Learning to Read and Reading to Learn, pp. 8-15.

2 "Best Leave it Between The Book and the Hearer"[1]

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Introduction

We have moved a long way from the concept of 'doing the questions at the end of the story' and referring to it as 'comprehension.' In its place we have an ever expanding umbrella-term we call 'comprehension' encompassing such areas as oral comprehension, written comprehension, reading comprehension, visual comprehension and multi-modal comprehension to name just some. For the purposes of this paper I will limit myself to examining the comprehension of linear written text.

'Schema Theory' (Anderson, 1984) and the conceptualisation of the associative nature of our thinking process (placing knowledge in some sort of context for the learner) was very popular in the 1980s and seems to have fallen into disuse in more recent times. It is a concept worth re-visiting as a backdrop to the complex area of comprehension, especially in light of 'Vygotskian' theory now being offered as a rationale for developmental learning. Because of this we have begun to re examine the importance of teaching children strategies to monitor their understanding. Many literacy experts feel that this area of meta-cognition and meta-language is central to children developing such abilities in relation to understanding text. They maintain that while schools are good at giving children procedural knowledge they do not always take the time to make sure that they gain the conceptual knowledge to accompany it.

Comprehension in reading is the main focus of this paper. It is not a single entity, but is very specific to each particular reading act and to each context. It appears that the teaching of reading-comprehension is still somewhat of a 'Cinderella' within literacy education. From several studies involving classroom observation (see, for example, Chapter 4 of the National Reading Panel, 2000) research would seem to indicate that teachers are still assigning the reading material to be studied; questioning and informing students about the content of what they are reading, but with

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1 Quote from *The Celtic Twilight* by William Butler Yeats (1902).

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little or no demonstration to students as to how to comprehend and learn this new information. This is quite worrying.

Other research studies into comprehension development (outlined in the National Reading Panel, 2000 p.4-6, 27) indicate that there is the need for a systematic and thorough teaching of vocabulary. Vocabulary development is seen as happening quite naturally through exposure to vocabulary-rich language for most children. But a more systematic approach to the teaching of vocabulary is also needed. For example, letting children gather words into personal word banks or dictionaries and encouraging them to celebrate their new words are some of the strategies found to promote vocabulary development.

At a more practical level, we must highlight the need for the teacher to ensure that 'the language of instruction' (what every word used by the teacher in daily teaching tasks means), is also taught! By listening to the teacher 'model' good speech and interesting sentences, and by the specific teaching of the meanings of things such as prefixes, roots and suffixes, the learner's attention is drawn to words, thus improving vocabulary. Cross-words and word games are really boring exercises but when done as a small group activity can become powerful tools to aid vocabulary development. Good 'read-alouds' (reading modeled by the teacher) are also really essential. Such 'read-alouds' should include as wide a range of genres as possible and not be limited to fiction only.

Comprehension

The definition of comprehension skills that I have used for this article is "the strategies a reader uses to construct meaning and retrieve information from a text" (Johnson 1998 p. 23). Donald Graves (in Keane and Zimmerman, 1977) discusses various possible models of how we teach comprehension. Some of them, he suggests, look at the *anatomy of comprehension* (the taxonomies which ask children questions of increasing complexity), while other models look more at the *physiology of comprehension* (those looking into the mental processing that children are using when they engage in the co-construction of meaning in order to understand a text). I am going to be so bold as to suggest a third model, in addition to those cited by Graves, to include the *soul of comprehension,* which is involved in the aesthetic and emotional realms of the child's engagement with text and, more precisely, with narrative text! This is, after all, what is at the very heart of being a reader of fiction, and I argue that our approach to supporting comprehension of narrative texts must be different somehow from

supporting comprehension of expository texts. I will briefly discuss each of these models of comprehension below.

The Anatomy of Comprehension

Benjamin Bloom, a professor of psychology, published his famous *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* in 1956. He understood thinking to be a process taking place in increasingly complex layers, and suggested these in a hierarchy:

Knowledge	the ability to recall previous learned material
Comprehension	the ability to grasp meaning, explain, restate ideas
Application	the ability to use learned material in new situations
Analysis	the ability to separate material into component parts and show relationships between parts
Synthesis	the ability to put together separate ideas to form a new whole and establish new relationships
Evaluation	the ability to judge the worth of material against stated criteria

Educationalists adapted this hierarchy to teaching, proposing that, if questions could be asked of the student at each level of the hierarchy, then more and more complex thinking would be required by the student in order to answer them. This puts the teacher in firm control of the kinds of meaning that the child will take from the text.

There are many variations of this approach. Harold Herber (1978) had one of the more interesting variations, not only on the taxonomy but also on the whole concept of asking students questions. He saw questioning as limiting rather than expanding the student’s power to think, because it focussed the student in one single direction – the search for the ‘right answer.’ Herber proposed that instead of questions, the student should be presented with a series of statements to consider. This way the student has to sample the text and decide whether he agrees with, or does not agree with, the statement. He felt also that this was best done in a small group setting where the student could hear the arguments ‘for and against’ a particular statement. It encouraged the student to consider possibilities, as well as offering role models for language usage which could be internalised to help with cognitive development.

Herber said that the statements could be offered at each of three different levels. These levels roughly correspond with the levels in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) but are collapsed to the following three levels:

The Literal Level	statements about what the author actually said.
The Interpretive Level	statements about what the author meant.
The Applied Level	statements probing the reader's opinion of what he read.

