Surefire Ways to Engage Students and Improve Comprehension: Guidelines and TOP 5 Comprehension Strategies

By Lori Oczkus
It is no wonder that reading comprehension manages to hold a prominent place on the list of “very hot” topics in literacy when the annual “What’s Hot” in literacy research survey comes out (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2010). Teachers across the globe continue to report that their students experience difficulty comprehending what they read.

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you?

- Sixth grader Hector only selects comic books or magazines to read during SSR time. He says reading is “really boring.”
- Henry accurately decodes the second-grade basal story but after reading can’t recall any of the highlights or important details.
- Swanceria experiences difficulty reading the social studies text.
- Mr. Johnson’s fourth graders range from first- to sixth-grade reading levels.
- Ana arrived from Mexico two years ago and reads fluently in English in third grade but experiences much difficulty comprehending what she reads.

Maybe some of these students are just like the ones in your classroom. Your students probably range greatly in their reading levels and skills. You may find that some of your students decode words but have difficulty understanding the text. Many students experience difficulty summarizing and pulling main ideas from the text. Even our very best readers may find nonfiction texts challenging. Then there are the students who simply are not engaged in their reading.

Just know that you are not alone. In recent years, an alarming 69% of fourth graders and 70% of eighth graders read below the proficient reading level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) pointed out that comprehension is a complex process. However, the good news is that we know more now about effective ways to improve comprehension than ever before (Oczkus, 2009).

What Is Comprehension and Why Is It So Important to Teach?
The goal of reading is to comprehend or understand what we read (Lipson, 2007). Simply decoding or reading the words isn’t enough if the reader cannot make sense of the text.

Recent reading research suggests that an urgent need exists for educators to teach comprehension strategies at all grade levels from primary to secondary. Reading experts agree that students need to be taught to use the “good reader” strategies (i.e., comprehension strategies) flexibly and with many different types of text (Duke, 2005).

The National Reading Panel identified comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonics, and phonemic awareness as the pillars or key building blocks of teaching reading (NICHD, 2000). Comprehension strategies can be taught to dramatically improve reading comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002). This month we explore practical and effective techniques for improving reading comprehension in your classroom.

Common Problems Students Have With Reading Comprehension

- Some students decode well but do not comprehend what they’ve read.
- Primary students may be so focused on decoding that they lose comprehension.
- Students may not be able to identify the main ideas of a text.
- Students do not make logical predictions based on the text or their background experiences.
- Students do not infer themes, character feelings, or other deeper interpretations of the text.
- Students of all ages may lack strategies for figuring out confusing or difficult words.
- Students may not make meaningful personal connections to the text including connections to their lives, other books they’ve read, and the world around them.
- Students may not ask questions about the text or anticipate questions the teacher may ask.
What Are the Most Important Comprehension Strategies to Teach?

Although the list of comprehension strategies differs slightly depending on the study, the core list is consistent. I like to call the six essential reading comprehension strategies the “Super Six”—a kid-friendly term that will stick with your students (Oczkus, 2004, 2009):

1. Making connections
2. Predicting and inferring
3. Questioning
4. Monitoring and clarifying
5. Summarizing and synthesizing
6. Evaluating

These research-based comprehension strategies are the critical ones that good readers use before, during, and after reading. They are universally accepted, and any published reading program that you use will include them. If your district uses leveled texts and novels or a readers’ workshop approach, you can also easily incorporate lessons on the comprehension strategies. I suggest teaching each of the strategies in think-aloud lessons using mentor texts and other interactive techniques (see the “Guidelines for Effectively Teaching Comprehension Strategies” section and Oczkus, 2009).

Connect

When we read, we naturally make connections to our own life experiences, other books we’ve read, and the world around us. When I read the popular book Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo, students are reminded of dogs or pets they’ve owned, books they’ve read about dogs, and movies they’ve seen. Personal connections help make reading more fun and meaningful.

