Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Project Study Materials

Module 4:
Reading Comprehension

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Contents

The purpose of this module

The purpose of this module is to help student teachers acquire a deeper knowledge of what reading comprehension is all about, how it works, why some learners struggle with reading comprehension and what teachers can do to help learners engage with texts and read more deeply, with understanding and enjoyment, in Sesotho or isiZulu, both at Foundation and Intermediate Phase levels.

Outcomes

After studying this module, student teachers should be able to:

- explain what reading comprehension is
- identify and describe the different components of reading comprehension
- identify and describe three key elements of reading comprehension
- identify and explain different levels of comprehension
- describe different strategies that readers can employ to understand texts better and how to teach these strategies
- apply different reading comprehension strategies to enhance learner's comprehension of texts
- assess reading comprehension, using a range of reading comprehension questions at different levels and using different assessment formats

What literacy teacher standards are covered?

The list of literacy teacher standards that are applicable to reading teachers in South Africa can be downloaded from:

https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/primted/standards/literacy-teacher-standards/literacy-teacher-standards-2020-1.pdf

These knowledge and practice standards relate to the knowledge of literacy teaching and decoding that graduate teachers need to have to teach learners to read and write. There are 21 standards in all. This module covers four of the standards (or portions of them). (The numbering of these standards below is not sequential, as only those standards applicable to this module have been selected from the list.)

8. Demonstrate knowledge of theoretical and research-based components of reading and writing teaching through the phases and grades (including its cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural foundations and the processes and concepts involved).

8.1 What learners need to be able to read and write, and why, within and across the relevant grades and subjects, can be described.

8.2 A broad understanding of the concepts, curriculum, and pedagogy of literacy teaching can be articulated.

8.3 A coherent evidence-based understanding of the teaching of reading and writing that guides their approach and practice can be articulated.

8.4 The broad continuum of reading and writing development can be described.

8.5 A variety of strategies to teach, assess and support learners' development across the continuum can be identified.

13. Demonstrate knowledge of comprehension, strategies to develop comprehension and strategies to develop comprehension across a range of genres.

13.1 An understanding of the role of full comprehension as the goal of reading is articulated.

13.2 An understanding of the interrelated roles of vocabulary, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and background knowledge in comprehension can be demonstrated.

13.3 Types of comprehension (lexical, literal, inferential, analytical, applied, affective, integrative, evaluative) are defined and examples given.

13.4 Comprehension teaching strategies that can be taught explicitly (such as main ideas, summarising, clarifying, question-asking, visualisation, predicting, inferences, making connections, monitoring comprehension, etc.) for use with different genres and types of texts are outlined.

13.5 The contribution to comprehension of learners' ability to read visual representations (tables, diagrams, maps, photographs, drawings and other artwork) can be explained.

13.6 The importance of the development of critical literacy is articulated, in which the meaning of texts, the kind of text and the versions of reality they present are examined.

17. Demonstrate knowledge of phase appropriate features of page or screen-based visual texts, of how the relationship of verbal and visual features of texts affects meaning and of strategies to teach learners to become, firstly, visually literate and, subsequently, critically visually literate.

17.1 Features of page or screen-based visual texts in relation to the meaning they are communicating or expressing (e.g. through layout, colour, image choice) can be explained.

17.3 Strategies for teaching learners how to read and view visual texts or texts that combine words and images for particular effects can be described.

20. Display knowledge about writing genres and text types.

20.1 Knowledge is demonstrated about appropriate literacy education texts in multiple genres, formats and degrees of complexity within various settings and cultural contexts, for various audiences considering learners' background knowledge, stage of reading development and any reading difficulties.

20.2 The purposes, functions and structure of various kinds and genres of texts (such as messages, stories, poems, and informational texts) are explained.

20.3 The ability to talk with learners meaningfully about the different genres is demonstrated.

20.4 Means of creating a classroom environment in which learners can communicate in writing using a range of genres, including creative writing, are described.

Unit 1: What is reading comprehension and why is it important?

Introduction

The ability to read with comprehension is one of the most important skills that a person can possess. Many everyday activities in the twenty-first century require people to read and engage with a variety of texts and understand what they read. Some children informally begin to learn about reading at home through exposure to books, by being read to and seeing other family members read. This early exposure has far-reaching consequences for their motivation to read with comprehension later in school and throughout life. Formal reading begins when children start school or in some cases at preschool level. According to Snow (2002: 16), both home and school environments play an important role in ensuring that children are not only able to read with meaning but that they stay motivated to read.

However, not all home and school environments are the same. Many South African children come from homes that contain few if any books and they seldom see their parents or other adults in the community engage in reading books, magazines or newspapers, so school remains the first place where they are exposed to books and reading. In such cases teachers are faced with the challenge of not only teaching such learners to read with understanding and enjoyment, but also of introducing them to books, mitigating reading gaps they bring to school caused by a lack of a print or book rich background to literacy in general and reading specifically.

To help learners read with comprehension, it is vital that teachers instruct children in reading at school, but parents and the community should also be empowered to see the value of reading, to set a good example by showing an interest in reading themselves and encouraging their children to read.

The article below (Wilkinson 2017) shows that reading is an activity that many South Africans are not particularly interested in.

Who reads books in South Africa?

Studies of book reading habits in South Africa are limited. 4 000 people over the age of 16 were interviewed on their reading habits during August to September 2016. The survey defined reading to include the reading of books, magazines and newspapers, both in print and online.

The survey found that 70.5% of the country's population had ever read for leisure, down from 75% in 2006. Almost a third of the population (29.5%) reported never having read for leisure.

Reading accounted for only 6% of adults' leisure time. Those that reported reading spent an average of 4 hours per week reading.

The study found that the least likely demographics to read for leisure were:

- black women (39%),
- people older than 50 (39%),
- people in rural areas (37%),
- people who only had primary schooling (19%).

Reading was the 5th most popular leisure activity done in the month before the South African Book Development Council's survey, with 43% of people reporting reading for leisure during that month. This was down from 65% in 2006.

The top 4 most popular leisure activities in 2016 were:

- listening to the radio (79%)
- watching TV, DVDs or videos (78%)
- shopping or going to the mall (51%)
- socialising at home (51%).

When reading of books was isolated from other types of reading, only 25% of respondents reported reading books. Book readers reported having read an average of 3.1 books (of any kind) in the past 6 months. The majority of book readers (27%) reported reading an average of more than 5 books during that time. A total of 5.3 million adults in South Africa (14%) were considered "committed printed book readers" by the study – the same percentage as the 2006 study. People described as "bookworms" maintain their reading habit, defend it against other tempting leisure activities and find new occasions to read books.

Just over 16 million adults in South Africa (58%) reported living in a household with no books. The remaining 42% of people lived in households with more than one book. Just 7% of people lived in households with more than 10 books.

Conclusion: This study shows that 25% of adult South Africans read books.

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Based on the article, what is your opinion of South Africans and reading books?

- Do you think South African teachers are included in the 25% of adults reported as book readers mentioned in this article?
- How do you think the generally low book reading culture of South Africans influences learners' reading and comprehension in school?
- As a teacher, what would you do in your classroom to change the situation?
- Do you think the actual percentage of book readers at 25% is satisfactory? Elaborate on your answer.

Hopefully, your answers to the questions above gave you a glimpse of the interest in reading of the learners you will teach in future.

It is vital that prospective teachers know and understand the reading background of learners they will teach and hopefully bring about a positive change, as contextual issues and inadequate teacher knowledge of reading attitudes and its instruction fuel poor reading comprehension.

Reading and comprehension have a **Matthew effect**; this means that the more you read, the better you get and the more you become inspired to read, and the more you read the more your vocabulary and background knowledge develop and help you to comprehend future texts. (Refer to Module 2 *Oral language proficiency development, vocabulary building and motivation for reading.*)

The actual situation in schools is often that teachers try their best to help learners to read with comprehension but lack the required knowledge to do so. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) mention that "in general teachers don't seem to have a clear understanding of the reading concepts, reading development and reading methodology". This and other factors that go beyond the classroom might contribute to the low performance of learners in reading comprehension.

What is reading comprehension?

Reading is about comprehension – the reason why we read any text is to understand it. As we saw in the previous modules, the Simple View of Reading regards reading comprehension as the end product of the reading process: we start the reading process by decoding the text, constructing its meaning as we go along and integrating this with our language knowledge and knowledge of the world.

Comprehension is the result of the interaction of two basic sets of activities: decoding/word recognition and language comprehension. Strong decoding skills and language and vocabulary knowledge all contribute to effective reading comprehension. Language comprehension enables the reader to construct the overall meaning of the text using the clues and cues provided by decoding.

Reading is thus more than sounding out the printed letters in a text and more than knowing the meanings of individual words in a text. It also requires the readers' capacity to use their background knowledge and powers of reason to make sense of what they read. Snow (2002: 11) defines reading comprehension as:

> *… the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.*

Four key words come up in this definition that need further explanation, that is, **extraction, construction**, **interaction** and **involvement**, which are important for teachers to understand. Let us unpack each of them to help us better understand what reading comprehension is in order that we can teach it successfully. But before we do so, let us first consider the nature of text information.

Some information in a text is stated directly but some of it is implied and as a reader, we need to 'read between the lines' and make connections in our heads while we read in order to understand the text properly. Consider for example the following three sentences:

> *A plate of steaming food was put down in front of the man. He had not seen food for three days so he gobbled it down. He burnt his mouth.*

- In Sentence 1 the writer does not tell us directly that the plate of food given to the man was very hot; instead, it is described as 'a plate of steaming food'. From that description we can infer that the food was very hot.
- Likewise, in Sentence 2 we are not told directly that the man was very hungry; instead, we are told that 'he had not seen food for three days' and that he 'gobbled' the food. These are clues that help us infer that the man was hungry and therefore ate very fast.
- In Sentence 3, we are simply told that the man 'burnt his mouth'. The reason for this is not stated explicitly but can be inferred from the information in sentences 1 and 2. Eating very hot (steaming) food and eating it quickly (gobbling it) can certainly cause one to burn one's mouth!

In reading the above passage we extracted information stated in the text but we also used knowledge that is ***in our heads*** – both background knowledge (knowing that not having food for three days can make a person extremely hungry; eating hot food can burn one's mouth) and linguistic knowledge (to *gobble* food means to eat it quickly, hungrily and in big mouthfuls) – and we linked it to information ***in the text*** to comprehend the text. Making connections while reading is thus a very important part of thinking, referred to as inferring or making inferences.

Reading comprehension is thus a process of extracting and constructing meaning from texts. To construct this meaning, readers are required to be able to create a coherent representation of text in memory. Rapp, van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou and Espin (2007: 292) describe this as follows:

> *… a coherent representation happens when a reader links information from the text with their background or prior knowledge to create a mental or situation model. The mental model is a representation of what the text message is about which may contain a variety of information including the people or things involved and the place and time that events occur. These entities might have properties associated with them such as physical characteristics, emotions, or names and structural relations that define the event told by the text message.*

Let us now examine the processes of extracting and constructing meaning and the need for interaction and involvement.

Extracting meaning

To extract means 'draw/take out of': when you extract you draw something out of something else. This means the reader tries to get the message that the author has conveyed in the text. The actions that good readers display are described as follows:

> *During reading, good readers read words accurately and quickly, and simultaneously deal with the meanings of those words — as well as the meanings of the phrases and sentences into which the words are grouped. Good readers connect the meaning of one sentence to the meaning of another. If something is confusing to them, they use their background knowledge to try to clarify the meanings of words and phrases. Sometimes good readers interact with the text by asking themselves questions about its content and reflecting on its ideas. (The Texas Education Agency 2002).*

Extracting involves pulling out and putting together information stated explicitly in a text and using that as a basis to link it to the knowledge in our heads so that we construct meaning that goes beyond the information which is stated explicitly.

Constructing meaning

Constructing meaning is what a reader does to try to make sense of the written text. This happens concurrently with extraction of meaning. While reading, the reader builds a mental picture of the information in the text and expands on it in ways that includes the characters, setting, actions and events in the story. This mental picture or representation is referred to as the **text situation** (Diesen 2016). Thus, while reading the three sentences above about the steaming food and extracting their meaning, we constructed a mental picture about a hungry man (not explicitly stated) who was given a plate of hot food (not explicitly stated) and who burnt his mouth as a result of eating hot food quickly (not explicitly stated). Even though we do not know who the man is, who gave him food, or why he had not eaten for three days, we still manage to construct a plausible mental picture of what the author was conveying to us in those three sentences.

Snow's definition above explains that when readers concurrently engage in the extraction and construction of meaning, the chances are that they will understand what they are reading. It is

however important to note that other factors such as reader attributes (which include background knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension skills) as well as text features (like text type, structure and difficulty) can determine whether comprehension is achieved or not. These aspects will be discussed below.

Interaction and involvement

The other two key words in Snow's definition of reading comprehension above, interaction and involvement, are also important for teachers to understand so that they can help learners to fully engage with texts and enhance their reading comprehension performance. Skilled readers interact continuously with the text while they read.

> *Skilled readers are never passive readers. Instead, they are highly active as they read: thinking, imagining, wondering, and evaluating as they make their way through a text. Many less-skilled readers, however, simply process words at a surface level, often with no idea that a deeper interaction is necessary for real learning. All students benefit from explicit instruction and practice in interactive reading. Such instruction enables lower-skilled readers to comprehend what they read and empowers higher-skilled students to use text interaction strategically to accomplish their learning goals, (reDesign 2023).*

Interaction with the text also implies involvement with the text. These mental activities while reading involve the reader in the interaction mentioned above. When we read the sentence *He had not seen food for three days* the thought "Oh, he must have been hungry!" may have gone through our minds very quickly, which indicates that we interacted with the text. Without this interaction, it is highly unlikely that a reader will glean anything from the activity of reading. Involvement in reading is associated with reading motivation, which is largely influenced by the purpose of reading. (See Module 2 *Oral language proficiency development, vocabulary building and motivation for reading*.)

Risdaneva (2014) points out that written language aims to communicate messages to the targeted audience and that the author of a text interacts interpersonally with the readers through the text. This interaction with written texts is not the same as a face-to-face spoken interaction in which the two people take turns in speaking, as the reader of a text is 'listening' to what the writer is saying. The reader can, in a way, respond by reading between the lines (*What's the author trying to tell us here?*), by agreeing or disagreeing mentally with the author, or by asking themselves questions about what the author says, depending on the type of text they are reading and the purpose for reading. Thus, when we read the sentence *A plate of steaming food was put down in front of the man*, we became involved in the reading process and interacted with the text when a thought like *Mmmm, 'steaming' means the food was very hot* went rapidly through our heads. A weak, unskilled or unmotivated reader may have read the three sentences passively and overlooked the clues the writer had given us to read the text more deeply.

In sum, if learners fail to engage in this meaning extraction and construction process either

through passive reading, reading only at a superficial level, reading only what is explicitly stated, reading with a lack of prior knowledge, or with inadequate instruction, then comprehension may break down. Teachers need to help learners understand how to interact with written texts. They can do this in three main ways: (i) by **role modelling aloud** what skilled readers do while reading; (ii) by **doing text work**, drawing learners' attention to words and structure in the text and asking questions that will help them interact with the text and delve more deeply into it; and (iii) by teaching learners **reading comprehension strategies**. We will discuss these ways in more detail in the other units of this module.

The importance of reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is inherently important (why bother to read anything if one doesn't understand what one is reading?!). However, the ability to read with comprehension is also empowering, as it gives a reader independent access to information and is a means of acquiring new knowledge. Reading with comprehension is also motivational, as it increases the enjoyment and effectiveness of reading and helps not only academically, but also in a person's personal life (Rutzler 2020). In her blog *The importance of reading comprehension* the author gives a list of other areas for which reading with comprehension is important. She points out that reading is everywhere and the requirement to comprehend what one reads is forever present in learners' lives. She outlines how reading comprehension impacts every subject:

- in science, learners read and learn about scientific related topics throughout their school life. They need to read and understand facts about animals, plants, the solar system, the scientific method and more.
- in mathematics they must deal with word problems
- in history they are taught about significant leaders and events and for them to succeed at reading about history they must understand what is being said.

The disadvantages of reading without comprehension are both immediate and far reaching. Indeed, without comprehension one can hardly be said to be reading. Children with reading difficulties have an increased likelihood of having behaviour problems and are at risk of dropping out of school. Reading comprehension difficulties also impact across children's **academic** and social domains of functioning and their difficulties are bound to continue into adulthood. Adults with low literacy skills tend to be limited in their ability to gather and understand the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions in work, family, and health spheres (Deacon & Tong 2013). There are various reasons why children struggle with reading comprehension, and interventions to help them must be matched with the underlying causes of reading difficulty. It is important for teachers to know how to identify reading comprehension difficulties and how to provide appropriate assistance. These issues will be revisited in Units 2-5.

There are two important curriculum documents that refer to reading comprehension and that teachers should know about:

- ***The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements*** *(CAPS) (Department of Basic Education 2011a, b, c, d, e, f)*
- ***National Framework for the Teaching of reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase*** *(Department of Basic Education 2021)*

The South African ***Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)*** (Department of Basic Education 2011a, b, c, d, e, f) requires that reading be taught both in the Foundation (Grades 1-3) and Intermediate (Grades 4-6) phases of schooling. By the end of the Foundation Phase, CAPS expects learners to be able to **"read fluently, with comprehension and enjoyment**".

The extracts below, from the curriculum policy, show what teachers are required to teach in reading comprehension in these phases. CAPS provides information on when to teach and do reading. Reading is part of the following 'lesson' components: Shared Reading, Phonics, Group Guided Reading, Paired Reading and Independent Reading (which can be done during Group Guided Reading) and Read Alouds.

Besides Phonics, where the focus is on teaching decoding, in each of these lesson components, comprehension is also important. Reference to comprehension in CAPS can be found at: Department of Basic Education 2011a [English HL] :12, 16-18; 2011b [IsiZulu HL] :13, 18-20; 2011c [Sesotho HL] :13, 18-20):

> *Comprehension: During the reading lessons the teacher has many opportunities to engage children in a range of levels of thinking and questioning. These are literal, reorganisation, inferential, evaluative and appreciative.*

(Consult Module 6: *Integrating the reading components in the classroom*, as well.)

Reference to reading comprehension in the Intermediate Phase is described as follows: Department of Basic Education 2011d [English HL] :10-11; 2011e [IsiZulu HL] :11-12; 2011f [Sesotho HL] :11-12):

> *Learners develop proficiency in Reading and Viewing using a wide range of literary and non-literary texts, including visual texts. Learners recognise how genre and register reflect the purpose, audience, and context of texts. Through classroom and independent reading, learners become critical and creative thinkers.*
>
> *A variety of comprehension activities need to be set to ensure that learners understand what they read.*

The stages of reading and reading comprehension

It is important for teachers to understand the similarities but also the differences between oral comprehension and reading comprehension. Although oral and reading comprehension share the same language and cognitive-linguistic processes, the ***modality*** (oral/written) creates subtle but important differences, especially in the early stages of reading development.

