Six Reading Comprehension Myths

Among other things, we now know that young readers can make inferences from what they read, that looking back when reading increases understanding, and that even good readers need help developing study skills.

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The language arts knowledge explosion of the 1970s and early 1980s has provided important insights about reading comprehension, but it has not affected teaching methods as much as it should. Unfortunately, the following myths about reading comprehension are still being perpetuated.

Myth 1. Poor readers should master literal comprehension before they are challenged to read inferentially.

Teachers tend to concentrate less on inferential comprehension with problem readers. However, Hansen and Hubbard (1984) found that poor readers in the 4th grade could learn to draw inferences from text when they were taught an inferential thinking approach, given many opportunities to practice thinking inferentially, and encouraged to discuss how they drew inferences.

This instruction included three types of discussion. The first type was a *metacognitive* discussion, conducted as a prereading activity. As students talked about their new reading approach, their awareness of the underlying principles of comprehension and how they learn increased. Students had opportunities to compare their personal experiences with those that occurred in the story they were assigned to read.

In *strategy* discussions, another prereading activity, students made inferences by connecting old and new information—that is, by using what they already knew to help them understand concepts, first introduced by the teacher, that they would subsequently read in the story. During each discussion, "they modeled the inferential process three times—three important concepts were preselected from each story and a pair of questions was generated for each concept" (Hansen and Hubbard, 1984, p. 588).

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After reading the story, the students were able to respond to *inferential questions* by integrating some of their prior knowledge with information in the story. For instance, students answered such inferential questions as, "Why do you think a half-hitch knot might be useful in other situations?" "Why do you suppose the balloon went down so fast?" "Why are fire engines called to accidents?" Readers shared their thoughts about the story, which gave them a new understanding of the text.

Students also realized that reading comprehension is more than simply retrieving facts and details. As they read, these readers "compared, extended, interpreted, and actively created messages" (Hansen and Hubbard, 1984, p. 589). In fact, they could no longer be considered "poor" readers.

Myth 2. Primary school children are not ready to read inferentially.

Related to the previous myth is the misconception that young children are unable to deal with reading activities beyond the basics. Interestingly, primary school children usually draw spontaneous inferences concerning world situations from their play encounters and from television and listening activities. Yet they tend not to make spontaneous inferences from what they read. The research findings of Anderson and Shifrin (1980), Dreher (1981), and Paris and Lindauer (1976) also suggest that children are able to instantiate—use context to refine their understandings of what words represent—but that they cannot do so automatically. Hansen (1981)

found that pre- and postreading discussions can promote spontaneous inferencing if the children visualize the relationship between their prior knowledge and inferences related to text and if they engage in substantial practice answering inferential questions.

Teachers can guide young readers to make inferences by providing them with a variety of activities, such as drawing or finding pictures that enrich the context of sentences and passages. Another approach is motivating students to act out sentences selected from a story—dramatizing the sense of particular words as used in the context of the sentences.

A similar activity is a modified version of the game charades, using sentences from a story children are about to read or have already read. This variation of the game helps young readers gain a sense of spontaneous inference making through motions and sounds, as well as through words and voice inflections.[1]

Hansen (1981) stresses the importance of posing inferential questions as a postreading activity, since they help young readers to think beyond the literal level of understanding. This important outcome can become part of students' natural thinking processes if the inferential questions and class discussions are used continuously.[2]

Myth 3. Questions to aid comprehension must come from the teacher or the textbook.

Although teacher-generated inferential questions can improve students' understanding of text, questions created by students also increase comprehension. Andre and Anderson (1978–79) found that high school students can be taught to develop questions related to the main points in text and, consequently, to facilitate comprehension of the reading material. Low and middle ability learners seemed to gain more benefits from the self-questioning instruction than did high verbal ability students.

According to the researchers, students with verbal facility were already aware of how to devise good comprehension questions, while those who did not possess such facility demonstrated less adequate study behaviors.

Thus, low and middle ability learners improved as readers probably because they used an approach that was more effective than the method they used previously. One reason for the effectiveness of the main idea self-questioning approach is reflected in cognitive and metacognitive characteristics. For example,

. . . self-generation of questions may be an effective reading strategy because the student is forced to (a) pause frequently, (b) deal with an "understanding question," (c) determine whether or not comprehension has occurred, and (d) decide what strategic action should be taken (Andre and Anderson, 1978–79, p. 620).

