# Reading for Meaning:

## A guide to the research on best-practice teaching of comprehension in today's world

**Susan Taylor**

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## About the author

Susan Taylor is an experienced primary school teacher who also lectures and facilitates tutorials for pre-service primary teachers at Macquarie University, NSW. Literacy, language and literature are her specialty subjects. Susan has a Master's Degree in Children's Literature as well as a Diploma in Book Editing and Publishing, has authored a series of English textbooks for primary students, and has written and consulted on Primary literacy for Oxford University Press in Australia. In 2018, she presented a workshop on teaching comprehension at the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) conference. Susan is passionate about students having a voice, and enjoys her role as a marker in the annual 'What Matters' competition for the Whitlam Institute.

# Introduction

Globalisation and technological developments are changing the landscape of Australian society at an ever-increasing rate, and education along with it. Because language and meaning-making influence culture, and vice versa, this gives classroom teachers reason to pause and rethink what is needed from literacy teaching for the future of their students (Kalantzis & Cope 2012). Central to this is the need to develop robust reading comprehension practices, as 21st century learners will increasingly rely on their ability to understand and be discerning about what they read. The forms of communication that students engage with are evolving rapidly with the influence of technology, with more written exchanges than ever before, and there is an increasing emphasis on determining the reliability and meaning of texts – highlighted by the term 'post-truth' being declared Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016.

Another key influence on teachers is the multilingualism that has become a significant factor in Australian schools. Teachers must consider the best way to help English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students connect with and thoroughly understand the texts they read to prepare them for their learning journey in the English medium. This paper reviews the research and evidence around teaching comprehension in light of these complexities and presents some practical classroom solutions.

*21st century learners will increasingly rely on their ability to understand and be discerning about what they read.*

Taylor 2018

# The importance of comprehension

*Comprehension is generally considered to be an essential skill required in all learning areas.*

Byers, Jones & Kervin 2012

'Comprehension is the understanding and interpretation of what is read' (Griffin 2010). For a student, the ability to derive meaning from texts is vital because it will either enable or hinder their progress in every school subject. 'Comprehension is generally considered to be an essential skill required in all learning areas' (Byers, Jones & Kervin 2012). To be able to effectively comprehend what they read both in and beyond the classroom, students need to be able to make personal connections with texts and engage in critical thinking and problem solving.

## Rethinking comprehension for 21st century learning

The demands on literacy skills have become more complex as the extent to which literacy must be considered a social interaction increase. Students are now consuming the written form more than ever before, as the medium of text spills into their methods of social communication. With increased learning and communication via technology, receiving and decoding of the written word needs to occur rapidly. Contemporary teachers must respond to this by empowering students with the literacy skills that they will need for their fast-paced, highly networked future. The need to fully discern truth from, and opinions about, what they read has never been greater as they navigate the increasing variety of textual forms.