Predict/Infer

Predicting is a student favorite. Students love guessing what will happen next. The trick to making good predictions is to go beyond wild guessing and make logical or more sophisticated predictions based on what is happening in the text and the reader’s prior knowledge. Throughout the reading of a fiction text, you can pause and ask your students to predict what they think will happen next; with nonfiction, ask what they think they will learn next.

I like to tell students that inferring is the cousin of predicting. Both predicting and inferring require that students use text clues and clues from their own minds to figure out what is happening in the text. Students can think of themselves as reading detectives trying to decode an author’s hidden message. Inferring is often called “reading between the lines” and is a strategy that the very best readers use constantly.

Question

Good readers ask questions before, during, and after reading. I bring a plastic microphone to class (all grade levels!) and tell students that asking questions is like three kinds of television shows: a game show for more literal recall, a Discovery Channel show for “wondering,” and a talk show for asking open-ended discussion questions. Children come to school brimming with questions; when we harness and encourage their natural curiosity, comprehension improves dramatically (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; NICHD, 2000).

Monitor/Clarify

Monitoring comprehension—or clarifying, as it is sometimes referred to—is much like checking the gauges on your car and then using tools to fix the problem. Some of our readers are simply not aware that they are supposed to pause frequently to try to figure out confusing words or portions of text. Monitoring comprehension involves using “fix it” strategies such as breaking words into syllables, sounding out words, and rereading for meaning. Monitoring also requires that students keep track of the big picture in the story by rereading and making “mind pictures” or visualizing while reading.

Summarize/Synthesize

Summarizing is a whopper of a strategy that involves lots of tough skills such as remembering details, sorting out important points and themes, and putting it all in a logical order. Students may moan (and you might, too) when you say it is time to summarize. Yet, researchers tell us that when students summarize, their comprehension improves (Duke & Pearson, 2002). My best advice is to make it fun. Try asking students frequently to summarize little chunks of text for practice rather than always making a summary for an entire story or chapter. Allow students to sketch drawings and create dramatizations as summaries, too.

Synthesis is related to summarizing, but when students synthesize they go beyond just recalling the text and they create new meanings. Students synthesize when they answer these questions: How has this text changed my thinking? What new ideas do I have about the topic?
Evaluate

Reality television provides us with a wonderful metaphor for evaluating during reading. Our students are familiar with the judges who spew results for music, dance, or cooking competitions. Good readers evaluate whether they liked the text, the author’s craft, characters’ actions, and even their own progress as readers. It is especially important to ask students to include reasons or a “because” to complete their evaluations. Evaluating moves students to higher levels of comprehension and thinking.

Guidelines for Effectively Teaching Comprehension Strategies

Here are some practical guidelines to help you introduce and reinforce the comprehension strategies all year long.

Provide metaphors for each strategy.
The very best teachers put metaphors to good use and make their teaching come alive. Students from kindergarten to high school remember the strategies better when we attach a metaphor to each (Wormeli, 2009). For example, for questioning as we read, I bring a microphone (the fake American Idol one I have is always a hit) and tell students that asking questions is like being on a game show or talk show.

You can choose on the “scale of kookiness” to show a picture representing the metaphor, to hold up a prop, or to dress up like a character to share the metaphor. You do not have to dress up if that is not you, but I suggest at least holding up a prop for students. Be sure to use the Helpful Strategy Starters to provide students with the language they need for each of the strategies. This is especially helpful if you have English learners in your classroom.

Teach using think-alouds.
Think-alouds are a great way to model comprehension strategies for students and make the thinking behind them more visible. A think-aloud starts with teacher modeling and moves to guided practice with peers and eventually independent practice. This is called the gradual release of responsibility so that students become responsible for learning, as in the following example.

Mrs. Carpenter shows the nonfiction text Zipping, Zapping, Zooming Bats by Ann Earle and tells the class that when they read it is helpful to clarify, especially when reading nonfiction. She engages the students in a quick partner discussion to see what the students know about bats. Then she asks the third graders what they know about clarifying their comprehension. Some hands go up, and students share that good readers reread, read on, and sound out hard words.