Another study concerning self-questioning was conducted by Singer and Donlan (1982). To comprehend complex short stories, 11th grade students were taught a problem-solving schema, which included the structure of short stories and related *schema-general questions*. They also learned to use the schema-general questions to generate specific questions about the story. For example, the teacher posed general questions such as, "What is the leading character trying to accomplish in the story?" and students generated specific questions such as, "Will the barber kill the officer with the razor?" Students then read the material while concentrating on answering their own questions. The results showed that students who learned self-questioning strategies significantly improved their understanding of complex short stories.

Myth 4. Real comprehension is a matter of finding the author's exact meaning.

Even experienced reviewers interpret a writer's work differently. This diversity of interpretation is usually

the result of each reviewer bringing to the written work a unique background of cognitive and affective experiences. Yet some teachers persist in structuring reading activities as if they are separate from students' backgrounds. Such an approach suggests to students that their experiences have dubious value for their reading and have little to do with understanding text.

Interestingly, as early as 1932, Bartlett discussed the importance of the reader's background in the context of intellectual factors as well as personal feelings, experiences, and awareness. Rosenblatt (1978) also elaborated on the role of individuals' experiences in comprehending text. How can teachers stimulate individual responses to text that meet personal needs but do not represent shallow understandings? Petrosky (1982) recommends linking reading and writing because the "putting together" of meaning as individuals read is similar to the "putting together" of thoughts as they write. To set useful standards for interpretation, Petrosky suggests using Bleich's (1978) response heuristic, which helps learners write about their comprehension of text as they blend factors involved in their personality and in the world as they understand it. With such a foundation, students can engage in critical discussions that lead to an analysis of their readings and of the process that informs them (Bartholomae and Petrosky, 1981).

Petrosky (1982) also provides examples of varied responses to literature. Poor responses are sketchy, unfocused, and narrow; students fail to apply their personal knowledge to explanations and descriptions—if they explain or describe at all. Conversely, good responses include specific retellings of the text; students make explicit connections between their personal

Figure 1. Six Reading Comprehension Myths and Preventive/Corrective Strategies.

Myth	Manifestation of Myth	Preventive/Corrective Strategies
1. Poor readers need a solid foundation in literal comprehension before they are able to read inferentially.	Teachers stress literal comprehension activities.	Guide students to construct meaning through: • Metacognitive discussions • Strategy discussions. • Post-reading discussions.
2. Young children are unable to read inferentially.	Teachers stress literal comprehension activities.	Motivate students to make inferences by: • Drawing or finding pictures that enrich the meaning of text. • Acting out sentences from a story. • Playing a variation of charades. • Engaging in prereading discussions that help children weave new information into old information. • Engaging in postreading discussions that highlight inferential questions.
3. Questions to aid comprehension must come from the teacher or textbook.	Teachers expect students to answer, but not ask, questions.	Help students generate their own questions by: • Teaching them self-questioning strategies to help them find the main points in text. • Teaching them schema-general questions related to the structure of complex short stories and guiding them to use these generalized questions to create story-specific questions.
4. Real understanding of the text comes from finding the author's precise meaning.	Teachers direct activities to interpretation of author's message.	Guide students to believe that their experiences bring value to their reading and can enhance their comprehension through: • Relating what they read to their own attitudes, perceptions, and feelings (when reading aesthetic literature). • Using their experiences and purpose in reading to affect their understanding (when reading nonaesthetic material). • Discussing the difficulty of distinguishing between aesthetic and nonaesthetic material due to varied purposes for reading. • Linking reading and writing while incorporating a response heuristic.
5. Looking back during reading lessens comprehension.	Teachers correct (or penalize) students for looking back.	Encourage students to use lookback strategies to overcome blocks to comprehension by: • Reading a passage and answering subsequent questions, some of which require lookbacks. • Using monitoring and resolving strategies when they encounter difficulty in comprehending, both during instructional activities and independent reading.
6. Good readers do not need guidance in effective reading and studying of textbook chapters.	Teachers provide minimal instruction in reading/studying techniques.	Provide systematic instruction in study methods, such as: • SQ3R (Robinson, 1962) • PQ4R (Thomas and Robinson, 1977; Sanacore, 1982) • Making and taking notes • Transferring study techniques to resources being used. Design textbook-related tests to match the structure of textbook chapters.

