International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature & Art Studies 11(4):48-54, Oct.-Dec., 2023
© SEAHI PUBLICATIONS, 2023 www.seahipaj.org ISSN: 2467-8511

Reading Comprehension Difficulties: Problems and Strategies

ISA, Abdulmumini

Department of Primary Education Studies
Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashua, Yobe State, Nigeria
Correspondence email: Isaabdulmumini9@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
The aim of reading comprehension is to derive meaning from a given text, while reading comprehension is decoding and constructing meaning through interaction with a given text. This paper reviews the concept of reading comprehension, levels of text comprehension in oral reading, the types of oral reading comprehension. The paper further discussed reading comprehension difficulties, the causes of reading comprehension difficulties, the strategies for teaching reading comprehension as well as the strategies for assessing oral reading comprehension. The paper recommends that teachers should teach skills that lead to text comprehension more specifically from the early classes.
Keywords: comprehension, oral reading, text, language skills

INTRODUCTION

The aim of reading certainly includes the fact that students reads and comprehend what they read and that they find reading source of knowledge. However, comprehension will not occur until reading is free of decoding errors and certain degree of fluency is achieved. According to Westwood (2009) reading comprehension is defined as the active thinking process through which a reader intentionally constructs meaning and deepens understanding from a text. The understanding of a text itself involves identification, activation of prior knowledge, and the application of cognitive strategies. Children who are good in text comprehension use variety of cognitive processes as they read. For example, they may visualize as they read narrative materials; they may pose questions to themselves; they may reflect upon the relevance of what they are reading; they may challenge the accuracy of a stated facts; and they monitor their own level of understanding.

Tompkins (2011) Conceptualized Comprehension as a creative, multifaceted, process which depend on four language skills, i.e., phonology (speech sound), syntax (arrangement of words in given sentences), semantics (meaning of words and phrases in a language) and pragmatics (how context contribute to meaning). Proficient reading depends on the ability to recognize words quickly and effortlessly. It is also determined by an individual's cognitive development, which is the construction of thought processes. Some people learn through education or instruction and others through direct experiences. There are specific traits that determine how successfully an individual will comprehend text, including prior knowledge about the subject, well developed language, and the ability to make inferences. Moreover, it is the ability to be self-correcting to solve comprehension problems as they arise.

Reading comprehension is a product of complex interactions between the properties of the text and what readers bring to the reading situation. The readers must relevant their knowledge, word decoding ability, text-based and situation model-based differencing skills, competency with a variety of reading strategies, metacognitive skills, and so on. Reading comprehension is a process in which the reader has to decide

linguistic symbol and reconstruct and reconstruct them up to a meaningful whole as intended by the writer. (Smith 2014).

Generally, reading comprehension has been explained in relation to three theories of reading which are; the bottom-up which states that readers comprehend text first by processing the visual information displayed by the reading task, the text, sentence, paragraph and the whole story. In the top-down model, the reader connects his background knowledge with the reading task for understanding text. While the meta-cognitive model states that reading is the interaction of reader's background knowledge and the reading task for text understanding.

According to Mahapatra and Sabat (2016), children with reading difficulties may struggle with basic reading skills such as decoding words, but comprehension is the greater weakness. Some children can read aloud with little or no difficulty pronouncing words, but they do not understand or remember what they read. When these children read aloud, their words and phrases are often read with no feeling, no change in tone, no logical phrasing and no rhythm. These children do not understand where and why these problems are occurring. Memory disorder is one of the areas that posit difficulties to those children

The concept of comprehension

Comprehension is synonym for understanding in discussions that are intended to appear technical and scientific. In such contexts the word frequently doesn't appear alone, but in such combination as comprehension skills or the comprehension process, even by people who would never use expressions like understanding skills or the understanding process. It means that comprehension may be regarded as relating aspects of the word around us- including what we read, to the knowledge. Reading comprehension is a product of complex interactions between the properties of the text and what readers bring to the reading situation. The readers must relevant their knowledge, word decoding ability, text-based and situation model-based differencing skills, competency with a variety of reading strategies, metacognitive skills, and so on. Reading comprehension is a process in which the reader has to decide linguistic symbol and reconstruct and reconstruct them up to a meaningful whole as intended by the writer. (Smith 2014).

