



How Can I Help My Students Who Struggle With Reading Comprehension?

David* is in the 8th grade. His test results indicate that his oral reading ability for word analysis (decoding) is **instructional level**** using 1st-grade reading materials. His tested oral reading rate and oral reading comprehension test scores show that he can handle 3rd-grade reading materials at an instructional level. Yet, the results of

his silent reading comprehension test indicate an **independent reading level** using 8th-grade reading materials. David has good **receptive vocabulary**, but has problems with **expressive vocabulary**, both written and verbal.

Jill* is in the 2nd grade. She cannot read even 10 percent of her **Dolch Sight Words**, indicating a significant concern in the area of word recognition. Jill does know the names of her letters, the sounds of beginning consonants, and short and long vowel sounds. However, she does not know her ending consonants or the **CVC/-**

CVCe patterns. Jill also has problems with rhyming, and when reading text orally, demonstrates **word-by-word prosody**. When the teacher uses 1st-grade materials to test Jill's oral reading comprehension, the results indicate that she is functioning on a **frustration reading level**.

Matt* is in the 11th grade. His journey through the school system has been difficult. Matt reads well; however, he is a "word-caller." He knows all of his Dolch Sight Words, so clearly he has no problems with word-recognition skills. He also has good **phone-**

* Not their real names.

** Words in purple are defined in the Glossary on page 21.

BY CANDICE HOLLINGSEAD AND RAY OSTRANDER

mic awareness and can apply phonics and word analysis to almost any text.

Matt's reading rate, both oral and silent, matches that of his peers. However, results of his comprehension tests indicate that for him to be successful, classroom materials will have to be at a 4th-grade level, whether he reads them orally or silently, or hears them read aloud.

Reading and Comprehension Defined

Each of these students has a comprehension problem. Their needs are different due to the complexity of the reading comprehension process. A precise definition of *reading* and *reading comprehension* will help teachers understand how to choose appropriate classroom interventions for individual needs.

How is reading defined? Reutzel and Cooter asked their university students what reading meant. Here are some of the responses:

"I think reading is when you make the sounds of the letters and put them together to make words."

"Reading is understanding what is on the page."

"Phonics is the first part of reading and comprehension is the last."¹

These students did grasp the fundamentals of reading—taking words apart and putting them back together to understand the whole. However, it is not a simple process, though it seems so for those who are adept at it.

Reading text requires an interactive and complex process of (1) *decoding*, the use of symbol/sound associations, (2) *word recognition*, the ability to instantly associate a printed word with its spoken corresponding word, (3) *encoding*, transforming *phonologically coded information* into a *semantic code* for storage in long-term memory, which is related to impairments in short-term (working) memory, and (4) *information retrieval*, which can be related to memory capacity, prior knowledge, and a host of other variables such as *central executive function*. A competent reader applies a coordinated structure of knowledge and

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skills concurrently, using a number of interrelated information sources, in order to gain meaning.²

The most important skill in reading is constructing meaning. Success in this area depends upon many factors: text structure understanding, vocabulary comprehension, use of prior knowledge, the ability to focus on comprehension rather than decoding (in order to read with confidence and fluency), and the value the reader places on the process of completing the task.³ Keene and Zimmerman liken the comprehension process to “a mosaic constructed of diverse pieces, each integral to the whole, each essential to the texture of learning.”⁴

Relevance in Schools Today

Although teaching students to read remains a prime objective in U.S. schools, a 2000 U.S. Department of Education study indicated that “approximately 37% of fourth-grade students did not achieve at the most basic reading level on a recent national test.”⁵ Societal trends such as increased immigration, the elimination of tracking systems in U.S. schools, and the inclusion movement have increased the number of classrooms with ethnic, linguistic, and academic diversity. The average public elementary classroom in the U.S. contains 22 students who, in one minute, can read between 0 and 183 words correctly. Teachers respond to this diversity in a number of ways, the worst of which are to ignore it and/or plan their instruction to reach the “average student.”⁶

Although today’s high-stakes testing requires that students achieve excellent comprehension in all academic areas, comprehension is usually not expressly taught. In 2000, the National Reading Panel Report outlined five critical reading skill areas. One of these was text comprehension strategies. Research has acknowledged the necessity of early intervention using the **alphabetic principle** in order to improve word-level decoding and reading. However, there are still many “word callers” who can read whole words yet struggle with comprehension skills be-

The fundamentals of reading [involve] taking words apart and putting them back together to understand the whole.

cause they do not understand the meaning of the text.⁷

Good readers bring an internalized set of expectations to the reading process, a “reader’s rudder” they use to ensure that they comprehend the content. They self-monitor what they read and demand that the material “make sense.” A poor reader’s inadequate silent reading comprehension skills frequently go unnoticed because teachers usually assess these skills by listening to children read aloud. Thus, many teachers do not recognize that students are underperforming in this important area and lack a “reader’s rudder.”⁸

