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**TEACHING AND LEARNING  
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

Comprehension  
Strategy Instruction

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# Executive Summary

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When asked what components of comprehension they teach, many teachers' answers include: main idea, sequencing, inferences, and questions. Yet when asked what they do as they read to help themselves understand a text, they talk, for example, of pictures in their minds, connections to their lives, or rereading when they are aware of not understanding. Research is showing us that in order to meet the challenges of the Information Age, our students need to develop thinking skills that will allow them to become strategic, critical readers. Those skills are the ones that the teachers used, but not necessarily the skills they taught.

The purpose of this research project was to encourage instruction based on current research in the area of comprehension strategies, as well as to develop students' higher levels of thinking skills as they approach a variety of texts. The objective was to provide benchmark classrooms to develop those skills.

The research question was: How does specific meta-cognitive comprehension strategy instruction affect understanding of what is read?

Three teachers and their classrooms volunteered to work with the Language and Literacy Consultant. Together they reviewed current research and developed a classroom model and structure. They then instructed their classes together for a period of 6-8 weeks.

This project showed that moving towards explicitly teaching research-based thinking processes to aid in comprehension was a dramatic shift of emphasis, both for the teachers and the students. Teachers had to rely on an awareness of their own thinking processes and model their use for the students. Students had to let go of habits they had developed that were successful in helping them avoid reading and thinking. Some students had to let go of traditional methods of understanding a text, even though they were successful at it. As teachers, we came away from the project feeling we had many more questions than answers, but that the questions were starting us on a journey that would enhance our students' lives by giving them the thinking processes to become strategic, critical readers and thinkers.

# Acknowledgements

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Rachel Florence, Connaught School, Christine Gibson, McKitrick School, and Michelle Beavers from Battleford Central School all supported this project by sharing their classrooms as well as their own wealth of experience and insights. Their willingness to risk and experiment in order to learn how to better their students' learning provides a perfect example of the teacher as a lifelong learner. That is one of the reasons they all are outstanding teachers!

We are thankful for the financial support of the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching. It was a great learning experience for all those involved!

## Research Team

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Rachel Florence	Connaught School	Grade Three
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# Introduction

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Today's students need to be prepared for a world we know nothing about. They need critical reading skills to make sense of the abundance of information they will encounter in their future. Their world will require its citizens to be strategic, critical readers. Is our reading instruction preparing them for the world they presently live in as well as the world they will grow into? What skills exactly do they need to develop in order to be the kind of reader who finds embedded in a text the big idea, the core information, the friendly turn of a phrase, the humour?

I love to read. I spend a great deal of both my personal and professional life reading. I've always been a reader. Why I read is not always easy to articulate. It's just been a big part of my life. After reflecting on the many different types of reading I do and why it is so important to me, I have concluded that I read because it changes me. When I read I gain new knowledge, my beliefs are challenged or affirmed, my horizons are expanded and I am taken to new places and situations. No matter the purpose for reading, whether for light-hearted fun, a good cry, relaxation or personal or professional growth, my schema is altered and I'm changed. I want to read more. My frequent practice has developed my skills and made me a proficient reader. Can I define exactly what skills I have that make me and, I hope, our students into critical, strategic readers who can make meaning from the texts we encounter in our world? With the help of others, I think I can.

# Literature Review

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## READING PROCESS

Dawn Reithaug (2002) breaks the reading process down into five components, all of them necessary for the reading process to work: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension. MacFarlane & Serafini (2006), based on Luke & Freebody's four-resource model, say that in order for students to develop into proficient readers, they need to weave their way through four different facilities: code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text critic. When I apply either framework to my reading, I know that I can break the code well and read fluently, but what keeps me reading is that I understand what I read and fit it into my schema. I utilize all aspects of the components of the reading process in order to gain meaning from the texts that I read.

In my professional life as a teacher and now as a Language and Literacy consultant, I hear a constant concern from teachers that there are many readers who don't understand what they read. Teachers work with students who have the other components in place. They can decode words and have developed fluency. Their reading looks and sounds proficient. But when it comes to showing they understand what they have read, they are unable to do so.

*Some children do not think while they read because they do not really know that they could! This child would learn to read words just as you would read this nonsensical sentence: He blocked the piffle with a gid daft. You can “read” all the “words” correctly, and you can even read with expression, but you get no meaning. In our case, of course, you get no meaning because there is no meaning there to get. (Cunningham & Allington, 2007, p. 112)*

## STRATEGIC READING

Traditional comprehension instruction has encouraged rote thinking read the text, answer the questions, write a paper. The skills traditionally have involved working on main idea, plot structures, sequencing, inferences and answering questions.

Donald Graves (1997) states,

*The shift from basals to trade books has been a good - one. Children read more books than before. But they don't necessarily read them well. (pp. ix-x)*

Keene and Zimmerman (1997) state that

*For decades many educators believed that teaching reading meant dealing with the visible and audible, rather than the cognitive manifestations of reading. (p. 16)*

In *I read it but I don't get it*, Chris Tovani (2000) explains that when we focus on the afore-mentioned skills, we are teaching students to comprehend at the literal level. Detailing and highlighting these “surface structures” guides students towards a literal understanding. Many teachers and students want to stop there. They believe that the story has been comprehended when they can recite who did what, when, and where. Tovani (2000) acknowledges that it is necessary to understand the surface structures, but more importantly, she goes on to say the surface structures need to be in place in order to move into the deeper structures of the text that allow the reader to gain a critical level of comprehension. It is at this level that I believe students will start to be engaged with what they read and start to develop their thinking skills. If students are engaged with what they read, they will read more, and thus practice their reading skills. If we agree that we want our students to comprehend at a deeper level, how do we help our students develop the skills necessary to do so?