"... teachers should *encourage* students to look back while reading."

experiences and their interpretations of the text, and they make generalizations from discussions. To elicit good responses, teachers need to read and write with their students, guiding them toward the realization that comprehending text is an act of composition (Sanacore, 1983).

Linking reading and writing activities, encouraging self-questioning strategies, and generating other active approaches teach students that they have valuable, personal insights that can enrich their understanding of text. They also become increasingly aware that comprehension involves constructing and reconstructing meaning rather than seeking a prescribed message.

Myth 5. Looking back during reading is negative behavior that will result in loss of comprehension.

Some individual diagnostic instruments (both standardized and informal) still penalize students for looking back while reading, because such behavior is considered to be a regression that lessens comprehension. Instructional activities for improving rate of comprehension have also contributed to this belief. In fact, mechanically controlled reading devices for increasing reading rate actually prevent readers from looking back. These diagnostic and instructional practices have generated misconceptions that do not consider the constructive aspects of looking back while reading.

Not only does looking back help students comprehend what they read, but they can use it as a strategy to help them find blocks to comprehension. Looking back thus becomes a prerequisite for resolving any loss of understanding.

Garner and Reis (1981) studied the effects of spontaneous lookbacks on eliminating comprehension blocks. Students read a three-paragraph narrative passage with questions following each paragraph. To answer certain questions, the students had to look back and locate information in the passage. The researchers found that poor comprehenders generally did not monitor their reading and did not spontaneously use lookbacks. Sixth and 7th grade good comprehenders monitored but mostly did not look back spontaneously, while 8th grade good comprehenders monitored *and* looked back. Good comprehenders, therefore, noticed a comprehension block, but only the oldest of these readers recognized that something could be done about the comprehension failure and acted to overcome it.

The results of this study have important implications for readers. All students should be encouraged to look back if necessary when they meet obstacles in comprehending—both in the classroom and in independent reading (Sanacore, 1984). They should be taught to

(1) recognize that a failure has occurred, (2) decide whether or not to do something about the failure at that time, and (3) engage (conditional upon step two) in fixup activities which supply the prerequisite information (Alessi and others, 1979, p. 199).

Myth 6. Students with adequate reading skills automatically read and study textbook chapters effectively.

Adams and others (1982) conducted a study of 5th graders' use of study skills. These students possessed adequate decoding skills for reading a social studies textbook, but they had not acquired effective study skills. Three instructional groups of 15 students each were asked to read passages ranging from 600 to 800 words taken from a textbook not used by the students. Over a ten-week period, the treatment group received systematic instruction in a method based on Francis P. Robinson's (1962) SQ3R study technique, which engages students in five steps: survey, question, read, recite, and review.[3] The other two groups engaged in independent study of the same passages—one group receiving teacher feedback, and the other no instruction at all.

An analysis of the results indicated that on short-answer tests, the treatment group performed significantly better than the other two groups. No significant difference was observed between the two independent study groups.

These findings indicate that students possessing adequate reading skills probably still need direct guidance in reading and studying textbook chapters. Especially needed is continuous support in transferring SQ3R (or another pertinent variation) to the actual materials being used. If learners apply such a method and then do well on textbook-related tests, they are more likely to use the technique frequently (Sanacore, 1982).

These six myths are dangerous because they lead to inadequate reading instruction, which in turn produces poor readers. Supervisors and administrators need to make sure teachers' practices are in accord with valid research findings.□

[1]Hansen (1981) also suggests prereading activities that show children how to understand information by "weaving" it into old information. Because Hansen's weaving metaphor is complicated and too lengthy to explain here, I urge readers to refer directly to her 1981 *Reading Research Quarterly* article.

[2]A more comprehensive description of these inferential activities (Sanacore, 1982) is available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Joseph Sanacore, District Office, Hauppauge School District, Long Island, NY 11788.

[3]A variation of this study technique, PQ4R, was developed by H. Alan Robinson, who included six steps: preview, question, read, reflect, recite, review (Thomas and Robinson, 1977).

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