Teaching Comprehension to Pupils with Learning Difficulties

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There is a constant stream of research around the teaching of reading and much debate over the most effective teaching strategies. What emerges time and again is that it is a multi-layered activity. Reading is not simply decoding words on a page; it also involves comprehension of the text. In fact, it could be argued that “reading is comprehension” (Rasinki et al., 2003, p.1). However, comprehension is not a simple process. No two individuals comprehend in the same way and effective comprehension requires the development of a wide range of skills and strategies over time (Rasinki et al., 2003). This paper explores barriers to comprehension for pupils with learning difficulties and outlines effective strategies for the teaching of comprehension which emanate from current research.

Introduction

Reading is an essential skill to acquire in order to succeed in the education system and the wider world. The purpose of any text is to convey a message, from the simple “STOP” road sign to the newspaper article. Without the skill of reading, access to meaning and messages is inhibited and life can present as a constant challenge. Reading is the first of the traditional “three R’s” and many teachers and indeed children see it as the most important skill to be mastered in primary school (Wray and Medell, 1991). There is a constant stream of research around the teaching of reading and much debate over the most effective teaching strategies. What emerges time and again is that it is a multi-layered activity. Reading is not simply decoding words on a page; it also involves comprehension of the text. In fact, it could be argued that “reading is comprehension” (Rasinki et al., 2000, p.1). However, comprehension is not a simple process. No two individuals comprehend in the same way and effective comprehension requires the development of a wide range of skills and strategies over time (Rasinki et al., 2000). In this paper, the composition and the teaching of comprehension will be examined. The barriers to comprehension for pupils with learning difficulties will be explored and finally, effective strategies for the teaching of comprehension will be discussed.
The Essence of Reading

Reading involves “extracting and constructing meaning from text” (Collins Block, Gambrell, Pressley, 2002, p. 25). In the constructivist context learners make meaning through connecting what they already know to what they learn. Similarly, when good readers comprehend a text, they make meaning by using their prior knowledge. In other words, the reader draws on background or prior knowledge to relate to the text. This prior knowledge needs to be activated by the teacher before reading so that pupils can draw upon it to connect with new information in the text (Pardo, 2004). In effective comprehension instruction the principle of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development is engaged. The teacher uses discussion or social interaction to scaffold the student to extend his or her thinking and to share ideas about the text. Comprehension therefore, “is a social constructivist process” (McLaughlin, 2003, p.3).

Comprehension was once seen as something that evolved naturally after oral language and decoding instruction, rather than a skill that had to be taught. However, it is now acknowledged that comprehension is a complex process involving inferential and evaluative thinking (Fielding and Pearson, 1994). In other words, comprehension is a process of developing understanding and interpretation or as Durkin put it “the essence of reading” (1993, as cited by NRP, 2000, p.13). In discussing traditional methods of teaching comprehension Keene (2007) remembers her own experience of being taught to identify the main ideas in the text and answering comprehension questions at the end of the story. However, the possibility of looking at layers of meaning in a text was not considered. Text on a page was a “literal, finite truth that wasn’t challenged by the reader”, (Keene and Zimmerman, 2007, p. 3). Keene’s experience is not uncommon. Students are often not challenged to use higher-order thinking skills when responding to text (King, 2006). Westwood (2003) identifies four levels of comprehension: literal comprehension - understanding the factual information in the text, inferential – reading between the lines of the text, critical reading – making judgments about the text and creative reading – producing new ideas or insights about the text. However, many comprehension activities in classrooms often do not require responses beyond the literal level or the recall of facts (Westwood, 2003).

When discussing comprehension, it is often asked; “what do good readers do?” Keene and Zimmerman (1997) point out that skilled readers comprehend what they are reading as they read. They know their purpose for reading and can identify what text requires of them. The effective reader is metacognitive, he or she use a range of skills to comprehend the text and
for further understanding of the text. Such skills include: using prior knowledge, determining the most important ideas in the text, asking questions, visualisation of the material, drawing inferences, synthesising, and evaluating the text (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997). The Primary School Curriculum English Teacher Guidelines (NCCA, 1999) promotes the development of comprehension skills such as analysis, prediction, summarisation, deduction, synthesis, deduction and evaluation as necessary to determine the full meaning from text. In fact, the Primary School Curriculum identifies ten comprehension skills though only five of these correlate with international research - prediction, summarisation, inference, synthesis and evaluation (RAI, 2011). In addition to using effective comprehension strategies, good readers display other important characteristics as outlined in the research of the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) in the United States. The NAEP and later the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) identified six attributes of good readers which directly correlate with comprehension. Good readers display positive attitudes in relation to reading, they have a good level of reading fluency which allows for concentration on the meaning of the text and good readers use prior knowledge to make meaning of the text. They comprehend by “extending, elaborating and critically evaluating the meaning of the text”, they use a range of strategies to gain meaning from what they are reading and they also read many different types of text for many different purposes (Collins Block et al., 2002, p. 4). When considering the vast range of skills and attributes of a proficient reader, it becomes apparent that teaching these skills to all pupils, especially pupils with a learning difficulty, is a daunting and complex task.