The “reader’s rudder” is the metacognitive component of reading comprehension. Students with strong metacognitive reading skills are actively aware of how well they comprehend what they are reading, and are able to organize, direct, and evaluate their own cognitive abilities. Several strategies can be used to improve metacognition by teaching students how to monitor their comprehension. This improves their strategic processing of material and encourages them to become active readers.⁹

Since reading comprehension depends upon the mastery of reading preskills, how important is it to teach reading comprehension rather than the preskills? Many teachers ask this question, and in fact, reading comprehension skills are frequently left untaught for this reason. Opitz and Eldridge, however, stress a critical point in reading instruction, “Comprehension is the

essence of reading . . . it has to be taught and cannot be left to chance!”¹⁰ Mastropieri and Scruggs echo this sentiment, “reading comprehension requirements increase substantially as students progress through school.”¹¹

Comprehension instruction will be an integral part of the new reading/language-arts program that will be introduced in North American Adventist schools this fall. The instructional framework for this program recommends that comprehension instruction take place during the Guided Reading segment. Mini-lessons in comprehension strategies, conducted during the “Before” segment of the Guided Reading lesson, will teach the critical skills necessary for students to create meaning from text.

Reading Comprehension Interventions

Reading comprehension interventions can significantly improve students’ academic performance.¹² Two approaches are supported by research: (a) *small, interactive instructional grouping*; and (b) *specific format teaching to help students generate self-monitoring text questions*.¹³ Small interactive instructional grouping strategies include Coop-Dis-Q, PALS, and POSSE. Specific format teaching strategies include techniques such as visual-spatial organization of passage content, **in-text mnemonic illustrations**, instructional study guides, Multi-Pass, and metacognitive instruction.

Small Interactive Instructional Grouping

Coop-Dis-Q consists of five steps that combine cooperative learning, discussion, and questioning. The teacher should actively participate in and moderate the discussion, modeling all behaviors expected from students. The recommended procedure is as follows:

1. *Create the groups*: Choose five to six students for each **heterogeneous** or **homogeneous** group.

2. *Prepare a set of questions*: After carefully considering the essential information in the reading passage, formulate questions on different cognitive

levels (literal, inferential, critical).

3. *Groups discuss the story and divide questions:* Organize the groups and begin a general discussion of the reading. Following the discussion, provide the groups with questions written on strips of paper. Subdivide the groups into triads to facilitate more discussion.

4. *Triads discuss, answer, and add questions:* Have each group choose a scribe, while encouraging all students

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to take notes and generate new questions or ideas.

5. *Triads present and discuss their answers:* Ask members from each triad to rejoin their original group and discuss their answers to the teacher's questions. Each group is to form a consensus answer for each question, which will be reported to the class by individuals assigned this role. The group may add questions and answers if they wish.¹⁴

PALS stands for Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy, which has proved effective in reading and math. It can transform instruction through the use of routines that improve reading comprehension and other reading skills. Students are paired, with each duo consisting of a high-performing and a low-performing student. Tutoring roles are reciprocal. The higher-performing student reads first, modeling the desired oral reading behavior. Because the first reader is higher performing than his or her partner, the text is on the independent reading level for this student; therefore, oral reading of the text should not present any problems for the high-performing student. The text used is at the lower-performing student's instructional reading level.¹⁵

Students are also assigned to group teams where they earn points for cooperative effort and achievement. Every four weeks, the teacher assigns new

pairs and teams. The PALS session includes three activities:

1. *Partner reading:* Each student reads the text aloud for five minutes. Then for two minutes, the lower performer retells the sequence of what was read.

2. *Paragraph shrinking:* One student reads aloud, a paragraph at a time, then pauses to identify who or what,

and to state the main idea of the paragraph in 11 words or less. After five minutes, the students switch roles.

3. *Prediction relay:* Students enlarge the paragraph shrinking described above to larger chunks of text. This activity requires students to make predictions and check them for accuracy after reading. Students switch roles after five minutes.¹⁶



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POSSE was originally developed and validated by Englert and Mariage¹⁷ and has since been replicated.¹⁸ The acronym stands for Predicting, Organizing, Searching, Summarizing, and Evaluating. During the reading comprehension period, students take turns leading a small-group discussion. They assume the role of teacher by asking relevant questions about the text. Cue cards provide students with practice and application activities until they achieve mastery. The application steps are:

1. Predicting ideas from prior knowledge,
2. Organizing predictions based on the forthcoming text structure,
3. Searching for the main ideas,
4. Summarizing the main ideas within the text structure, and
5. Evaluating comprehension.¹⁹

