Teaching Reading Comprehension:

From Theory to Practice

Thomas G. Devine

TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION:

From Theory to Practice

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TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION

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to Susanne F. Canavan

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About the Book

"What happens in students' minds as they read stories and textbook assignments? As they listen to me talk in class? How do they make sense of what they hear and read? How do I really know when they have comprehended?"

These and similar questions have bothered me since I first began to teach. Periodically, I checked the professional literature in reading instruction and came away with no firm answers.

Two years ago I decided that such questions were central not just to my teaching but to all education, and that I needed some reasonable answers to help me make sense of my continuing career as a teacher.

I discovered then that many others have been bothered by these same questions and that—particularly during the past decade—answers have been suggested by researchers working in such fields as cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, information processing, artificial intelligence, and rhetorical analysis. Their findings, I discovered, contribute to what may be seen as a gigantic information explosion, one that has led to unprecedented speculation, theorizing, and research in reading comprehension.

Today much is finally known about key factors that influence the ways students comprehend both spoken and printed texts—linguistic competence, prior knowledge, knowledge of word meanings, knowledge of textual structure, and memory. Enough is now known, too, to discount some widely shared beliefs about reading comprehension—that there are discrete "reading comprehension skills," that there are "levels" of comprehension, that reasoning may be equated with comprehension, and that comprehension may be measured by available "reading comprehension" texts.

This book, in short, recounts my search through the often exciting theoretical and research literature of the past few years and my subsequent synthesis. Specifically, it:

- Examines critically the factors that clearly affect (and do not affect) reading comprehension.
- Suggests a coherent explanation, based on the recent research, of what really happens when students try to understand their reading materials.
- Describes hundreds of teaching/learning strategies that positively influence the reading comprehension of children and young adults.

It should help other teachers make more sense of the theory and research and thus better comprehend comprehension. It also offers a wide variety of effective ideas for teaching students to better understand what they read and hear in class.

Preface

What does it mean to understand something? to get meaning? to comprehend? How do people understand? get meaning? comprehend? Can they learn to do these things better? How? Questions like these stimulated the writing of this book, which presents the answers its writer found.

The book is organized, as briefly and coherently as possible, around these and similar questions and the answers found in the rich and exciting research literature of the past decade or so. This remarkable period in human thought has seen the coming together (with all expected clashing and flying sparks!) of a number of areas of study—cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, psycholinguistics, communications theory, and others. This coming together has led to an Ideas Explosion of sorts and, as might be expected, to the growth and development of new insights into the ways people understand, comprehend, get meaning, and think.

The questions that serve as an organizational framework for these chapters tend to reflect the concerns of teachers, particularly reading teachers—rather than, say, those of specialists in psycholinguistics or computer science. Thus, "How do people comprehend?" becomes "How may students better comprehend school reading assignments?" The answers, too, reflect these shared concerns. Thus, "How may students better comprehend school reading assignments?" is answered in terms most teachers will readily recognize.

There are a few points readers should note before they begin to read *Teaching Reading Comprehension:*

1. Writers of doctoral studies have long been advised to include early in their proposals and dissertations both a statement of purpose and a paragraph or two (usually labeled "Scope and Limitations") which note in advance not only those topics to be studied but also those the writer does *not* intend to study. This is considered an academic safeguard. If, the reasoning goes, the writer tells readers exactly what is and is not intended, they can hardly fault him later for not doing what he had never set out to do in the first place.

The purpose of *this* book, discussed at greater length in Chapter 1, is twofold:

- To review, as concisely as possible, recent research and theory related to reading comprehension.
- To suggest effective teaching/learning strategies, growing out of this research and theory, for the improvement of students' reading comprehension.

This book does *not* intend to examine (despite occasional references) such important areas as child growth and development, developmental psychology, the sociology of reading, literacy, classroom management, or the organization and supervision of the reading program.

These limitations may be better appreciated if prospective users know the intended readership of the book. It is planned for teachers, practitioners and practitioners-in-the-making, and designed for use both as a resource for teachers in schools and as a supplementary textbook in undergraduate and graduate courses in reading instruction. It is assumed, always, that readers either already know a good deal about the teaching of reading or have other, more comprehensive, books available.

2. The first three chapters, all labeled "Research and Theory," review recent research and speculation in the area of comprehension, focusing particularly on linguistic competence, prior knowledge, word meaning knowledge, memory, and schema theory. The remaining chapters, all labeled "From Theory to Practice," describe teaching/learning strategies suggested by recent theory. The strategies are grouped under Relating the New to the Known, Developing Word Meaning Knowledge, Improving Comprehension of School Reading Assignments, Understanding Ways Texts Are Organized, and Thinking about and beyond the Text. The measurement and evaluation of instruction are considered separately at the end of the book.

Each separate chapter includes an Introduction and Overview, Teaching Guidelines, Suggested Study Questions, a summary Recapping of Main Points, End-of-Chapter Activities, and References. The "From-Theory-to-Practice" chapters also include Idea Boxes interspersed throughout. These contain additional teaching activities and strategies.