A Balanced Approach to the Teaching of Comprehension Strategies

Since Dolores Durkin’s significant research on comprehension instruction in the United States in 1978, there has been a wealth of international research on the teaching of comprehension. In her research, Durkin discovered that there was very little comprehension instruction in upper-elementary grades and rather than teaching strategies for comprehension, teachers asked comprehension questions at the end of the text to test the pupils (Durkin, 1978). Considering the lack of research in this area at the time, this may not be surprising. However, despite the volume of current research in this area, a similar deficiency is still apparent in current practice (Pressley, 2000, RAI, 2011). The Primary School Curriculum English Teacher Guidelines (NCCA, 1999) acknowledges that there has been a tradition of teaching comprehension through written exercises in middle and senior classes. However, the
curriculum states that comprehension can be much more effectively developed through discussion under the guidance and prompting of the class teacher (NCCA, 1999). Despite this recommendation, comprehension strategy instruction has been identified as one of the weakest areas in the teaching of reading in Ireland (RAI, 2011). Textbooks present pupils with comprehension questions at the end of the text but often pupils are not taught how to answer these questions effectively (King, 2006). The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) requires primary schools to use standardised testing to assess pupils’ performance in literacy in 2nd, 4th and 6th class. However, while beneficial for screening purposes, standardised tests do not provide detail into the types of difficulty a pupil may have which could inform teachers’ instruction in the classroom (RAI, 2011). It is important that a continuum of assessment is used to inform the teaching of comprehension as outlined in the Assessment Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2007). Teachers need to use assessment for learning (AfL) methods as well as assessment of learning (AoL) tools. Through using AfL assessment methods the pupil is made aware of the learning focus of the lesson and how to assess whether the learning outcome has been achieved. This develops metacognition which enables the pupils to reflect on his or her learning (NCCA, 2007).

International research promotes a balanced approach to literacy instruction (RAI, 2011). The Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) also highlights the value of using a wide range of approaches in the teaching of reading. However, prediction is the only comprehension strategy recommended for use from junior infants to second class in the curriculum. The Primary School Curriculum advocates the development of the higher order comprehension strategies from the middle classes onwards while reading accuracy and fluency is prioritised by the curriculum in the early years. Yet current research suggests that the teaching of comprehension strategies is also essential from the beginning stages of reading instruction (Pressley, 2000, Westwood, 2003).

Barriers to Comprehension for Pupils with Learning Difficulties

The National Reading Panel (2000, p.13) identifies comprehension as being “critically important to the development of children’s reading skills and therefore to the ability to obtain an education.” Yet for many children with learning difficulties, reading comprehension is a constant challenge for various reasons. Collins Block et al. (2002) identity that lack of attention to developing oral language ability can impede reading comprehension development. Learning to read is a developmental process rooted in oral language development. The
Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) identifies that competence in oral language needs to be developed before formal reading instruction begins. In order to succeed in reading and written comprehension, oral and aural comprehension must firstly be developed. A student may be able to decode the text but not understand what it means. In this case instruction may need to focus on vocabulary building and pre-teaching difficult vocabulary before reading. In its report Teaching Children to Read the National Reading Panel found that the teaching of vocabulary greatly benefits reading comprehension and that a variety of methods is more effective than any single teaching method (NRP, 2000).