According to Mahapatra & Sabat (2016), reading comprehension is an intentional, active, interactive process that occurs before, during and after a person reads a particular piece of writing. Reading comprehension is one of the pillars of the act of reading. While reading a text, a person engages in a complex array of cognitive processes. He or she simultaneously uses his or her awareness and understanding of phonemes, phonics (connections between letters and sounds and the relationship between sounds, letters and words) and the ability to comprehend or construct meaning from the text. All models of comprehension recognize the need for readers to build up a mental representation of text, a process that requires integration across a range of sources of information, from lexical features through to knowledge concerning events in the world.

Tompkins (2011) Conceptualized Comprehension as a creative, multifaceted, process which depend on four language skills, i.e., phonology (speech sound), syntax (arrangement of words in given sentences), semantics (meaning of words and phrases in a language) and pragmatics (how context contribute to meaning). Proficient reading depends on the ability to recognize words quickly and effortlessly. It is also determined by an individual's cognitive development, which is the construction of thought processes. Some people learn through education or instruction and others through direct experiences. There are specific traits that determine how successfully an individual will comprehend text, including prior knowledge about the subject, well developed language, and the ability to make inferences. Moreover, it is the ability to be self-correcting to solve comprehension problems as they arise.

Levels of Comprehension

Smith (2005) provided four 4 levels of comprehension:

Literal comprehension

This is the most basic level of understanding, involving a grasp of the factual information presented in the text. Literal comprehension depends upon sub-skills such as understanding, recognition of main idea,

grasp of sequence and order of detail or events. This level greatly depends upon the learner's own previous knowledge and experience. Even literal comprehension and recall will be difficult if concepts being presented are completely new to the reader.

Inferential comprehension

This level of comprehension involves the reader in going beyond what is actually presented in the text, and reading between the lines to predict and draw tentative conclusion. Sub-skills at this level includes interpreting outcomes, making generalization, reviewing cause and effect when these are not stated, and discovering real or possible relationships. Some reading experts prefer to call this "interpretive level" believing that the skills involved cover more than prediction and inference.

Critical reading comprehension

This level involves critical judgment of the quality, value, accuracy and truthfulness of what is read, or detecting bias or overstatement. Critical requires a personal (and sometimes emotional) response from the reader.

Creative reading

At this level of reading comprehension, the reader goes beyond the massage of the text to generate new ideas or develop new insight triggered by the reading and related to the theme or topic but not explicit in the text.

On the above comprehension levels, Westwood (2009) argued that most comprehension in classrooms rarely demand response beyond the literal level (recall of facts). He suggested that this level is the most important since it is basic to the other three levels, but a curriculum that set out to develop comprehension skills in children should include other more challenging questions that demand thinking at the interpretive, critical and creative level

Types of reading comprehension

In a comprehension task, there are various reasoning and information processing skills that are required by the reader to construct meaning from what they read. The types of reasoning according to how readers have to activate their background knowledge to construct the meaning are the categories of comprehension according to (Voughan &Boss 2009). The types of comprehension according to this model are:

1. Textually explicit comprehension: in this type of comprehension, information is derived directly from the text with minimal impute from the readers' background knowledge
2. Textually implicit: here, the information is derived from the text, but readers are required to use their background knowledge to put together the ideas presented in the text.
3. Scripturally implicit: in this type, information is not stated in the text. Readers have to activate and use their background knowledge to obtain the information from the text.

Reading comprehension difficulties

Reading difficulties is a condition in which the person faces difficulty in reading, usually caused by an unknown factor or factors. The unknown factor is the disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive and process information. This disorder can make it problematic for a person to learn as quickly or in the same way as someone who is not affected by reading disability. Children with reading disability have trouble performing specific types of skills or completing tasks if left to figure things out by themselves or if taught in conventional ways. This condition prevails despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and socio-cultural opportunity. It results from cognitive disabilities which are frequently of constitutional origin. Children with reading disabilities face difficulties in reading comprehension because it affects their ability to understand the meaning of words and passages. Those children may struggle with other aspects of reading such as decoding, but comprehension is mostly their areas of difficulty. (Mahapatra, Iyoti & Sabat 2016).