Our provincial ELA curricula (2000, 2006) encourages the understanding and use of language cueing systems. Teachers are to use these cueing systems in all aspects of instruction to aid students in making meaning from texts. The language cueing systems can be divided into Tovani's (2000) surface and deeper structures. The graphophonic and syntactical, and some aspects of the textual systems deal with the surface structures. Using the semantic, pragmatic and textual can help us move on to the deeper structures.

In *Mosaic of Thought*, Keene and Zimmerman (1997) state that

*If reading is about mind journeys, teaching reading is about outfitting the travelers, modeling how to use the map, demonstrating the key and the legend, supporting the travelers as they lose their way and take circuitous routes, until, ultimately It's the child and the map together and they are off on their own. (p. 28)*

They then argue,

*We know that many children, including some who can read fluently, sound words out, and use context to identify unknown words, do not think about their own thought processes as they read, and that therefore, they aren't reading text in a critical, analytical, imaginative, or probing way. If we know that thinking about our own thinking and using the strategies that form this metacognitive foundation are associated with the tendency to read more deeply, critically, analytically, and independently, shouldn't comprehension strategy instruction be a major focus of our work with children who are learning to read and reading to learn? (p. 43)*

## COMPREHENSION

In order to truly know how to guide students towards higher level comprehension, we need to be able to explain what comprehension is. There are a variety of theories and ways to look at comprehension, but I will focus on just a few.

Schema theory is a common way of looking at comprehension. Schema is an organizational structure based on pattern. When applied to learning, it refers to the experience, knowledge base and belief system each learner brings to a task.

Widmayer states that

*All human beings possess categorical rules or scripts that are used to interpret the world. New information is processed according to how it fits into these rules. These schemata can be used not only to interpret but also to predict situations occurring in our environment.... Information that does not fit into these schemata may not be comprehended, or may not be comprehended correctly. This is the reason why readers have a difficult time comprehending a text on a subject they are not familiar with even if the person comprehends the meaning of the individual words in the passage. (para. 2&3)*

Frank Serafini (2003) takes schema theory and relates it to the transactional theories of reading. He refers to transactional theory as

*emphasiz(ing) the roles of the reader and the text, and views meaning as the result of the cognitive processes of an individual reader in transaction with a particular text. (Transactional theories and practice, para. 2)*

The meaning is made when the reader uses cognitive processes to interact with the text. The meaning is not from the text, but rather is created when the reader brings their schema and thought processes to reflect on the meaning in the words. Serafini (2003) also states that

*Reading is a social practice that takes into account the social, political and cultural dimensions the reader and text bring to their transaction. The history of who I am comes through the meanings I construct.*

That means there may be variable interpretations and understanding of the same text. Serafini (2003) explains it further

*As literacy educators we should shift the focus from trying to find the right method for teaching children how to read, to determining whether the reading practices and experiences constructed in classrooms are addressing the broad repertoire of practices required in today's society. (Final paragraph)*

For the purposes of this project comprehension refers to the concept of understanding a text at different levels. That means that the receiver of the text gains meaning from the words by using cognitive processes to transact with the text - combining their schema with the text to create their own meaning. The reader interprets the text within the context in which they exist and arrive at an understanding of the big idea.

## COMPREHENSION THINKING PROCESSES

The previous authors referred to the importance of the cognitive processes. Exactly what are the processes and skills that proficient readers use to transact with a text? In the last ten years there has been a preponderance of research and publications that promote the development of comprehension by explicitly instructing the cognitive processes. Some of the major players are Keene and Zimmerman (1997), Frank Serafini (2003, 2004), Lori Oczkus (2004), Richard Allington (2001, 2007), and Regie Routman (2003). They each have done research and suggested specific comprehension strategies that proficient readers use. Their way of looking at the strategies may be slightly different, but all are based on clear research. For the purposes of this report, I have chosen to use Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) organization of the strategies. They focus on Making Connections, Determining Importance, Questioning, Visualizing, Inferring, Synthesizing and Monitoring Comprehension.

The cognitive, or thinking processes readers use to extract meaning are commonly referred to as comprehension strategies. I will refer to them in this report as thinking processes. This clarifies the difference between the skills used (thinking process) and the actual purpose of reading, which is to obtain meaning (comprehension). Thinking processes are what we use to comprehend. Regie Routman (2003) states

*We must take care that teaching a particular strategy does not take precedence over reading and understanding text. Students can "know" lots of strategies and also document their use of particular strategies. But being able to complete a strategy exercise is not the same as knowing how and when to use and apply a strategy in the act of reading to gain understanding. (p. 129)*

*Strategies have wrongly become synonymous with comprehension, when, at best, they are a tool for facilitating and extending comprehension. (p.119)*

The term thinking processes also encourages the use of these skills in other subject areas and across the curriculum. It implies that we must understand the reading that we do in other content areas. Cheryl Sigmon (2005) asks the question

*Is Language Arts (defined as all courses taught that revolve around communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing) being taught as an end in itself rather than as the means to success in content area and ultimately to becoming productive citizens? (para.1)*

Another reason for using the term thinking processes is the confusion that can arise when using the word strategy. When teachers use the term strategy, we often think of an instructional strategy that we use to help our students gain a concept. It can be inferred that the instructional strategy is KWL, etc. when what is actually meant in the term comprehension strategy is the cognitive process the reader uses. Dycha & Fricker (2005) from Elk Island Public School Division state that

*Literacy is the ability to use a variety of interrelated thinking processes to construct and convey meaning. (Learners) access a number of thinking processes flexibly, automatically, interconnectedly, and appropriately. Thinking steps are not linear steps, they are employed simultaneously.*

How should these thinking processes be taught?

