

## Promoting Children's Comprehension

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

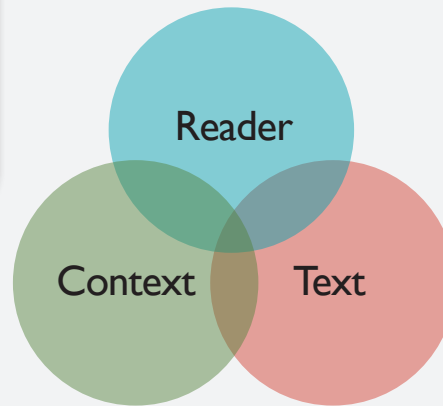
Children develop concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:

- Engagement
- Purpose, genre and voice
- Comprehension

### Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language (Rand Reading Study Group, 2002). **Extracting meaning** simply means understanding what an author has stated, explicitly or implicitly. **Constructing meaning** means interpreting what an author has said by bringing the learner's capacities, abilities, knowledge and experience to bear on what he/she is reading.

Three key elements interact in the construction of meaning:



Comprehension lies at the heart of all reading and therefore plays a central role in a balanced and integrated approach to literacy instruction.

### Key Findings From Research

In their 2010 report, *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade*, the IES issued 5 key recommendations:

1. Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies.
2. Teach students to identify and use the text's organisational structure to comprehend, learn and remember content.
3. Guide students through focused, high-quality discussion on the meaning of the text.
4. Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development.
5. Establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehension.

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Research clearly indicates that comprehension can and should occur from the earliest years. Children need to be both code breakers and meaning makers, utilising both word-level and text-level skills in the construction of meaning.

Shanahan et al. (2010) identify six areas of knowledge and skill considered to be crucial in the development of comprehension among young readers, namely:

- word-level skills
- vocabulary knowledge and oral language skills
- broad conceptual knowledge
- knowledge and abilities required specifically to comprehend a text
- thinking and reasoning skills
- motivation to understand and work towards goals.

Effective comprehension instruction must draw on and develop children's concepts, dispositions and skills in each of the above areas.

### Effective Comprehension Instruction

Good readers are strategic, active and purposeful, and approach a text with clear goals, whether they are reading for pleasure or information. While some children develop these characteristics instinctively, most children require developmentally appropriate instruction in using comprehension strategies.

However, many younger and less experienced readers are unable to detect the teacher's subtle cues and need direct instruction of the cognitive processes a successful reader employs. Such explicit instruction occurs through a process of the teacher thinking aloud, making the implicit thinking process explicit for pupils.



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### Comprehension Instruction: A Whole School Approach

Whole-school planning for comprehension begins in stage 1 with a spiral approach to strategy instruction. Breadth and depth are added as children progress through stages 2, 3 and 4. This approach is outlined below:

#### Junior Infants

- Prediction
- Making Connections
- Visualisation

#### Senior Infants

- As Above
- **Questioning**

#### First and Second Class

- As Above
- **Monitoring Comprehension: Declunking and Seeking Clarification**
- **Determining Importance**
- **Inference**



### Guidelines for Comprehension Strategy Instruction

High-quality children’s literature which engages children is one key to successful comprehension instruction. Using high-quality children’s literature affords children the opportunity to witness authentic strategy use, to understand the purpose for applying the strategy and to appreciate strategic reading.

Picture books are recommended for all classes when introducing and supporting new strategies. Other genres can be introduced as pupils grow in experience and confidence.

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### Introducing a New Strategy