3. The book rests on an interactive theory of the comprehension process, one that suggests three "texts" are involved in reading:

- One which the writer has "in-the-head" as the written version is developed.
- The actual printed text—which may or may not (depending upon the writer's rhetorical competence) reflect the original, writer's text-in-the-head, and which, in any case, takes on a life of its own once it has left the writer's hands.
- The text-in-the-head the reader develops using his or her linguistic competence, prior knowledge, knowledge of word meanings, cognitive skills, and knowledge of the ways texts-on-paper are organized.

Comprehension, from this view, is the process of using syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical information found in the printed text to reconstruct in the reader's mind (using his or her prior knowledge, as well as needed cognitive skills) another "text"—one that resembles the writer's text-in-the-head when

the printed text was prepared. This theory, explained in Chapter 3, is not unique to this book but may be new to many readers.

4. The explanation of the comprehension process found here rests, in turn, on schema theory, a theory which seems to account best for the ways knowledge is encoded and stored in memory and later retrieved and used by writers and readers. Schema theory and its importance in reading comprehension are explained in Chapter 2.

5. This book, it should be noted here, tends to downplay some beliefs long held by many teachers and various authorities in reading:

- That there are separate, discrete, identifiable reading comprehension skills.
- That these may be sequenced hierarchically.
- That "levels" of comprehension exist.
- That comprehension must necessarily involve "thinking."

Discussions of these issues are found in Chapters 3 and 8.

6. *Teaching Reading Comprehension* focuses on *school* reading, particularly the reading of school assignments in basal readers and content area textbooks. The explanation of the comprehension process presented in Chapter 3 and the many strategies suggested throughout the "From-Theory-to-Practice" chapters relate to *all* reading. It is important, for example, to be able to activate prior knowledge or figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word when reading the daily newspaper; to use one's knowledge of the ways texts are organized when reading a technical report; to make inferences and predictions when reading a novel for pleasure. However, given the space constraints of the book, it was decided to focus primarily here on *school* reading assignments. It is assumed that teachers of reading will help students make transfers from basals and school textbooks when they can. It is also assumed that, given the constraints of the typical school and the typical school day, most teachers have influence upon only school reading assignments anyway.

7. No attempt has been made here to program or sequence teaching/learning strategies by age or grade levels. The suggested teaching ideas and activities found throughout the "From-Theory-to-Practice" chapters (and in the Idea Boxes) are presented in the context of the discussion, in places that seem most appropriate. Thus, while describing the importance of inference to the comprehension process, a specific suggestion is made for improving students' ability to make inferences; in a discussion of textual organization, a specific idea for teaching paragraph patterns may be introduced. These suggestions may refer in one place to fourth-graders and in another to eighth-graders. The assumption throughout these pages is that teachers use the suggested teaching ideas as "triggers" to stimulate their own creative processes. The description of an effective teaching game in a second-grade group, for example, may stimulate a seventh-

grade teacher to develop a somewhat similar game more appropriate for her age group; a suggestion for an activity that works for eighth-graders may provoke a fourth-grade teacher to create a comparable one for her children.

Listing strategies in a carefully sequenced program from kindergarten through high school is a worthwhile project but is outside the scope of this book. Here it is assumed that the creative teacher, like the cutpurse Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale,* takes what he or she finds, changes it a bit here and a bit there, polishes it up, and reshapes it to fit the needs of a particular group of students.

Finally, a word about masculine and feminine pronouns. Elementary teachers are usually (but not always) referred to by feminine pronouns. This is done because the vast majority of elementary school teachers are, indeed, women. When referring to students (who are rather evenly balanced by sex in schools), *he* and *she, him* and *her,* are interchanged regularly and, it is hoped, sensibly.

This book, as noted, is the result of a search to find answers to questions about reading comprehension, particularly about the teaching of reading comprehension in schools. The search took its writer through most of the important research and theory of the past two decades. Clearly, the end result, *Teaching Reading Comprehension,* has been shaped by the search. Even the "original" explanation of the comprehension process given in Chapter 3 owes much to the research and speculation of others. The writer has taken and reshaped the ideas of many theorists and researchers, who are all noted in the chapter references.

Special note must be made here to individuals who gave (knowingly or unknowingly) *special* help. They include Susanne F. Canavan of Allyn and Bacon, Inc., who encouraged the writer from the first three-page proposal to the final typescript; Dr. Anne M. McParland of the University of Lowell who generously shared her professional materials; and those reviewers whose comments throughout proved valuable beyond measure: Margaret Early, Syracuse University; JoBeth Allen, University of Kansas; Gary Anderson, Arizona State University; John M. Kean, University of Wisconsin at Madison; Sam Sebesta, University of Washington; Clyde G. Colwell, Kansas State University; Timothy Shanahan, University of Illinois at Chicago; Patricia L. Anders, University of Arizona; Richard L. Allington, SUNY Albany; and Roger DeSanti, University of New Orleans.

T.G.D.

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PART ONE

Theoretical Background

The development of effective teaching/learning strategies for reading comprehension needs to rest upon some kind of reasonable theoretical framework.

The three chapters of Part One look at reading comprehension in today's schools, at some of the problems that get in the way of successful instruction, at various factors that influence reading comprehension, and at one explanation of the comprehension process. The teaching/learning strategies and approaches presented in Part Two grow out of the theoretical framework outlined here.

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