The comprehension of text is a complex interaction between the reader and written language. In an effort to derive meaning from text, the reader employs a number of psychological processes such as perception, attention, memory, learning and motivation. Researchers have examined the relationship between reading

comprehension and psychological, cognitive and linguistic processing theories in an attempt to understand these interactions better. It is therefore believed that deficits in any of the processing ability can potentially lead to deficits in reading comprehension performance. The nature and origin of reading comprehension difficulties, however, are not yet clear.

Perfetti and Stafura, (2014) provide a framework for understanding the processes and skills involved in reading comprehension; deficits in comprehension could result from a variety of sources beyond decoding, including differences in sensitivity to story structure, inference making, comprehension monitoring, syntactic processing, verbal working memory, and oral language skills. However, it is not established whether comprehension deficit in children is related to language deficit. Although it is possible that the documented deficits in oral language account for the observed deficits in reading comprehension, they may only be a contributing factor (Spencer &Wagner 2018).

Comprehension problem do not only affect children with learning disabilities only, for example, the United states Department of Education (2013) reports that only 36% students of grade 4 and 38% of grade eight have comprehension scores above proficiency level. Furthermore, nearly 31% of 4th grades and nearly 24% of 8th graders continue to attain reading scores that are below the basic level in similar vein, the report estimated that 10-15% of eight year old children of normal performance on decoding measures yet, experience difficulties in reading comprehension. Although the estimate varies depending on the criteria used in identifying children with comprehension problem, a large scale-scale identification studies have shown that the prevalence of comprehension problem is mostly around 8% for children around age 9-14 years. In Nigeria, Onm and Eziekel (2019) cited a report of the federal ministry of Woman affairs and social development 2011in its baseline survey on pupils with disabilities to have reported58% of people with disabilities 31% of the total disabilities was dyslexia related including comprehension problems. Similarly, they reported a survey by the department of Special Education University of Calabar in Calabar metropolis educational zone that dyslexia related disabilities constituted 15%.

Causes of reading comprehension problems

Although, what specifically causes reading comprehension problem is not yet known, mostly comprehension problem is understood in relation to what underlines comprehension proficiency. For example, Perfeti (2005) made it clear that text comprehension is a complex task that involves many different cognitive skills and processes. Consequently there are many different aspects of the reading process where difficulties may arise which may, in turn, contribute to these children's poor comprehension. In fact, impairment at the word, sentence, and discourse, level plays a causal role in comprehension difficulties in children. In the same vein, Mahapatra, Iyoti, and Sabat (2016) reasoned that in order to identify causes of poor reading comprehension, children with poor comprehension should be compared with younger, normally developing children whose comprehension skills are at a similar level. If children with poor comprehension show impairments in a particular cognitive or linguistic skill relative to younger control children matched for comprehension age, that skill is unlikely to be a simple consequence of comprehension level. Comprehension problem is mostly explained in relation to the following models:

Simple view of reading

This model of the process of learning to read as proposed by Hoover and Gough (2009) explains Reading Comprehension as the product of Listening Comprehension and Decoding the model also offered that listening comprehension or the linguistic process involved in the comprehension of oral language strongly constrains the process of reading comprehension, that involves identification of word meanings, the representation of sentences, the drawing of inferences, and the identification of underlying text structure as well as the global gist of the text. Automated word recognition (word decoding) frees mental resources for closer consideration of the meaning of a text and thereby allows readers to employ reading as a tool for the acquisition of new information and knowledge (National Reading Panel, 2000). But besides this, listening comprehension turns out to be an important predictor for reading comprehension. Especially in younger and poor readers have more problems with listening comprehension than older and better

readers. In fact, listening comprehension and reading comprehension are so intricately inter-wined that progress on one variable more or less automatically promotes progress on the other (Perfetti 2005).

In fact, a critical evaluation of simple view of reading reveals that reading comprehension needs more than decoding and listening comprehension and more demanding texts need skilled reading. This involves making connections between different parts of the text, making connections with other texts, and making connections with what the learner already knows. It involves also drawing of inferences i.e., perceiving what is implied by the author as well as what is stated. Moreover skilled reading is an evolutionary process, i.e., as the reader makes his/ her way through a demanding text, comprehension of later passages makes room for reinterpretation of earlier ones. Skilled reading may also involve a consideration of the text's social context and an evaluation of its worth in terms of its practical, intellectual or imaginative contribution to our understanding of the world. Moreover, engagement in reading and commitment to it are both highly desirable qualities that are needed to be developed in children. (Mahapatra, Iyoti, & Sabat 2016).