She continues by telling the students that clarifying is like wearing clarify glasses as she puts on a pair of giant yellow glasses. The students giggle, but Mrs. Carpenter has their undivided attention. As she reads aloud from the book, she pauses frequently to model for students how to clarify a difficult word or phrase using the strategy starter “I didn’t get…, so I….”

After a few pages and examples, she pauses on a word and asks the students to turn to partners to try out the strategy starter and to clarify the word echolocation. At the end of the lesson, she tells students they will collect five hard words to clarify in their own reading today and share ways to clarify words with their table teams.

Mrs. Carpenter invites a student up to the front of the room to wear the big

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Note. Ideas found in Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons: 25 Surefire Ways to Engage Students and Improve Comprehension by Lori Oczkus, 2009, New York: Scholastic; Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
glasses and to reflect on the lesson. The student says, “I reread the sentence, and I can chop the word in parts when I clarify.”

Teach comprehension strategies in different settings.
In most of my schools, we post the comprehension strategies on the wall in every room. Some teachers even hang the props on the wall for a colorful display and for reference during all sorts of reading lessons. You can easily reinforce the comprehension strategies throughout the day in a variety of settings, including the following:

■ Whole-class lessons—Refer to the strategies and conduct mini think-alouds during read-alouds, novel or basal study, or content area lessons. Besides modeling, be sure to allow partners and groups to find examples in the text.
■ Guided reading—Guided reading is the perfect setting for selecting just one or a few of the strategies to reinforce at a student’s reading level.
■ Independent reading—After a read-aloud in which you model one of the strategies and provide practice with partners, try asking students to find examples of their strategy use with independent reading books. Have students provide examples on a bookmark, self-stick notes, or a Strategy Collection Sheet (they can fold a paper into fourths and record strategy examples in each box).

Encourage higher level thinking skills.
If you focus on only lower level literal thinking skills, that is what you will get from your students. When you teach a balance of literal, inferential, and critical thinking, students grow in their comprehension (Pearson, 2010). Don’t fall into the trap of providing only your best readers higher level thinking questions. Struggling readers benefit from critical thinking as well!

Try discussion starters that promote deeper thinking, such as
■ “What are you wondering?”
■ “Why do you think?”
■ “How...?”
■ “I think…because...”
■ “I used to think..., now I think... because...”
■ “I rate this...because...”

Require students to always give a “because” after every response.

Steps for a Well-Crafted Think-Aloud at Any Grade Level

1. Introduce the strategy
■ Say, “When good readers read they [name the strategy], and it helps them.”
■ Ask students what they know about the strategy: “What do you know about...?”
■ Explain the strategy: “When we [name the strategy], we first..., then we..., then finally we....”
■ Optional: Use picture, prop, or character costume.

2. Model in an interactive think-aloud
■ Select a passage from a text to read aloud and show the steps you use with a given strategy: “I am stopping here to [name the strategy]. Watch me as I show you how it helps me understand what I am reading.”
■ Optional: Add props or strategy starters to your think-aloud.

3. Guide practice
■ Read on in the text, pausing to allow students to turn and talk to a partner to try out the strategy. Or have table groups try the strategy in teams and then share.

4. Provide independent practice
■ Students use sticky notes to mark their texts as they read on their own and hunt for places they will use the strategy you are working on.

5. Wrap up
■ The class discusses how the strategy helped them with the reading today: “The strategy helped us because...”

Sample Strategy Collection Sheet

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Lori’s Top 5 Surefire Strategies for Comprehension

Try these proven lessons that you can use over and over to strengthen your students’ reading comprehension.

1. **Connection Chains (Oczkus, 2009)**
   Provide three different colors of paper cut into strips. One color is for text-to-self connections, one for text-to-text, and the other for text-to-world. Students write their connections on the papers using the frame “This reminds me of….” Then they roll and glue or tape the strips into paper chains, which we hook together and hang around the room.