David Pearson said that “comprehension strategies (thinking processes) are what you use when the going gets tough.” (2005) Students need to develop these thinking processes so that they can call upon them as needed, eventually almost subconsciously.

*Thoughtful literacy can be fostered but the classrooms most successful in developing such proficiencies look different from traditional classrooms. Nonetheless, if we want students to develop the thinking around reading and writing activity that marks thoughtful literacy, classroom instruction will necessarily change. (Allington, 2001, pg. 96)*

*For the kindergarten-through-twelfth grade reading curriculum to focus primarily on those strategies, we need a new instructional paradigm: Our work with children must look dramatically different from the approaches in wide use in our school today. We need to find benchmark classrooms where the application of the proficient reader research is up and running and learn from them. (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997, pp. 53-54)*

# EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

One way that instruction in the classroom will change is through the use of explicit instruction.

The ELA K-5 (2000) curriculum explains the explicit model of instruction.

*Teachers explain and model the needed language skills and strategies, give students opportunities to use and practice these skills and strategies, and provide opportunities for students to apply their skills and strategies. (Curriculum Principles, point 7, pg. 5)*

Regie Routman (2003) uses the term Optimal Learning Model to describe the process where students move through the stages of dependence to independence through the expert guidance of the teacher (pp.43-48). She has defined the four phases of learning as demonstration, shared demonstration, guided practice and independent practice. She goes on to explain that the way to move learners into the independent practice stage is to focus on “determine(ing) the levels of supports students need in learning a new skill, strategy, or task rather than focus(ing) first on the specific teaching context (p.44).

Scaffolded instruction is a term that refers to providing the differing level of supports individual students need.

*Vygotsky's principles address the social context of learning. Students would be taught within their zones of proximal development. It is through social dialogue with adults and/or more capable peers that language concepts are learned. Instruction within the zone should incorporate both scaffolding and social mediations. (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 4)*

*This framework is supported by Vygotsky's work on instruction within the zone of proximal development and by scaffolding, the gradual relinquishing of support as the students become more competent in using the strategy. (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 10)*

Debbie Miller (2002) describes her underlying philosophy that frames her classroom.

*When I think about the principles that guide my teaching of reading comprehension, I realize that they are the same principles that guide my work throughout the day. Gradually releasing responsibility to children as they gain expertise, teaching a few strategies of great consequence in depth over time, and giving children the gifts of time, choice, response, community, and structure. (p. 6)*

Frank Serafini (2006) uses the term Emerging Expertise Model that has a slightly different emphasis than the Gradual Release Model. It focuses on the

*student's emerging expertise or involvement in the learning experience, rather than the release of responsibility from the teacher. The focus in this model is on the student and the amount of responsibility the student accepts. The focus of this model is on learning, not teaching. (p.2)*

# CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

The structure that is often recommended for implementation in a classroom is the Readers' Workshop (Tovani (2000), Miller (2002), Keene & Zimmerman (1997) and Serafini (2004). This allows time for instruction as well as independent reading.

*The reading workshop framework also provides teachers with numerous opportunities to teach reading. That's right, teach! Explicit, deliberate, preplanned, engaging, reading comprehension lessons. Effective teachers teach during the reading workshop, every day, in a variety of settings, for a variety of purposes. (Serafini, 2004. p. 3)*

*We learned that on average, dedicating about one fifth of each period to explicit strategy instruction was sufficient to provide students insight into comprehension skills, which they then applied and extended in the remaining four fifths of the period. (Allington, 2001, p.97)*

McLaughlin (2003) organizes her classroom somewhat differently. Her structure starts with a teacher-directed whole class instruction of the thinking process. After that time together, the class is divided into three groups, one which is a teacher-guided small group, and the other two focus on developing the thinking processes through routines or centers. This is similar to the structure of a guided reading classroom.

# LENGTH OF INSTRUCTION

In summary, the thinking processes should be taught in either a workshop or guided reading format. They need to be taught explicitly, using a form of gradual release of responsibility model. How intense should the focus on each strategy be?

*A third conclusion from the research was that strategy learning took time. The most successful interventions tapped a single strategy and developed that strategy through longer-term instruction and repeated application activity. While the traditional "main idea" lesson in a teacher guide, for instance, might last one day or, in some cases, for one week, effective strategy teaching often offered four to ten weeks of focused instruction and application of a single strategy. (Allington, 2001, p. 97)*

Debbie Miller (2002, p.12-13) advocates planning for a 6-8 week course of study that focuses on one thinking process.

*There was no defining moment that told Debbie it was time to move on to another strategy...The eight weeks devoted to schema had left the children with a kind of independence, a kind of power in their thinking that engaged them in reading more thoughtfully, critically, and enthusiastically. (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997, p. 70)*

Nancy Boyles (2004) challenges the assumption that each thinking processes should be taught individually for a longer period of time. Her theory is that each strategy should be introduced and then refined by calling attention to the different thinking processes that suits the purpose and the text being read.

*It makes more sense to introduce students to a manageable repertoire of strategies initially. Then, as they practice using several, blended strategies, the teacher can see which strategies students are applying well and which strategies are more difficult for students. In this way, comprehension strategy teaching can become more focused. Rather than teaching an intensive lesson on a broadly defined strategy -connecting or visualizing, for example - you can zero in on a specific application of a strategy to the study of literature or informational text. (p. xiii)*

When I refer back to my own way of reading, I know that I use the processes interchangeably. They rely on each other. Even though we may teach each thinking process independently of one another, the outcome that we want for our students is to have each thinking process at their beck and call as they read. They are tools to help us unlock the meaning that comes from an interaction between ourselves and the text. Nancy Boyles (2004) makes the point that focusing on one strategy for an extended period of time can put the emphasis on the strategy use, not on comprehension.

