



	59,567	55.2	15,749
Unemployed	27,495	60.2	8,116
Not Employed or Seeking Work			

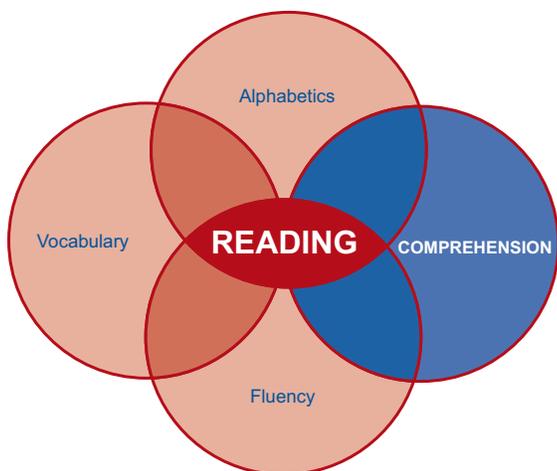
Reading Comprehension: Research and Teaching Strategies

This research digest on reading comprehension is one of a series that reviews four components of reading: alphabetic, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The digest contains a discussion of current research, provides references, and suggest strategies for teaching adults to improve their reading comprehension.

Comprehension Defined

Comprehension is the end goal of reading, whether an individual reads for pleasure, to learn, or to locate information. It is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (Snow, 2002). Individuals construct meaning from text as they read, absorbing new information and comparing it to their pre-existing knowledge. Readers are able to comprehend text only if the other key components of reading—alphabetic, fluency, and vocabulary—are in place (Curtis & Bercovitz, 2004). While reading, an individual decodes words (alphabetic), associates the words with meanings stored in memory (vocabulary), and processes the phrases and sentences rapidly enough (fluency) that meaning is not forgotten during the reading process (Kruidenier, 2002b).

The Four Components of Reading



The Need for Comprehension Instruction

Two national surveys of adult literacy in the United States, the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993) and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (Kutner, Greenberg, & Baer, 2005), indicate that millions of Americans have difficulty reading complex text. Many adult learners enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) classes have poor functional literacy comprehension. Adult learners may be able to perform daily comprehension tasks, such as locating a piece of information in a simple text, but be unable to integrate or synthesize information from longer or more complicated texts (Kruidenier, 2002b).

In some cases, learners are unable to comprehend texts because they need additional background knowledge or vocabulary, but many learners struggle with comprehension because they have not yet developed a repertoire of strategies for monitoring and supporting their comprehension (Curtis & Longo, 1997). Some learners view reading solely as decoding and do not actively consider comprehension (Gambrel & Heathington, 1981). Other readers struggle with comprehension because they are unfamiliar with various types of texts, such as poems, narratives, or expository texts. Not surprisingly, reading a wide variety of text types is associated with high scores on the National Adult Literacy Survey (Smith, 1996).

Studies show that explicitly teaching comprehension in combination with other reading components can improve student comprehension (Kruidenier, 2002b). Some researchers suggest that the way skills are currently taught may be too narrowly focused on learners' functional levels or on extracting information, at the expense of engaging learners in actively constructing meaning (Weiner, 2006).

Assessment of Comprehension

To find the correct reading level for learners, programs should assess learners as soon as they enter the reading program. Learners will not make gains in reading if they are assigned materials that are at the wrong reading level. Curtis and Bercovitz (2004) explain that "if the material is too difficult, learners will expend all their efforts decoding and won't be able to think about comprehension." Learners also benefit from the specific information assessment gives them about their strengths and weaknesses in reading. Equipped with a profile of

their reading abilities, they can track their own progress, use the information for self-evaluation, and note their personal growth (Kruidenier, 2002a).

One type of assessment cannot fully capture the range and depth of a learner's comprehension skills. Programs often assess learner comprehension using silent reading tests in which learners read passages and answer multiple-choice questions. There is no consensus on the validity of these standardized tests (e.g., the Test of Adult Basic Education [TABE] Reading Comprehension) because student performance can vary greatly on multiple administrations of the same test (Perin & Greenberg, 1993; Venezky, Bristow, & Sabatini, 1994).

For a more complete picture of learners' comprehension skills, learners should be assessed orally as well as with written instruments. *Retelling* is one form of easily administered oral assessment. After silently reading a passage at a level that the learner can easily decode, the learner explains to the teacher what he or she has just read. Teachers look for accuracy, completeness, and organization in the retelling.

Another way to assess learners' comprehension skills is to conduct informal reading inventories (IRIs) (McShane, 2005). IRIs are administered by asking students to read passages and orally respond to questions posed by the teacher. Using this format, teachers can address issues related both to the text (e.g., asking about specific items in the passage) and to the reader's interpretation of the text (e.g., asking about the implications of the passage).

Learning and Teaching Comprehension

Instruction begins with assessment. To improve comprehension skills, learners must read from texts that are at the appropriate level of difficulty for them. Once the teacher has determined the appropriate level of reading materials for the learner, explicit instruction is the next step.

According to Kruidenier (2002b), explicit instruction to support the development of reading comprehension skills can be effective. In particular, learners and teachers are advised to work with materials that are adult-oriented and contextually relevant (Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1997). Context is important not only because it helps maintain student interest, but because skills learned in one context or in the abstract do not easily transfer to other contexts (Smith, 1996; Sticht, 1988). For example, a learner whose goal is to comprehend the correspondence from her child's school is better served by reading the actual school flyers than reading commercially prepared textbooks. Likewise, job-specific instruction in the workplace can lead to better comprehension of work related material (Sticht, 1997).