When a teacher reads a story *to* a class (as in Read Alouds) or when she reads *with* the class (as in Shared Reading) and then asks the learners questions about the text and discusses it with them, the learners may listen attentively, involve themselves enthusiastically in the story, answer the teacher's questions well and participate in the discussion. The teacher may be happy with their responses, but she cannot claim that her learners have good **reading** comprehension, only that they seem to have good oral or general comprehension. Would the learners have responded as well had they been given the text to read *on their own*? Maybe some of the learners would have answered the questions equally well in the written mode, but some of the learners would not have performed as well when they had to make sense of the text *on their own*. Reading comprehension is thus a specific type of comprehension related to independently understanding language in the written mode. It requires accurate and rapid decoding skills, knowledge about texts, and the ability to use background knowledge and apply thinking skills while decoding the text. Reading comprehension tests typically assess learners' ability to understand a text when they read *independently*, i.e. when they read a text on their own, without the text being mediated by a teacher or another person.

Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) list the following stages of reading development that teachers can use to recognise the reading level of a child. We have added approximate times/grades when learners typically go through these stages (although these will depend a lot on the learners' own abilities, their home background and quality of schooling) and how comprehension plays out during these stages:

- **The emergent reader**: Preschool, most learners have not yet acquired the alphabetic principle. They rely on listening comprehension and develop listening comprehension skills related to stories that are read to them orally. The teacher mediates text comprehension.
- **The novice reader**: Early Grade 1, when formal reading instruction starts. Reading is initially jerky, slow and inaccurate, and novice readers read word-by-word. Texts are short and contain simple language and sentences. Comprehension starts developing in the written mode at a basic level, but working memory is still highly engaged with decoding. Listening comprehension is dominant and the teacher mediates much of the text comprehension.
- **The decoding reader**: Later Grade 1 and early Grade 2 (some Grade 3 readers may still be in this stage). Decoding skills are improving but have not yet become fully automatised. Some of the text is read word-by-word, but they are increasingly reading

larger chunks of text (e.g. phrases) more smoothly. Comprehension in the written mode is still developing but is still at a basic level. Learners can start making connections while reading on their own, but mainly within sentences or between adjacent sentences. Listening comprehension is still dominant and the teacher still mediates much of the text comprehension.

- **The fluent, comprehending reader**. By the end of Grade 3, children should be able to read accurately, fluently, with comprehension and enjoyment. Decoding is no longer word-by-word, and decoding skills are becoming automatised. Intonation sounds like natural speech, freeing up working memory so that the reader can construct meaning while reading ***on their own***, aloud or silently. Readers are developing more advanced reading comprehension skills beyond a basic level. They can now read chunks of words at a time (phrases). They can make connections across paragraphs and can integrate and evaluate information across the text on their own, without the teacher mediating comprehension. Reading can now become a powerful tool for independent learning. Readers become increasingly fluent and skilled in later primary school and high school.
- **The expert reader:** Highly skilled readers become expert readers. They are people who read prolifically, often in a specific domain, and have a deep understanding of what they read. They consistently maintain their reading habits. This can happen in high school, university or in the workplace. Their reading comprehension skills are developed to a very high level, and they often rely more on reading comprehension than listening comprehension to extend their knowledge. Note that not all high school or university learners become expert readers; some may remain fluent comprehending readers. However, they still generally cope with the reading demands of university.

In Module 3 (Unit 7), Frith's three stages of reading development were described. Frith's first pictorial stage overlaps with that of the emergent reader, and the second stage, the phonological reading pathway, overlaps with the novice and decoding reader above. In these early stages of reading development, comprehension of a text is still mediated to a large extent by the teacher or an adult figure, and comprehension is assessed informally and draws largely on oral comprehension. For example, a teacher may read a short passage to a learner and ask questions afterwards to see how well s/he has understood the story read to him/her, or a teacher may give a learner a short text to read aloud and then ask some questions to see whether the child has understood what s/he has read.

In Frith's third stage, the orthographic reading pathway, decoding has become accurate and fluent and is becoming increasingly automatised. This is similar to the fluent, comprehending reader above. Primary school learners are expected to achieve the fluent, comprehending reader stage by Grade 3. It is at this stage that learners' ability to read a text *on their own* and answer questions on it *independently* in the written mode becomes important. This is when the more formal assessment of ***reading*** comprehension occurs. This is why the large-scale international assessment of reading comprehension undertaken by PIRLS is aimed at 10-year-olds, as it

is assumed that by then learners worldwide have become *independent* fluent, comprehending readers.

The above stages are not fixed and not all learners move through them at the same pace. Some learners may learn to read easily and quickly ahead of their peers and move through the stages more quickly, while others may find learning to read more difficult, move at a slower pace and may need interventions to bring them up to the desired level. Favourable or unfavourable conditions in the home or schooling context or a learner's individual linguistic and cognitive capabilities can also affect a learner's trajectory through the different stages of reading.

The poor performance of South African Grade 4 learners in PIRLS reading comprehension suggests that our learners are still novice or decoding readers and have not yet moved to Firth's third stage, where independent fluent decoding enables learners to move beyond basic reading comprehension to more advanced text comprehension involving higher-order understanding. In fact, South African research in the past decade indicates that many learners in senior primary school and even in high school are still slow decoders, which suggests that they are still in the decoding-reader stage and have not yet developed automaticity in decoding. This means that their ***reading c***omprehension skills are still at a basic level, so reading comprehension is not yet an effective tool for independent learning and they rely on listening comprehension and memorising information to acquire new knowledge.

Conclusion

This unit started by considering the reading habits of South African citizens. From survey data collected across adults in South Africa, it seems that very few people are actually avid readers, and many people do very little reading on a daily basis. Poverty can affect reading habits, since reading habits depend on easy access to books and print material (paper or digital). Why is it important for BEd students to be aware of such trends?

The importance of reading comprehension in our 21st century is especially clear. The ability to read with comprehension is a vital ingredient in schooling success and in life generally. Reading gives people independent access to information and knowledge. Reading levels affect careers and earning capacity, where salaries rise with increased levels of education. If reading habits are not common in the adult population, this can affect the reading development of children, since role modelling plays an important role in building positive attitudes to books and establishing reading habits. Teachers play a vital role in developing good reading skills and positive reading attitudes in learners right from the beginning of schooling. In order to do so, teachers need a deep understanding of what reading comprehension entails.

The unit describes reading comprehension as a process of continually extracting information stated in the text and using that as a basis for 'reading between the lines' and constructing meaning that goes beyond the explicitly stated information. In order to extract and construct meaning, readers must interact with the text and be actively involved in the reading process.

Finally, the unit revisits the stages of reading and outlines the transition that beginner readers make from oral comprehension to reading comprehension, which involves making sense of written language.

Self-assessment activities

These are 'quickie' assessment activities to check how well you have understood key concepts discussed in this unit and whether you are able to perceive the pedagogical implications of such concepts in the teaching of reading.

Note: The key to these self-assessment activities is given in the Appendix at the end of this module. If you score less than 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

1. In each of the statements below provide **the appropriate missing word (or words)**. (5)

   a) Reading and reading comprehension have been described as showing a _____ _____, meaning that the more you read, the more you become inspired to read, and the more you read the more your vocabulary develops and helps you to comprehend future texts. (1)

   b) Reading comprehension is a process of _____ information and _____ meaning from texts. (2)

   c) The ability to read with comprehension is empowering, as it enables _____ learning. Learners can acquire new knowledge without waiting for someone to teach them or tell them something new. (1)

   d) Large-scale international assessments of reading comprehension undertaken by PIRLS is aimed at 10-year-olds, because it is assumed that by then learners worldwide can read with _____ and _____. (1)

2. Indicate which one of the following statements is **false**. (1)

   a) When readers extract information from a text, they typically engage in higher-order thinking skills such as inferencing and evaluation.

   b) When readers construct meaning from a text, they go beyond the literal level of what is stated in texts to form a mental picture of what the text is about.

c) When readers interact with a text, they use their background knowledge to help them make sense of the text.

d) When readers are involved during reading, their attention is focused on the text and they notice clues that help them extract and construct meaning.

3. Indicate which of the following statements is the **correct** one. (1)

a) When learners 'read between the lines' this suggests that their decoding skills are poor and that they often skip lines while reading.

b) Learners who cannot read fluently can still become independent learners since they rely on oral communication by listening to their teachers for learning new information and acquiring new knowledge.

c) Even if learners are interested in the natural sciences or mathematics and do not enjoy reading literature or fiction, they still need to be skilled readers to excel in their content subjects.

d) If, in a story, it is stated that "tears rolled down the little girl's cheeks", then the writer is explicitly telling us that the little girl is sad.

4. Consider the following scenario and then select only **the option** which is likely to be **an inaccurate reflection** of this scenario. (1)

Although many of his Grade 3 learners still read slowly and some have reached only the Grade 2 ORF benchmark, Teacher Bongani has been doing a lot of reading with his class in Shared Reading and Read Alouds, asking them questions after reading a text to or with them. They enjoy his readings and respond actively to his questions. He gets the feeling that their reading comprehension skills are good and so at the end of Term 2 he gives them a formal written reading comprehension test appropriate for Grade 3 learners. However, after marking the test he is disappointed with the learners' performance, as the class has achieved an average of only 43% for reading comprehension. He knows his learners enjoy it when he reads them stories and he wonders if the test was too difficult for Grade 3 learners.

a) From the scenario above it seems that these Grade 3 learners have quite good listening comprehension skills, as they interact with stories when their teacher asks them oral questions on the texts that they read together.

b) From the scenario above it seems that even if learners display good listening skills when teachers read stories to them, they may struggle to transfer these skills to the written mode when reading on their own if their decoding competencies are not yet accurate and fluent.

c) From the scenario above it seems that these Grade 3 learners enjoy reading and have quite good reading comprehension skills. Their poor performance in the test was probably because the test was too advanced for them in Term 2.

d) From the scenario above it seems that teachers need to be aware of the differences between listening comprehension and reading comprehension in order to make reliable judgments about their learners' reading abilities.

Unit 2: Components of reading comprehension and elements involved: text, reader, activity

Introduction

Snow's (2002) definition of reading comprehension discussed in Unit 1 highlights that reading comprehension is the simultaneous extraction and construction of meaning. Many skills and areas of knowledge have to work to make reading comprehension possible. This unit focuses on the components of reading comprehension – the parts that make up the whole and enable learners to extract and construct meaning. This unit also examines reading comprehension in terms of the three elements involved in reading, namely, the text, the reader and the reading activity.

The components of reading comprehension

As discussed in Module 3, the Simple View of Reading (SVR) (Hoover & Gough 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope model (2001) are similar in that both models argue that reading comprehension is a product that comprises two basic sets of skills, namely decoding knowledge and skills as well as linguistic knowledge and skills. While these main components are described in the SVR model, the diagram of Scarborough's 'reading rope', shown in Figure 1 below, depicts these components visually.

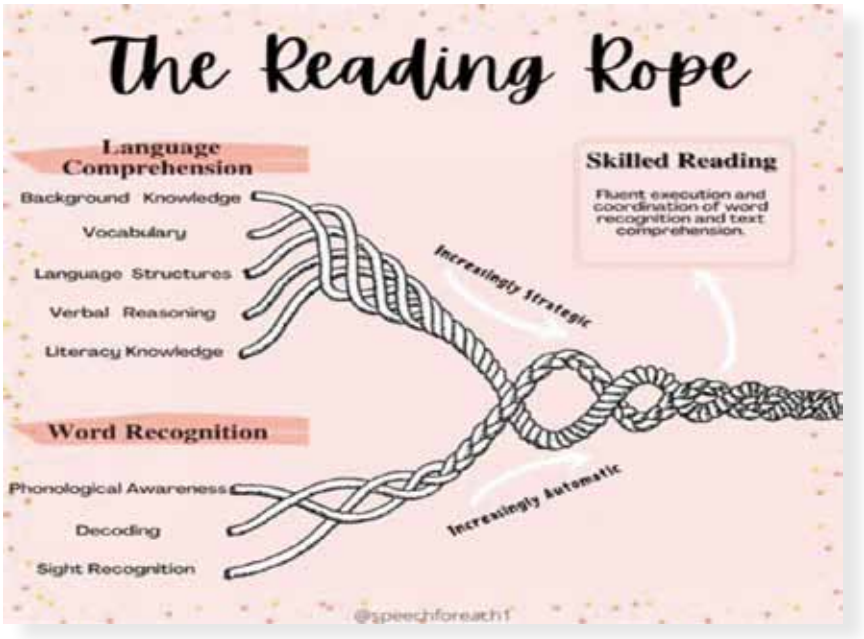


Figure 1: Components of reading comprehension in the reading rope model

The diagram in Figure 1 shows that there are a variety of skills readers need to master to reach the goal of reading with comprehension. As argued in the SVR, the role that decoding plays is very important in the early stages of reading, but once decoding skills are in place and become automatised, then other components of reading comprehension play an increasingly important role. We are now going to unpack these components of reading comprehension in greater detail, using a slightly different diagram, as shown in Figure 2 below. The different components have been colour coded for easy reference.

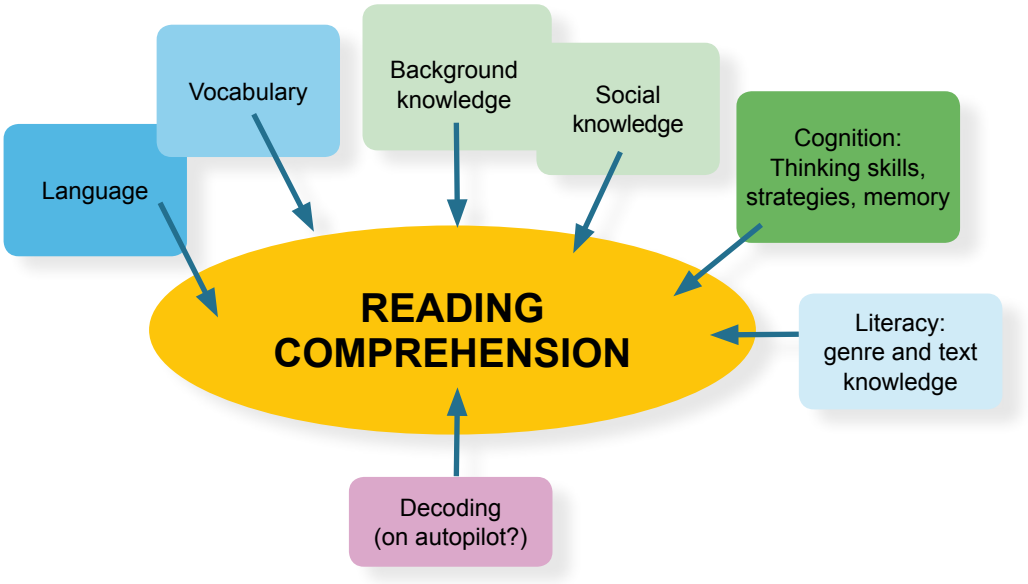


Figure 2: The components of reading comprehension

Decoding (purple component)

Nearly all models of reading comprehension assume that decoding skills underpin the reading process. Independent reading comprehension is not possible without decoding. Competent readers can read and understand a text on their own without a teacher mediating the text for them. Competent readers read accurately (with at least 95% accuracy) and fast (according to their grade norms or benchmarks), so they now have enough working memory to draw on all their other knowledge and skills to help them understand the text more deeply. In competent readers, decoding goes into 'autopilot'. If they encounter an unknown or difficult word or if a section of text does not make sense to them, they go out of decoding autopilot and reread the word more slowly and consciously to decode it or reread the difficult section again to check what they have missed. Once they are satisfied that they have decoded the tricky word or section of text, they go back into decoding autopilot and continue reading the text.

The question "on autopilot?" in Figure 2 implies that if learners are not yet decoding on autopilot, then they are likely to find it difficult, *when reading on their own*, to effectively use the other components that contribute to extracting and constructing meaning.

Language (blue component)

Competent readers use all aspects of their language knowledge to help them understand a text. This includes phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, vocabulary and pragmatics. Good **word-level skills** allow learners to identify, or decode, words in texts accurately and fluently. The relationship between print and speech is understood and there is knowledge of **language structures:** word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), grammatical functions in sentences (subject-verb-object), grammatical constructions (subject-verb agreement/concordial agreement), syntax (word order and the relationship between words and sentences), and semantics (the analysis of word meanings and relations between them). In agglutinating languages such as the African languages, morphology is particularly important in aiding word and sentence meaning.

Vocabulary (light blue component)

Although vocabulary is part of language, it has been labelled as a separate component here because it is so important in reading comprehension. As discussed in Module 2, research has consistently shown that children who perform well on reading comprehension assessments have larger vocabularies than children who perform poorly on the same assessments. The more words that learners know, the easier it is for them to understand what they are reading. In agglutinating languages such as the African languages, it is likely that morphological knowledge will be closely related to vocabulary. This is an area that awaits future research.

A large vocabulary enables readers to understand the meaning of words and connected text. For reading for academic purposes (reading information texts or textbooks to learn) learners also need to know typical academic words/terminology and words that signal text structure or types of argument. (Consider for instance words such as *because*, *however*, *by contrast*, *as a result* that point to whether the text or portion of the text is a description, a sequence, a comparison or contrast, a problem-solution, or information about causes and effects.)

Background knowledge (green component)

Background knowledge refers to everything one knows about the world, people, animals, objects and events. The more one knows, the easier it is to understand what one is reading. For example, if a Grade 3 boy is interested in soccer, knows the rules of soccer, the different clubs and teams and main players, then, provided he has good decoding skills, he will probably find it easier to read and understand a text about soccer than someone who has very little knowledge of the game.

However, although background knowledge of a topic increases one's chances of text comprehension, this does not mean that *not* having knowledge about a topic prevents one from understanding a text. Bear in mind that reading itself is a powerful means of acquiring new knowledge. It is largely through reading that we learn new things and increase our knowledge. Thus, a skilled reader who knows little about soccer will still be able to read a text about soccer quite easily and learn things about soccer in the process. Such a reader may even perform better

on a reading comprehension based on a text about soccer than a struggling reader who knows a lot about soccer but who still decodes inaccurately and slowly and struggles to extract and construct meaning from the text.