*Additionally, when we go the route of teaching one strategy at a time, our emphasis too easily becomes “getting good at the strategy,” rather than getting good at reading comprehension. But when we teach kids to apply these reading comprehension strategies as a package, we are more likely to remain focused on our real goal, empowering children to understand what they read. (p. xiv)*

Other authors have expressed the same caution.

*While It's fine to introduce and practice strategies one at a time, remember that when we read we use all these strategies at the same time and that our comprehension process is largely unconscious. (Routman, 2003, p. 120)*

*Being strategic is much more than knowing the individual strategies. When faced with a comprehension problem, good strategy users will coordinate strategies and shift strategies as it is appropriate to do so. They will constantly alter, adjust, modify and test until they construct meaning and the problem is solved. (Cunningham and Allington, 2007, p. 114)*

There is a great deal of current research available on comprehension. A move towards the thinking processes as a focus of instruction requires a knowledge of the reading process as well as a willingness to change classroom practice. This literature review was used to build the knowledge base and guide the instruction used during this project.

# Purpose and Objectives

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The purpose of this research project is to improve students' understanding of what they read. Another purpose is to provide teachers with a structure in which they feel free to take risks and try new research based models for teaching comprehension strategies.

## Research Question

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Many questions come to mind. What are the essential comprehension strategies? In what order should they be taught? How much specific strategy instruction is necessary before readers begin to integrate their use? What grade levels benefit most from comprehension strategy instruction? How do we provide teachers with supports to enable them to gain the current knowledge of comprehension strategies and practice to instruct effectively?

Upon consideration, the research question developed to guide the research is:

***How does specific metacognitive comprehension strategy instruction affect understanding of what is read?***

## Methodology

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There are many aspects to consider when moving toward using thinking processes to increase the comprehension levels of our students. We need to understand the processes, teach explicitly through demonstration and explanation, provide practice through independent reading and be sensitive to know how long to focus on an individual thinking process. It's a big task. This project attempts to experiment with the ideas previously mentioned so that we can better understand how to move our students along the path of understanding.

Three teachers and their students volunteered to work with the Language and Literacy Consultant. The LLC and classroom teacher reviewed current research and developed a classroom model and structure. They then instructed the class together for a period of 6-8 weeks. The students were assessed before and after the 6-8 week period, both for comprehension levels and perceptions of the process. Anecdotal records of the process were collected.

# STUDENT ASSESSMENTS

- Diagnostic Reading Assessment on every student DRA™

This tool gives a picture of the level at which students are reading. It will be used to ensure instruction is at the students' instructional level, and also to determine growth.

- One of two metacognitive awareness inventories found in *Guided Comprehension* by McLaughlin and Allen (2002) pp. 206-212
  - Metacomprehension Strategy Index* Schmitt (1990)
  - Metacognitive Reading Awareness Inventory* Miholic (1994)
- Reading engagement questionnaire
  - A Reading Survey: What Do You Think?* Trehearne (2004)
  - DRA™ *Student Reading Survey*

## **CLASSROOM ONE**

- Grade 3 class in a community school
- September to November, 30 – 45 minutes per day
- Classroom Composition  
This Grade 3 classroom consisted of 20 students. The ability level was wide ranging, including designated students, and several beginning readers. The reading ability varied from K level to 3.4 on the Gates-MacGinitie Tests. The students were somewhat temperamental and were academically well behind norms. Attendance was irregular and transience was frequent, so the makeup of the class fluctuated.

## **CLASSROOM TWO**

- Grade 6 teacher in a community school
- November to December, 45 minutes per day
- Homogeneous Reading group of 12  
Grades 2-8 were reconfigured for reading instruction based on reading levels as determined by Gates-MacGinitie. This class was composed of 10 students in grades 6 to 8 who were reading at approximately a grade 4 to 5 reading level. Attendance and transience were somewhat problematic.

## **CLASSROOM THREE**

- Grade 8, mostly rural students
- January to March, 45 - 60 minutes per day
- Classroom Composition  
This class consisted of 20 students who were fairly strong academically and were generally quite successful in school. They knew each other well. Attendance and transience were not an issue.

# Data Analysis

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A major roadblock that was unanticipated was the attendance and transience of the students. This impacted directly on the ability to obtain accurate data. This was further impacted by the fact that the assessor was not in the school regularly and so could not assess the student when they did show up. That said, the data did provide insights.

## METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS INVENTORY

The metacognitive awareness inventory showed growth in all three classrooms. Students were able to understand the questions and explain their answers in the June inventory where as in the early part of the year they could not respond to the questions without an explanation of the question.

### **GRADE 3**

The Grade 3 classroom improved with five students showing a growth of 10% or more. There was growth shown, but they still were scoring well below expectations.

#### **Grade 3**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Aug/05</b>	<b>/26</b>	<b>June/06</b>	<b>/26</b>
Student 1	4		15	
Student 2	9		16	
Student 3	7		6	
Student 4	7		11	
Student 5	9		8	
Student 6	10		10	
Student 7	8		12	
Student 8	5		15	
Student 9	7		6	

### **GRADE 6**

The Grade 6 classroom also became more aware of their thinking processes. Two students doubled their scores.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Before /10</b>		<b>During /10</b>		<b>After /5</b>		<b>Total /25</b>	
	<b>Nov/05</b>	<b>June/06</b>	<b>Nov/05</b>	<b>June/06</b>	<b>Nov/05</b>	<b>June/06</b>	<b>Nov/05</b>	<b>June/06</b>
Student 1	4	6	2	4	2	4	6	14
Student 2	6	7	8	9	2	4	16	20
Student 3	2	6	3	7	1	5	6	18
Student 4	3	5	2	6	3	5	8	16

## GRADE 8

The Grade 8 classroom found the inventory the easiest to do, both in November and again in June. They were a stronger class academically and their vocabulary was stronger. Each student indicated varying degrees of awareness. However, the June scores are below expectations with three students below 50%, only four above 70%, and 11 students scoring in the 60% range. Again, even though this was a stronger class, the scoring is below expectations.