Westwood (2003) identifies a number of problems that may affect comprehension one of which being readability of the text. Firstly, it is important that the text is matched to the pupil’s own reading level to increase comprehension. Running records are an essential tool in the identification of a pupil’s instructional reading level. At the instructional reading level, a pupil can read 90-94% of the text with accuracy thus enabling comprehension of the text. If a pupil is reading text that is below his or her instructional level the emphasis will be on decoding the text and comprehension will be inhibited. Pupils may have problems with decoding or reading fluency, which can result in loss of meaning. Work on word-identification skills such as sounding out, chunking, re-reading and reading on, adjusting the reading rate and analogy is necessary to improve decoding and reading fluency (NCCA, 2012). The reading rate of the pupil may cause problems. Reading very slowly or too quickly can also affect comprehension levels. Very slow reading can result in the reader not retaining information for long enough to be understood. If the reader reads very quickly the comprehension can be impeded as the reader may overlook important detail. The reader must be explicitly taught reading fluency skills which also aid comprehension of the text. Sequencing may be a problem area for pupils with comprehension difficulties. Students need to be taught how to sequence through appropriate comprehension activities such as sequencing poems, familiar stories, recipes and so on. Visualisation of the text is a crucial comprehension strategy. However, often students with poor comprehension need to be taught how to visualise. Some students may have difficulty recalling information from the text. Recall can be improved when the text is connected to the reader’s own experience, for example through the language experience approach (Westwood, 2003).
Overcoming the Barriers to Comprehension

Improving language skills
In confluence with international research around reading comprehension, King (2006) and Westwood (2003) as well as research carried out for the new language curriculum (NCCA, 2012) emphasise the importance of teaching comprehension skills and strategies in an explicit and direct way. King (2006) identifies developing language as an essential skill for reading comprehension. In some cases there may be a discrepancy between the language of the pupil and the language of the text. One method of overcoming a language barrier is to use the language experience approach. This involves using the child’s own language to create reading material for the child under the guidance of the teacher. The motivation to read is also a key factor in the development of comprehension skills. Research has found that motivation and achievement are connected (Collins Block et al, 2002). With the language experience approach it is possible to use the pupil’s own interests to produce reading material and the teacher can work with the pupil at his or her level of competence (Westwood, 2003). Therefore, the pupil is more likely to be interested and motivated in the text. Teaching students how to generate their own questions about the text can also benefit language skills (Collins Block et al. 2002; Westwood, 2003; McLaughlin, 2003; and King 2006). To develop this skill, pupils could exchange LEA books and ask each other questions about what they have written. Some pupils may also have problems with understanding expressions and sayings, homophones, syntax and structure. These components need to be taught explicitly in order for pupils to access the meaning of text (King, 2006).

Teaching Cognitive strategies
In line with current research, the Reading Association of Ireland advocates using a strategic approach to the teaching of comprehension from the earliest stages of children’s reading development based on the strategies of “prediction, visualisation, making connections, questioning, clarifying, determining importance, inference and synthesis” (RAI, 2011, p. 9). Building Bridges of Understanding is a comprehension programme, which is specifically designed to develop these strategies with the aim of improving comprehension (Courtney and Gleeson, 2011). The programme provides details of how each strategy can be taught in the classroom through teacher modelling and ‘think aloud’ processes. The ‘Gradual Release of Responsibility’ (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) approach to teaching the comprehension
strategies is promoted in research around effective comprehension instruction and also in the Building Bridges programme. This approach is based on Vgotsky’s ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ and involves teaching the strategies through the stages of modelling the strategy, shared practice, guided practice and finally the independent stage. Teacher modelling is a common thread throughout the research on the teaching of comprehension strategies (Pearson and Dole, 1998; Collins Block et al. 2002; Westwood 2003). In order for pupils with learning difficulties to grasp how to use comprehension strategies he or she needs to see the strategies in use as the teacher makes the “invisible visible” (Clay, 1991). In other words, the teacher thinks out loud while demonstrating the strategy. Westwood (2003) maintains that reading comprehension skills can be improved when teachers model and demonstrate effective reading strategies.

Reciprocal teaching has proven to be a successful approach to teaching comprehension strategies to pupils with learning difficulties and indeed all pupils. In this approach teachers and students work together in small groups to develop cognitive strategies for comprehension. The teacher models effective comprehension skills with the aim that the pupils will eventually use these skills independently. This approach places emphasis on encouraging students to provide instructional support to each other (Rosenshine and Meister, 1994). Duke and Pearson (2002) outline a similar model of comprehension instruction. Firstly, the pupil is taught what the strategy is explicitly and how and when it should be used. Then the teacher models the strategy and then the teacher and pupil use the strategy together. The teacher continues to guide the pupil in the use of the strategy gradually releasing responsibility to the pupil until the pupil can use the strategy independently. PQRS can also prove a supportive method of developing comprehension for the pupil. In PQRS the pupils preview the text, generate questions about the text, read the text carefully and again if necessary and finally, summarise the text by identifying the main ideas (Westwood, 2003).