Specific Format Teaching

Visual-spatial organization provides a “code” that depicts passage content and interrelationships.²⁰ Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker²¹ say that knowledge of “text structure” or “story grammar” is essential for comprehension. Using arrows, lines, colors, and spatial arrangements of text content allows the students to construct their own understanding of the story grammar. This activity helps students to focus on relevant information and to link previous knowledge with the newly learned information, thereby enhancing recall.²²

Mnemonic illustrations can help students remember important facts by linking new information to something familiar through the use of visual cues.²³ For example, the “keyword strategy” is a commonly used mne-



monic device to promote vocabulary development. The student remembers the definition of a new word by relating it to a familiar word or “keyword” through the aid of an illustration. For instance, to remember the meaning of the word *goatee* (beard), a student might use a picture of a beard on a goat. Because most reading textbooks do not include mnemonic strategies, they must be overtly taught.

Instructional study guides help students focus on critical information and relationships. The guides serve as adjunct aids rather than independent learning guides. The activities should be scheduled to occur before, during, and after text reading. Some ideas to include: **semantic charts**, interactive vocabulary procedures, predictive and evaluative questions, and self-monitoring for comprehension accuracy.²⁴ Instructional approaches that increase the reader’s cognitive engagement dur-

ing reading thereby enhance comprehension and learning. The planned comprehension activities should transform thinking rather than merely inform knowledge.²⁵

MultiPass, a strategy similar to SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), prompts students to progress through the reading material three

times. Here are the instructions that are given to students:

1. *Survey Pass*: Become familiar with the text organization and main ideas in the chapter. Search for relationships to previous learning and summarize in your own words.

2. *Size-up Pass*: Read questions provided in the chapter/at the end of a section or chapter, skimming the material to find the answers. Paraphrase the answers without prompts.

3. *Sort-out Pass*: Conduct a self-assessment of the chapter content to ensure that you understand it and can remember its content.

Students who learn how to use self-monitoring significantly boost their reading comprehension achievement.²⁶ A necessary component of comprehending what one reads is the ability to reflect on a skill and to examine and evaluate how well one is using it. For students to do this, they

must be taught to notice how well they comprehend and then provided with “repair strategies” when they realize that they do not understand the text. This is referred to as “comprehension monitoring” and involves reader metacognition. Metacognitive instruction overtly teaches how to apply a strategy to text and provides structured practice. Systematic teacher monitoring and feedback must be provided until the student achieves mastery. At this point, teacher support can fade as the student assumes responsibility for his or her own learning.

Throughout the process, it is important for the teacher to model and observe how students use metacognitive strategies. The purpose is to get students to use a deliberate and active processing procedure to attack the text and to remind them to monitor their comprehension as they read.

Many metacognitive strategies encourage students to think aloud about what they have read. Verbalizing what they are thinking helps them to integrate information from different parts of the text, build their metacognitive skills, and improve their comprehension.²⁷ Most researchers agree that one significant explanation for poor comprehension is students’ failure to read strategically and to spontaneously monitor their own understanding. Metacognitive instruction’s success can be attributed to its more overt method of structuring comprehension activities, which forces students to think. This approach provides them with helpful hints through the use of questions and/or steps that guide their judgment and engage them in the application of comprehension strategies. Two such strategies have been described in this article: POSSE and MultiPass.²⁸

Conclusion

Improving student reading comprehension should be the goal of every teacher. Over the years, numerous interventions have been proposed, researched, corroborated, and employed to achieve this goal.²⁹ What can the teacher do for David, Jill, and Matt, the

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hypothetical students described at the beginning of this article?

Eighth-grader David would benefit from a reading comprehension program that included PALS and visual-spatial organization of passage content. This method would pair him with someone who could model reading comprehension using reading materials on his instructional reading level. The visual-spatial method would use his receptive vocabulary strengths to build his expression vocabulary.



Second-grader Jill's reading comprehension program should include Coop-Dis-Q and the use of study guides to increase her metacognitive skills. The Cooperative Discussion activities will build her comprehension skills in a non-threatening and socially accepting atmosphere. The study guide will provide her with tools to build the

specific skills she needs to work on, while at the same time teaching her to self-monitor and evaluate her own performance.

Eleventh-grader Matt definitely could improve his reading comprehension through the use of POSSE, Multi-Pass, and study guides that include visual-spatial organization tools and

metacognitive self-monitoring strategies. The teacher's biggest challenges will be teaching Matt how to think about what he is reading and how to self-monitor his comprehension in small chunks, rather than waiting until the end of a large section of text.

Changing to a new reading program takes time and hard work; how-

GLOSSARY

Alphabetic Principle: Understanding, at least implicitly, that a letter (the minimal unit of print) represents a phoneme (the minimal unit of speech) rather than a unit of meaning.

Central Executive Function: The term psychologists use to describe self-regulation—the ability to problem solve and control one's emotions.

