



Is comprehension even teachable?

Reach All Readers Podcast #245

Today we're tackling an important question: Do you actually need to teach comprehension? Or does it just happen naturally once kids can decode?

Today I'm breaking down what comprehension is, how it fits into the science of reading, and why—despite what you might assume—comprehension instruction is absolutely essential.

So what is comprehension? To answer that, I want to start by clearing up a common misconception—that comprehension is just another reading skill.

You may be familiar with the Big Five—these are the five key factors in learning to read identified by the National Reading Panel. They're often represented as the five pillars of reading instruction. It's true that these elements, including others like oral language and written expression, should be present in every reading program, but the common five pillars graphic presents all five areas—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension—as if they're fundamentally the same in complexity. It gives the false impression that comprehension can be taught in the same way that we teach phonemic awareness and phonics. But that's not accurate.

Think about it this way: if you learn to swim, you can swim in a backyard swimming pool or an Olympic-sized pool, a lake, or even the ocean. But comprehension doesn't work like that. Comprehension isn't a single thing you can teach and then apply across different reading situations. It's far more complex than that. How well you comprehend depends on what you're reading and why you're reading it, your background knowledge about the topic, your purpose for reading, the complexity of the text—all of these factors come into play.

To understand what comprehension actually involves, we need to look at researcher Walter Kintsch's model, which shows us that there are actually three levels of text representation.

The first level is the surface level. This is simply being able to read and pronounce the words on the page—the exact wording and syntax of the text.

The second level is the textbase. This is where you understand the structure of the text and how the ideas relate to one another. You're making connections between ideas in the text and understanding what's explicitly stated.

But deep comprehension requires a third level called the situation model or mental model. This is what you take away from the text when you're done reading. It's shaped by your background knowledge, your experiences, everything you bring to the text. The situation model goes beyond what's explicitly on the page, it's your mental representation of the situation the text describes.

This complexity is exactly why researchers Jane Oakhill and Kate Cain say, "Reading is a complex task, which requires the orchestration of many different cognitive skills and abilities."

As I wrote in my book *Reach All Readers*, "Like it or not, comprehension is a complex beast."

I've been asked, where does comprehension fit into the science of reading? As a reminder, which you probably know, the science of reading is simply the body of research about how we learn to read and how to teach it. But one way to answer this question is to look at the Simple View of Reading, which is a theory proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986 that has been supported by research many times over. That is that word recognition times language comprehension equals reading comprehension.

reading and language comprehension.

So for successful reading comprehension to occur, these two skills must work together.

These components contribute differently to overall reading depending on where students are developmentally.

So for beginning readers, variation in reading ability is usually connected to word reading—because the texts they're reading are so simple. The language comprehension they need has already developed through their spoken language.

But as the texts they read get more complex, language comprehension actually becomes more important than word recognition for reading comprehension.

Now, if you're thinking, "I teach kindergarten—this isn't important for me," think again. Because the teaching strategies I'll be discussing in future episodes also apply when students are listening to text read aloud.

So let's review what we've covered so far. We've talked about how comprehension isn't a single skill—it's complex and depends on what you're reading and why. We looked at Kintsch's three levels of text representation, from simply reading the words on the page all the way to building that deeper mental model. And we've seen that according to the Simple View of Reading, both word reading and language comprehension are necessary for reading comprehension.

Let's move on to the question I proposed at the beginning of this episode: Do you actually need to teach comprehension? Or does it happen naturally once kids can decode?

Here's the thing: word recognition is necessary, but not sufficient, for comprehension.

You absolutely CAN have students who read words accurately and fluently but still struggle to comprehend what they're reading.

In fact, I'm guessing you've had the same experience as an adult. I'm currently working my way through a very dense book about statistics for my PhD, and I don't enjoy it. There have been weeks where I did the assigned reading and it went way over my head. It meant nothing to me. Even though I could decode all the words, the topic was far out of my reach.

Let's look at why written text is harder to comprehend than spoken language.

Here are four reasons, based on research from Oakhill, Cain, and Elbro in their book, *Understanding and Teaching Reading Comprehension*.

One reason that written language is harder to comprehend than spoken language is you can't interact with a text the way you can with a speaker. When someone's talking to you and you don't understand, you can say, "Wait, what do you mean? Can you explain that again?" You can't do that with written text.

Second, written language lacks the nuances of spoken language—things like pauses, emphasis, tone of voice, and facial expressions. All those cues that help you understand meaning just aren't there.

Third, written language includes more complex sentence structures. For example, you might read something like this from my textbook, "If you want to construct confidence intervals around those parameters, or compute significance tests relating to those parameters, then assumption of normality matters in small samples, but because of the central limit theorem we don't really need to worry about this assumption in larger samples." That kind of complex sentence structure is much more challenging to process than how we typically speak.

Fourth, when you're speaking with someone face-to-face, you share the same context, the here and the now. But a writer and reader don't share that context. Plus, when we speak, we naturally revise and

clarify as we go, making language less dense. Written language is more dense, there's more information packed into each word.

The bottom line is that reading text is more complicated than understanding oral communication.

So what does good comprehension actually involve? Some of this happens unconsciously as you read, but let me break it down.

You need to know the meanings of individual words.

You need to understand sentence structure and syntax. Those are the grammatical rules that determine how words are arranged. Text connectives matter too, words like "however," "although," "because," or "in contrast" signal important relationships between ideas. Have you ever stopped reading and gone back because something didn't quite click or make sense? When I do that, I often find it's because I jumped over a connective.

For example, imagine you're reading a book about reading comprehension and you come across this sentence, "While explicit vocabulary instruction is beneficial, incidental word learning through wide reading contributes significantly to vocabulary growth." If you skip over that "while," you might miss the contrast being set up between the two complementary approaches.

As you read, you may need to compare what's in the text to what you already know, and sometimes you'll need to revise your prior knowledge or resolve conflicts between what you thought and what the text says.

This was certainly my experience reading Emily Hanford's "At a Loss for Words" a number of years ago. What I thought was true about how children learn to read was directly challenged in the article. I had to read it multiple times before I could reconcile what I'd believed with what the evidence actually showed.

And here's the detective work, you have to make inferences to fill in the gaps between what's explicitly stated and what isn't.

You also need to monitor your comprehension, notice when you're getting off track, and know what to do about it.

If you want to dive deeper into this topic, you're invited to register for my workshop, "Building Comprehension from the Ground Up." In that training, we'll bust common myths related to reading comprehension, explore what research truly says about teaching comprehension, and you'll also get practical tips and tools you can use right away. You can register for that workshop using the link below this episode.

The answer is clear. No, comprehension does not occur naturally even when word recognition is strong. That's because comprehension is much more than a single skill. There are specific things we can do to improve comprehension, and we'll explore what those things are in future episodes.

Thanks so much for listening, and I'll talk to you next time!