Name	Before /10		During /10		After /5		Total /25	
	Nov/05	June/06	Nov/05	June/06	Nov/05	June/06	Nov/05	June/06
Student 1	4	6	2	4	3	4	9	14
Student 2	1	3	5	9	4	5	10	17
Student 3	6	8	2	4	3	5	11	17
Student 4	4	7	4	7	1	1	9	15
Student 5	3	5	5	7	1	3	9	15
Student 6	4	6	4	7	2	3	10	16
Student 7	5	9	4	6	3	5	12	20
Student 8	3	5	3	6	3	4	9	15
Student 9	3	4	2	3	2	3	7	10
Student 10	6	9	6	8	1	3	13	20
Student 11	2	4	2	4	1	2	5	10
Student 12	4	7	4	7	1	3	9	17
Student 13	6	9	3	7	1	2	10	18
Student 14	3	6	3	5	2	4	8	15
Student 15	5	8	3	4	2	4	10	16
Student 16	2	6	5	7	2	4	9	17
Student 17	1	3	2	3	2	3	5	9
Student 18	5	8	5	8	2	4	12	20

This indicates that all three classrooms, despite being better able to articulate their metacognitive awareness, generally are scoring below expectations in their awareness of what thinking processes they use when reading.

## DRA™

These tests assess different components of reading. For the purposes of this project, the comprehension results only were analyzed.

	DRA™ Comprehension Score		
	Increased	Decreased	Did not change
Gr. 3 – 8 student (Higher level text)	3	4	1
Gr. 6 – 4 students (Higher level text)	3	1	
Gr. 8 – 11 students (Same level )	2	8	1

The Grade 3 results may indicate that the right level of text is extremely important when assessing comprehension. It also shows that four of the students were unable to use the thinking processes adequately when they encountered more difficult text.

The Grade 6 class showed appropriate growth in comprehension. It should be noted however, that these students are still reading below grade level.

The Grade 8 classroom's results raise several questions. Only two students raised their level of comprehension while three students dropped by 20% or more, with students dropping 10-20%. These Grade 8 students were given the highest level in the DRA™ kit, which includes three different texts. When administered the first text in November, they scored an average of 73%. On the second text, administered in June, they scored an average of 62%. On reflection, there may have been two major extenuating circumstances. The students all commented that the second text was difficult to understand. They did not enjoy the piece and were unsure of its meaning. The second issue was the circumstance of the assessing. Due to everyone's scheduling, it was done in the midst of another activity in June. The students were disinterested and in a hurry to get through the DRA™ assessment and back to their classroom activity.

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement was analyzed based on anecdotal comments as well as reading surveys administered to students.

### **GRADE 3**

Most of the Grade 3 students were eager to read and most perceived themselves as readers.

They gave general reasons for why they saw themselves as readers.

*Lots of people think so.  
I just think so.*

Some students felt they were not good readers.

*I read slow and mess up al the words.  
I always get messed up.*

They defined their strengths as related to word decoding and fluency.

*I can read in my head.  
I can sound out the words.  
I can read big words.*

Most of the students could list one or two strategies to rely on when they don't understand, such as rereading or ask the teacher. Not understanding to them meant they could not read the word. Most of the students in this classroom identified non-fiction texts as a source of enjoyment. They also mentioned series or authors they enjoyed.

## **GRADE 6**

The Grade 6 classroom identified their strengths and weaknesses in relation to fluency and reading out loud. Two students stated they like to read and seek out quiet places to do so. Two of the boys were adamant that they hated reading. On the second survey, the students were better able to use the language of the thinking processes to articulate what they do when they read. When asked to identify what they like to read, they were better able to list a wider variety and included other types of text than novels in June than in May. Most indicated they did not read at home, for a variety of reasons

*I don't really read because I don't have books at home, only when I take the books home from school.*

*I'm not reading nothing at all at home, but I am reading a short chapter book at school about a kart race.*

## **GR. 8**

Students in this classroom perceived themselves as capable readers. They were able to define their strengths and weaknesses. The strengths and weaknesses were generally not related to understanding, but rather to decoding or fluency. In June, more students were able to explain their strategy use and were using the language of the thinking processes. Reading selection was expanded on the second survey. Novels headed the list, but other types of texts were given. The boys predominantly listed magazines.

# Summary of Student and Teacher Learning

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- as expressed by participating teachers

## **GRADE 3**

R.Florence, Connaught School

### ***THE STUDENTS***

Students were eager and interested to be a part of a research project. They understood that they would be observed and tested. We were essentially experimenting on them and the way they learn and more so, the way we teach. We began the sessions in mid September. Mrs. Kasper came into the class at 9:00am each day.

We began by teaching the students how to choose a just right book. It was really surprising to see that students would choose a book and be content with it regardless of their ability to read or make any sense of it whatsoever. After we taught the \*five finger method we worked with students to help them make their own selections. It was from these books that we began teaching the comprehension strategies.