Social knowledge (light green component)

Social knowledge (also referred to as social cognition) is also part of our background knowledge and refers specifically to our knowledge of humans, how people feel, think, act and behave, and what makes them do the things they do. Although all cultures have their own particular cultural norms of behaviour, much of social knowledge is also generic or universal because we all have the same brains and we are wired neurologically in the same way – we cry if we are sad or get hurt, we laugh if we are happy, we can get grumpy if we are tired or hungry. Although social knowledge is part of background knowledge, it has been labelled as a separate component here because it is so important in reading comprehension, especially the reading of stories or narrative texts.

Cognition (dark green component)

Cognition is a broad term that includes thinking skills (understanding temporal sequence, making inferences, seeing part-whole relationships, perceiving cause and effect, similarities, differences and contrasts). It also includes general cognitive abilities such as executive function, a set of mental skills that include working memory, the ability to plan, control attention, self-regulate, problem solve, and cognitive flexibility (switching from one mental activity to another). In the diagram of the reading rope, cognition is referred to as verbal reasoning. Research has shown that general cognitive abilities are also related to reading comprehension; learners with better working memory and attentional control, for example, typically perform better in reading comprehension than learners with poorer working memory or attentional control. Yildiz and Centikaya (2017: 366) argue that attention is a prerequisite both for reading fluency and reading comprehension and that readers with inadequate attention may fail to accomplish the reading tasks assigned to them. As they read, readers need to keep updating information in their minds, using their **working memory**. Without this constant update, readers will not be able to integrate the information read earlier with what comes later to understand the main idea of the text. Not understanding the main idea means that the reader cannot understand texts at a deeper level.

Literacy knowledge (blue component)

Literacy knowledge is also part of our background knowledge and refers specifically to what we know about the conventions related to written language, text genres and structures and how texts ‘work’. Research has shown that literacy knowledge (also referred to as text knowledge) is closely related to reading comprehension; learners with better literacy knowledge, for example, typically perform better in reading comprehension than learners with poor knowledge of texts.

The three elements in reading and their broader context

Another way to think about reading comprehension is to consider which elements are always present in the reading process, and how these elements can be affected by the broader context in which reading occurs.

Researchers agree that there are three important elements that play a role in reading with comprehension (Snow 2002): the **text**, the **reader**, and the **activity** (the purpose for reading). Reading always occurs within a broader social, cultural and economic context. The diagram in Figure 3 shows the three elements involved in comprehension, all of which are embedded within the larger sociocultural context (Snow 2002).

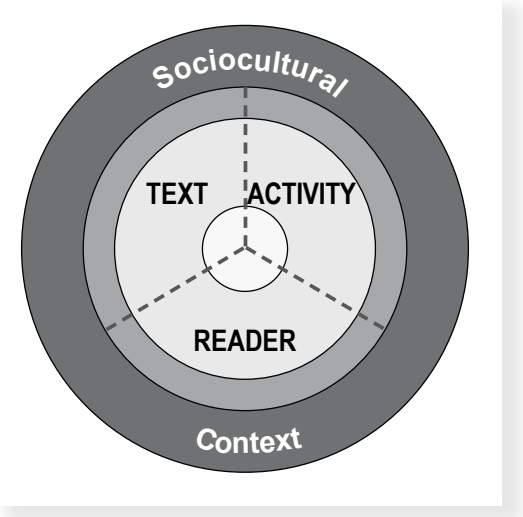


Figure 3: The three elements of a text embedded in a sociocultural context

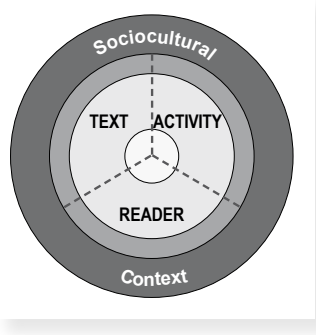
Some contexts may provide more favourable conditions for reading to develop and thrive than others. Snow (2002) says the following about the sociocultural context of reading:

> *When we think of the context of learning to read, we think of classrooms … children bring to their classrooms varying capacities and understandings about reading, which are in turn influenced, or in some cases determined by their experiences in their homes and neighbourhood context and economic disparities in the larger society … [S]ociocultural and sociohistorical theories of learning and literacy describe how children acquire literacy through social interactions with expert peers and adults.*

The article mentioned in Unit 1 on South African's reading habits illustrates how a particular sociocultural context can influence people to read or not to read. If children grow up in homes with a few or no books and where adults are not seen to read much, where storybooks are not read to and shared with children in an enjoyable way that sparks their interest and motivation

to want to read on their own, then, through no fault of their own, such children may not see much value in reading, may not be inclined to read and may not realise that reading books can be enjoyable and empowering.

Text



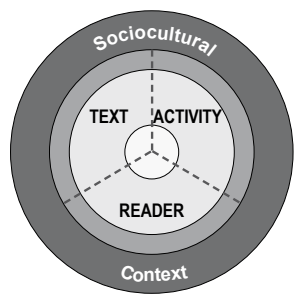
A text is the original words and form of a written or printed work, and it can be paper-based or digital. There are different kinds of texts such as newspapers, textbooks, posters, books of fiction, instructional guides. Whatever type of text, its main purpose is to be read with comprehension.

There are different kinds of texts, e.g., narratives, information texts, cooking recipes, legal judgments, do-it-yourself (DIY) texts, feature articles in newspapers or magazines, sport sections in newspapers, etc. Narratives can be fictional (storybooks, novels, science fiction, etc.) or factual (e.g., newspaper or magazine reports of something that happened to someone, diaries, biographies, autobiographies). Different texts serve different purposes, and they are structured differently to serve those purposes in the most efficient or effective way possible. For example, a crime thriller or detective story will usually start with the murder or death of a person, or the discovery of a dead body. This is to grab the reader's attention from the start and make them want to continue reading, as the rest of the story is about what or who caused the death, and why, and who solves the crime. (In English this is humorously referred to as a 'whodunit' *Who has done it?*).

Readers of all ages should be aware of different text structures to be successful in the reading process. The structure or organisation of a text is the arrangement of ideas and the relationships between the ideas. Readers who are unaware of text structures are at a disadvantage because they do not know what to expect and do not approach reading with any type of reading plan. However, readers who are familiar with text structures expect the information to unfold in certain ways.

Children's reading comprehension can be improved if their teachers include instruction on text types and text structure and draw their attention to how information is structured differently in different types of text, as learners will not automatically know that. **Narrative** and **information texts** (also sometimes called **expository** texts) are the text types mostly used in schools. Most narrative texts have information about the setting (where or when the story takes place), the main characters (and secondary characters), the main events around which the story revolves (there is usually some problem that occurs, and the character(s) must resolve it). The story ends when the problem is resolved. On the other hand, information texts do not usually have a story element. Instead, they provide information on specific topics and make use of headings and subheadings to structure the information. We will return to the topic of structure in narrative and information texts in Unit 4 when we look more closely at how to teach reading comprehension.

Reader

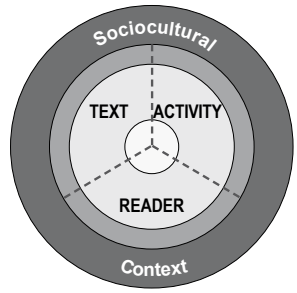


The reader is an important role player in the process of text comprehension. To understand any form of text, a reader must have a wide range of capabilities and abilities (Snow 2002), as discussed in the components of reading comprehension. Some of the characteristics that a reader should possess include the various **linguistic, cognitive** and **literacy** related knowledge and capabilities reflected in the different components of reading comprehension shown in Figures 1 and 2.

As discussed above, besides being able to decode, the different types of knowledge that a reader should have to support comprehension include **vocabulary, domain and topic knowledge, linguistic and discourse knowledge, and knowledge of specific comprehension strategies**.

Vocabulary knowledge	Vocabulary knowledge means understanding the meanings of words one encounters when reading. Zano (2019) argues that being cognisant of a word in its entirety means having a mixed type of vocabulary knowledge, including articulation, spelling, opposites, synonyms and word building.
Domain and topic knowledge	Over and above vocabulary is the knowledge about the topic being discussed, which derives from knowledge of a domain. Knowing the topic enables readers to make sense of sentences.
Language and discourse knowledge	Understanding discourse involves building meaning from extended segments of language, such as novels, news articles, conversations, textbooks and other everyday materials. Comprehending larger units of texts and discourse requires making inferences to connect ideas, and establishing the connections depends on integrating information from prior discourse contents and from prior knowledge (Sparks 2012).
Knowledge of specific comprehension strategies	Comprehension strategies are conscious plans or sets of purposeful activity steps that readers can use to help make sense of text.

The reading activity



According to Snow (2002), the reading activity includes the purposes and processes of comprehension as well as the consequences of performing the reading activity. The purpose of reading affects how we approach the reading activity. Are we reading to get the main news of the day, to learn something new about a topic that interests us, to temporarily escape our problems and get lost in a fictional world of adventure or romance, to find out something practical (like how to set the timer on your new stove), to get juicy gossip about the wealthy and glamorous, or to find spiritual solace by reading a sacred text? Our reason for reading a specific text affects our level of motivation, how attentively we read and how much time and effort we are willing to invest in it. This in turn will affect our level of engagement with the text, how quickly and superficially or thoughtfully and deeply we read the text and what reading comprehension strategies we consciously or unconsciously apply while we read.

Reading problems

Now that you have a better understanding of the different components involved in reading comprehension, it is easier to understand that problems with reading comprehension can arise from difficulties in one or more of these components. As Spencer and Wagner (2018: 366) state:

> *… reading comprehension is a complex process, involving a variety of cognitive and linguistic skills. As a result, deficits in any cognitive or linguistic ability important to the comprehension process can potentially lead to deficits in reading comprehension performance.*

In order to be able to help learners who struggle with reading comprehension it is vitally important for teachers to correctly identify where the reading problem lies. The success of interventions that teachers put in place to help struggling readers will be largely determined by how well the teachers have correctly identified what is causing the reading problem. It is also important for teachers to have a good understanding of what counts as good reading comprehension. If Andile gets 34% on a RC test and Sipho gets 62% on the same test, how should the teacher respond? Andile clearly seems to be struggling, but what about Sipho? Does he also need help or is he managing fine? This is an issue that is examined in the section below.

What counts as good reading comprehension?

When can learners be regarded as being 'good' at comprehension? Getting 50% or more for a test is often regarded as a general rule of thumb for passing a test, but is this criterion applicable to reading comprehension too? We know from decades of research findings that reading is a precise skill and that the more skilled a learner becomes at reading, the more precisely they read

and the better they comprehend. Based on the strong relationship between decoding ability and reading comprehension, McCormick (1995: 100) identifies four levels of reading comprehension as set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of reading comprehension

Level of comprehension	Measures of skill	Description
Independent level	98% or higher decoding accuracy 95% or higher level of comprehension	These are highly skilled readers with high levels of text comprehension who can effectively learn from texts appropriate for their specific maturational level._
Instructional level	95-97% decoding accuracy 75-94% comprehension accuracy	These are readers who do not have major reading problems but who will benefit from reading comprehension instruction at their maturational level.
Borderline level	90-94% decoding accuracy 55-74% accuracy in comprehension	These readers need to be given additional reading exposure and practice to improve both decoding and comprehension. They benefit from explicit comprehension instruction.
Frustration level	Less than 90% decoding accuracy 54% or less comprehension accuracy	These readers have major reading problems and are reading well below their maturational level. They need intensive reading intervention to improve their decoding so that they can start making meaning while reading. They will properly benefit from explicit reading comprehension instruction only once they can decode with greater accuracy.

As can be seen from this table, getting 50% on a reading comprehension is definitely NOT a 'pass'; learners who get 50% or lower on a reading comprehension test are frustrated readers who understand very little of what they read. Andile at 34% clearly fits into this category of frustrated

reader and needs help from the teacher. But Sipho at 62% needs help from the teacher as well. Reading with comprehension requires a high level of reading skill, and learners who perform below 75% on a reading comprehension test are not yet skilled readers. Sipho can be regarded as a borderline reader: there is much in the text that he has missed or misunderstood. To really provide Andile and Sipho with appropriate support, the teacher would need to assess their oral reading fluency as well to see whether they need intervention with decoding as well as reading comprehension, or whether their decoding is adequate. If that is the case the intervention can focus on improving their reading comprehension.

It is important for teachers to note that there are basically two types of **struggling** readers, namely:

1. struggling readers who cannot yet decode properly (and so cannot yet extract and construct meaning from a text independently)
2. struggling readers whose decoding skills are adequate for their grade level but who still struggle to properly comprehend the texts they are reading (perhaps because they are not yet wholly fluent)

As was discussed in Module 3, learners whose decoding skills are weak read slowly and inaccurately. Reading slowly hampers comprehension, as working memory is tied up with figuring out the code. Consequently, the reader does not have enough attentional capacity and memory to take note of clues in the text needed for constructing meaning. Slow and inaccurate decoders forget what was read earlier in the text and thus fail to integrate ideas across the text to comprehend at a deeper level. Such learners need help in decoding more accurately and in increasing their reading fluency to the point where they have sufficient working memory to extract and construct meaning from the text when they read on their own. It is very important for these learners to reach the ORF benchmarks commensurate with their grades.

The struggling readers in the second category may be able to read words and sentences fairly adequately but they may struggle to integrate their meaning and understand the text as a coherent whole. They might understand explicitly stated information in the text but fail to use text clues to make inferences or see connections across paragraphs, and thus be unable to reach deeper levels of comprehension, meaning that they fall into the bracket of poor readers (Kirwan 1983) (levels of comprehension are discussed in the next unit).

Once learners can decode with at least 95% or more accuracy, their reading speed should be increased to levels appropriate to ORF benchmarks in their language. Only then will they have the processing potential to extract and construct meaning from the texts they read. How well they do this depends on their knowledge and their ability to apply their knowledge in one or more of the components of reading comprehension:

- language (knowledge of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse)
- vocabulary (size and depth of word knowledge in the language that they are reading)

- background knowledge
- social knowledge
- cognition (are they making inferences, following time sequences, perceiving causal or contrastive connections, integrating information across sentences and paragraphs?)
- literacy knowledge (are they sensitive to story structure in narratives?; can they identify main ideas in information texts?; do they relate visuals to the text?)
- comprehension monitoring

(For more information on decoding and language skills refer to Module 2 *Oral language proficiency development, vocabulary building and motivation for reading* and Module 3 *Decoding: Alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency and morphological awareness.*)

Conclusion

This unit discusses the different components that underpin the ability to read texts with comprehension. Reading comprehension is always embedded within a larger sociocultural context and can also be viewed from the perspective of the three elements always present in reading, namely the text, the reader and the reading activity.

In order to help learners who struggle with reading comprehension, teachers need to understand that reading comprehension assumes high levels of precision and understanding; even if learners seem to be quite competent readers, they may still be missing important aspects of the texts they read. In order to improve learners' reading comprehension levels teachers need to identify what is causing problems with comprehension.

Self-assessment activities

These are 'quickie' assessment activities to check how well you have understood key concepts discussed in this unit and whether you are able to perceive the pedagogical implications of such concepts in the teaching of reading.

Note: The key to these self-assessment activities is given in the Appendix at the end of this module. If you score less than 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

1. In each of the statements below provide **the appropriate missing word (or words)**. (5)

   a) Both the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope model (2001) argue that reading comprehension is a product that comprises two basic sets of skills, namely _____ and _____ . (2)

b) The role that _____ plays in reading is very important in beginning reading. (1)

c) In agglutinating languages such as the African languages,_____ is particularly important in aiding word and sentence meaning. (1)

d) _____ refers to everything one knows about the world, people, animals, objects and events. (1)

2. Indicate which one of the following statements is **false**. (1)

a) Narrative and information texts are the text types mostly used in schools.

b) The three elements always present in the reading process are text, activity and reader.

c) Getting a mark of 60% for a reading comprehension test can be regarded as a good performance.

d) To be able to help learners who struggle with reading comprehension it is vitally important for teachers to correctly identify where the reading problem lies.

3. Indicate which of the following statements is the **correct** one. (1)

a) Even if some learners read very slowly, they can still easily construct meaning from the text.

b) Reading with comprehension depends on various code, linguistic, cognitive and literacy related knowledge and capabilities.

c) The success of interventions that teachers put in place to help struggling readers will be largely determined by how well the teachers monitor the intervention.

d) Once learners can decode with at least 85% accuracy, their reading speed will increase to levels appropriate to ORF norms in their language.

4. Consider the following story and then select **the option** which is an **inaccurate reflection** of this text. (1)

One special Friday Yusuf's father gets dressed before a flicker of light brightens the sky. He pulls on his heavy weather-proof jacket and the green woollen cap that covers his ears. He waves his boy goodbye. Yusuf's eyes brighten when Papa says, "Today is the day I will catch a fish and bring a gift home for you." (taken from A fish and a gift, originally published by Book Dash: bookdash.org[1])

a) Learners can extract information from sentence 1 explicitly informing them that the story starts very early in the morning.

b) Learners can draw on their background knowledge in sentence 2 to infer that the kind of work that the father does requires warm clothing.

c) Learners need to draw on their morphological and discourse knowledge to understand who is referred to in ***He*** *waves…* in sentence 3.

d) Learners can draw on their social knowledge in order to understand how Yusuf is feeling from the description *Yusuf's eyes brighten* in sentence 4.

[1] This story is available in English, isiZulu and Sesotho on the Book Dash website: bookdash.org

Unit 3: Levels and processes of reading comprehension

Introduction

This unit explores what it means to understand a text. The physical text that we see is one-dimensional, but the meaning its words and sentences contain can be multidimensional. When we read a text, we can understand it in different ways and at different levels. We can read a text at a fairly basic and superficial level, or we can read it at a deeper level and make connections and interpret it in ways that we didn't when we first read it quickly. Words such as *superficial level* and *deep level* are metaphors that we use to indicate **hierarchy** (or **ranking**), a system in which things are arranged from top to bottom according to some feature, such as their importance, their composition or their difficulty. In theories of reading comprehension, the different 'levels' of comprehension are usually explained in terms of how information in the text is being processed. In this unit we examine the different levels of text comprehension and the different reading processes involved in their comprehension. It is important for reading teachers to have good knowledge of these different levels, as it is largely through modelling the thinking involved in reading and posing questions about the text at these different levels that teachers can help learners become better readers and engage with texts at a deeper level of meaning.

Extracting information and constructing meaning: clues and connections

As we saw in Unit 1, reading comprehension is a *process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language* (Snow 2002). How well readers extract information and construct meaning from a text and how well they interact with the text depends on their own knowledge, thinking skills and experience of reading different kinds of text, which in turn determines how superficially or deeply they comprehend a text or what kind of meaning they have missed or misunderstood.