Vocabulary and prior knowledge

According to this model, learning to read written texts is not the same as learning to understand written texts. Reading comprehension involves understanding the words, seeing relationships among words and concepts, organizing ideas, recognizing the author's purpose, evaluating the context, and making judgments. Many children who successfully learn to read in grade one or two are unable to understand books they need to read by grade three or four. One of the reasons for this is lack of adequate vocabulary and there is evidence suggesting that children with poor comprehension have relative weaknesses in expressive and receptive vocabulary, indicative of lack of knowledge at the word level.

Prior knowledge is also an important aspect to successful reading and studies have shown that lack of cultural familiarity with the subject matter has a greater impact on reading comprehension of a passage than the pre-teaching of vocabulary. The child's ability to recall information and make inferences is enhanced when they are familiar with the subject matter. Thus, moving beyond the meaning of individual words, domain knowledge is also considered crucial for comprehension. Appreciation of the domain that is being referred to in a text allows the reader to move from a word- or propositional-level representation of the text to one which integrates this knowledge with a broader body of background knowledge, thus allowing the reader to build a potentially inference-rich mental model of the situation or event. Prior knowledge about a text predicts comprehension of it. Clearly then, complete lack of knowledge will result in a complete lack of comprehension. Yet, this is not all about comprehension problems, because comprehension weaknesses are still apparent when care is taken to include vocabulary that is familiar, and when domain knowledge is to some extent controlled by teaching the children a novel knowledge base from which comprehension is subsequently assessed.

PASS process and reading achievement

PASS which means planning, attention, simultaneous and successive process. This model which is based on the neuropsychological studies of A. R. Luria in 1980, explains all intellectual operations in terms of four different but interrelated cognitive processes, namely, planning, attention, simultaneous and successive (PASS) processes which are carried out in different areas of the brain. The part of brain; occipital, temporal and parietal lobes of the cortex is responsible for carrying out the processes of coding that refers to storage and processing of information. Two different modes of coding, namely, simultaneous and successive commonly underlie all mental activities. Simultaneous processing involves organization of information into a quasi-spatial and relational manner, whereas, successive processing involves organization of information into a temporally based sequential manner. The prefrontal area of the brain which responsible for planning, involves activities like searching, goal setting, generation, selection and execution of plans or strategies, performance monitoring, evaluating the course of an action and decision making. Hence it determines the nature of coding. Planning is a higher order cognitive process and is considered to be the essence of human intelligence.

Strategies of teaching comprehension

Joderic and Naverrate (2019) reported that strategies of teaching comprehension have been grouped in to 4: the first wave: Single Strategy Instruction, Second Wave: Multiple Strategies Instruction, Third Wave: Transactional Strategies Instruction and The Fourth Wave: Dialogic Approaches.

First Wave: Single strategy instruction

This strategy focused on the effects of teaching students' individual comprehension strategies in comprehending a single text. These strategies were: identification of main idea, story theme identification, self-regulation, semantic mapping, use of expository text structure, and use of mental imagery. According to Willkinson (2011), evidence of this waves were mostly from the studies of children at risk of reading disabilities.

Second Wave: Multiple strategies instruction

This highlighted the effects of teaching students' multiple strategies in comprehending a particular reading material or materials which is not comprehended concurrently but as a single entity. For example, Reciprocal Teaching in which students is asked to apply strategies such as questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting. Collaborative Strategic Reading is another example and this is a mixture of reciprocal teaching and cooperative learning. Abuhasna (2015), opined this strategy aimed at targeting learners with disabilities and second language students. This employs four comprehension strategies: brainstorming and predicting, monitoring understanding, identifying main ideas, and generating questions and reviewing key ideas. Furthermore, modeling and guided practice in pair or small group are also utilized. This employs four comprehension strategies: brainstorming predicting, monitoring understanding, identifying main ideas, and generating questions and reviewing key ideas. Furthermore, modeling and guided practice in pair or small group are also utilized.

Third Wave Transactional strategies instruction

This stressed transactions between readers and text and among participants. Students are taught a set of strategies which includes predicting based on prior knowledge, generating questions, clarifying confusions, constructing mental images, relating text content to prior knowledge, and summarizing.

