



Jennifer D. Turner, Ph.D.



Deborah J. Short, Ph.D.

# Building Comprehension for All Students

by Jennifer D. Turner and Deborah J. Short

As teachers, we have all worked with students who can read any text placed in front of them, but they simply can't comprehend what they've read. When we see these students struggle, it reminds us that comprehension is more than just reading a text; when students comprehend they are able to make meaning from the text, and equally important, they are able to critically think about and transform those meanings for their own purposes (Au, 2006; Hammerberg, 2004).

## Why don't all students "get" comprehension?

There are a number of reasons why students may have difficulty with reading comprehension. Some readers do not have some of the "basic building blocks" of comprehension, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary. Students of non-English language backgrounds may also have to learn our alphabet system. Such skills are the vital foundation for constructing meaning from texts.

Some students have started to develop these foundational skills but struggle in other ways. They may decode words successfully but not know the meaning of an unfamiliar word, or they know an alternate meaning for a multiple-meaning word. They may not have the background schema to activate key concepts or themes in a text. Without broader vocabulary and background knowledge, students struggle to comprehend what they read.

Other readers may not have acquired comprehension strategies because they had limited access to explicit strategy instruction. In today's schools, this may sound a bit unbelievable, but it does happen. Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are often placed in low-level reading and writing groups which overemphasize beginning skills. Although some students may need these skills, a problem occurs when instruction in these groups overemphasizes literal recall and other lower-level skills, and at the expense of building higher-order thinking skills and teaching comprehension strategies (Au, 2006).

A related and equally significant impediment happens when teachers do not believe that students of color are capable of building and using complex comprehension strategies (Hammerberg, 2004). By waiting too long for introduce comprehension strategies to students, we do them academic harm as they get further and further behind their grade-level peers.

Finally, some students, especially those who have severe reading difficulties or have been placed in special education, may need additional scaffolding to acquire comprehension processes and strategies. Some may need additional in-class support, while others might need targeted interventions.

## What can teachers do to promote comprehension for all students?

Many students benefit from an explicit approach to teaching comprehension strategies, including clear teacher modeling and explanation, extensive practice and feedback, and opportunities for application across a variety of literary and informational texts that span topics across the content areas (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Duffy, 2009; Villaume & Brabham, 2002).



▲ Decodable texts and authentic literature selections provide literary and informational texts that span the content areas.

According to Fisher, Lapp, and Frey (2011), comprehension is dependent upon the interaction of four sets of critical variables:

- reader variables
- text variables
- educational-context variables
- teacher variables.

We would add a fifth set as well, support variables—oral and written discourse supports for making meaning of text.

To consider, plan, and implement effective comprehension instruction, teachers need to become *orchestrators* (Turner, 2005). Orchestrators carefully and thoughtfully bring together these five variables in ways that support students' comprehension and develop their lifelong love of literacy. Finding and using appropriate materials can assist teachers and students in this endeavor.

## Reader Variables

No two readers are the same. Children enter our classrooms with a variety of backgrounds as literacy learners. They have different strengths in reading and writing, different genre preferences and interests, and different areas of challenge. All of our students have their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and participate in a multitude of literacy practices embedded within their families, friendship networks, and communities (Au, 2006; Turner & Hoeltzel, 2011). Research shows that comprehension instruction is most effective when it is responsive to the varying needs and interests of individual readers and builds upon their cultural and linguistic resources (Au, 2006; Hammerberg, 2004).

Fortunately, *Reach for Reading* can help teachers to learn more about their students and use that knowledge to their pedagogical advantage. First of all, the units and lessons feature high-quality fiction and informational texts that reflect the diversity in our classrooms. In these pages, students read about people and places within a wide variety of cultural, racial, ethnic, and global communities. Primary languages are often incorporated into the selections in ways that affirm students' linguistic backgrounds, and multiethnic characters and storylines build on students' cultural knowledge (Moll, 1992). As children discuss these varied texts, make personal connections, and share their family and community experiences, teachers gain insights about their students' cultural backgrounds.

Second, affective diagnostic assessments in the *Reach for Reading* program, such as interest surveys, also provide multiple opportunities for teachers to gather information about students' reading preferences in and out of school. All of this information can help teachers to be more responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of their students.



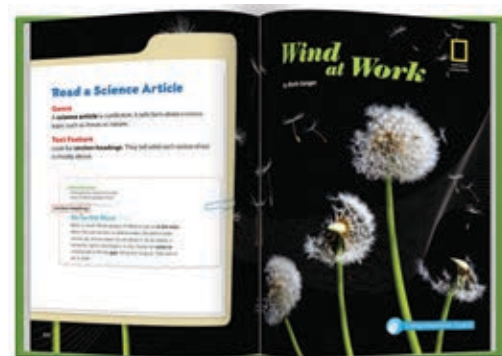
▲ Anthologies and libraries feature a diverse array of literature and informational texts.

## Text Variables

Increasing literacy demands of the workplace and a globalized society require that our children know how to consume, comprehend, and critique the texts they encounter in their schools, their families, their friendship networks, and their communities (Au, 2006). Now more than ever, students need to start learning to read a wide range of texts and then reading to learn from them. The Common Core Standards as well as the National Assessment of Educational Progress put a premium on different genres.