Besides background knowledge, there are also text factors that influence how deeply a reader reads a text. Two text factors that can affect how we extract information and construct meaning are (i) the clues in a text from which we make connections and how explicit they are, and (ii) the distance between bits of information in a text from which we make connections. Explicitness and distance can affect the ease/difficulty with which we process information, thereby affecting the 'level' at which we process information. For example, are we making an inference from information *within* a sentence or *between* two sentences that are next to each other (called a **local** or nearby connection), or are we making an inference from a sentence in one paragraph and linking it to information given later in sentences in another paragraph? In the latter case, the connection is more **distant**. Consider the examples in (i) and (ii) below.

i) The teacher asked the children to hand in their homework. John smiled at the teacher and took his book out of his bag, but Mpho looked away and Sally pretended to be reading.

A reader who is familiar with English and African culture will know that first names will usually reflect the person's gender. So, when reading sentence 2 above we can infer that John is a boy learner and Sally is a girl learner as these are fairly obvious clues in English and they are local clues, as they occur within sentence 2. However, like English, certain first names in the African languages are gender neutral, so we will need to read further in the text before we know for sure whether Mpho in this text is a boy or girl, because that name can be given to a boy or a girl. Furthermore, based on our social knowledge (how learners may behave when required to submit homework), we may tentatively infer that perhaps John is the only one who did his homework, as Mpho and Sally seem to engage in avoidance behaviour! This is a local connection made between sentences 1 and 2 in (i) above, where sentence 1 provides a context for us to interpret the children's behaviour in sentence 2. This is the mental picture we are building in our head as we read. We will only know if our mental picture is correct or not as we continue reading the story in (ii). We update and adjust the mental picture as we get new information and construct meaning from it.

(ii) The teacher asked the children to hand in their homework. John smiled at the teacher and took his book out of his bag, but Mpho looked away and Sally pretended to be reading.

The teacher was puzzled as she knew the children well. Mpho loved school and came from a happy home with four loving sisters who made sure their baby brother did his homework every day. Why was he looking out the window when he was usually the first to hand in his homework? And Sally was the best reader in the class, yet the book she was reading was the wrong way up!

The second paragraph provides an indication that Mpho is a boy, but this is more distant and comes in only sentence 2 of the second paragraph, where he is described as the 'baby brother' of four loving sisters. And the clue that the teacher knew that Sally 'pretended to be reading' is also distant, as it comes only at the end of the second paragraph. These more distant clues are ones that weak readers often miss, especially if they read slowly and don't have enough working memory in which to store information while reading in order to make such links.

Research has shown that learners who struggle with reading comprehension usually find it easier (i) to process explicit information than information that is implied, and they also find it easier (ii) to make local than more distant connections, even when there are explicit clues in the text. Also, the ability to use information in the text to extract and construct meaning depends on (iii) a reader's language, background, cognitive, social or literacy knowledge. All these factors (using clues and making connections, both local and distant, based on knowledge) affect how

deeply learners comprehend texts. In text (ii) above, if readers lack linguistic, cultural and social knowledge, then they will miss these clues. Also, if learners read mindlessly and do not engage with the text, then they will miss the clues altogether or fail to apply their knowledge to make the relevant text connections.

We now turn to levels of comprehension and see how the processing of explicit versus implied information and the distance between text elements can affect the 'level' at which answers to reading comprehension questions occur.

Levels of reading comprehension

The different levels of reading comprehension are often described by educational researchers as **taxonomies** of thinking skills that are arranged hierarchically (from easy to more challenging) and that readers should master to guarantee that learning is deep and solid. The different levels of comprehension in effect refer to "the thinking processes that are stimulated in order to arrive at answers to reading comprehension questions" (Hawker Brownlow Education 2010: 3).

Reading comprehension levels can be loosely compared to the layers of soil, as shown in Figure 4. The text is what we see at the top, the topsoil or explicitly stated facts. The second and succeeding levels indicate the depth of comprehension that the reader can gain from the text while they are reading, or on re-reading the text. While the different levels in the soil are not exactly the same as the different processes that occur in reading, the overall image is one of different layers, only one of which is explicitly visible. One needs to bear in mind that in the skilled reader all these processes or levels are in operation at the same time during reading. Pretorius and Murray (2019) use a similar analogy of an iceberg to depict these levels. Most of an iceberg is unseen, below the sea water level.

Figure 4: Levels of soil as a metaphor for levels of comprehension

There are a variety of educational taxonomies that demonstrate these levels/processes of understanding. For example, Barrett's taxonomy of comprehension (1968) is often recommended for teachers to use in engaging and deepening learners' thinking about texts. The taxonomy has five levels:

1. **Literal comprehension** relates to ideas and information that are explicitly stated.
2. **Reorganisation** involves the analysis, synthesis, and/or organisation of ideas or information explicitly stated in the text (e.g. comparing information, sorting out the temporal sequence of events, matching parts to the whole, etc).
3. **Inferential comprehension** refers to 'reading between the lines', when readers connect ideas and information explicitly stated in the text with their background knowledge or personal experience as a basis to guess or speculate more deeply about what the text conveys.
4. **Evaluation** relates to judgment about things dealt with in the text, their accuracy, feasibility, the points of view expressed in a text, whether the text contains fake information, etc.
5. **Appreciation** refers to a reader's sensitivity or emotional reaction to the merits of the work (e.g. a novel) and how the author used style or imagery to depict characters and relate a story. Although this level of comprehension usually relates to works of literature, it can also be applied to non-fiction.

A useful and somewhat simpler categorisation of the abilities required for different processes of comprehension is captured by the ***PIRLS Framework for Assessing Reading Achievement*** (Mullis and Martin 2021). It reflects four levels of comprehension, namely:

1. The ability to focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information
2. The ability to make straightforward inferences
3. The ability to interpret and integrate ideas and information
4. The ability to evaluate and critique content and textual elements.

Further details of this framework are summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2: PIRLS framework for assessing reading comprehension

Comprehension process	Relationship between the question and the information in the text, and the reader's own knowledge
The ability to focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information	The reader has to focus on the text at the word, phrase, and sentence level in order to construct meaning. At this level readers can understand information that is stated explicitly in the text. This explicit information provides the basics of the text like names of characters, their actions, and events in the story. The reader may also have to retrieve pieces of information from several pertinent locations in the text to construct and organise information being presented or to make a summary of a narrative. Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following: • Identifying and retrieving information that is relevant to the specific goal of reading and is explicitly stated in the text; • Looking for specific ideas stated in the text; • Searching for definitions of words or phrases; • Identifying the setting of a story (e.g., time and place); • Finding the topic sentence or main idea (when explicitly stated); and • Identifying specific information in a graphic (e.g., explicit information given in a graph, table, or map).
The ability to make straightforward inferences	As readers construct meaning from text, they make inferences about ideas or information not explicitly stated. Making inferences allows readers to move beyond the surface of texts and resolve the gaps in meaning that often occur in texts. Some of these inferences are straightforward in that they are based primarily on information that is contained in one place in the text – readers may merely need to connect two or more ideas or pieces of information. Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following: • Inferring that one event caused another event; • Inferring how a character feels or giving the reason for a character's action from their behaviour; • Describing the relationship between two characters; and • Identifying which section of the text would help for a particular purpose (e.g. answering a specific question).

The ability to interpret and integrate ideas and information	As readers interpret and integrate, they are attempting to construct a more specific or more complete understanding of the text by integrating personal knowledge and experience with meaning that resides within the text. For example, readers may draw on experience to infer a character's underlying motive or to construct a mental image of the information conveyed. They often need to draw on their understanding of the world, as well as their background knowledge and experiences, more than they do for straightforward inferences. Many of the connections they make at this level involve more distant connections across paragraphs or across the whole text. Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following: • Discerning the overall message or theme of a text; • Considering an alternative to actions of characters; • Comparing and contrasting text information; • Inferring a story's mood or tone; • Interpreting a real-world application of text information; • Comparing and contrasting information presented within (and across) texts.
The ability to evaluate and critique content and textual elements	As readers evaluate the content and elements of a text, the focus shifts from constructing meaning to critically considering the text itself. Readers engaged in this process step back from a text in order to evaluate and critique it. Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following: • Judging the completeness or clarity of information in the text; • Evaluating the likelihood that the events described could really happen; • Evaluating how likely an author's argument would be to change what people think and do; • Judging how well the title of the text reflects the main theme; • Describing the effect of language features, such as metaphors or tone; • Describing the effect of the graphic elements in the text; • Determining the point of view or bias of the text; or determining an author's perspective on the central topic; • Judging the credibility of the information in the text.

The PIRLS framework identifies explicit information in the text as being the first or basic level of comprehension, while the levels that follow are higher-order comprehension levels and become increasingly more difficult. Note that PIRLS merges the Evaluation and Appreciation categories into one level (Level 4). This framework identifies inferences as important aspects of reading comprehension. However, it is important to note that making inferences can occur at all levels of text beyond the literal, explicit level – i.e., we can also make inferences when we integrate, evaluate, or appreciate aspects of a text.

The PIRLS four levels of comprehension can be used as guidelines in formulating reading comprehension questions and in assessing how deeply learners have comprehended a text. Children who struggle with reading comprehension may answer level 1 questions more easily (those relating to information stated explicitly in the text) but they often find the higher-order questions more difficult. Struggling comprehenders often find it difficult to make inferences while reading, and they find it difficult to integrate or evaluate information across larger chunks of text – e.g., across paragraphs or across pages of text. As you will remember from the previous unit (and from Module 3), working memory plays an important role in reading comprehension. If one cannot hold information in memory for long while reading, then it is difficult to integrate and evaluate information in the text.

Below is an example of a traditional story from Indonesia followed in Table 3 by the types of questions that teachers can ask about the story in relation to each of the four comprehension processes to ensure that learners are engaged in deeper levels of comprehension.

The Story of Sura and Baya

Once upon a time there were two animals who were friends. Sura was a shark and Baya was a crocodile. Both of these animals lived in the sea and on land, and although they were friends they tended to fight because they were greedy.

One day the friends went to look for food on land, and Baya saw a goat.

“Mmmm! That’s my lunch,” said Baya.

“Not at all, that’s my food, you’re greedy,” Sura said to Baya.

Then they started fighting. They collided head-to-head, circling each other while hitting the water with their strong tails. Baya bit Sura’s tail. Sura jumped but Baya had already cut off a piece of his tail. This made Sura very angry, and he leaped forward and bit Baya with his sharp teeth. They fought and bit each other until they were both bloody and tired.

To avoid further wars, they decided that they would live in different places and hunt for food where they lived. So, Sura went to the sea while Baya stayed on the river. The border was the shore.

One day Sura woke up hungry and went to look for food in the river because there was little food in the sea. Baya was very angry when he saw that Sura did not keep his promise. They fought again, biting each other and thrashing their tails. Baya chased Sura back to the sea. These two lived alone for the rest of their lives.

https://www.facebook.com/storytellingclubindonesia/posts/the-legend-of-sura-and-bayacontoh-narrative-text-lagenda-sura-dan-bayaa-long-tim/569899263096246/

Table 3: Questions on the narrative text based on PIRLS processes of comprehension

PIRLS levels of comprehension		**Questions**
The ability to focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information	At this level readers can understand information that is stated explicitly in the text. This information provides the basics of the text like names of characters, their actions, and events in the story.	What are the names of the animals in the story and what kind of animals are they? Where did the animals live before they fought over a goat? What was Sura doing in the river when Baya saw him and became angry?
The ability to make straightforward inferences	Here, readers can read between the lines and make more intricate connections across paragraphs. Some of these inferences are straightforward in that they are based primarily on information that is contained in one place in the text – readers may merely need to connect two or more ideas or pieces of information, e.g., to infer that one event causes another. They can identify which section of the text would help for a particular purpose.	Who are the main characters in this story?[2] What was the promise that Sura did not keep? How do you think Sura and Baya felt after their last fight? Give a reason for your answer.

[2] Note that this is an inferential question, because the story does not explicitly state that Baya and Sura are the 'main characters'. Our literacy knowledge about how stories work and story structure enables us to make this inference.

The ability to interpret and integrate ideas and information	Readers can identify critical features in the text and make generalisations. They can follow complex arguments and procedures. They may need to see how the information can be applied or compared or contrasted with information in other texts.	Why do you think that the friends created a border between themselves? How did the two animals' greed affect them eventually?
The ability to evaluate and critique content and textual elements	Readers can identify themes and the author's stance; they can interpret events or arguments in the text and can give evidence from a text to support their evaluation of the text. They can judge the completeness or clarity of information in the text. They must be able to evaluate the likelihood that the information gained is true and complete.	When Baya saw the goat, he said "Mmmm! That's my lunch." Instead of fighting over the goat, what could Baya have said instead? Mmmm! …… Explain how you think the story could have unfolded if the two friends were not greedy? What important life lesson did the two characters not understand? Select one option: a) They did not understand that sharks and crocodiles are different. b) They did not understand that goats do not live in water. c) They did not understand how borders work. d) They did not understand that unity is strength.

Note that the questions in Table 3 are arranged according to their level in the PIRLS framework for levels of comprehension. In a reading comprehension, they would normally be arranged according to the sequence of events in the text. Level 3 and 4 questions usually come towards the end, as their answers usually require the reader to have read most if not all the information in the text to be able to answer appropriately. For example, the last question is about a moral (the big idea) that can be derived from the story, and one cannot answer it unless one has read and understood the whole story and understood the message from it that the author is conveying.

Conclusion

This unit looked at the different processes involved in understanding a text such as extracting literal information, making close or more distant inferences, re-ordering information in the text in our minds to better understand it, or integrating and evaluating information within and across the whole text. These different processes can be associated with 'levels' of reading comprehension and the questions that are posed to assess comprehension, ranging from easy to more challenging. Understanding these levels and the different processes associated with them helps teachers better develop and assess learners' reading comprehension by including questions that cover a range of processes and different levels of ease or difficulty.

Self-assessment activities

These are 'quickie' assessment activities to check how well you have understood key concepts discussed in this unit and whether you are able to perceive the pedagogical implications of such concepts in the teaching of reading.

Note: The key to these self-assessment activities is given in the Appendix at the end of this module. If you score less than 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

1. In each of the statements below provide **the appropriate missing word (or words)**. (5)

    a) Reading comprehension is a process of simultaneously extracting information and _____ meaning. This requires learners to pay attention and _____ with the text. (2)

    b) Research has shown that learners who struggle with reading comprehension usually find it easier to make _____ than more _____ connections in text. (2)

    c) The PIRLS framework identifies _____ _____ in the text as being the first or basic level of comprehension. (1)

2. Indicate which one of the following statements is **false**. (1)

    a) Not understanding the theme or 'big idea' means that the reader cannot understand texts at a basic level.

    b) Readers who can judge the completeness or clarity of information in the text are operating at a high level of comprehension.

c) Readers who can retrieve information that is stated explicitly in the text are operating at the first and basic level of comprehension.

d) Struggling comprehenders often find it difficult to make inferences while reading.

3. Indicate which of the following statements is the **correct** one. (1)

a) The highest level of understanding a text according to the PIRLS framework is the ability to interpret and integrate ideas and information.

b) Two factors that can affect how a reader constructs meaning while reading are the clues in a text and the distance between the bits of information.

c) Analysing how characters feel or giving the reason for characters' actions from their behaviour is an example of retrieving explicitly stated information.

d) Judging the credibility of information in a text is an example of the ability to interpret and integrate ideas.

4. Consider the following scenario and then select only **the option** which is **an accurate reflection** of this scenario. (1)

Teacher Zandile has several readers in her Grade 3 class who read slowly and who struggle to read extended texts. After reading Unit 3, Teacher Zandile wants to assess her Grade 3 learners' reading comprehension in Term 1. Below is the reading passage she has selected and five questions she has posed for the learners to answer. She has only asked five questions so as to get a rough idea of how her struggling readers will cope with a formal written reading comprehension assessment.

Mphemba's cattle

Mphemba farms with Nguni cattle. He has been farming with cattle for more than 40 years and has become a very successful breeder of Nguni cattle. He cares for his cattle and keeps record of everything. He keeps record of things such as the milk he gets from each cow, the calves born from each cow, the cost and quantities of feed he provides for each cow, the dates and cost of the dipping treatment for the cows, the weekly

weight gain of the calves. This information enables him to determine the cost of raising calves and the ideal time to sell them and thus ensuring the profitability of breeding cattle.

He divided his farm into five different camps and he rotates the cattle grazing in the camps to prevent over-grazing. Each camp has its own clean water troughs. The water is supplied from windmills each with its own reservoir. The water runs from the reservoir to the drinking trough through plastic pipes that are buried in the ground. The drinking troughs have stop valves that allow the water to flow into the trough when the water level drops below a particular point. This system ensures that there is always enough water in the trough for the cattle.

Mphemba's two daughters and two sons take turns looking after the cattle when they are not at school. The daughters check the stop valves regularly and clean the water troughs when needed. The sons help to look after the cattle generally and assist in milking the cows each evening, weighing the calves each week and dipping the cattle.

Questions

1. *What kind of cattle does Mphemba farm with? (1)*
2. *How many children does Mphemba have? (1)*
3. *Why do you think the farmer weighs the calves each week? (2)*
4. *Why do you think that the pipes providing water to the drinking troughs are buried in the ground? (1)*
5. *Supply two reasons why you would regard Mphemba as a successful farmer. (2)*

a) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Zandile has formulated two questions (Q1 and Q2) that require learners to retrieve explicitly stated information.

b) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Zandile has selected a text that does not directly explain what 'over-grazing' means and will thus confuse readers.

c) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Zandile selected a reading passage that lends itself to the formulation of questions that cover all levels of reading comprehension.

d) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Zandile has formulated questions that require too much knowledge about farming that will disadvantage readers from urban areas.

Unit 4: Explicitly teaching reading comprehension

Introduction

In this unit we focus on some of the ways that teachers can help improve their learners' reading comprehension. Research shows that teachers are a very important factor in any learning, and the instruction of any new skill or concept is one of the things that influences effective learning. It is therefore important for teachers to know how to help learners to read with greater comprehension and how to identify and remediate reading comprehension problems. Failure to read with comprehension leads to failure in reading and in academic achievement in all subjects.

The ability to comprehend the meaning of texts develops along a continuum that is in effect lifelong. Our vocabulary expands throughout our lifetime, as does our background knowledge and our ability to comprehend texts at a deeper level. Much of this growth cannot be formally taught (for example, there is simply not enough time for a large vocabulary to be taught – it can grow only through an individual's independent reading). However, research has shown that learners benefit when teachers explicitly show learners how texts work and explicitly teach them comprehension strategies and skills.