**Questioning is key**

Successful comprehenders question what they are reading while they read (Owecki, 2003). In order for pupils to successfully engage in comprehension they must be taught how to move from the literal level of thinking to the inferential, critical and creative levels comprehension (King, 2006). Questioning by the teacher must start at the literal level but in order to foster effective comprehension strategies the questioning needs to involve the higher order levels of comprehension. It is useful to consider Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) when
composing questions to challenge higher-order thinking skills. By devising questions according to the levels of knowledge; comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, each level of comprehension is addressed. Research has shown that pupils need to participate in “high levels of questioning in an interactive setting to achieve high levels of comprehension” (Taylor et al., 2002, as cited by Concannon in Dwyer and Shiel, 2007). To facilitate this, pupils must have an understanding of the question and answer relationship. Question and Answer Relationship instruction teaches pupils about “in the book questions” where the answer is found in the text and “in my head questions” which require the reader to think about the text and draw on prior knowledge and experience. It is a metacognitive strategy, which provides a shared language with which pupils can communicate to the teacher about their progress and ask for help if necessary (Raphael & Au, 2005). In their research into question and answer relationships, Raphael and Au (2005) discovered that pupils’ reading and listening comprehension skills improved when engaged in QAR instruction on a consistent basis. Pupils developed confidence in answering questions effectively and generating their own questions around the text. Training pupils to generate questions about the text is a key comprehension strategy as it gives the reader control over the text. The pupil has to actively engage in processing the text, which in turn benefits the comprehension ability of the pupil (Concannon in Dwyer and Shiel, 2007).

**Comprehension routines**

Collins Block et al. (2000) recommend guided reading as an instructional method to teach comprehension effectively. In this method the teacher teaches comprehension strategies to small groups of students of a similar reading ability. Guided comprehension as outlined by McLaughlin (2003) is a similar method. In guided comprehension the teacher starts with whole-group instruction, moving to small group instruction and student-facilitated comprehension centres and routines where students work individually, in pairs or in small groups on activities that integrate reading, writing and discussion. The teacher then moves back to whole-group instruction where whole-group reflection is facilitated. McLaughlin (2003) argues that the guided comprehension model is a dynamic framework that caters for pupils’ individual needs.

Time for actual reading has been identified as crucial for developing comprehension (Fielding and Pearson, 1994; Duke and Pearson, 2002; Westwood, 2003). Without practicing the application of comprehension skills and strategies that have been learned, readers will not
improve their literacy skills. Pupils need to experience reading real texts for real reasons and experience a range of genres. Pupils will not become successful comprehenders if they do not experience reading the different types of text that they will encounter in real life from storybooks to how-to instructions. The classroom needs to provide an environment rich in vocabulary and development of ideas through discussion and experience facilitated by the teacher. Pupils need to be taught how to decode accurately and also spend time writing texts for others to comprehend. Finally pupils should be actively involved in high-quality discussion about texts through pupil-to-pupil and teacher to pupil talk (Duke and Pearson, 2002).

**Conclusion**

Students with little knowledge of effective comprehension strategies experience less success in their reading compared to students who have substantial knowledge of these strategies, regardless of the type of reader the student is (PISA, 2009). King (2006) points out that often, skills taught by the learning support or resource teacher, are not transferred by the pupil to the classroom. According to King, it is imperative that class teachers teach the same comprehension strategies on a continual basis. Collins Block et al. (2002) and Raphael and Au (2005) highlight the importance of in-depth professional development for teachers in the teaching of comprehension. They maintain that teacher learning which supports a whole-school approach to the teaching of comprehension strategies will increase literacy success for all pupils.

In this paper, strategies for teaching comprehension to pupils with learning difficulties have been discussed. What emerges from research in this area is that students with learning difficulties do not need different instruction from their peers. They learn to read and comprehend by learning the same strategies and using the same materials provided in regular classrooms. However, pupils with learning difficulties do need highly structured and intense instruction over many years (Block et al., 2002). It is evident that effective comprehension instruction encompasses a variety of teaching methods and routines. The pupil needs to be provided with sufficient time for actual reading and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. The pupil also needs to be engaged in collaborative learning and student-teacher sharing of reading responses (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Reading comprehension should be the focus of any literacy programme from the beginning and not something that comes after learning how to read (Westwood, 2003, NCCA, 2012). Teaching comprehension strategies to the average pupil is an arduous task. Teaching comprehension strategies to the pupil with...
learning difficulties is an even greater task. However, regardless of difficulties, most children can acquire skills in comprehension through the implementation of effective teaching strategies (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Westwood, 2003).

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