Students therefore benefit not only from exposure to various text types but also to explicit instruction in genre study and in selecting appropriate comprehension strategies according to the genre. This type of instruction helps students anticipate the type of information to be delivered and offers schema for constructing meaning.

*Reach for Reading* offers students a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction texts. While children from all cultures enter our schools with knowledge of narrative, because story-telling is a universal experience, not all children have been exposed to informational and expository text, or poems and biographies for that matter. Yet we know that the ability to make meaning from all types of text is critical for success in school. *Reach for Reading* highlights a wealth of genres including realistic fiction, science articles, photo essays, poetry, folktales, and digital texts (e.g., blogs). Students are given tools for attacking these types of text, first recognizing unique features of the genres and then applying step-by-step comprehension strategies in guided, then increasingly independent, ways.



▲ Students are given tools for working with informational and literary texts.

## Educational-Context Variables

Comprehension should be woven into all aspects of classroom life. Teachers must be purposeful about the “creation of the social contexts and situations that shape children’s cognition” (Smolkin & Donovan, 2002). Whether teachers are working with the whole class, in small groups, or one on one, comprehension is a key literacy goal. This is easier said than done, given limitations on instructional time and the daily distractions that arise. *Reach for Reading* provides teachers with numerous research-based practices, such as cooperative learning strategies, small group and learning station resources, and technology-oriented activities that maximize instructional time, address learning styles, and facilitate deeper understanding of texts.

Highly-motivating classroom communities are designed with active, inquisitive children in mind. To become strategic readers, students need multiple opportunities to interact with peers and meaningfully respond to tasks that support text comprehension. Just as students need practice reading and making meaning of texts from different genres, they also need to respond to a range of literal, inferential, and critical thinking questions. *Reach for Reading* includes engaging learning activities that help students to build the kind of comprehension competencies emphasized on standardized tests (e.g., stating the main idea, making inferences) as well as more authentic tasks that encourage students to apply and extend their critical thinking skills and communicative skills.

## Teacher Variables

Teachers play a significant role in developing skilled readers “who actively read and automatically construct meaning as they read” (Fisher, Lapp, & Frey, 2011, p. 259). Although there is no “magic bullet” for teaching comprehension, the gradual release of responsibility model is a useful framework. Fisher, Lapp, and Frey (2011) outline five critical steps within this model:

1. Establishing Purpose
2. Teacher Modeling
3. Guided Instruction
4. Productive Group Work
5. Independent Student Practice

Through these steps, teachers build skilled readers by explicitly modeling comprehension strategies and coaching students to collaboratively practice using strategies with a variety of texts. Then they step away to allow students to independently apply strategies.

*Reach for Reading* is built upon this model of systematic instruction, with units and individual lessons designed to support the release of responsibility from teacher to students through multiple opportunities for practice, feedback, and the “trying out” of new skills. By focusing instruction on one strategy over the course of a unit, students spend time “getting good” at each strategy. Strategies that arise naturally out of the text’s demands are consistently included to ensure strategies are employed in the service of reading comprehension.

## Support Variables

While much of this monograph has focused on the process of reading, research shows us that investing time in student-generated oral and written discourse can support the development of comprehension skills (Cazden, 2001; Holliday, 1994; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2007). By creating structured opportunities for students to engage in academic talk and academic writing, we can build their reasoning skills, their background knowledge, their vocabulary, and their ability to use discourse markers and subject area registers to share ideas and relate experiences. Talking about a text before, during, and after reading it builds comprehension. Talking with partners lets students confirm or clarify their emerging understandings of a piece of text. Writing about a text gives students time to reflect on what they read and convey their impressions, formulate an argument, or condense details into a summary.

One major support that *Reach for Reading* provides is explicit teaching with language frames. Sentence starters and other types of language frames help students articulate their thoughts, orally or in writing. When a student wants to give an opinion, the program helps them say not only “I believe that...” or “I disagree because...” but increases the sophistication of the discourse, showing them other options such as “In my opinion, \_\_\_\_\_ should \_\_\_\_\_” and “\_\_\_\_\_ claims \_\_\_\_\_ but I found that \_\_\_\_\_.” These language frames offer students ways of thinking about and applying higher-order comprehension processes and reading strategies. As they learn to use them, they will also learn to recognize and comprehend them when encountered in text.

## Conclusion

We know that young learners do not always learn at the same rate as their classmates. And when reading and language arts instruction are considered, we know that some skills and language domains may develop more rapidly than others. We also know that our students enter our classrooms with varying reading abilities already in place—some accelerated, some on grade-level, some below-level, and some having no success yet. Our job as educators is to help all students become skillful readers. We do that best by knowing our students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, topics they might be interested in reading about, skills they have acquired, and those they need more instruction and practice on.

The *National Geographic Reach for Reading* program gives us tools to make our work with young learners more effective, more meaningful to them, and more fun overall. Students learn to read and learn how to talk about and write about what they have read. If we do our jobs well, students will be on the path to a lifelong love of reading.

For **research citations** see page R27.