

Information for parents and teachers

Comprehension

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Comprehension is the ability to understand what you read. When you comprehend something you are able to connect what you are reading to knowledge you may already have about what you are reading. This knowledge can help you predict what may happen next in what you are reading. Most students enjoy being able to predict as it gives a purpose to their reading.

Comprehension occurs at four different levels of complexity and each level is dependent upon competence at the previous level. These levels are called the literal level, the inferential level, the critical level and the creative level.

The literal level is when the reader understands the basic facts. This information is contained explicitly within the text being read. The reader at this level needs to understand word meanings, recognise the main idea, understand about sequence and order and be able to recognise cause and effect when they are mentioned in the text being read.

At the second or inferential level, the reader needs to go beyond what has been written in the passage and needs to add meaning or draw conclusions. Skills at this level include being able to make generalizations, being able to predict what may happen, working out cause and effect when these are not specifically stated, and discovering relationships between people and things.

The third level is called the critical level. This is where the reader is involved in assessing and working out the (good) sense of what is being read in the passage. The reader at this level may think of new ideas or develop new insights that have not been stated explicitly in the text being read.

The fourth level is the creative level. This is where the reader takes information and the ideas read, and then creates new ideas from them. At this level the reader is stimulated towards new and original thinking.

Some children have difficulty moving beyond the first level and may even have difficulty at this level. It is important to realize that a child may be able to read a word but not understand what that word means. If this occurs the child needs to have his or her vocabulary enhanced by using a variety of different strategies to develop a greater understanding of the meaning of commonly used words.

Some children who read very slowly or, for that matter, some children who are fast readers, may not always understand what they are reading. They may have difficulty recalling what they have just read.

If this is the case, parents and teachers need to teach and make the child aware of the following key components:

- locating the main idea in what is being read
- drawing inferences
- generating questions
- monitoring one's own understanding
- making a summary.

Adults in the child's life, in addition, need to model and demonstrate some of the following strategies to help improve a child's comprehension ability and skills:

- Previewing material before it is read so the child can gain an overview before reading the text.
- Helping the child to locate the main idea in the paragraph.
- Helping to generate ideas about what is being read by "talking and thinking aloud".
- Helping the child to predict what may happen next in the text being read.
- Making the child summarize what he or she has just read.



In addition, teachers and parents need to provide time for the child to read many different types of texts, and for the child to talk about what he or she has read and his or her feelings about what he or she has just read. You should also make sure that the material is interesting to the child and that it is at the child's readability level.

Readability is the ease with which a book or other piece of written material can be understood.

Readability formulae predict the ease of reading of a particular piece of writing based on the objective assessment of such factors as sentence length, word length and familiarity of vocabulary.

If a text contains too many unfamiliar words, the reader will struggle and become frustrated. The first step in attempting to increase fluency is to select a text at the correct readability level. For a book to be read easily by a student he/she should know at least 97 per cent of the words on the page (Westwood, 2001). Texts with this rate of success are said to be at the child's independent reading level.

If someone is available to help the student as he/she reads, then a text in which at least 90-95 per cent of the words are known can be used. This is termed the "instructional level".

If the student knows less than 90 per cent of the words, the book is said to be at "frustration level". A poor reader should never be expected to read a book or material at frustration level, since this leads to a situation where the student ceases to expect to understand what he/she is reading (Westwood, 2001).

Modern day readability formulae grew out of a concern expressed by science teachers that their texts contained too many technical terms. Dozens of factors were implicated as being possible sources of reading difficulty, but research has shown that the two factors that most accurately predict the difficulty of a text are vocabulary and sentence length. Generally speaking, the greater the numbers of unfamiliar words, then the more abstract the ideas. All other things being equal, longer sentences are harder to understand and, as average sentence length increases, the complexity of the passage usually also increases.

Reference

Westwood, P. (2001). Reading and learning difficulties: Approaches to teaching and assessment. Victoria: ACER Press.

For more Information

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