#### Prior to Instruction

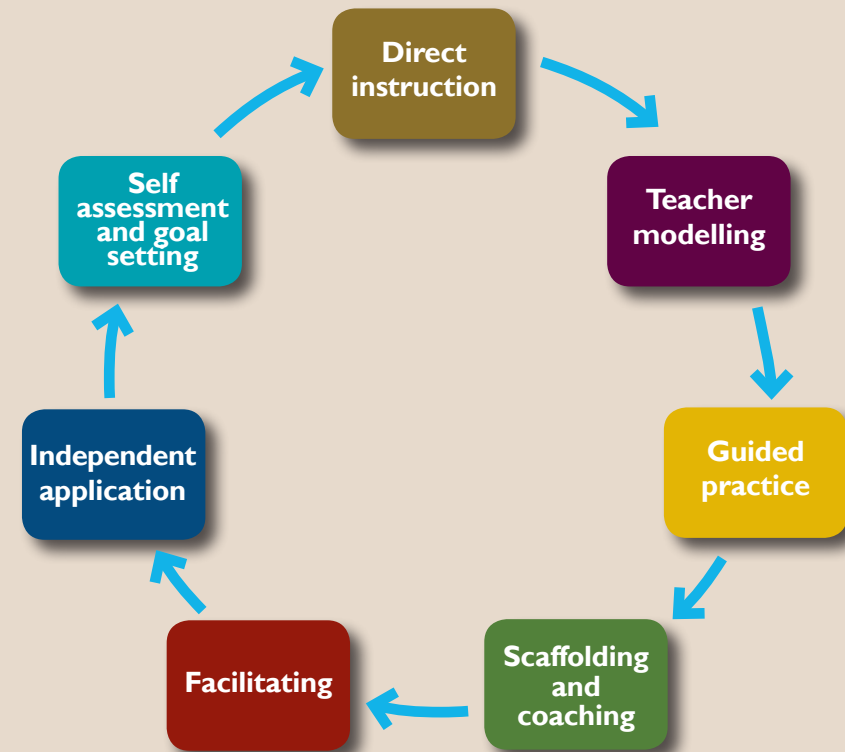
- Select an appropriate text that will allow multiple opportunities to model given strategies.
- Identify opportunities in the text for explicit instruction.

#### Initial Instruction

- Tell the class the new strategy you will use, explaining what it is and **why** it is useful.
- Read the passage, stopping to model the named strategy using Think Aloud, ensuring that the language used is clear, concise and appropriate for the children.
- It is important to include **how** you are employing the strategy so that the children understand the cognitive process involved.
- At the end of the lesson allow time for a **debriefing session**, reviewing with the pupils **what** the strategy is, **how, where** and **why** we applied it. These elements are crucial in enabling the children to replicate the process for themselves.

### Gradual Release of Responsibility

The overall goal of comprehension instruction is to develop active and purposeful readers who are able to apply a collection of strategies to construct personal interpretations of text, evaluating and questioning as



they read. The development of such independent readers requires that teachers gradually release responsibility to pupils, providing scaffolding and support as needed until pupils become confident reading strategically. This instructional model is characterised by cycles as shown above.

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It is important for children to have opportunities to share their understanding of thoughts on the text before, during and after reading. As pupils become more adept at strategic reading, there will be a shift from teacher-led to pupil-led discussion. Rather than seeking known information, teacher questioning may prompt pupils to consider other interpretations or engage in higher-order thinking. It may also be used as a scaffolding tool to model how contributions can be extended. It is important that such dialogue allows for pupils to respond to each other, rather than following a teacher-child-teacher format.

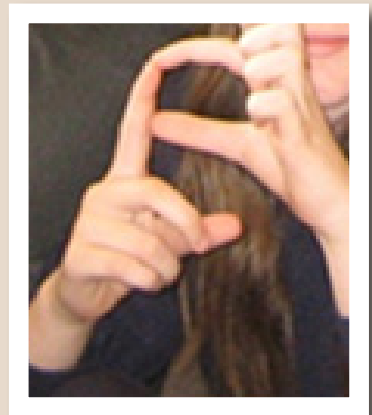
### Comprehension Process Motions

Comprehension Process Motions (CPM), a series of hand signals to indicate use of a strategy, can support pupils through this process, allowing younger and less experienced readers to signal their **independent strategy use** to the teacher.

Comprehension strategies are key to the process of interpreting a text. Children constructing meaning are at the heart of this process. The goal in planning and teaching is for children to develop and use a repertoire of comprehension strategies to support their engagement with text.



The use of CPM also allows pupils to independently apply comprehension strategies, not only during the reading process, but across all curricular areas. In this way, the needs of pupils can be identified and instruction differentiated accordingly. Research has shown that this approach is of great benefit for all pupils, but most especially younger readers (Block et al., 2008).



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The use of CPM also allows pupils to independently apply comprehension strategies, not only during the reading process, but across all curricular areas.

Through planning and teaching for comprehension, teachers enable children to develop a repertoire of comprehension strategies which they can use flexibly and interchangeably to support their engagement with text.

### References

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