Explicit instruction in reading comprehension

In their research on reading comprehension in the classroom, Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) found that many teachers reported that they teach reading comprehension but what they usually do in the classroom is give children a text to read followed by questions on the text that the learners need to answer, either orally or in writing. This, however, is ***assessing*** reading comprehension, not ***teaching*** reading comprehension. There is a widespread assumption that by 'doing' reading comprehension children will become better at it. Research shows that this is not so and that many children continue to perform poorly in reading comprehension despite 'doing' reading comprehension in the classroom. Instead, research shows that when teachers do 'text work' in the classroom and explicitly show children how texts are structured, how to use clues in the text to construct meaning and how to apply strategies to read more effectively, then all children benefit, across the board. In other words, weak and average readers get better, and even skilled readers who usually perform quite well in reading comprehension tests become even better.

Before we discuss strategies to build comprehension, we would like to use an analogy from Pretorius and Murray (2019: 184) to help teachers formulate an idea on teaching reading comprehension strategies:

> *One afternoon Mrs Jordan goes to pick her son up from a soccer practice at the local soccer club. She arrives early and watches the practice session. The coach first gets the players to jog around the field twice, then he gets them to do warm-up exercises.*

He talks to them about the importance of being fit and building up strength and stamina for playing soccer. After that he explains a particular technique in dribbling the ball that he wants them to practise. He shows them the technique, explains the benefits of using this technique, and mentions some famous players who are particularly good at using this technique. Then he gets them to practise the technique in pairs, while he watches them carefully and gives feedback. After that players play a practice match. He blows the whistle often to stop play and explain a point or to demonstrate to the team how to improve a particular skill that some of the players are struggling to master. While watching the coach interacting with his players, a thought suddenly strikes Mrs Jordan: should she become more like a coach in her reading lessons and show learners explicitly what to do when reading and how to do it. She feels quite excited at the thought of becoming a reading coach and at home that evening thinks about possible ways in which she might coach her learners to become better comprehenders while they read. Mrs Jordan's sudden insight (what is called an ah-ha moment) that comprehension can be taught explicitly is an idea that has been promoted by some reading researchers since the 1980s (Brown and Ambruster 1984), and research findings indicate that it can be beneficial in improving comprehension.

As you read about the various strategies and tips on how to teach reading comprehension in this and the following unit, remember that you are a reading coach and you need to guide each learner to acquire and practise each strategy (Pretorius & Murray 2020: 183-187).

Some general teaching comprehension tips and strategies

Reading comprehension skills can be taught, modelled and practised in a planned progression within a lesson (before, during and after reading) and also across lessons (e.g. during the week). You cannot teach all the skills and strategies in one lesson or even one week. Aim to focus on teaching only one or two aspects of texts or reading comprehension strategies a week and integrate the 'old' and 'new' text aspects and strategies across lessons so that learning is consolidated.

Use the gradual release model of teaching (*I show you; We do it together; You do it on your own*) as a basis for comprehension instruction. You can also 'chunk' the reading lesson into before, during and after reading, and you can read a text more than once in the lesson. You can also read the same text across the week, focusing on different aspects of it and demonstrating the application of different strategies while reading it on different days. Here are five basic tips to incorporate into your lessons when teaching reading comprehension:

- **Provide explicit instruction.** Have a clear idea of what new skill or strategy you want the learners to learn and practise in each lesson. At the start of the lesson, tell your learners which skill of strategy you are going to focus on. Explain what it is and why it is important to know about it. This is the first step in the *I show you* part of the gradual release model of instruction. This is done before you start reading a text with the learners.
- **Modelling** the skill or strategy is important. Modelling happens when teachers show learners how to do something and use 'think alouds' to demonstrate how skilled readers

think and use reasoning skills to engage with the text and figure things out. This is the second step in the *I show you* part of the gradual release model of instruction. This can happen before, during or after reading.

- **Do 'text work'.** This refers to the way in which the teacher draws the learners' attention to the text itself (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, visuals, etc.) while reading a text, asking questions about the text and looking for answers in the text to the questions. In doing this 'text work', the teacher shows learners how the information in the text and the knowledge in a reader's head continuously interact and how the text information can expand or modify our knowledge of the world. Much of this text work happens during reading, but some of it can also happen before or after reading.
- **Provide opportunities for practice.** Once you have explained and modelled the skill or strategy that you are teaching, read a text together with the learners and let the learners apply and practise it. Making mistakes is a natural part of learning, so create a safe learning environment and give your learners corrective feedback on their attempts, so that they know whether they are applying it correctly or not. If not, do not get angry or impatient but provide supportive feedback, to encourage them to try again until they get it right. Opportunities for practice can happen before, during and after reading a text. For example, the teacher can facilitate the learners' interaction with a text through text work, or their application of a comprehension strategy during or after reading a paragraph or subsequent paragraphs, providing them with guidance and feedback.
- **Create 'habits of mind'**. Integrate the skills and strategies across lessons so that the learners get plenty of opportunities to familiarise themselves with the strategies and see how to apply them in different texts, irrespective of the text type. Initially they will apply strategies in a conscious manner but once they get used to applying them, the strategies become 'habits of mind' and the learners adopt them unconsciously.

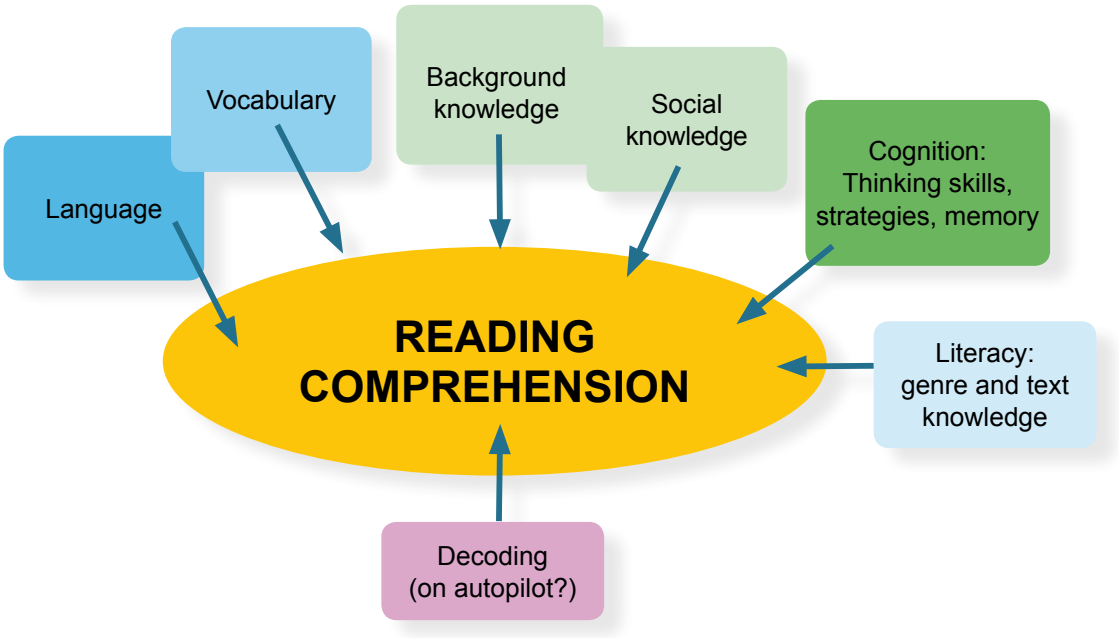
Teachers need to teach comprehension in a classroom environment that emphasises reading and writing as meaning-making processes. Teaching reading comprehension strategies must include emphasis on comprehension as being the way of reaching desirable reading goals.

Comprehension is important in all school grades, though of course in the higher grades it gets more complex and relies increasingly on higher-order thinking skills that support making inferences from texts and evaluating them. However, the explicit teaching of reading comprehension can begin as early as in Foundation Phase and be adapted according to the learners' grade level.

Good **word-level skills** allow learners to identify, or decode, words in texts accurately and fluently. The relationship between print and speech is understood and there is knowledge of **language structures** (word classes – nouns, verbs, etc.), grammatical functions in sentences (subject-verb-object), grammatical constructions (subject-verb agreement/concordial agreement), syntax (word order and the relationship between words and sentences), and semantics (the analysis of word meanings and relations between them).

A growing **vocabulary** enables readers to understand the meaning of words and connected text. Instruction in this area involves strategies to build vocabulary and activities to strengthen listening comprehension. For reading for academic purposes learners have to know typical academic discourse words and text structure signal words (e.g. *because*, *however*, *by contrast*, *as a result*, that point to whether the text or portion of the text is a description, a sequence, a comparison or contrast, a problem with a solution, or information about a cause and its effect).

Let us now turn to two aspects of texts that form an important part of explicit instruction in reading comprehension, namely text types and text structure (dealt with in Unit 2). We present them together because text structure is determined largely by text type or genre. They fall under the component of reading comprehension referred to in Unit 2 as part of literacy knowledge – knowing about written language, genres and texts (the light blue component in the visual).



Text type and text structure

The two main types of text that learners are exposed to in primary school are narrative and information texts, so we will focus on these. Children in Foundation Phase are commonly exposed to narrative texts and learn to read narrative texts first, but information texts are also included, and by the time learners move to Intermediate Phase and start learning different subjects, they are increasingly exposed to information texts via their content subject textbooks. Narrative and information texts are structured differently. As explained in Unit 2, knowledge about text structure is an important component of reading comprehension, so it is important for teachers to draw learners' attention to these different structures.

Narrative texts and their structure

Telling and listening to stories have been part of human history for thousands of years. Humans use stories not only for entertainment but also to make sense of their world and provide reflection on and guidance for life events and how to deal with life's challenges. Initially stories were told orally, but with the advent of writing, written stories have become an important part of our everyday lives. Narrative texts include any type of writing that 'tells a story' by relating a series of events concerning one or more characters. It includes both non-fiction (e.g. diaries, newspaper stories about people, biographies (such as *Long Walk to Freedom*, about Nelson Mandela's life) and fiction (made-up stories). Both fiction and non-fiction narrative forms tell stories that use imaginative language and express emotion using imagery, metaphors, and symbols (Sejnost & Thiese 2010). All cultures across the world have storytelling traditions as a way of teaching children about the world, so using written narrative texts in early schooling by way of children's storybooks is no exception. Narratives are said to be central to children's learning. They teach children about the world, about life, and help them organise ideas and explore new ideas and experiences.

Many stories around the world have a common structure which is referred to as **story grammar**. Lehr (1987: 550) defines story grammar as "a rule system devised for the purpose of describing the regularities found in (narrative) text." These regularities include the following:

- A **setting**. This refers to the time and/or place in which the story occurs. The setting can be vague and general (*Once upon a time*), or it can be described in some detail. **Characters**. There can be one or more main characters, and several secondary characters. Characters can also involve animals. Talking animals are common in traditional tales.
- The story recounts events revolving around some or other **problem** that a main character (or more) must solve. This kicks off the main action and events in the story.
- The story ends with the **resolution** of the problem.
- Besides its entertainment value, the purpose of telling the story is often to convey some kind of message or moral, also referred to as the theme or the **Big Idea**.

Here is an example of a Japanese folk tale, ***The Peach Boy***, and how its story structure can be represented visually *(https://www.education.com/worksheet/article/momotaro-japanese-folktale/)*. The story is summarised below.

> Once upon a time there was an old couple who didn't have any children. One day while the old woman was washing clothes in a river, a big peach came floating towards her. She took the peach home to surprise her husband for dinner.
>
> The old woman began to cut the peach but was caught by surprise when the peach split open and a baby boy jumped out. They were so happy because they had always wanted a child. They named him Momotaro, which means Peach Boy in Japanese.

Years later Momotaro heard of a place called Ogre Island. He told his parents that he wanted to go there to stop the ogres from being mean to the people of his village. The ogres scared them and stole many treasures from them.

On the way to Ogre Island, Momotaro met a talking dog, monkey and pheasant. They all agreed to help Momotaro. Momotaro and his friends fought the ogres. Momotaro told the ogres to leave the people of his village alone and to give back the treasure that they stole from them. The ogres apologised and returned the treasure to Momotaro. He and his new friends returned home and the village was happy and peaceful again.

The diagram below depicting Momotaro's story is an example of the regularities found in most narrative texts.

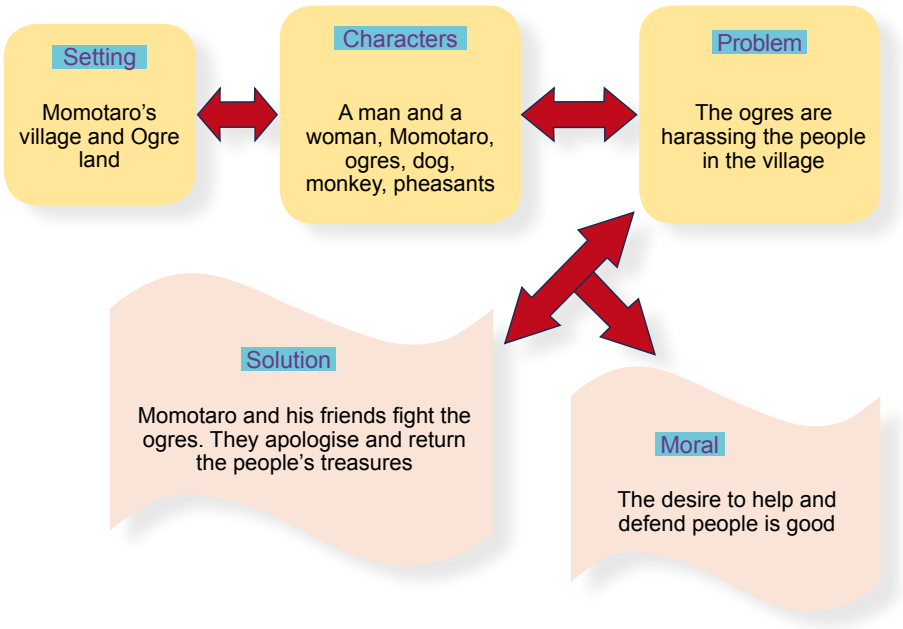


Figure 5: Story structure of the Momotaro narrative

There are three things to note about the story structure in the Momotaro narrative.

- The setting is rather vague, and the story takes place sometime in the past in a village in Japan. It is described only as "*Once upon a time*". This is typical of fairy stories or traditional tales. However, in some stories details about the setting are provided and the setting may be an important aspect of the story.

- Some stories have more than one problem-resolution structure. You will note that there are actually two problems in the Momotaro narrative – the first and minor one concerns the elderly couple who did not have children (problem) and the little boy who pops out of the peach pip and becomes their adopted son (resolution of problem). The second problem is the main one – the ogres who live on an island near the village, scare the people and steal things that were valuable to the people. Momotaro, with help from his friends, confronts the ogres and peace is restored.
- Readers may have different responses to a story and interpret it in different ways. There is thus often no single fixed moral or Big Idea in a story and we can often identify more than one theme or idea. For example, other possible themes in the above story include: it takes courage and effort to solve a problem; solving a problem often requires a team effort. One could also argue that the Momotaro story represents the 'one good turn deserves another' idea. Momotaro is repaying the kindness of his adopted parents who loved and cared for him by protecting them (and their village) from the ogres.

There are many different ways of representing story structure visually (as you will find if you google story structure on the internet!). The story glove, shown in Figure 6, is one way to help young children learn the structure of narratives. A teacher can easily make a glove from felt or any cloth material (it can also be made from cardboard) and the glove becomes an interactive learning tool as Grade 1 learners put it on and wiggle their fingers to identify the different parts of the story.

Figure 6: Story glove

Explicitly teaching children about the structure of narratives can start as early as in Grade R and Grade 1. Using the gradual release model, after explaining and modelling the five common elements of a story to the learners, the teacher can read a story to the children and then use questions to guide them in identifying the different elements of the story.

Knowing about story structure helps learners understand stories in many ways:

- A story is developed through a sequence of activities or events which revolve around some kind of problem and how it is solved, so it provides a framework for remembering what the story is about.
- The five elements in the structure provide a useful way to summarise stories, to remember the temporal sequence of events, and to reflect on what the story is telling us about life in general.
- It can help children pay attention to detail in a story and how stories differ in their details, e.g. how much detail is given about the setting, the characters, how they resolve the problem, etc. Some authors explicitly describe their characters (he was tall and strong and fearless) but some authors give us indirect clues about the characters that need to be inferred from their decisions, actions, responses and relationships with other characters. This helps children develop inferential skills about people's motives, emotions and behaviours which in turn helps develop their social cognition. (*Why did Momotaro go to Ogre Island? What do you think this tells us about his character*?) Asking questions that help them make inferences also gives them practice in integrating different parts of a story to understand it more deeply.
- Asking questions about the Big Idea helps learners to step back from the details and think about what the story reflects about life. This helps to develop their interpretation and evaluation skills. Asking questions about the Big Idea can start as early as in Grade R (*Now, children, think about this story. What big idea do you think the story conveys to us? What life lesson do you think the author wants to share with us?*) Remember that questions about the Big Idea should be open-ended questions that don't have only one 'right' answer. But it is also important to teach the learners that their answers must be **justified** answers – the reasons for their interpretation must derive from evidence *in the text itself* and not from guessing or just be plucked 'from their air', so to speak.
- To develop higher-order thinking skills, teachers should ask questions that will guide the learners to think about things that they might not necessarily have thought about when they first listened to or read the story. For example, a teacher could say: *Some people resolve problems through violence and some by making a pact or agreement between groups. Does Momotaro use violence only to solve the problem of the ogres? What do you think? What parts of the story can you use to support your view?* This opens the way for discussion and helps children see that there are different ways of solving a problem. In this way, you help children to see links between stories and the real world (conflict can be resolved through talk, negotiation and coming to an agreement).

The Access Center of the United States Department of Education (2005) developed a *Story Grammar Elements Rating Scale* which teachers can use to teach learners how to analyse narrative text structures (and to guide them when they are asked to write their own story), as shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Rating scale for story grammar elements

Story Feature	0	1	2
Setting (Place and time)	No place/locale or place is mentioned.	A locale (e.g., "the woods," "Mount Everest") is given, but little description is offered.	The locale given is described vividly or is unique (e.g., "the town of Atlanta which sits between two rivers and covers over ten square miles," "the newly colonised planet Mintaka").
	The time when the story takes place is not provided. Note that "one day" or "once upon a time" is a generic and not a specific time reference and so scores 0.	The time is given but is traditional or vague in reference (e.g., "a long time ago," "twenty years in the future")	The time given is unusual or described in great detail (e.g., "during prehistoric times when man lived in caves and hunted for his food," "March 31st at 3:00 a.m.")
Main Character	No main character is established in the story.	A main character is established but very few descriptive details are given; the character may or may not have a name.	The main character is presented and described in great detail (e.g., personality traits and physical attributes).
The problem An initiating event that creates a problem	The problem or event which causes the main character to act is not presented.	The precipitating event is clearly evident; it can be a natural occurrence (e.g., "A landslide destroyed the village."), an internal response (e.g., "He felt lonely."), or an external event (e.g., "The ogre stole the king's crown.").	The initiating event is well described, unusual, or complex (e.g., "A meteor hit the mountain, which started the landslide that destroyed the village and everything that the man owned.").