In addition, students are teaching themselves much more directly than in the past as they interact with highly accessible digital information. Comprehension must be immediate and clear for young students, as there will not always be an adult present to control or help them interpret what they encounter. The more aware and confident students are with their own comprehension skills, the more independent they will become. This integrates well with the vision that 'successful learners … are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are …' (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008).
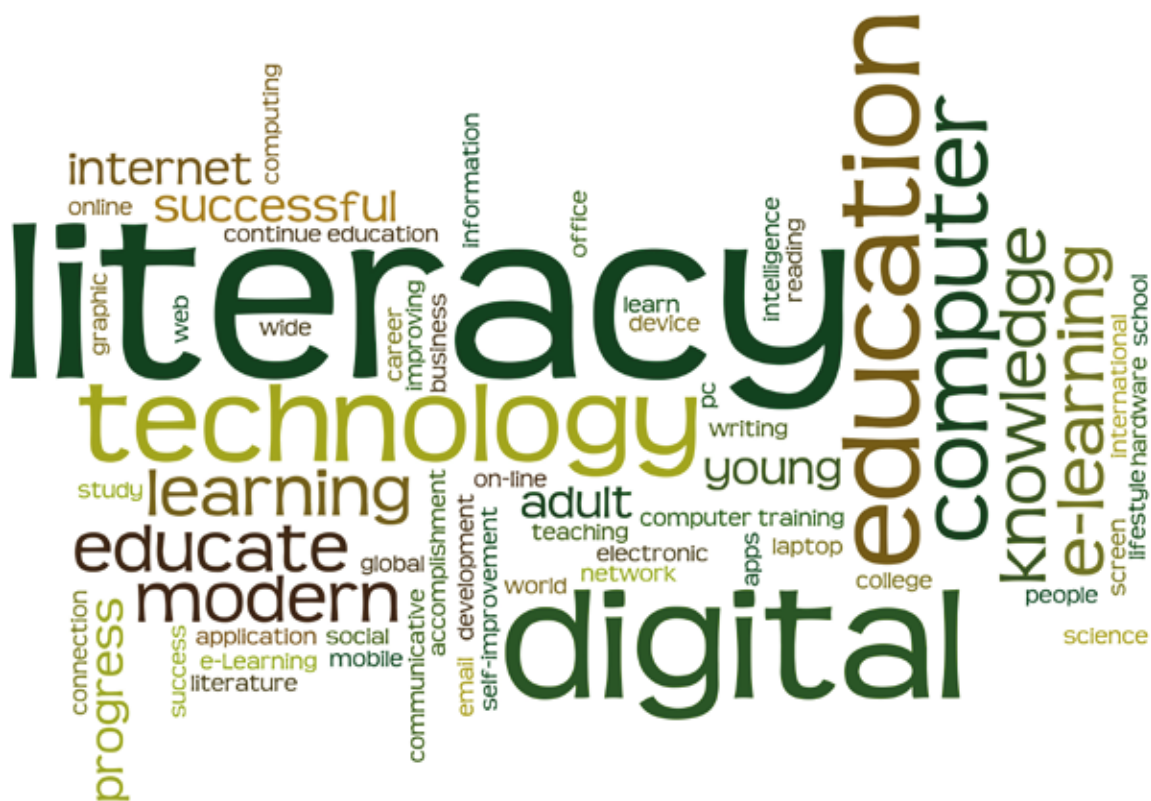
# Effective reading instruction

Research into effective reading instruction has found that phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension need to be taught in combination, but that it is also important to distinguish the skills of word reading and reading for meaning with explicit, systematic instruction (NSW Centre for Education 2017).

'It is an obvious truth that the goal of reading is comprehension and that skilled reading involves understanding as well as decoding text. In short, learning to read progresses to reading, effortlessly, to learn. The teaching of beginner readers requires an understanding of the processes that underpin this progression' (Rose 2006).

You can first model for students how to use multiple comprehension strategies by using metacognitive language to describe the processes, and then use a gradual release of responsibility model to encourage them to move first to guided and eventually to independent practice of comprehension skills.

## Comprehension strategies and skills: a new framework

Oxford University Press has worked with leading academics and practitioners in the field of comprehension, including Professors Jane Oakhill and Kate Cain, to develop a framework of comprehension strategies and skills. The framework has been devised to represent the best research in the area of comprehension, while also reflecting curriculum requirements and ensuring ease of use for both teachers and students.

In Jane Oakhill and Kate Cain's four-year longitudinal study (published in 2012 in *Scientific Studies of Reading*), they identified four clear areas that contribute to skilled comprehension:

- inferential skills (both being able to link up references within sentences and more global text connections involving ideas, settings or themes)
- comprehension monitoring (i.e. being aware of own level of understanding of a text and what to do if it breaks down)
- identifying text structure (deriving a framework for understanding the text to help identify main parts and retell coherently)
- receptive vocabulary (knowledge of the meanings of words).

In Oakhill, Cain and Elbro's book *Understanding and Teaching Reading Comprehension* (Routledge 2014) they outline the research background and make suggestions as to how the research findings could be put into practice in the classroom.

# Strategies and skills

Strategies and skills are linked and convergent. Strategies are consciously employed during reading to help construct meaning in real time; skills are abilities that can be used after reading to answer questions about the text. Strategies are not easily assessable or measurable, whereas skills can be assessed.