The first comprehension strategy we taught was making connections. The students seemed to grasp this concept quite quickly but soon discovered that they were unable to connect with everything they read - which is fine too. The students did a better job of making connections when they listened to a story rather than when they read it themselves. I believe this is because several of the students were having so much trouble just decoding the words that they were utterly exhausted by the time it came to trying to understand what they all meant.

I remember one instance when Mrs. Kasper was reading a book to the students and one boy whispered under his breath that he had an aunt (or something like that) with the same name. It was pointed out that he made a connection and well, the connections flew from there. One student, aka - The Queen of Connections, found something in every second sentence that she had seen, heard or knew about. It was from here that we learned that in order to teach these strategies, we had to be very clear in why we were teaching them. The point of making connections, visualizing or using any of the comprehension strategies is to gain a deeper understanding of the text. These strategies can help to make the text more meaningful and from there we can take from a text whatever we need.

As a result of this experience students have become more proficient at choosing books that are within their ability range. They still enjoy some books that are too

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\* The five finger method is a simple way of helping students choose a book at their level of reading. They hold up five fingers and open a book to any page and begin to read. Every time they encounter a word that they have to stop at, either because they can't decode it or they don't know what it means, they put down a finger. If five fingers are down by the time they finish the page, the book's level is too high.

hard or too easy but now know when they have made those choices. The students generally make connections quite easily and many of these connections are actually beneficial to the understanding of a story.

The next strategy that we worked on was visualization.

The last strategy the classed worked on was questioning. The unit was introduced with the story *No, David!* by David Shannon. As we flipped through the pages of this very simple book we tried to generate questions from the pictures. The student enjoyed this task but the questions remained at the superficial level. Throughout the session the students had a difficult time generating higher level questions even with much demonstration and practice. Modeling the expected skill helped but we did not seem to attain the desired results.

### ***THE TEACHER***

I have a lot to learn in this process. The entire process has left me with many more questions than it did answers. I believe that this is the right way for me to teach and I will continue to work at increasing my ability to teach these concepts. I have started on the path of learning these comprehension strategies but still need an extreme amount of practice. Some of the major challenges during this experience were:

1. The steep learning curve for these strategies - this is just not the way I have previously taught reading in my classroom. Even the very language of the lessons and ideas is different. In the past I may have said, "Does this remind you of anything?" yet the language of making a connection allows the students to probe their thoughts even more deeply. The idea of text to text, text to self and text to world gave the students more opportunity to think deeper about the story rather than my previous methods.
2. It was nice to have JoAnne around to bounce ideas off of but it also would have been nice in the beginning to have coworkers who were working on similar strategies. Our school has since made this a priority in the 2-7 classrooms and through our discussions during our PLC time the concepts have been discussed and problems shared and worked through.
3. The independent reading time within the lessons did not always seem well used during the class. Many students spent their time exchanging books or simply flipping through the ones they had. As the students read JoAnne and I walked around the room conferencing with the students. So some students would be on task whereas others were not.

Things to do differently next year:

- I would choose a different time of day to do the comprehension teaching. The attendance was poor and students often straggled in near the end of the session.
- I would work with students on identical texts at a too easy level until the concept of the strategy was understood. Then I'd model the concept in a team approach and have the team teacher demonstrate the other text and give the students some instruction to work with their own Just Right Book in order to practice and demonstrate the skill.

## GRADE SIX

C. Gibson, McKittrick

### *THE STUDENTS*

JoAnne came to my class at the beginning of November 2005. My class was composed of 10 students in Grades 6 to 8 who were reading at approximately a Grade 4 to 5 reading level. JoAnne introduced three strategies: connections, questioning and visualizing. Each strategy was introduced using a variety of literature genres such as poetry, short stories, excerpts from novels and excerpts from text books. JoAnne explained in detail what each strategy was, then modeled the strategy using the literature she had prepared in advance. This required many interruptions while reading each piece of literature. Some students found this frustrating as they felt the goal of reading should be to “get it done.” Taking the time to stop and discuss different aspects of what they were reading felt foreign. Some students did not seem engaged in the process of discussion and were somewhat unfocused. The students seemed to understand fairly quickly and for the most part could participate in class discussions surrounding the strategies. They were then asked to pick a book to read independently. The idea was to have each student practice these strategies while reading their individual books. After a quick mini-lesson based on one of the strategies, the students were given 30 minutes a day to read silently. As the students were reading, both JoAnne and I circulated in the classroom, conferencing with the students one-on-one.

Some students found the task of reading and practicing the strategies quite simple while others struggled. Despite best intentions, there were two or three students who did little to no reading on their own. Instead they would get up to exchange their book, ask to go to the washroom or fiddle in their desks. They did not seem to get “hooked” on any book.

In summary, most of the students gained a few new skills. First and foremost, they gained the ability to talk about a book. They found it was acceptable to slow down and discuss different aspects of what they were reading. Initially, they were quite hesitant because they thought their answers might be wrong but slowly they gained more confidence and opened up. Connecting became one of the easiest strategies for my students and they enjoyed sharing parts of their past when it connected to something they read. Visualizing also came easily to the group and they enjoyed picturing funny parts of the novel *Joey Pigza Loses Control* by Jack Gantos while JoAnne read it to them. Questioning was very difficult for my group. Being able to distinguish between questions whose answers were right in the text or questions that one could ask but the answers could not be found in the text was almost too much for the group. I do not think they truly understood the difference between the types of questions we were trying to teach them.

Throughout the first five weeks working with JoAnne, I think the group lacked focus. There were no assignments given as homework nor was there a specific task they were asked to complete. I think some students felt as though they did not know what to expect or what we expected from them. Reading for the sake of reading was something they had not experienced for an extended period of time (6 weeks) in an E.L.A. class before. At the end of our project, JoAnne and I asked the students to produce a poster describing one of the three strategies we had discussed and to relate it to the book they were reading independently. They worked well on this assignment and every student except two handed it in.