The goal or motive (this drives the character to solve the problem)	A goal is not established.	A goal is presented but ill-defined (e.g., “Billy decided he would do something about it.”).	A goal is clearly articulated (e.g., “Billy decided he would do just about anything to rescue his friend.”). * Add one additional point if two or more goals are clearly articulated.
Resolution of problem (Actions/ events that attempt to resolve the problem)	The actions which the main character initiates to solve the problem are not presented or could not possibly lead to a resolution._	The attempt of the main character to solve the problem is presented and would be expected to lead to a resolution.	The actions of the main character demonstrate ingenuity or originality (e.g. “Did Momotaro only use one strategy to deal with the ogres?”). * Add one additional point if more than one episode is present.
Direct consequence	The direct consequences of the main character’s attempt to solve the problem and achieve the goal are not presented; the story does not conclude; the problem is not resolved.	The direct consequences of the main character’s actions are presented (e.g., “The man built a new home far away from any mountains and he lived there happily ever after,” or “Billy rescued his friend.”).	The direct consequences are presented, but the ending is unusual, humorous, or contains a moral (e.g., “It just goes to show that crime doesn’t pay,” “This is how he got the name Eagle Arrow,” or “The boy’s horse died just as it crossed the finish line in first place.”).

Emotions and feelings (can be expressed anywhere in the story)	The emotional reactions of the main character are not presented.	Some feelings of the main character are presented, but they are cursory (e.g., "Billy was relieved," or "The boy felt sad.").	The emotional reactions of the main character are expressed with depth (e.g., "The boy's heart sank in his chest as he watched his beloved horse, his friend, die.").
Dialogue	No dialogue is present in the story.	Dialogue is present in the story (e.g., 'Yes,' she said.).	Dialogue is present and is integral to plot progression (e.g., 'One day I'll have my cake and eat it too,' she mumbled in protest as she huffed her way out of the room.).

When readers have knowledge of these text features, they will be able to organise and process the text in ways that facilitate comprehension.

Some narrative **text types** (refer to Module 5 *Children's literature and teaching reading* for more information) that teachers can use to teach learners both structure and comprehension are: fable, folk tale, short story, novel, biography and autobiography.

Information texts and their structure

Information texts (also referred to as expository texts) differ greatly from narrative ones in tone, style, structure and text features. These texts are non-fiction and are the primary source of reading material used to present different kinds of instructional content (e.g., social studies, natural sciences, history, mathematics). Textbooks are non-fiction information texts and tend to be more complex than narrative texts because they present the learners with new topics, new vocabulary, concepts and often complex ideas and relations (Akhondi, Malayen & Samad 2011) that go beyond the readers' everyday knowledge. They often include a mixture of different types of text structures, like comparison and contrast, cause and effect, problem and solution, and sequence and description (Kraal, Koornneef, Saab & van den Broek 2018).

Roehling, Hebert, Nelson, and Bohaty (2017: 71) present several characteristics of expository texts that may contribute to difficulties with comprehension which teachers must be aware of and help learners with. Information texts mostly have:

- unfamiliar content
- technical vocabulary
- high density of facts
- cognitively demanding concepts.

Consider the text below on tortoises.

Tortoises

Tortoises are strange, prehistoric-looking animals that are slowly becoming extinct in our busy and overcrowded modern world. They belong to the family of reptiles (e.g. lizards, snakes).

They live mainly on land. Some tortoises also live in water and they are called turtles or terrapins. Terrapins are smaller and have flatter shells to make it easier to swim.

Tortoises are protected from their enemies by a strong shell. The shell is often the same colour as rocks or stones, and this helps to camouflage them. They can pull their head and feet inside the shell and not move at all, until the danger goes away. Sometimes one does not even notice a tortoise because it looks like a rock!

Tortoises are herbivores. This means that they eat grasses, bushes, weeds, flowers and fruit. They are slow-moving animals and walk very slowly.

Tortoises have babies by laying eggs. The female digs a shallow hole in the ground and lays her eggs, usually at night time. She covers the eggs with some soil and leaves them to hatch. The eggs can take between 60-120 days to hatch. When the baby tortoise hatches from the egg, it digs its way out of the hole.

Some tortoises can become very big. One large tortoise became famous when he became friends with a baby hippo. Tortoises can also live to a ripe old age. The oldest tortoise ever recorded lived on the island of Tonga and was looked after by the royal family. He was 188 years old when he died in 1965.

(Adapted from Wikipedia)

If we look at the paragraphs, we can identify the following structure:

- Paragraph 1: General introduction.
- Paragraph 2: Description of habitat (Where do they live?)
- Paragraph 3: Description of main features (What do they look like?)
- Paragraph 4: Description of food (What do they eat?)
- Paragraph 5: Description of reproduction (How do they reproduce?)
- Paragraph 6: Some interesting facts (Size and age)

In an information text, the topic is introduced in a general way in the first paragraph. In the following paragraphs or sections, different aspects of the topic are unpacked. For example, if the topic is about animals, then a description is given of what they look like, where they live, what they eat, and how they reproduce. Other aspects related to the animal may also be discussed, e.g. challenges they face, factors that threaten their survival, etc.

The content in information texts is usually unfamiliar to learners. The purpose of the text is thus to inform the readers and provide them with facts to increase their knowledge of a topic. Although Foundation Phase children may know about tortoises in a general way (they may know the name and may have seen pictures of tortoises or may have seen one in a zoo; children from rural areas may be more likely to have seen a live tortoise), the text provides technical details about tortoises in every paragraph, which makes it factually dense. Although common, high-frequency words are used, the text becomes more 'sciency'; there is a shift away from everyday BICS to a more formal CALP register (see Module 1 for a discussion of the difference between BICS and CALP). Notice too, the increase in the use of technical vocabulary – *become extinct, reptiles, lizards, turtle, terrapins, camouflage, herbivores.*

Each paragraph deals with a specific aspect of tortoises. The first sentence usually signals the main idea of the paragraph. For example, paragraph 3 starts with the sentence: "Tortoises are protected from their enemies by a strong shell." The shell is the main feature of tortoises, so the rest of paragraph 3 relates to the shell and how it protects the tortoise.

Teachers need to **scaffold** the structure and content of information texts for learners to comprehend the content of the subject that the text is presenting. They can do this through explicit instruction (explaining in what ways information texts are different from narrative texts), by modelling their thought processes and thinking aloud when they read an information text, and through 'text work', by asking relevant questions that draw learners' attention to specific aspects of the text. For example:

- After reading the second paragraph aloud, the teacher can say something like: *Hmm, I knew tortoises lived on land, but I never really thought about them living in water too! That's something new I've learned. And see, when they live in water their name changes – they are called turtles or terrapins! Another new fact I've learned!* This is an example

of a **think-aloud** where the teacher shows learners how to engage with the text and how information in a text can modify and add to our background knowledge.

After a first reading of the tortoise text with the learners, the teacher can ask questions that engage the learners in **text work** that helps to make text structure and the meaning of the text more visible, such as:

- *Ok, my children. We've read the text but now we are going to revisit it and become like detectives to understand it better. Ready, text detectives? How many paragraphs are there in this text?*
- *In which paragraph are we told where tortoises live?*
- *What is the main idea in the third paragraph? How can we check, Detective Buyeleni? Do all the sentences in the paragraph tell us more about that main idea? Show us.*
- *What does the picture next to the third paragraph show? How does it relate to the information in the third paragraph?*
- *Is there a new idea in paragraph 4? What is it? And in paragraph 5? OK, can you see how the writer is structuring information? Each paragraph tells us something new about tortoises – where they live, what they look like, what they eat, how they reproduce. The writer is writing very systematically, ne? When you write something about a topic, you must also unpack it systematically like this. If you bring in a new idea or aspect of the topic, you start a new paragraph.*
- *Now, what do you think, children: will tortoises hunt other animals to eat them? How do you know this, Detective Sibongile? Does the text tell us this directly or do we make an inference? Ok, so in which paragraph do you find evidence to support your answer?*
- *Three facts are mentioned about tortoises in the last paragraph. Who can identify them for us? Detective Lindiwe, can you find them?*
- *Let's go back to the beginning of the text. In paragraph 1 it says tortoises are related to snakes and lizards. Look at the first photo in the text. Can you see a resemblance between tortoises, snakes and lizards? In what way do you think tortoises seem similar to them?*
- *In paragraph 1 it says that "tortoises are slowly becoming extinct in our modern world". What do you think that word* ***extinct*** *means? Oh, this is a nice new word to learn in isiZulu/Sesotho! I hope someone will use this word in the classroom this week!*
- *Does the text tell us* ***why*** *tortoises are becoming extinct? Yes, you're right, Detective Nompumelelo, the text just tells us this fact but does not explain why. But are there perhaps some clues, hmm? What about "... in our busy overcrowded modern world"? Use the knowledge in your heads here, children – why do you think tortoises are slowly dying out in our modern world?*
- *OK, detectives, one final question. It's a tricky question, so put on your thinking caps now!* The teacher takes out the story glove and holds it up. *Can we use the story glove to*

explain the information in this text? What do you think? Are your thinking caps properly on your heads? You must use evidence from the text to support your answer. What do you think, Detective Zama: can we use the story glove with this text?

These examples show what '**text work'** entails when teaching reading comprehension and how important the role of a teacher is in helping learners to engage with texts and drawing their attention to details in the text through the skilful use of think-alouds, explanations and questions (and of course providing feedback to learner responses). Turning it into a detective game makes it fun and encourages children to participate. This helps learners read carefully and shows them how to use their heads while reading, how to apply their thinking skills, and how to delve below the surface of the text.

Learners who are explicitly taught about text structure and are exposed to teacher modelling, think-alouds, text work and these kinds of questions on a daily basis will learn to interact closely with texts and develop far stronger reading comprehension skills than learners who have teachers who only 'do comprehension' without teaching it and who only ask superficial questions.

In sum, the main differences between narrative and information texts, their purpose and structure, are summarised in the table below.

Table 5: Text types and their main characteristics and functions

NARRATIVE TEXT	INFORMATION TEXT
The main focus is on characters, the problems they face and their actions to overcome the problems.	The focus is on a particular topic (e.g. elephants) or issue (e.g. global warming) in the world.
Main purpose: to entertain, to provide an aesthetic experience through literature, to reflect on 'big ideas' in life and human behaviour.	Main purpose: to describe, explain, present information or to persuade.
Deals with life experiences and relationships between characters.	Often deals with details beyond our everyday experience of life, with abstract concepts and relationships between concepts/ideas.
Often contains dialogue and many words common in spoken language; however, narratives also contain words from the mid and low word frequency levels.	Uses academic language; many topic-related words and more complex language structures than in everyday speech.
Often uses the past tense (e.g., simple past, with *-ed*) for telling the story.	Usually uses the simple present tense for conveying factual information.

Uses a predictable sequence along a timeline (there are *beginning, middle* and *end* events); it usually contains a setting, characters, and a problem-resolution structure.	Uses different text patterns (description; cause-effect, compare-contrast, problem-solution, time sequence).
In children's narratives, there are illustrations that show characters or actions in colourful detail.	Has charts, tables, diagrams, pictures or illustrations.
Reader asks questions such as: *What's the setting? Who is the main character? What's the problem? What happened next? How was the problem solved? What's the big idea in the story?*	Reader asks questions such as: *What is the text about? How is this topic unpacked into different main ideas across the paragraphs? What are the supporting details and how do they relate to the main ideas in each paragraph? What new information have I learned? How has my thinking about this topic changed?*

Conclusion

The focus in this unit is on explicitly teaching learners how to comprehend texts rather than just 'doing' comprehension. Some general guidelines were provided for explicitly teaching reading comprehension skills and strategies, with specific reference to ways to enhance learners' literacy knowledge of text types and text structure. The notion of doing 'text work' was described, where teachers draw learners' attention to the different ways that narrative and information texts are structured.

Self-assessment activities

These are 'quickie' assessment activities to check how well you have understood key concepts discussed in this unit and whether you are able to perceive the pedagogical implications of such concepts in the teaching of reading.

Note: The key to these self-assessment activities is given in the Appendix at the end of this module. If you score less than 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

1. In each of the statements below provide **the appropriate missing word (or words)**. (5)

   a) _____ is an important factor in learning any new topic, concept or skill. (1)

   b) Giving children a text to read followed by questions on the text that the learners

need to answer is more about _____ reading comprehension rather than _____ reading comprehension. (2)

c) _____ texts seem to be mainly about entertainment but they actually teach children about the world, about life, and help them organise ideas and explore new ideas and experiences. (1)

d) Besides its entertainment value, the purpose of telling a story is often to convey some kind of message or moral, also referred to as the theme or the _____. (1)

2. Indicate which one of the following statements is **false**. (1)

a) The five elements of a story are the setting, characters, problem, resolution and theme.

b) A story may have more than one theme or Big Idea.

c) A teacher should start the explicit teaching of story structure of narratives in Grade 2.

d) The setting of a story comprises place and time descriptions or depictions.

3. Indicate which of the following statements is the **correct** one (1)

a) Information texts have the same structure, tone, style and text features as narrative texts.

b) Information texts can pose comprehension challenges for learners due to unfamiliar content, technical vocabulary, high density of facts and cognitive demanding concepts.

c) Text work entails learners discovering text structures and information cues by reading and rereading texts.

d) The gradual release model of teaching comprises a strategy of *I tell you; We tell each other* and *You tell me*.

4. Consider the scenario below and then select **the option** which is **an accurate reflection** of this scenario. (1)

After working through Unit 4 Teacher Zaza decides to teach her Grade 3 learners the difference in structure between narrative and information texts. She uses the traditional story of the Hare and the Tortoise (where against expectation, the slow but steady Tortoise wins a race against the fast but overconfident Hare) and an information text about tortoises (like the one used in this unit). She reads and does text work with the narrative text on Monday and Tuesday, and does the same with the information text on Wednesday and Thursday. With both texts, she follows the gradual release model, models good reading and thinking processes, and engages the learners in detective work when doing text work with them. On Friday she gives them a formative assessment test, asking the learners to identify relevant aspects of text structure across the two text types.

a) The teacher can draw a story glove in the test and ask the learners to identify the structural elements of the story in the Hare and the Tortoise.

b) The teacher can ask the learners to identify the topic sentence in each paragraph of the narrative text.

c) The teacher can ask the learners what they think the Big Idea is in the information text.

d) It is too early for the teacher to give her learners a formative assessment after only one week.

Unit 5: Teaching reading comprehension strategies

Introduction

This unit focuses on seven reading comprehension strategies which have been found to be beneficial in improving learner engagement with and comprehension of texts. These are framed in terms of before, during and after reading, depending on when in the reading process they can be most usefully employed.

Reading comprehension strategies

A reading comprehension strategy is a conscious plan or set of steps that a reader applies to a text before, during or after reading in order to engage with the text and understand it better. Research has found that there are numerous reading comprehension strategies that skilled readers use while reading. Not all readers read strategically, and research studies have found that if learners are explicitly taught these strategies, their engagement with the text during reading improves, as does their reading comprehension.

The gradual release model (explained in Unit 4) is used for strategy instruction. Thinking aloud is a metacognitive activity in which teachers speak aloud as they reflect on their behaviour, thoughts, and attitudes as they read (McEwan 2007). After the reading comprehension strategy is explained to learners and they see how it is modelled by the teacher, they are given opportunities to practise applying the strategy before, during or after the reading process. One comprehension strategy can be taught and practised a week, and the strategies integrated and practised together as the terms progress. At first the learners may apply the strategy consciously but once they become used to applying the strategies they may apply them unconsciously during reading so that they become a 'habit of mind'.

The following are seven of the research-based reading comprehension strategies dealt with in this unit:

1. Monitoring reading comprehension
2. Activating background knowledge
3. Predicting
4. Visualising
5. Thinking and reasoning skills (these include inferencing and the four main logical relations of additive, temporal, causal and contrastive relations)
6. Questioning
7. Identifying main ideas and summarising.

Monitoring reading comprehension

One of the most important skills underlying RC is the ability to be aware of what one understands while reading. Being aware of what is going on, recognising when the text does not make sense and then doing something about it is an important aspect of reading comprehension.

Research has found that weak readers continue reading a text even if they don't really understand what is going on. In other words, they read passively and in a non-strategic manner. They don't really do anything about their lack of understanding and just keep on reading. Often readers are not conscious of their own comprehension. They read on 'automatic pilot' until a word, sentence or section of text creates an obstacle, causing them to focus attention consciously on getting the meaning (Pitts, 1983). In contrast, skilled readers construct meaning from the start of the reading process. They are alert and strategic in their reading. They apply thinking skills while reading and quickly become aware of when the text does not make sense, and they behave strategically – they make use of clues in the text, and they adopt strategies to help them construct meaning. When they don't understand something, they'll do something about their comprehension failure by backtracking and rereading a part of the text to gain clarity, by asking themselves a question, by using reasoning and thinking skills, etc.

Continually checking whether what is read makes sense and how it is making sense is thus a vital part of comprehension. Readers need to be aware of what they do and do not understand so that they can use appropriate strategies to resolve problems in comprehension.

It is important to teach learners to become aware during reading, to monitor their understanding of the text and to use strategies to 'fix' problems in their understanding as they arise.

Tips for teaching comprehension monitoring

Teach your learners the following tips to help them monitor their comprehension.

Stay alert. Remind the learners to 'switch on' their minds when they start reading, to stay alert during the reading process, and not to go into 'zombie-mode' where they just read without paying proper attention.

Identify when/where the difficulty occurs. Teach the learners to recognise ***when*** the text no longer makes sense. At what point in the story or text does comprehension failure start happening? Just as a driver listens out for strange engine or car noises and stops the car to check what is wrong, so too does a reader become aware that something is wrong in comprehension, e.g. *Ok, this second paragraph on page 5 is causing me problems*.

Identify what the difficulty is. Once the learner detects a comprehension problem, the next step is to decide what is causing the problem. Is it an unknown word, is it a sentence, is it a section of text?

