carefully while skimming others
• Build and revise meaning as they read
• Ask questions
• Use prior knowledge to understand text
• Think about characteristics and intentions of the author
• Monitor their understanding
• Try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text
• Evaluate the text’s quality and value
• Respond intellectually and emotionally
• Read different kinds of text differently
• Process text before, during, and after reading (adapted from Duke and Pearson 2002)
## Reflecting on Your Practice

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