## ***THE TEACHER***

I think that after participating in this study, I now have more questions than answers. Why do these strategies not come naturally to my students when I myself possess these skills but have never been taught them? Why do I enjoy reading but the vast majority of my students do not? Is it too late to instill a love of reading in students at this age? Do these strategies need to be introduced at a very young age to become mastered? Will these strategies make a difference in the academic success of my students? I think as teachers, the bottom line is that we want our students to be successful. I struggle with this notion in my classroom because the majority of my students are operating below grade level and already feel unmotivated and unsuccessful at school. By appearances, academics seem unimportant to my students and their families.

Interestingly, I learned some valuable information from this project that otherwise I do not believe I would have been aware of. During many of our “talks” I was awed at what little vocabulary my students possess. Words such as “income” stumped them. How could a child possibly comprehend and therefore begin to enjoy reading if the words themselves cannot be understood? I learned to never assume the students are understanding the literature. As a teacher I must make sure they comprehend what I am presenting to them.

I also learned that no matter how hard you try, you cannot force a child to enjoy reading. For some, it takes finding the book that is just right for them, for others it is still a mystery to me. One student stands out in my mind because no matter what I said or how many times I got after her, she still found ways to avoid reading. Curiously, a few weeks after finishing up with JoAnne, she picked up a *Junie B. Jones* book and was hooked. She read through the whole series in a couple of weeks. Perhaps I really need to back up and provide books at a much easier reading level to foster an interest in reading among some students. The *Junie B. Jones* series by Barbara Park is written at a Grade 1-2 level. Maybe this is where her comprehension is at. How do we properly assess their comprehension abilities? Is there any test that will give us an accurate reading of their comprehension and vocabulary skills?

Finally, I learned that I need MUCH more practice with these strategies in order to be able to teach them well. Personally, I need to read more about the strategies and try different activities with them. I need to model the strategies from the beginning of the year and hold the expectation that we will continue to use the strategies throughout the entire school year. I would love to participate in another team-teaching experience with JoAnne as I feel I learned the most just from watching her teach my students. This project has sparked an interest that is worth exploring. I feel there is real validity in this research and that if taught properly, could open up a world of understanding and comprehension when reading among my students.

## GRADE 8

M. Beavers, Battleford Central School

### *THE STUDENTS*

The BCS Grade 8 class that participated in this project consisted of twenty students who were fairly strong academically and were generally quite successful in school. JoAnne came into the classroom for about an hour each day for about three months. All the reading strategies were introduced, modeled, put into practice as a group and then used on an individual basis.

My Grade 8 class was introduced to the reading strategies well into the school year. They appeared to be a bit apprehensive yet willing to participate. As the strategies were introduced they were comfortable with being led through the activities and were interested in the books and literature (even the picture books) presented to them. This comfort level seemed to decrease when they were asked to be more actively involved in discussions. On numerous occasions they needed lots of encouragement to answer questions or to give feedback. A fear of being wrong or the inability to put their thoughts into spoken words could be reasons for this. When asked to put the strategies into practice on their own, it seemed that most of the students wanted more guidance. With extra feedback they were able to demonstrate an understanding of the strategies. I am sure that most of the class could list and give a short explanation of almost all of the strategies. But I am not sure that they could really explain the value of the strategies and how they help them to understand what they read. Because they were not used to approaching literature from this perspective, they were skeptical and wary of its usefulness.

The students were given time to read novels of their choosing individually or in small groups. At first they wanted to read the same books as their friends but eventually they switched to books that interested them on an individual basis. As each strategy was introduced the students were able to apply the strategies to their novels. The need to have a written response became apparent as it was difficult to conference with each student. So they were asked to start writing in journals. The journal responses were quite general with just a retelling of the plot with little else, so we gave the students more guidelines in the form of a rubric to help them write about when they were using the strategies and how those particular strategies made it easier to understand what they were reading.

There was some frustration and confusion at times. Most of the students expressed that they did not like to stop their reading and make note of a strategy. Sometimes strategies were used and the students did not recognize that they were using it. We found ourselves wondering if we needed to teach the strategies to students who already appeared to be fairly proficient readers. The most common strategies that were used in their journals were questioning and connections. These may be the strategies that they felt the most comfortable with. It was a challenge to get the students to look for the important details and to move to a deeper analysis of the main idea. It appeared that they preferred to remain focused on the literal aspects of the literature instead of looking at the more profound meaning. At the end of the project the students were given picture books and asked to apply the strategies. Then they were asked to share their books and their findings in the form of a coffee shop atmosphere. The small groups were focused and motivated in their discussions but most students still seemed to remain fixed on simply retelling the story. With some extra guidance and questioning they were eventually

able to tell what they thought were the main ideas. I am starting to think that they need the extra pushing and outside intervention to guide them into synthesis.

### ***THE TEACHER***

The awareness of the strategies has changed the way that I approach reading instruction and the focus of reading in all subject areas. The students and I seem to be more comfortable using the strategies with the common novel that we are reading since learning about the strategies. As we read I find new ways to respond to and talk about the work. This project has given me a renewed interest in assessing what I do to improve reading comprehension in my students.

# Conclusions

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After participating in the project, I too have many questions, but also realize much learning has occurred. The students most importantly began the process of being aware of the use of thinking processes to enhance their comprehension. The teachers shared the learning process with me and we have started on the path to improve our own understanding of comprehension and how we can instruct in a way that benefits our students. The following are some of the conclusions and observations I drew throughout the process.