The fourth wave: dialogic approaches

This wave of reading researches which is labeled as "dialogic" comes as a response to the above limitations of reading strategies instruction, and the belief that comprehension was a more fluid, context-sensitive process that required a more dynamic, flexible approach to instruction.

Strategies for assessing reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is the most difficult to assess aspect of reading. Perhaps this is because understanding and interacting with the text occurs largely as thinking and cannot be observed by the teacher. The only way a teacher has to knowing whether and how a child understands text is by asking them to describe what they read or to ask them question about it (literal comprehension).

There are several ways of assessing comprehension depending on which component of the reading comprehension the teacher wishes to assess. According to Voughan and Boss (200), teacher has to consider several critical aspects of comprehension test before selecting one. What is the purpose of the test? Does the teacher want to screen, monitor, diagnose, or evaluate students? Second, what type of information about the students' comprehension is the teacher seeking? Does the teacher want to know whether they can recall what is in the text? Is the teacher interested in whether the students can tell the main ideas or make inference? Third, does the teacher require a long or short amount of time, is it difficult or easy to score, and will it provide the type of information that will inform instruction? Teachers can also assess students' comprehension by monitoring the students' fluency because fluency is another excellent predictor of reading comprehension. Another way to assess comprehension is story retelling. Here, the teacher asks the students to retell the story they have just read. Cloze procedure is also used in assessing reading comprehension where a passage is selected and each sixth or seventh word in the passage is deleted leaving a gap then the child fill in the gaps with the appropriate contextual words.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the student's ability to comprehend what is read is vital in making subsequent academic progress. The students need to be taught the appropriate reading comprehension skills, assessed properly so as the underlying comprehension difficulties is identified and adequate preparation is made to teach reading comprehension skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Literacy teachers should emphasis in their literacy programs on developing student's early reading comprehension skills
2. Teachers should set goals and work towards achieving them in teaching students comprehension strategies.
3. Research should aim at revealing the simpler ways in developing comprehension in students.

REFERENCES

Assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implication for reading instruction *NIH publication 00-4754* https//www. Interventioncentral.org

Bos, S. C. and Voughn, S. (2009). *Strategies for teaching students with Learning and Behavior problems: seventh edition.* USA: Pearson Education., Inc.

Hoover, W. & Gough,C (2009) A simple view of reading & writing: an *inter disciplinary journal* 2 *(12,) 17-28*

Joderic, C. & Navarrate (2019). Reading comprehension theories & strategies Toward an effective reading instruction. *Journal of education & practice 10*(1),32-38 https:www.iiste.org. Doi 110701761jp

Mahapatra, S. and Sabat, J. R. (2016). Comprehension difficulties in reading Disabled children. *I O S R Journal of humanities and social science* .21(9), 16-22. https//:*.iosrjournal.org*

National reading panel (2000). Teaching children to read; an evidence based *needs. Fifth edition*. Oxon: Rutledge 2 park square .

Onm, S. & Izekiel, U.F (2019). Prevalence of specific learning disabilities and Its management among pupils in Calabar educational zone cross rivers State. https://www.researchgate.net/publication32205

Perfetti, C. & Stafura, J. (2014). World Knowledge in theory of reading comp Rehension: A specific study reading https://www. Doi:1010888438201.827.687

Perfetti, C. (2005). *The science of reading: A hand book*. Malden MA Black well Progress (NAEP) datafile.https://www. National report Card.gov/science2011 summary.aspx *Readers* (3rd edition) Pearson Boston. research188 3 https://www. Rerarea.net

Smith, F. (2014) *Understanding reading* sixth edition Lawrence & AssociatesNew jersey US

Smith, J. A. & Read, S. (2005) Early literacy instruction. Upper saddle river Mj Marri/-printice Hall U.K

Spencer, M., & Wagner, R.K. (2018). Comprehension problem of children with poor reading adequate decoding: A meta-analysis Review of educational

Tomkins, G. E. (2011). *Literacy in the early grades: A successful start for pre k-4* Uk

United States department of education (2013). National assessment of educational

Westwood, P. (2009). *commonsense methods for children with special education*

Willkinson, I, A. (2011). *Hand book of reading research.* Rutledge London UK