Reading in the moment requires the reader to make sense of text as it's being read. In doing so, the reader builds up a literal understanding of the text, by dealing with the surface layer of meaning. (Tennet, Reedy, Hobsbaum & Gamble 2016)

We can encourage students to verbalise their thought processes during reading to describe what they are reading and the strategies they are employing to deal with challenges. It is important to model this 'think aloud' metacognitive skill for students to emulate. 'Teachers facilitate these developing comprehension strategies by implementing instructional processes in which their goals are clear, and engage students in the development of thinking skills' (Griffin 2010).

The Comprehension Skills Framework underpins both *Oxford Reading for Comprehension* (Oxford University Press 2018) – a guided reading program that focuses on the explicit and systematic teaching of comprehension – and *Oxford Reading Buddy* (Oxford University Press 2019) – a digital reading service that offers virtual coaching of the strategies and monitoring of the skills during independent reading. The following table shows how the framework links comprehension skills and strategies.

| Comprehension Skill | Linked Comprehension Strategies |
|---|---|
| **Finding information** <br> Retrieving literal information from the text or pictures about characters, settings, overtly expressed feelings | • Determine importance <br> • Monitor comprehension <br> • Activate prior knowledge <br> • Ask questions <br> • Visualise |
| **Making connections and inferences** <br> Reading between the lines of the text, finding clues and building meaning from information that isn't explicitly stated in the text | • Infer <br> • Predict <br> • Monitor comprehension <br> • Visualise <br> • Ask questions <br> • Activate prior knowledge <br> • Determine importance |
| **Understanding vocabulary** <br> Identifying the meaning of words and phrases | • Monitor comprehension <br> • Infer <br> • Visualise <br> • Ask questions |
| **Using structure and organisation** <br> Making sense of a text by understanding the gist, ordering events and identifying main ideas, drawing on knowledge of text conventions, forms and features | • Monitor comprehension <br> • Determine importance <br> • Infer <br> • Activate prior knowledge |
| **Appreciating the author's toolkit** <br> Understanding how the author uses language and punctuation to create effect, being aware of the author's intent and expressing evaluative opinions on a text | • Infer <br> • Activate prior knowledge <br> • Ask questions <br> • Visualise |

# Teaching the strategies

### Activate prior knowledge

In an article for the journal *Practically Primary*, Queensland teacher Danielle Troegger emphasised the effectiveness of activating prior knowledge during her teaching of a unit on animals, called 'All Creatures Great and Small'. Before reading the book *Please Don't Feed the Bears* (Fowler, 1991) to her Year 2 class, she encouraged her students to share the information they already knew about bears using a collective mind map to ensure they were actively engaged with the topic. Troegger spent time exploring and drawing on students' existing knowledge of the topic and vocabulary, and identified potential challenges in advance. She found that in doing so, her students developed more confidence in their approach to working with texts.

Activating prior knowledge is a useful practical technique and once you have modelled it to your class, you can encourage students to create their own mind maps in small groups. This kind of activity fits with the notion that 'learning is a social construct …', as it '… requires interaction with others' (Ward 2013). Indeed, the ability to collaborate effectively with others is considered to be one of the skills that employers of the future will require most.



*Lalor Gardens Primary School word wall*

## Predict

This strategy can be activated by drawing on the natural curiosity of students. You probably often ask students to predict what will happen in a story from the front cover of a book, but you could also engage in a 'picture walk', silently turning through the first few pages of an illustrated book and asking students to predict what will happen next. This technique is helpful for keeping students engaged with the text, especially if they know that you are likely to ask them if their predictions turned out to be correct (Klingner et al. 2010).

## Monitor comprehension

Effective readers use this strategy when they check that the text makes sense to them. Once students become adept at identifying and dealing with challenging words or concepts, they can move on to problem solving to clarify meaning. To assist with vocabulary development, you could promote a discussion about the meaning of words in context, and further embed this by creating and displaying a laminated card showing each word and an accompanying image. A vocabulary word wall in the classroom can help to reinforce learning and to enhance activities in which students make connections between words.