Vocabulary dramatically impacts comprehension. Students were in the habit of ignoring words they didn't know the meaning of. As teachers, we need to carefully choose words that we want to emphasize as well as monitoring students' understanding of the vocabulary. Students need to monitor their own reading, recognize which words they don't know the meaning of, and have a repertoire of strategies to call on to help them understand those words.

Students are totally satisfied to read without understanding. In all three classrooms, students had developed fake reading skills. These were so ingrained that they felt if they were reading the words, and turning the pages, they were doing what was asked of them. Here is a short story to emphasize the point.

The Grade 3 students were reading together from *The Rain Forest* by Pat Malone. They came to the sentence "Big snakes like boa constrictors wind around branches." They read "wind" with a short i vowel. They were ready to continue on, not recognizing that the sentence did not make any sense. We tried many different strategies to figure out what the word actually was. When we finally figured it out, you could see the "light-bulb" go on. They could then put all the pieces, the other words in the sentence, the picture and their background knowledge together to truly understand the text. We then proceeded to have a good discussion in relation to that page in the book.

The point is, they were prepared to continue reading with very little meaning occurring because that is what they are used to doing. Even as early as Grade 3 they develop avoidance skills.

Some students stated they did not like to read. In order for them to change that perception, I believe they need to have exposure to a wide variety of texts, and the experience of truly understanding what they read. Understanding increases the motivation and engagement for reading. A Grade 6 student wrote

*I learned how to be a better reader. I like reading. I didn't really like reading before, but now I do. I know how to make connections when reading the book. I also make pictures in my head while reading. It makes reading fun.*

- Choice of text

As students recognized they had more choice in their reading, their motivation increased. This was not an automatic response. Students at all grade levels were reluctant to think about choosing a book at their reading level as well as one whose topic interested them. It takes patience and knowledge to guide students to choose the right book for themselves. It is a new concept for some students that choosing a book takes some care and thought. They also needed permission to NOT like a book, although they needed to know why they didn't like it. Often it was because it was too difficult. No student, no matter what age, wanted to admit they read at a lower level than their peers. They would rather fake read, say they don't like to read, or use avoidance behaviours. They needed a classroom where a sense of trust and acceptance of differences was prevalent.

- Classroom and School Library

In order to support students' choice at many different levels of reading, the classroom library becomes crucial. Students need access to a wide variety of text types at many different levels. Only a well stocked classroom library allows that to happen. Miriam Trehearne (2004) quotes Sharon Taberski who says

*There must be enough books in each classroom to accommodate the changing needs and interests of our children. I believe that 1500 is about the right number of books to have in each classroom. (p. 543)*

The students put up roadblocks when we asked them to discuss their thoughts and responses to what they read. Part of that was because we were asking them to respond in a different way, but some of it was because they did not feel comfortable with classroom discussion that was not controlled by the teacher. We needed to be more cognizant of this and scaffold the discussion with different strategies and work them up to the point where they become comfortable. We also came to the conclusion that we needed to make sure that we provided ways other than discussion to make their thinking visible. Many of the books listed in the references provide ways to do that.

Letting go of control is difficult, both for the teacher and the student. The Grade 8 students in particular were uncomfortable letting go of the structures and ways of thinking that they were used to. They were unsure what was expected of them. They had been successful in the more traditional exercises and felt it was a risk to try something new. As teachers, it was hard not to guide students to our understanding and interpretation of the story while we were encouraging them to develop their own.

All four teachers involved in this project are readers. We have a strong interest and background in the area of language arts. We grew up on traditional instruction and are avid proficient readers. When shifting the emphasis to instructing thinking processes, it raised two major questions.

Is there still a time and place for traditional exercise of read the passage and answer the questions? This relates back to Chris Tovani's (2000) concept of surface and deep structures. Using her thoughts, there is a place for question and answer and other practices that focus on traditional concepts of comprehension. I think that we need to always keep in mind exactly what information

about the learner we want to get from the questions we ask. We can ask questions and receive answers for various reasons:

- They tell me that they read the story
- Indicates they can go back into the text and locate information
- Writing skills – answering in a complete sentence
- Knowledge level indicates a certain level of understanding
- Build confidence

Do proficient students need to be instructed in these processes? If students are avid readers and can show they are understanding the critical levels of comprehension, do they need to become aware of their cognitive processes? I don't have a clear answer to that question. I know from my experience, that understanding how I read has made me more aware of what and why I read. As Ellin Keene (1997) mentions

*My thinking as a reader can be manipulated. I can help myself delve deeper, reflect more, remember more, make more conscious decisions about how I read and what I understand.*  
(p. 5)

All these thoughts need to be put into the context of knowing what we want in our students as readers. Does every student need to love reading with the same passion I do? What is our goal for our students as readers? Some students will read and may choose to read only for a function. Their purpose is to allow them to do what they see as necessary. Others may add enjoyment as a purpose. They will read for fun and relaxation. Still others will use their reading to grow and become exposed to life issues, new ideas and other worlds. As teachers, we need to help students know what their purpose and goals are and then help them develop the skills to achieve those goals. Providing them with thinking processes is a valuable tool that will not only enhance and increase their comprehension, but will help set them on the path of getting the most they can from what they encounter in their daily life. As one Grade 8 student wrote at the end of the project, "Oh, I get it now. Reading actually has a point." If we can get our students to see the point in reading, to decipher the meaning in the words, then we will have contributed to them finding their way in the world.

*By the mysterious alchemy of the written word, we range over time and space, expanding our experiences, enriching our souls, and ultimately becoming more fully, more consciously human.* (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997, p. 218)

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