Apply a strategy to solve the problem. Teach the learners to become strategic and to apply a strategy that will help them fix their problem. Common fix-up strategies include:

- **Rereading the word/sentence/part of text that is causing the difficulty.** If it's an unfamiliar word, try to work out its meaning using morphological clues in the word or using clues from the preceding or following sentences. If the sentence or longer section of text is tricky, reread that part and try to state the difficult sentence or part in their own words.
- **Look back through the text.** Point out to the learners that sometimes our attention drifts during reading and we might lose track of an important detail. *Mmm, oh, now I see that it is Mr Monama who is speaking. I thought it was still his wife speaking. I'd better wake up and read more carefully.*
- **Look forward in the text for information that might help to resolve the difficulty.** Sometimes a reader might be puzzled by something in the text only to find that the potential problem is actually dealt with later in the text. *The text says that "the groundwater may form a stream or pond or create a wetland. People can also bring groundwater to the surface." I do not understand how people do that. Oh! the next section is called Wells. Ok, I will read this section to see if it tells how groundwater is brought to the surface.*

Some learners do not like to admit that they have a comprehension problem while reading, so teachers need to emphasise that it is normal to sometimes 'lose the thread' while reading and that even skilled readers have comprehension difficulties. It is not comprehension failure that is the problem, but failing to fix comprehension failure that is the problem.

- Create a safe classroom environment for making mistakes and learning from them.
- Encourage learners to identify comprehension challenges (*OK, please put up your hand if you have a comprehension problem while we read this text. I want to see who is alert and can recognise where the problem happens and what is causing it*).
- Encourage learners to become strategic readers with a fix-up plan (*Ok, Sipho, you identified your comprehension problem clearly. Well done! Now tell us, what's your fix-up plan?*)

Activating prior background knowledge

As was discussed in Unit 2, using one's background knowledge is an important component of RC. This background knowledge can relate to linguistic, general, cognitive or literacy knowledge. The activation of prior knowledge assists not only RC but also new learning. Prior knowledge acts as a foundation upon which new content is laid. Our background knowledge is often thought to

function, metaphorically, as a schema (plural, **schemata**) (Wessels 2014), where objects, events and associations related to a topic are stored in memory. For example, we may have a wedding schema, a shopping mall schema or a going-to-church schema that relates to typical actions or people involved in these activities, according to our different cultural habits and norms.

Background knowledge includes not only general knowledge about language, texts, the world and people but also knowledge drawn from science, social studies, and other disciplines. Good teaching in the various school subjects can help learners develop the background that is necessary for good reading comprehension, though the bulk of learners' background knowledge will come from their own life experiences and from reading.

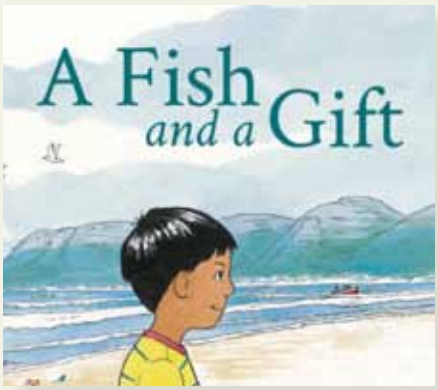
Activating prior knowledge may seem like common sense, but weak readers often do not activate it even if they do have relevant background knowledge, so this is an important skill that all learners should be informed about and taught to use. Even if one does not know much about a topic (e.g., tortoises, solar flares on the sun, skateboarding or fishing), one can still activate the little one knows, as this engages one's attention at the start of the reading process and forms a basis on which to construct meaning and acquire new information.

Teachers can demonstrate how to activate prior knowledge before reading, during reading and after reading. Activating it at the start of the reading process (i.e., before reading) is especially important.

Some tips for activating prior knowledge (Lynch 2014)

Before reading

In the before reading stage, the teacher reads the title of the story/text and draws the learners' attention to it and to any illustrations on the cover (of the book) or on the page (if it's in a textbook or reader).



Skateboarding: the new Olympic sport

- Whether you are reading a narrative or information text with the learners, ask them questions to help them activate their prior knowledge and briefly discuss what they know, from the title or visual. For example: *The title for this narrative is **A fish and a gift**, so where is the boy standing? Is there anything in the picture that relates to a fish? Who has been to the sea? Who has seen fishing boats going out to sea? How big is the fishing boat in the background? Is it a small boat to go out on the big sea, what do you think?*
- Ask them to turn and talk to their desk neighbour for a few minutes (**Turn and Talk**) about what they know about key words in the title (e.g., what do they know about catching fish, fishermen and boats, do they think it can be dangerous going out to sea every day to catch fish, in what way; or: what do they know about skateboarding, have they ever tried it or seen someone doing it, do they think it's easy to do?).

During reading

During the reading of the story/text, the teacher can

- model how to make connections between words and sentences through **think alouds**
- ask questions that will help learners make connections between the text, themselves, other texts and the world.

After reading

The teacher can discuss with the learners how prior knowledge, including knowing the text vocabulary, can help increase engagement with and understanding of the text. In cases where learners did not know much about the topic beforehand (as is often the case with an information text), they can say what new things they learned from reading the text.

Predicting

Prediction in the context of reading is about asking oneself the question, "What is next?", "What is likely to happen?" It is about thinking ahead, and it is tied closely to the events in the text. Prediction is allied to a sense of anticipation – of expecting something (exciting) to happen. This strategy is particularly suitable for use when teaching narrative texts because of their sequential structure and the actions taking place. Prediction brings in an element of enjoyment to the reading lesson – it can create interest and capture the learners' attention.

Tips to help learners make predictions (Reading Rockets 2023b)

Making predictions can happen before, during or after reading. Teach learners to ask questions such as:

- *We can't be sure what this story is about as we haven't read it yet, but just by looking at the cover picture of **A fish and a gift**, what role do you think the boy will play – do you think he will **give** a gift to someone, or will he **receive** a gift from someone? Mmm, and I wonder what the gift will be. Do you think it will have something to do with a fish or the sea?* (Before reading.)
- Questions can be asked about what might happen next. *When Yusuf's father says, "Today is the day I will catch a fish and bring a gift home for you", where do you think the gift is likely to come from? From a shopping mall? Fishermen spend all day on the sea, so where will the father get the gift from?* (During reading.)

Always include a question at the end of the story that encourages the learners to revisit their predictions:

- *Now that you've read the story, think again about your predictions. Were your predictions accurate, did the boy give or receive a gift? And did we predict what the gift was? No, the writer kept us in suspense, ne! It was an unusual gift, wasn't it? What made it unusual?* (After reading.)

Teach learners to support their answers with evidence from the text, in combination with knowledge in their heads; they must not guess wildly but learn to think systematically, based on what has already happened in the story and from what they know about the characters, the story problem and the attempts to solve it.

Make the learners aware that there are not necessarily right or wrong answers for predictions because we can never be sure what writers are going to do in their stories, but predictions help us engage with the text and help us read carefully so that we can pick up the clues that writers give us in the text.

Visualising

To visualise is to create mental images supported by the five senses. It is to imagine that we are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling what we are reading about.

When visualising, readers make images in their minds to make sense of the processes or events the text is presenting. Readers who visualise while reading have the advantage of being better able to recall what they have read than those who do not. When reading narrative texts, readers can visualise such things as the setting, the characters, the actions in the plot, and the environment in which the text happens.

Tips for teaching visualising

Note that not all texts lend themselves well to visualisation, so select texts that are suited for this purpose. Narrative texts often work best in this regard, although some information texts are also suitable. Select a text that contains descriptive language and strong verbs or a striking visual that can create vivid images or feelings. (It is not necessary to start with an entire book: even a well-crafted sentence or short paragraph can provide a rich springboard for a visualising lesson.)

OK, my little readers, let's look at that skateboard. What is underneath it? Yes, Bulela? …. Now, all of you, please stand up, next to your desk, and close your eyes. We're going to go skateboarding now for the first time. Imagine yourself stepping onto the little plank, with only four small wheels under it! How will you feel? Kholiswa, are you steady, or are you wobbling? And you, Thandeka, are you ready to roll or do you first want to get your balance? Kabelo, tell us why you're bending your knees, does it give you better balance?

- *Let's look at the picture and read the words on this page. (She reads the words aloud.)*

A fish and a gift? Oh, what will it be? Papa cycles down to Muizenberg Beach. Squeak squeak go the wheels all the way to Surfer's Corner.

Gulls circle the sky. "Whaaat? Whaaat? Whaaat?" they cry. "What will you bring back for Yusuf?"

Papa rings his bell. "Wait and see what it will be!"

Now close your eyes, my dear little readers and listen again to the words the writer uses: "Gulls circle the sky. 'Whaaat! Whaaat!' they cry. 'What will you bring back for Yusuf?'" What do you see in your mind's eye, Nthabiseng? How many gulls are flying above your head? What bird noises are they making? What do they seem to be saying to you? Oh, isn't that a beautiful image from the story!

After listening to, or reading the sentences once or twice, learners can discuss the mental images created by the sentences.

Learners will likely differ in their descriptions of the scene that the teacher asks them to visualise. There is no single correct answer; the main point is to encourage the readers to begin to form a mental picture of whatever is happening in the text and to encourage them to engage with the text. Learners can work on the visualising skill in small groups or pairs.

Thinking and reasoning skills applied to the text

There are several thinking and reasoning skills involved in extracting and constructing meaning during reading. These include making inferences, seeing how information is connected in a text in logical ways (through addition, temporal, causal and contrastive connections or relations), questioning, engaging in critical thinking.

Inferencing:

Inferencing has already been discussed in previous units, so this is just a brief recap. Inferencing means filling in what is not written in the text or working out what the author is trying to tell you using clues and evidence from the text when it is not explicitly stated.

Teachers need to help learners make inferences. This is done through explicit instruction, role modelling and asking questions that draw learners' attention to relevant details in the text that serve as clues for making connections and reading more deeply.

Tips for teaching inferencing

After you have explained what inferences are and role modelled how you make inferences by reading a text aloud and thinking aloud, teach learners to infer by doing the following:

- Use the information in the text to find clues that help them read between the lines.
- Add those clues to what they already know or have read.

- Discourage them from making wild guesses. Learners need to be able to support their inferences with evidence from words or sentences ('**in the text**' clues), combined with their own knowledge of the world ('**in my head**' information).

Because reading is a powerful tool for learning new information, we may sometimes make incorrect inferences because we do not have adequate knowledge about a topic. Help learners develop the habit of continually updating their thinking as they gather new information. Point out that sometimes, as we read further in the text, we may realise that our initial inference was wrong and we need to revise our interpretation about what is going on, based on new information we encounter in the text.

Logical relations (logical connections):

Pretorius and Murray (2019) explain that information in a text is often connected in specific ways (referred to as logical relations) between sentences, or between paragraph, in both narrative and information texts. These logical relations can be additive, temporal, causal or contrastive.

Each of these logical relations and the words that typically mark them in texts are briefly discussed below. Teachers must ensure that before they read any text with their learners, they understand which logical relations occur in it.

1. Additive relations

Here information is added to a clause or sentence and is loosely related to it. This happens when the writer is adding details to a sentence. Some of the words and phrases that are used to mark this relation in texts are:

and, in addition, also, as well as, too, besides, furthermore, moreover, similarly.

Examples:

- *The herder lay down in the shade of a large tree **and** looked up at the leaves. They **too** were covered in dust just as he was.*
- *Throughout the drought Peter was unhappy as he was always hungry. The people all over the earth were unhappy **as well**. **Moreover,** animals were dying from thirst and hunger.*
- *It had been a long day. **Furthermore,** she still had not found the earring that had fallen off during break time.*

In these sentences, the connectives ***and, too, as well, moreover*** and ***furthermore*** signal how additional information is added to the idea expressed in the first sentence, providing more details and 'fleshing out' the initial description.

2. Temporal relations

Temporal relations show the sequence of events. Learners need to follow the time sequence in narratives. Temporal sequence is also important in history texts, procedural texts (texts that explain a procedure or tell you how to do something, like recipes, how to do a science experiment, how to fix a plug, etc.). There are many words and phrases that are used to mark this time relation in texts:

later, next, now that, once (you have done x), since, still, suddenly, subsequently, then, after, afterwards, thereafter, already, as soon as, before, first, following that, lastly, finally.

Temporal relation in texts, however, do not always follow each other sequentially (think of "flashbacks" in films and television series). In some texts, a reader might not need to make these connections immediately but might need to track down information or facts given earlier to make meaning of information later.

Examples:

- ***As soon as*** *she started running, she felt hot and tired.* ***When*** *she was halfway along the course, she stopped running and sat by the wayside for a few minutes. She* ***then*** *stood up and continued running, but* ***before*** *she could reach the finish line, she fainted.*
- ***Years later****, Veli still remembered that day very well.* ***As soon as*** *school closed, he went to visit his friend Sakhela.* ***Later*** *they played soccer on the open patch of field.* ***Suddenly*** *they heard shouting and smelled smoke.* ***Before*** *they could run away, large flames appeared on the edge of the field.*
- ***First****, you must find a nice sunny spot for growing vegetables.* ***Next*** *you must pull out any weeds or plants.* ***Thereafter*** *you must level the ground, rake it, and add compost to it.* ***Finally****, you are ready to sow your vegetable seeds.*

In these examples, the temporal connectives in bold all signal the sequence of events that are mentioned in each text. Notice how time is 'interrupted' in the second example. The time described in the first sentence of the first paragraph is different from and much later than the time described in sentences 2-5. These latter sentences function as a 'flashback' and deal with an earlier time in Veli's life.

If readers do not pay attention to temporal relations while reading it will be difficult for them to construct meaning accurately from a text. A fun way to get learners to pay attention to temporal relations is to give them 'scrambled texts' and ask them to rearrange the text into its correct sequence. The example below is scrambled.

> Read the following scrambled text with your partner. Rewrite the paragraph, re-arranging its sentences so that they occur in a logical sequence. Underline the temporal clues in the text that helped you unscramble the text.

Next you must pull out any weeds or plants. First you must find a nice sunny spot for growing vegetables. Finally, you are ready to sow your vegetable seeds. Thereafter you must level the ground, rake it, and add compost to it.

3. Causal relations

In causal relations, two or more idea units are expressed in clauses or sentences that stand in a special relation to each other. One is the antecedent (it happens first) and it brings about a change, or causes something else to happen, or is a reason for something else to happen. The subsequent change that happens is called the consequent. The antecedent is thus the cause or reason that brings about a consequence, effect or result:

Antecedent → Consequent

Cause/reason Consequence, effect, result

Some words associated with causal relations include:

as, because, since, affects, and so, as a result, brings about, causes, consequently, follows from, results in, so …(x) that …(y), so that, therefore, thus, if… then…

Examples:

- *She didn't worry **because** she knew she had prepared well for the exams.*
- ***If** it's a sunny day we will have a picnic in the park.*
- *She went around the house **in order to** see who was making so much noise.*
- *She was **so** sad **that** she forgot to take care of the plants; **consequently** they started to die.*

Although the antecedent always happens first in the real world, a writer can change them around in a text and present the consequent before the antecedent. The different ways of presenting causal relations are shown below.

Antecedent X: Andile was badly injured → **Consequent Y:** The ambulance rushed him to hospital.

*Andile was badly injured **and so** the ambulance rushed him to hospital.*

*Andile was badly injured, **consequently** the ambulance rushed him to hospital.*

***Since/as/because** Andile was badly injured, the ambulance rushed him to hospital.*

*Andile was **so** badly injured **that** the ambulance rushed him to hospital.*

*Andile was badly injured **therefore** the ambulance rushed him to hospital.*

*The ambulance rushed Andile to hospital **because** he was badly injured.*

*The ambulance rushed Andile to hospital **as a result of** his bad injury.*

Andile was badly injured. The ambulance rushed him to hospital.

In the last example, the writer does not give any causal clues but simply puts the sentences in sequence. It is up to the reader to make the relevant causal connection and see how the sentences are related.

As can be seen from all these examples, there is no 'right' way to present this causal event; the different ways of stating what happened reflect stylistic choices that a writer makes, whether consciously or not. Whichever way the causal relation is presented, it is important for learners to be able to recognise which is the antecedent (X) part and which is the consequent (Y) part.

> *Andile was badly injured. The ambulance rushed him to hospital.*
>
> *The ambulance rushed Andile to hospital. He was badly injured.*

It is important for teachers to ask lots of *Why?* questions when doing text work with learners, as *why* questions draw attention to causal relations in a text (*Why did the ambulance rush to the hospital*?).

4. Contrastive relations

In contrastive relations a first statement is followed by another statement that contrasts with, counters, or contradicts the information in the first part. One way to look at an oppositional or contrastive relationship is as the opposite of the additive relationship. A contrastive relationship is the relation between statements in which two entities or issues are contrasted (contradictory to each other).

Some words and expressions used to mark this relation are the following:

although, but, in contrast, conversely, even so, however, despite, in spite of, yet, whereas, on the one hand ... on the other hand.

Examples:

- ***In spite of*** *being very rich the man was very mean about spending any money.*
- ***Although*** *he studied very hard, he failed the exam.*
- *Lerato refused to see Kabelo again,* ***despite*** *his impassioned pleas for forgiveness.*

In the first example, the contrast occurs between having lots of money but not spending it. Usually, people with lots of money have no problems spending it. Similarly, studying diligently usually results in success in exams, but the opposite happens in the second example. Likewise, impassioned pleas for forgiveness often result in the person who was wronged forgiving the wrongdoer, but not so in Lerato's case.

In all these examples, there are ideas in a sentence (or paragraph) that are related in specific 'logical' ways, either temporally, causally or through contrast. Research has found that learners

who do well academically are good in particular at perceiving and understanding causal and contrastive relations in texts, particularly the information texts that they read for learning their content subjects. You can read more about these logical relations in *Reading Comprehension* by Pretorius and Murray (2019: 206-237).

Questioning (getting learners to ask questions)

As we have seen throughout this module so far, good teachers use questions in skilful ways to engage their learners in a text and get them thinking about the text at a deeper level. But teachers are not the only ones who can ask questions! Questioning is a reading comprehension strategy that readers themselves can use to engage with the text. Unfortunately, many children get the idea that reading should be an unbroken action of reading out the words of the text without pauses for thought or reflection. If teachers encourage learners to ask questions, this allows readers to focus on the text more carefully and learn to ask questions, which draws attention to clues in the text that can help them to solve problems with comprehension that they may encounter as they read. Getting learners to ask questions about a text can also be done before, during and after reading.

Tips for teaching learners to ask questions before, during and after reading

- Teachers need to model how to ask questions while reading to help children learn how to build interest in the text and become stronger readers through their own questions.
- Show the learners how to turn information into questions, e.g. from the title of a book or chapter or headings.
- Get the learners to ask a question that will help form a connection between two adjacent sentences.
- Get the learners to ask a question that will integrate information across several sentences.
- Get the learners to ask a question about the main idea after reading a paragraph in an information text.
- Get the learners to ask a question about a main character during a story.
- Encourage the learners to ask a question about the Big Idea after reading a story.