CVC Pattern: A *consonant-vowel-consonant* letter pattern in a word.

CVCe Pattern: A *consonant-vowel-consonant-e* letter pattern in a word.

Dolch Sight Words: A list of 200 frequently used words that E. W. Dolch believed should be mastered by 3rd grade. Many of these words cannot be sounded out because they do not follow decoding rules.

Expressive Vocabulary: Speaking and writing (all the words that a person can use appropriately in speaking and in writing).

Frustration Reading Level: The level at which a child's reading skills break down. Fluency disappears, word-recognition errors are numerous, comprehension is faulty, recall is sketchy, and signs of emotional tension and discomfort become evident.

Heterogeneous: diverse, assorted, mixed (e.g., different reading levels; both genders).

Homogeneous: uniform, identical, all the same (e.g., same reading level; only girls or boys).

In-Text Mnemonic Illustration: A memorization strategy where a picture is devised to represent the meaning of a new vocabulary word. The child draws the picture on a piece of paper and places it next to the word in the book (e.g., *aloft* means "high in the air"). The student pictures "a leaf" blown high in the air, which sounds similar to *aloft* and reminds him of its meaning.

Independent Reading Level: The highest reading level at which a child can read easily and fluently without assistance, with few word-recognition errors, and with good comprehension and recall.

Instructional Reading Level: The highest level at which a child can do satisfactory reading with teacher preparation and supervision: word-recognition errors are not frequent, and comprehension and recall are satisfactory.

Phonemic Awareness: The ability to discriminate among the sounds that make up the English language, such as comparing *pan*, *pen*, *pin*, and *pun*.

Phonologically Coded Information: Readers transform a spoken or written word into a string of phonemes by using phonologic and morphophonologic rules. They then compare the phonemic string to ones in their lexicons in order to identify the word. Phonological coding assists in the storage and retrieval of information.

Receptive Vocabulary: Listening and reading (all of the spoken words a child can understand; all of the printed words a child can recognize and whose meanings he or she understands).

Semantic Charts (Mapping): Using a graphic organizer before or after reading to connect new vocabulary words to a variety of ideas and events.

Semantic Code: Linguistic representations of meaningful concepts as encoded in both individual words and groups of words. (*Coding* is defined as changing information into a code. *Encoding* is defined as changing a message into symbols.) Word meaning comes to exist in a complex network of interrelated associations, stored in long-term memory. These become more elaborated and better defined during the course of lexical development. *Semantic coding* is the process whereby meanings are attached to and conveyed by certain language components.

Word-by-Word Prosody/Reading: The person reads very slowly, pausing noticeably after almost every word. He or she often uses finger pointing and lip movements during silent reading, and a monotonous voice during oral reading. The person frequently needs to reread materials in order to comprehend them. He or she often groups the wrong words together and may ignore or misinterpret punctuation.

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ever, it is well worth the effort, considering the potential for student improvement. Six essential steps are necessary to create a strong reading comprehension program:

1. Create an inviting learning community using books at appropriate reading levels and on topics that are of interest to your students.

2. Communicate your own passion about reading.

3. Use direct instruction and modeling to show students how to engage in the assigned tasks—for example, talk about how to think aloud, and provide many opportunities for students to become engaged in the reading process (peer tutoring, visual-spatial organization, vocabulary development, study guides).

4. Provide multiple opportunities for guided practice while gradually encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and independently use the comprehension skills they have mastered.

5. Collect and use student assessment data to monitor and modify instruction using line graphs and goal setting each time practice occurs. Use approaches validated by data derived from student assessments.

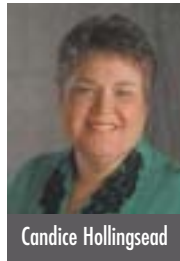
6. Celebrate students' success and encourage them to reflect upon and share techniques that work for them.³⁰

Remember that under the façade of the unwilling reader is an individual who truly desires to learn and enjoy reading as much as the other students in your classroom. It is your responsibility to nurture that desire by building upon small successes.

Even though specific techniques and strategies are essential to reading acquisition and improvement and have been proven effective by research, the most important tool you have is prayer. God and His love in your classroom can multiply all of your methods and hard work. Using reading strategies, without prayer, for a student having significant difficulty can be compared to providing health care to an individual with a broken leg, but not giving him a pair of crutches to use during the healing process. Use prayer

daily to reach the seemingly unreachable. It is your most powerful technique. With it and the application of proven methods, you will be able to reach all your Davids, Jills, and Matts. ✍️

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Candice Hollingsead

Candice Hollingsead

is Professor and Department Chair for the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum in the School of Education at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.



Ray Ostrander

Ray Ostrander is Director of the Master of Arts in Teaching Program in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum at Andrews University.

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