Teachers can focus on specific elements of texts to help learners identify patterns, which helps build comprehension. (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001). For example, learners benefit from observing how expository texts typically present an idea, supporting evidence, and a conclusion. Learners may need guidance in examining the purpose and nature of features such as timelines, charts, graphs, and captions or conventions such as headings, subheadings, italics, bold font, and transition words, such as *before*, *after*, and *therefore*.

Rich and Shepard (1993) examined the impact of teaching learners how to engage in self-questioning and summarizing. Both of these strategies can be helpful for learners when they engage in independent reading beyond the classroom. Learners who were taught both strategies made greater progress than those taught only one strategy, and self-questioning appeared to have a greater impact than summarizing alone. There is a caution about using summarizing with English language learners because learners may not have the background knowledge or schema necessary to understand the text (Burt, Peyton, & Duzer, 2005). Teachers should wait to introduce the summarizing strategy until they are sure the English language learners understand the text they are reading (Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996).

Teaching Strategies

Directed reading-thinking activity

The teacher directs learners to look at a text's title and other information in the text (e.g., photos) and then asks learners to predict the content of the text. For example, if the headline of an adult literacy newspaper article is *Home Loan Rates Hit New Low*, learners can predict that article will contain information on past and current loan rates as well as statements from financial experts on why the rates have changed. After the pre-reading activity, learners read to an agreed-on stopping point, review their predictions, and make new ones. Learners can make their predictions orally, in writing, or graphically. Teachers should model the approach before having learners do the activity independently.

Graphic and semantic organizers

Using charts with a variety of structures (e.g., boxes, circles, arrows), teachers help learners create visual representations of the ideas and relationships in a text.

Highlighting

Teachers model using different colors of highlighters to mark different aspects of the text. For example, teachers and learners highlight key sentences, vocabulary words, and plot turning points. Highlighters should be used to consciously mark parts of the text rather than as a rote mechanical task. Students may overuse highlighting, so teachers are advised to model and encourage its strategic use.

Comprehension Tasks

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate prior knowledge • Make predictions • Ask questions • Answer questions • Monitor comprehension • Adapt reading rate • Reread • Use text aids • Use context clues • Recall • Identify main ideas • Identify supporting details • Relate reading to background knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retell • Summarize • Compare and contrast • Determine cause and effect • Infer • Draw conclusions • Analyze • Evaluate • Recognize story structure • Recognize non-fiction text structure • Create graphic organizer
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From Curtis and Bercovitz, (2004, p. VI-21).

Using Imagination

Teachers work with learners to model how to use imagination when reading. While reading a text aloud, the instructor stops and asks learners to imagine the scene being described. For example, when reading a passage about working in a coalmine, the teacher asks questions such as, *What does the tunnel look like? What kind of light is there in the tunnel? How does the tunnel smell? What does the machinery sound like?*

K-W-L Activity

Learners examine what they **Know**, what they **Want** to know, and what they **Learned** while reading. The activity helps learners improve their ability to ask and answer questions. Before reading the text, learners fill in a chart with columns for each letter. Completing the chart activates their prior knowledge. In the first column, they answer the question *What do I know about this topic?* In the second column, they focus their attention by responding to the question *What do I want to know about this topic?* After reading the text, learners respond to the question *What did I learn while reading this text?* In the last step, they brainstorm new questions the text might have raised.

K-W-R-L Activity

Learners examine what they **Know**, what they **Want** to know, what **Resources** are available to extend their knowledge, and how they will show what they have **Learned**. The first two questions are the same as the above K-W-L activity. In this variation, however, learners identify a variety of texts that address their topic by asking themselves *What resources are available?* The final question encourages them to demonstrate independent use of texts. They respond to, *How will I show what I have learned?*

Discussion

Adult learners have adult knowledge, concerns, and interests, which they enjoy discussing. Using a reading passage of high interest at an appropriate readability level and a copy of *Bloom's Taxonomy*, teachers can create questions to generate discussion and stimulate higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation.

Professional Development

Workshops

CALPRO offers two 4-hour *Research-Based Adult Reading Instruction* workshops in which adult educators examine the definitions and research basis of the four components of reading and practice instructional and assessment strategies for each component. In *Session 1*, participants explore alphabets and fluency, and in *Session 2*, vocabulary and comprehension. For workshop information, visit the CALPRO Web site, www.calpro-online.org, and click on the "calendar," or contact your local CALPRO Professional Development Center.

Study Circles

CALPRO promotes site-based professional development on adult reading instruction by training teachers to facilitate study circles at their agencies. Study circles offer teachers an opportunity to develop their knowledge base in reading instruction as they read about, discuss, and explore the latest research on reading. For information on study circle facilitator training, visit the CALPRO Web site or call 800-427-1422, toll-free in California.

Additional Resources on Reading Comprehension

The Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS)
www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/arcs.htm

Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers
www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/adult.html

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
www.ncsall.net

National Institute for Literacy
www.nifl.gov

Reading and Adult English Language Learners:
 A Review of the Research
www.cal.org/caela/research/raell.pdf

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