Encourage students to reread – to stop and think about what they are reading, and ask questions such as 'Have I missed something?' and 'What have I learned?'. Students can record these findings or questions on mini-whiteboards.

## Ask questions

Asking questions allows the reader to consider where they will look for answers to the questions they have about a text. It helps them to connect to the text and form opinions about it. Teachers can model this strategy, and continue to focus on it as students progress to asking questions regarding their own comprehension using the 'think aloud' method. They can then practise by posing questions for their peers to answer. 'Engaging in a conscious "think aloud" focuses attention on aspects of reading comprehension that might otherwise go unnoticed' (Clarke et al. 2013).

Classroom-based research conducted with a Year 5 class in South Australia showed that the model of explicitly teaching comprehension via 'here/hidden/head comprehension questioning is effective for students in the 21st century' (Harris 2011). The most sophisticated of these questions, known as 'head', where the answer is not on the page but requires a connection with personal experience, needs the most explicit instruction. This is where students examine the purpose or intention behind the text, for example in the persuasive nature of advertising. The incorporation of such a complex examination of the text by students would be supported by research that shows there is a need for Australian teachers to consider how to best teach higher order thinking skills, not just concentrate on basics (Griffin 2004).

### Infer

Inference is an important strategy because it builds a coherent understanding of the text and helps students evaluate characters' motivations, feelings and emotions. When readers employ this strategy they go beyond the literal meaning of the text by connecting the clues embedded in the text with their own knowledge of the outside world.

Inferring enables an effective reader to make informed choices about meaning through careful examination of the text, rather than merely guessing. In discussing students' thoughts on the meaning of a text it is important for teachers to acknowledge that sometimes more than one conclusion can be reached.

Graphic organisers can help students to record and organise inferred meanings they have found in a text. For example, a student could record clues embedded in the text, and then combine them with written clues about what they already know about a topic to help them to work out what the inferences mean on a personal level.

### Determine importance

The ability to differentiate between the main idea of a text and less important information is a critical skill, particularly when consuming texts rapidly. A good technique to support the strategy of determining importance is asking students to summarise the text either verbally or in writing, for example when describing the message of the text to someone else.

'Think alouds' can also be applied when activating this strategy. Ask students to pause during shared reading sessions and summarise what has happened so far in the story. They could draw a story map showing the main events: beginning, middle and end. You can add complexity to this task by asking several students to summarise the text and then as a group combine their answers.

'Determine importance' also works well with non-fiction texts. Ask students to identify the salient features of a text. Students can also highlight the key features and important words – this leads them to where they need to be by upper primary and in secondary school, where they will depend on effective research skills.

### Visualise

When it comes to comprehension, 'a visual display helps a reader understand, organise and remember some of those thousand words' (Duke & Pearson 2009). Model the practice of 'sketch-to-stretch' by pausing when reading aloud and drawing (on a whiteboard, smart board or large sketchpad) the pictures you see in your mind as you read, and reinforcing this with a 'think aloud' discussion. Students can use this strategy by pausing during their own reading and drawing on a mini-whiteboard.

Another engaging way to activate visualisation skills is to use drama techniques such as having students create freeze frames depicting scenes from a book (Mills 2009). Drama also provides rich opportunities for cooperative learning.

# Comprehension and learners with languages other than English

*It is quite possible to read aloud fluently in a new language with minimal comprehension: the problem for many learners with English as another language / dialect (EAL / D), is not that they cannot decode or read the words on the page, but that they cannot comprehend them.*

De Courcy et al. 2012



It is essential that EAL/D students have access to explicit, systematic instruction in comprehension to prevent them from becoming marginalised in their Australian schooling. Ensuring that EAL/D students are taught vocabulary is critical, as is engaging learners in content that is meaningful to them and connects with the literacy skills they already possess. Activating prior knowledge and experience that is relevant to these students and clarifying unfamiliar contexts and idiomatic language is also important, as it cannot be assumed that students from varying cultural backgrounds have the necessary conceptual information needed to connect to new learning.