I used this system myself for many years and with great success – it gave me a real insight into how children were engaging with what they were reading and how they were developing as readers. As a learning support teacher I was often concerned by the lack of questions that children brought to the text. Later, when I went back into mainstream teaching, I became aware that this was a feature of many 'able-readers' in my classroom also. In many instances the children did not appear to know how to frame questions beyond the literal level. One of many ways in which I attempted to compensate for this was to give children the answers and to ask them to come up with the questions. I adapted Herber's 'levels' for this and used them to elicit some quite interesting exchanges within small group discussions.

The Physiology of Comprehension

Andrew Johnson (1998) likens comprehension skills to thinking skills, in that thinking skills are part of a cognitive process which can be deconstructed or broken down into stages and therefore can be taught explicitly. Johnson follows the lead of many other writers working with non-fiction text and breaks comprehension skills into three distinct 'types of skill' – pre-reading skills, during-reading skills and post-reading skills.

Pre-reading skills

- Previewing
- Brain storming
- K.W.L. (**K**now, **W**ant to know, **L**earned) (Ogle 1986)

During-reading skills

- re-reading
- reading and pausing
- note-taking

Post-reading skills

- summarising
- retelling and creating a summary
- re-reading
- modifying the summary

Each of these sets of skills can be taught explicitly to students and then practised in order to have them interact with the text is a systematic and structured way.

The Soul of Comprehension

Johnson (1998) argues that it is necessary to use a very different approach when talking about comprehension of narrative as opposed to expository texts. He feels that ‘one size cannot fit all’ and that when dealing with narrative / story as opposed to non-fiction, we need to have a very different mind-set as to how we engage children about what they have read. Indeed, he declares that the primary function in reading narrative text is to enjoy the story and to allow it to lead to literate conversations between students and between students and their teacher.

Developing this concept of a ‘literate conversation’ is the practice of what are called ‘Literature Circles’ now found in many classrooms. Literature Circles have a firm educational basis and structure. According to Daniels (1994, p. 23) this ‘allows for a progressive and systematic development of children’s encounter with, and response to, story.’ Daniels (1994, p. 54) suggests that there are twelve ingredients of Literature Circles:

1. Children choose their own reading material.
2. Small, temporary groups are formed, based on book choice.
3. Different groups read different books.
4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule.
5. Children use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.
6. Discussion topics come from the students.
7. Group meetings aim to be open, natural discussions.
8. In newly-forming groups, students play a rotating assortment of task roles.
9. The teacher serves as a facilitator.
10. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
11. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.
12. New groups form around new reading choices.

I think that it is really important that children have appropriate reading behaviours modelled for them as part of being in a literature circle. They need to be given the language of literature discussion in an age-appropriate way. The teacher needs to talk about what is being read so that the children hear how to discuss literature. The teacher does *not* need to comment on everything that is read to the children – but the teacher *can* introduce the language of discussion by referring to a text, a poem or an article that has been read.

Glenna Sloan (1984, p.150) shows just how complex that whole interaction of child and text can be. Sloan suggests ways in which we might engage children with literature in a meaningful way:

- Where and when does the story take place? How do you know? If the story took place somewhere else or in a different time what would be changed?
- What incident, problem, conflict or situation does the author use to get the story started?
- What does the author do to create suspense, to make you want to read on to find out what happens?
- Trace the main events of the story. Could you change their order or leave any of them out? Why or why not?
- Think of a different ending to the story, How would the rest of the story have to change to fit the new ending?
- Did the story end the way you expected it to? What clues did the author offer to prepare you to expect this ending? Did you recognize these clues as important to the story as you were hearing it?
- Who is the main character in the story? What kind of person is the character? How do you know?
- Are any characters changed during the story? If they are, how are they different? What changed them? Did it seem believable?
- Some characters play small but important roles in a story. Name such a character, Why is this character necessary to the story?
- Who is the teller of the story? How would the story change if someone else in the book or an outside narrator told the story?
- Does the story as a whole create a certain mood or feeling? What is the mood? How is it created?
- Did you have strong feelings as you read the story? What did the author do to make you feel strongly?

- What are the main ideas behind the story? What makes you think of them as you read the story?
- Is this story like any other story you have read or watched?
- Think about the characters in the story. Are any of them the same type of characters that you have met in other stories?

This kind of activity, suggested by Sloan, allows children to engage with the story and the characters. This engagement is the key to helping children make the transition from children-who-can-read to being children who are readers. When the child connects with the book, then the reading becomes something else. Johnson (1998 p. 26) quotes Neil Mercer as referring to this as ‘a joint construction of the narrative in that space created by the author and illustrator for the reader to live’! In that space the child is free to make the connections he wishes to make, and to live where he is – surely the very heart and soul of reading.

Conclusion

There is no such thing as a single construct that embraces all that is involved in teaching comprehension. Instead, there are many different kinds of comprehension, and children can benefit from explicit teaching in some of these, so maybe we need to think about teaching *comprehensions*. Children need to be taught to think about their reading, and they need to have ‘good reading models’ showing them how to do this! There is a very clear and definite need to teach vocabulary across the curriculum. And children need to have ‘literate language’ modelled for them and opportunities to engage in literate conversations. But above all, I feel that children need the time and opportunity to engage in their own private reading and to inhabit the world that that opens up for them.

I would like to finish with a short quotation from the award-winning American author, Katherine Paterson.

> Any adequate literary diet for growing children would contain both realistic fiction and fantasy, not to speak of books of biography and non-fiction, but it would be natural for readers to have different tastes and so generally prefer one genre over another. (Paterson, 2001, p. 37)

Our role as teachers is to ensure that each child has the skills to develop as a reader of whatever genres suit his or her taste and needs.

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