2. **Roll Your Prediction (Oczkus, 2010)**
   This lesson focuses on the language of predicting. Write the following strategy starters on blank foam or large, plastic cubes from the teacher store, or use regular dice and assign a strategy starter to each number. Students roll the cubes or dice every few pages and take turns using the starters to make predictions about the text.
   - 1. “I think I will learn….”
   - 2. “Maybe…because….”
   - 3. “I think…will happen because….”
   - 4. “Next, I think…because I know….”
   - 5. “I’ll bet…because….”
   - 6. “So far…so now I think…will happen.”

3. **Pop the Question (Oczkus, 2010)**
   Students generate questions they might ask the main characters in the text and use toy microphones (or their fists as a pretend microphone) to interview one another. During reading, students collect and record the questions they will use as they role play. This is a quick, impromptu activity that you can engage students in any time to improve questioning and deepen comprehension, because students are forced to make inferences as they role play and answer one another’s questions. As you listen to the pairs, encourage open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions. You may even want to audiotape students and make a quick, fun, class DVD to show during parent nights or to show other classes.

4. **Pause to Clarify (Oczkus, 2009)**
   Every student in your classroom has experience with remote controls. Ask students to show you with their hands what a pause button looks like. (Have them put their arms parallel like ||.) Tell them that when good readers read, they pause when they do not understand something. Good readers either rewind (reread) or fast forward (read ahead) or even chop up the word or part to fully understand it. Use motions to demonstrate:
   - Pause—Bend arms at elbows and hold parallel to form two lines like a pause button.
   - Rewind—Point to indicate rewinding.
   - Fast forward—Point to indicate fast forwarding.

   Read aloud from a text and ask students to put their arms up in a pause when they hear something they do not understand. Stop reading and ask for examples and model/discuss how to clarify the points the students selected. Using hand motions this way improves comprehension, because the kinesthetic motions help students create mental representations for abstract concepts (Collins, 2005).

5. **So Far/Next (Oczkus, 2009)**
   This is one of my favorite lessons because it engages students on many levels. After reading a portion of text, students stop to sketch what has happened so far in the story and then sketch what they think will happen next. I model and conduct this as a read-aloud for the first few times, but this activity makes wonderful independent work as well. You can assign reading and indicate stopping points (pages or ends of chapters) when students will sketch their two drawings: a “so far” and a “next.” I like providing strips of cut paper for the students to fold into boxes, or you can have them sketch in a reader’s notebook. Allow students to share their summaries and predictions with partners and their tablemates.
Lori D. Oczkus is a literacy coach, author, and popular speaker across the United States. Tens of thousands of teachers have attended her motivating, fast-paced workshops and read her practical, research-based professional books, including Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons: 25 Surefire Ways to Engage Students and Improve Comprehension (Scholastic & International Reading Association, 2009) and Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension (2nd edition; International Reading Association, 2010). Lori has extensive experience as a bilingual elementary teacher, intervention specialist working with struggling readers, staff developer, and literacy coach. She works regularly with students in classrooms and really knows the challenges that teachers face in teaching students to read! You can contact Lori through her website at www.lorioczkus.com.

Web Resources

LoriOczkus.com: www.lorioczkus.com
See the Think-Aloud and Reciprocal Teaching video clips available here, in particular.

Reciprocal Teaching at Work Classroom Video Clips: www.reading.org/General/Publications/Books/SupplementalContent/BK507_SUPPLEMENT.aspx

ReadWriteThink: www.readwritethink.org
ReadWriteThink is a great resource for hundreds of free downloadable lessons in reading comprehension and all aspects of reading. Here are some to try:

- “Building Reading Comprehension Through Think-Alouds” (Grades 6–8) by Laurie A. Henry
- “Family Ties: Making Connections to Improve Reading Comprehension” (Grades K–2) by Violeta L. Katsikis
- “Guided Comprehension: Making Connections Using a Double-Entry Journal” (Grades 4–6) by Maureen McLaughlin and Mary Beth Allen
- “Questioning: A Comprehension Strategy for Small-Group Guided Reading” (Grades 3–5) by John Young

References


Lipson, M.Y. (2007). Teaching reading beyond the primary grades: A blueprint for helping intermediate students develop the skills they need to comprehend the texts they read. New York: Scholastic.