'Students' reading comprehension ability often has more to do with their relevant prior experiences and knowledge of the topic, genre, or vocabulary than their cognitive ability. For example, students with varied social and cultural backgrounds will have differing schemata or conceptual structures upon which to relate new knowledge from texts.' (Mills 2009)

# Case study
# Teaching comprehension in a school with a high EAL/D population

## School: Lalor Gardens

| | |
|---|---|
| **Teacher's name:** | Amy Sneddon |
| **Role:** | Curriculum Development and Implementation, Literacy and Numeracy F–6 Leading Teacher |
| **Number of students on roll:** | 345 |
| **School demographic:** | EAL/D students comprise 78% of the student population. Students have predominantly Arabic and Asian backgrounds, with increasing numbers of Pacific Islander and refugee families. The majority of students who enrol in Foundation have little or no understanding of English, and many have not had any pre-school education. |

### What's the most important thing to remember about teaching comprehension to EAL/D students?

- Teachers should not make any assumptions about the experiences and knowledge students hold. This fits with Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, Number 1: Know students and how they learn. Teachers must interpret cultural messages within the text that students may not have experienced outside the school setting.

### What practical activities do you use with EAL/D students to prompt comprehension?

- Encourage and build students' abilities to 'think aloud' about texts through use of full sentences, including vocabulary learnt, and adding more details. Through introductions, rotation activities, share times and guided reading, teachers prompt talk and include this as a focus for students.
- Use descriptive pictures and wordless picture storybooks and ask students to describe what they can see, what is happening, how characters are feeling, how it makes them feel, and what they think happened before or might happen next. Comprehension questions can be accompanied by pictures to guide thinking.
- Play barrier games where one student reads or listens to instructions and follows directions. These can link to vocabulary the students are learning. For example, location words, topic vocabulary, high-frequency words, shapes, colours, nouns, adjectives and verbs. Students can be provided with a background and cards or magnets to move on it, or they can draw.
- Encourage text-to-text connections by providing experiences, other texts and viewings related to the text being read. These can be built around the topic or events in the text. Through experiences, we build a word bank related to the experience and include words from the text. For example, before or after reading a text about making cupcakes, we would make cupcakes with the students, modelling the language from the text.
- Focus on building vocabulary knowledge and increasing word banks through word associations, synonyms and antonyms. Use picture prompts, actions and sounds to complement vocabulary or events in the text.
- Look at literacy from a holistic view where reading, writing, and speaking and listening activities support each other. Texts and new knowledge gained in reading can be incorporated in writing and oral language programs to consolidate the knowledge and build a deeper understanding.
- Encourage text-to-world connections by using non-fiction texts to build background knowledge. Non-fiction texts, viewings and information can be related to the text being read, for example when reading fiction text, non-fiction knowledge is used as support.

### How do these activities lead to sound comprehension in reading?

- Providing multiple ways of looking at information in a text helps build an understanding.
- Experiences and visuals help build knowledge for students with limited English where using words alone can confuse them.
- Focusing on oral language is important as students generally learn to speak before they learn to read and write; it is important that they are able to demonstrate their understanding through speech. The use of pair and group work can help students to engage in complex conversations.
- Background knowledge, including vocabulary, is needed to build a sound understanding of a text. It is best if new words are predicted and clearly defined first by the teacher and practised during the text exploration, and then reinforced after reading to help store information in long-term memory.

# Conclusion

Effective readers use a range of strategies during reading to help them to gain a sophisticated understanding of the texts they engage with. These strategies can be made accessible to all students through specific instruction and modelling by teachers, and will underpin comprehension skill development. EAL/D students are particularly in need of systematic teaching in the area of comprehension. They must be taught vocabulary explicitly, and be given opportunities to explore prior knowledge and cultural understanding without assumption prior to the commencement of literacy teaching. Of equal importance is the consideration of the changing nature of literacy practices due to the influence of technology. The need for students to fully comprehend, and be discerning about, the multitude of texts they engage with in various forms has never been greater.

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In classrooms across Australia, educators are facing a comprehension challenge. Although students are able to read independently, many have not developed the comprehension skills they need to understand the context of what they are reading. This affects their ability to learn and to read for enjoyment.

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