

Comprehension is an essential part of the literacy equation

By Annie Facchinetti

Imagine that you were lost in Turkey and the only directions you had were written in Turkish. You could probably read them out loud with reasonable accuracy, even though your phonological awareness of the language may not be perfect, but unless you can speak Turkish, your understanding would be limited. Reading the directions is therefore unlikely to be a valuable activity for you. So, while phonics and decoding are critical skills, without comprehension, the whole point of reading is lost.

Seminal research by Gough and Tunmer (1986) proposed the Simple View of Reading, which places equal value on decoding and comprehension using a mathematical equation: $\text{Reading} = \text{Decoding} \times \text{Comprehension}$ or $R = D \times C$. In this equation, if there is no comprehension, and therefore the C has a value of 0, the R will also equal 0. In other words, if comprehension is not happening, reading is not happening.

A comprehensive study by the US National Reading Panel (NRP & NICHD, 2000) identified five areas as being critical to reading instruction: phonemic awareness; phonics; fluency; vocabulary; and text instruction. Often referred to as the 'big five', the NRP concluded that each component is necessary for successful reading from the earliest stages of school.

This represents a shift from traditional thinking, whereby phonics was the main focus for early years students and comprehension was introduced later.

The view that comprehension should be an integral part of reading instruction has garnered much support in the research literature. Cunningham and Shagoury (2005, p.4), for example, contend that emphasising decoding too heavily in lower grades can lead to a lack of understanding when reading by the time students reach the middle years. They advocate explicit instruction in a range of comprehension strategies, including visualising, inference and synthesising skills. Reed (2016) takes this one step further, asserting that:

Teaching comprehension while students are still mastering foundational reading skills will not only allow for students to demonstrate age-appropriate skills, but it also will help reinforce the reasons we read in the first place: to derive meaning, understanding, and enjoyment from a book or other text.

This suggests that not only are students capable of text comprehension as soon as they begin reading (Gregory & Cahill, 2010), but also ensuring that they have the skills to access meaning as they read is vital to help students become successful and willing readers.

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While instruction in some of the foundational skills of reading, such as phonological awareness, will gradually become less necessary as students' reading proficiency increases (Reed, 2016), comprehension remains important right through the primary years and beyond. A lack of comprehension skills will affect not only a student's academic results, but also a whole host of areas in their adult lives, including opportunities for future study and employment prospects (Marshall, n.d.). Consequently, it is necessary to provide continued support for students to develop and refine strategies to understand and critically analyse what they read throughout their school lives.

There is general agreement that while decoding is necessary for successful reading, by itself it is not sufficient (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Van Kleeck, 2008). Incorporating targeted and explicit comprehension instruction into daily literacy programs is therefore essential to support students as readers and learners.

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