In sum, questioning is a crucial skill, as other forms of thinking about a text all rely on the asking of questions.

Identifying main ideas and summarising

Summarising refers to the ability to condense information, explaining the main ideas or events of what you have read in your own words, either in written form or using a graphic organiser. Summarising enables the reader to determine what is most important to remember once the reading is completed. Texts may have more than one or two ideas and it is important to identify all of them and restate them for retention. A summary has the following characteristics:

- It is always shorter than the original text.
- It is to the point and contains the big idea of the text.
- It omits secondary information and small details.
- It is not a retelling of a story nor is it a photocopy of a text.

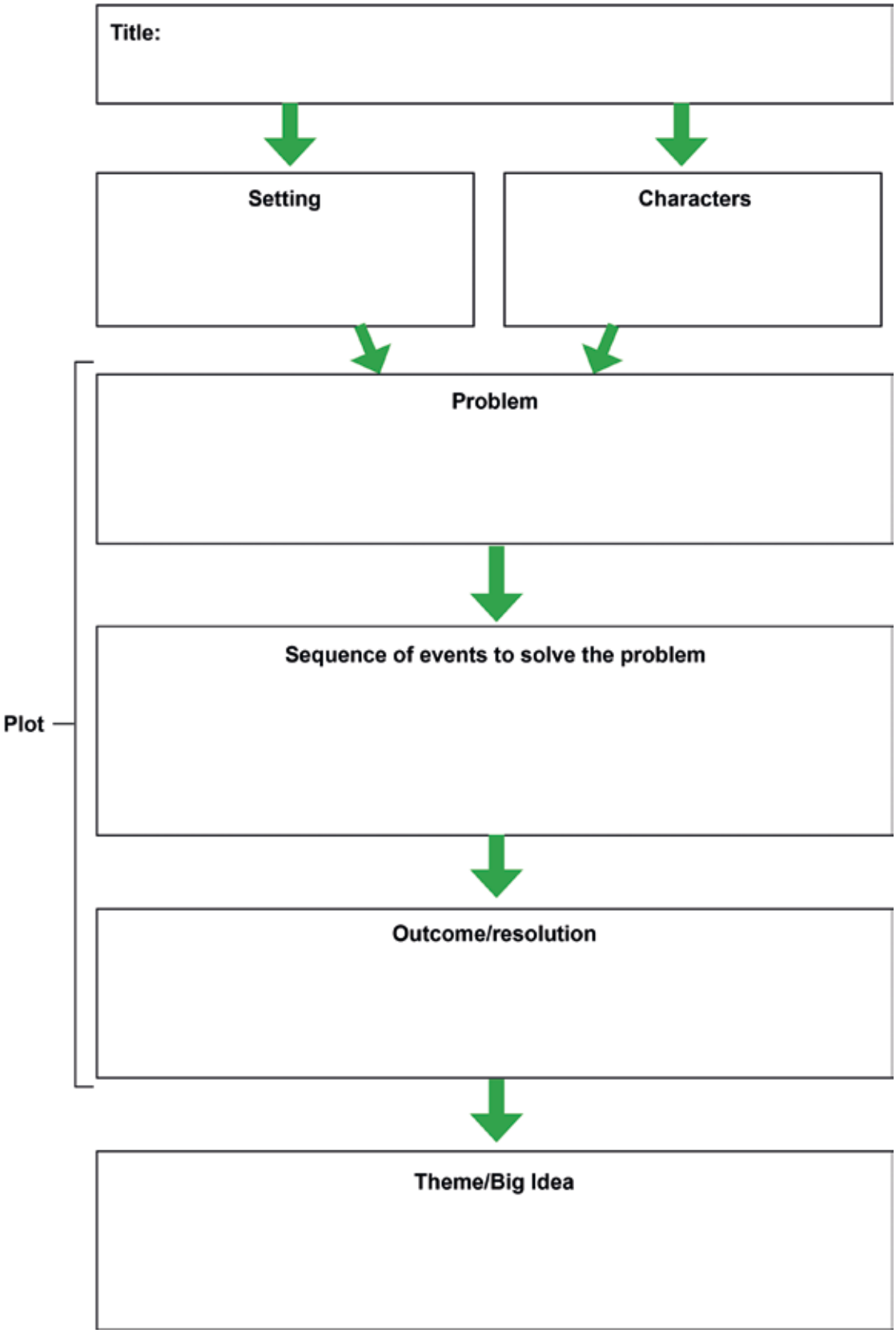
Summarising is an effective strategy because it helps readers recall the text quickly. It is especially important when reading to learn to do written assignments or to learn for tests or examinations.

It relies on awareness of text organisation, and how ideas are related, so before you can teach learners to summarise, you first need to teach them how to identify main ideas. Application of this strategy is thus closely related to understanding text structure, so many aspects of this strategy have already been discussed in Unit 3.

Tips for teaching summarisation (McEwan 2007; Department of Education 2023)

For **narrative texts**, first teach the learners story structure, using the story glove (setting, characters, problem, resolution, and the 'big idea'). This enables them to summarise the important parts of a story. The template below can be used to help them practise summarising stories.

Story structure or story map: Fill in the story elements of …



For **information texts**, teach learners to:

- Identify the main idea expressed in each paragraph. They do this by locating the topic sentence. This is a sentence that contains the main idea in the paragraph. It is often found at the beginning of a paragraph (or sometimes in the middle or end of the paragraph).
- Articulate that idea in one sentence.
- Repeat the above sequence until learners have worked their way through a text.
- They can then summarise the text by presenting the main ideas in sequence, in their own words.

Facilitate guided practice with learners

- Using an easy-to-read content text, read aloud and generate a summary together with the whole class.
- Using an easy-to-read text, ask learners to read with partners and create a joint summary.
- Using an easy-to-read text, read it aloud together with the learners, then assign and expect learners to read and generate summaries independently in their workbooks.

Critical thinking and literacy

Most approaches to developing comprehension share the ideal that full literacy requires readers of texts to adopt a critical and questioning approach – in other words, readers should also be critical thinkers. A critical thinker reading a text asks appropriate questions, sorts through the text for information and evidence, including silences and biases, relates it to previous knowledge, re-examines his or her own beliefs, assumptions and ideological views, reasons logically and draws sound conclusions. A range of cognitive skills are needed to do this – understanding, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, monitoring own reasoning, etc. Critical thinking is increasingly referred to as a key 21st century competency.

Many texts contain false information or misinformation, make claims without evidence to support their claims, draw attention to some problems while ignoring others or present a topic from a biased perspective, with the aim of convincing people to think or behave in a certain way. Biases can come from many sources and can be based on gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, politics, upbringing, history (what is taught in school and what is omitted), etc.

A critical reader thinks about information in a text and examines its truth or falsity, its good and bad points. In information texts we are chiefly interested in criticising the factuality and completeness of the material – is this factual or is it fake news, is there bias or prejudice in the

way the writer has presented the information, what is the intention of the writer in presenting the information in this way? In a fictional narrative text (a story, novel or poetry), we are often more interested in the effectiveness and beauty of the writing or in the intention of the author in sharing the particular view espoused in the text.

As readers, our feelings, values and beliefs all affect our emotional response to texts and how we understand them. Our feelings are influenced by our beliefs, our likes and dislikes and our past experiences. These feelings may hinder or interfere with our comprehension. Very often we have not examined our feelings or beliefs very deeply and it is only when reading a text dealing with a particular topic or theme that we are confronted by feelings or beliefs different from our own. Learning is often a painful experience, as through reading we often have to let go of previous false beliefs or understandings and replace them with more accurate ones or more tolerant ones. For example, someone who grew up with an abusive alcoholic parent may be reluctant to read a story about an alcoholic because of the negative experiences that this evokes. Alternatively, another person who grew up with an alcoholic parent may be interested to read stories about alcoholics in order to understand how this affects family dynamics and relationships. Each reader approaches the text from a different perspective and with different feelings and attitudes. The motivation to read, whether for information or pleasure (or the reluctance to read), is a vital part of comprehension, as comprehending a text requires active mental effort and can evoke feelings and attitudes.

Although critical literacy is usually associated with older learners in senior primary or high school, it can start as early as in Foundation Phase. By modelling Think Alouds, by doing text work, by teaching children the reading comprehension strategies discussed in this unit, by getting learners to engage with the text and read more deeply, teachers can lay the foundations of critical reading skills from an early stage.

Summarising the reading process

The reading process consists of pre-reading, reading and post-reading stages. The activities learners will be engaged in can be summarised as follows:

Pre-reading:

- Looking at the title, author, visuals
- Activating prior knowledge
- Making predictions.

Reading:

- Use the context to work out the meaning of unknown words as much as is possible; where this is not possible, stop and use a dictionary.

- Use clues in the text to make connections between sentences while you read.
- Monitor your comprehension; pause occasionally to check your comprehension and to let the ideas sink in. If you don't understand a part here and there, keep going for a sentence or two as incoming information might help to clarify the problem. If you still don't understand, stop and re-read. Read confusing sections aloud, at a slower pace, or both. Identify what is causing the comprehension problem.
- If you still don't comprehend, ask someone to help you understand a difficult section.
- Compare the content to your predictions.
- Visualise what you are reading.
- Engage with the text and reflect on what you read.

Post reading:

- What new words did you learn from this text?
- Were your earlier predictions correct? If not, in what way did your predictions change while reading?
- If it is an information text, what new things did you learn about this topic from the text?
- If it is a narrative text, what is the Big Idea?
- Can you identify the main ideas in the information text and use them to summarise the text? What new questions do you now have on the topic?
- Evaluate the quality of the text. What parts of the text did you like? Were there some good images that the text evoked?
- Were their parts that you did not like? If so, what were they and why didn't you like them? Was there bias or inaccuracy in the text?

Additional resources:

Funda Wande has produced a number of videos on teaching comprehension. They are in Xhosa, but have English subtitles. They can be downloaded from:

https://fundawande.org/video-resources?i=6#learningResourcesHolder

Conclusion

This unit focused on seven main reading comprehension strategies that teachers can explicitly teach learners to help them read greater comprehension, namely (1) Monitoring reading comprehension, (2) Activating background knowledge, (3) Predicting, (4) Visualising, (5) Using thinking and reasoning skills, (6) Questioning and (7) Identifying main ideas and summarising. The thinking and reasoning skills include inferencing skills and the ability to perceive logical relationships between ideas in sentences. Teachers can use the gradual release model to explicitly teach strategies that learners can apply while reading. Explaining and modelling how these strategies can be applied while reading is an important component of explicit comprehension instruction. Using questions to guide learners and draw their attention to specific aspects of a text, and providing opportunities for learners to apply their newly acquired skills and giving them supportive feedback in a safe learning context are also important aspects of explicit comprehension instruction.

Self-assessment activities

These are 'quickie' assessment activities to check how well you have understood key concepts discussed in this unit and whether you are able to perceive the pedagogical implications of such concepts in the teaching of reading.

Note: The key to these self-assessment activities is given in the Appendix at the end of this module. If you score less than 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

1. In each of the statements below provide **the appropriate missing word (or words)**. (5)

    a) Initially strategies are applied in a _____ manner but after much practice they become a habit of mind. (1)

    b) Teachers must create a _____ classroom environment to allow learners to make mistakes and learn from them. (1)

    c) Background knowledge can apply to language, general, _____, social and _____ knowledge. (2)

    d) Before reading, the teacher should draw the learners' attention to the _____ of the story and any illustrations. (1)

2. Indicate which one of the following statements is **false**. (1)

    a) Predicting in reading entails asking the question "What is going to happen next"

before and while reading and is suitably applied to narrative texts.

b) Weak readers often do not activate their prior knowledge when reading even if they have relevant information on the text being read.

c) Inferencing entails using clues and evidence in the text to figure out aspects that are not overtly stated by the author.

d) Visualisation when reading is a technique that is applied by weak comprehenders to remember what they have read.

3. Indicate which of the following statements is the **correct** one. (1)

a) Logical relations in a text can be marked with words or phrases within sentences or paragraphs and apply to both narrative and information texts.

b) A flashback is a technique used in texts, film and television series to mark additive relations.

c) Causal relationships are marked by conjunctions such as *although* or *on the other hand*.

d) Questioning is a strategy that should be used by both teachers and learners only after a text has been read.

e) Consider the following scenario and then select only **the option** which is **an accurate reflection** of this scenario. (1)

Teacher Sibongile is teaching her class how to use comprehension strategies. She has already taught them the relevant strategies and is using this text for practise opportunities. She has selected the text below for the purpose of her practice lesson. After the text follows an account of her interaction with the class. Based on the information contained in this text select the option that best describes teacher Sibongile's focus in this lesson.

Nonhlanhla and Malusi's daily routine

Nonhlanhla gets up very early in the morning because she has certain tasks she has to finish before she can go to school. First she has to wash the water container in the chicken pen and then put in fresh water. Thereafter she has to clean the feeding bowls and then fill them with chicken food. While she takes care of the chickens her brother, Malusi, cares for the cows and calves. He milks the cows first, then he takes the milk

home in the bucket. After that he opens the pen where the calves have been sleeping separately from the cows. He needs to check that the calves are healthy, and that each calf is united with its mother.

Excerpt from the discussion on the passage

…. Right class, now that we have read this passage, let us put on our investigator hats on and examine how certain words, phrases and expressions show how they connect information in the text in particular ways.

Now, I want you to get together in your groups and do text work together in each group. (The learners quickly re-organise themselves into their groups.) Right, now read Sentence 1 and find the first words or phrase that tells us about when this story starts. Yes, Leopard group? Correct, the story starts with Nonhlanhla getting up very early in the morning. Let's underline that in red. And where is she? Yes, at home. Is that explicit or did we infer that? … Where else will she be in the morning? Yes, at school, thank you Cheetah group. Now, what else happens early in the morning. How does the writer sequence the events in time? Please read each sentence in the paragraph and underline softly in pencil all the words – including maybe morphemes or verb forms – that signal time. Check with each other in the group. Remember, we discussed those time words on Monday. But first, use a pencil! Later, all the groups will check those words with each other and then when we're sure, we will underline them in red. ….

a) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Sibongile is teaching the learners vocabulary and aspects of syntax (the relationships between words) as comprehension strategies.

b) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Sibongile has selected a suitable text that focuses learners' attention on certain words or phrases that signal how sequences of events in a text are related to one another temporally.

c) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Sibongile is teaching concepts that are too difficult for her Grade 3 learners.

d) From the scenario above it seems that teacher Sibongile has selected a text suitable for practising all the different types of logical connections in a text.

Unit 6: Assessing reading comprehension

Introduction

In this unit we focus on different ways of assessing reading comprehension and why it is important for teachers to do so on a regular basis. Joseph (2023) points out that it is important for teachers to gather data from their learners and use it to identify learners who are having trouble with reading and to determine who needs help and where, i.e. in which aspects of reading. She argues that teachers who do not collect learner information systematically can exacerbate learners' struggles with reading. It is also important to identify promising and good readers and see how they can be helped and encouraged to perform at even higher levels.

The assessment of reading comprehension

Lombard (2010) refers to assessment as a cyclical process of gathering, analysing, interpreting, recording, reporting and using information about learner achievement. In reading, comprehension must be assessed accurately to determine the level of understanding, to identify learners who need support, and to inform future instruction (Nel 2011). This can be done informally and formally.

Informal assessment

Informal assessment entails the teacher making observations during reading activities and taking note of each learner's strengths and where more help is needed in engaging with text overall. In this case the learners do not realise that they are assessed. We do informal assessments in the following ways:

1. Observing learners as they read and write every day. Working with a different group every day during Group Guided Reading provides an ideal opportunity for observing learners in smaller groups, hearing them read aloud and seeing how they answer questions when you do text work with them.
2. Taking notes, as you observe learners, on their strengths and needs. It's difficult to remember details about all your learners, especially in large classes, so keep a notebook on your table and make quick entries during the day. It is also useful to keep your notebook (and a pen) close to your lap when you work with a group during group Guided Reading, to jot down observations quickly. You can read through your notebook at the end of each day as you prepare lessons for the following day.
3. Using your knowledge of the curriculum and reading goals to teach at the right level. Identifying next steps to help learners improve their reading.
4. Changing your teaching and your lesson plans according to the level and needs of learners.

Informal assessment is particularly important in the Foundation Phase. However, informal assessments on their own are not enough, even for experienced teachers, and specific reading difficulties can be missed (especially in large classes) if information is not also systematically gathered through formal assessments and records kept of learner progress.

Formal assessment

Teachers can conduct formal assessments to measure specific skills such as decoding, oral reading fluency or reading comprehension. Module 2 provides information on how to assess phonological and phonemic awareness, and Module 3 provides information on how to assess word reading and oral reading fluency, so in this module the focus is on assessing reading comprehension.

In CAPS Foundation Phase, the most important formal assessment at the beginning of the year is using a baseline assessment to get an idea of the reading abilities of the individual learners in the new class and to form ability groups for Group Guided Reading. Follow-up formative assessments are done during the year to track learners' reading progress and a summative assessment must be done towards the end of the year.

Assessing oral reading fluency as a predictor of reading comprehension

It is important for Foundation Phase teachers to assess each child reading orally to measure accuracy, rate and overall fluency. A child's ORF rate will give teachers a good estimate of the child's potential for reading comprehension (i.e. reading a text on their own and understanding it). The EGRA test recommended by the Department of Basic Education includes an oral reading fluency test. This can be done towards the end of Grade 1, and as baseline in Grades 2 and 3. Learners who make several errors while reading (read with less than 95% accuracy) and who score below the ORF benchmarks (Grade 2: IsiZulu 20 wcpm, Sesotho 40 wcpm; Grade 3: IsiZulu 35 wcpm, Sesotho 60 wcpm) will struggle with reading comprehension. The best intervention for slow and inaccurate readers is improving their alphabetic knowledge and their decoding skills.

Assessing reading comprehension

Assessing comprehension in Grade 1 is usually done orally one-on-one, with a teacher reading a short story and asking the learner 4-5 questions on it to see how well the learner has understood it. However, this is a **listening comprehension** test, as most Grade 1 learners do not yet have adequate decoding skills to read a text independently and do a formal written **reading comprehension** assessment.

Reading comprehension can be assessed **orally** one-on-one in Grades 2 and 3 after an ORF assessment, with the teacher asking the learner 5-6 questions on the text that the learner has just read, to see how well s/he understands it. In this case, although the questions are asked orally by the teacher and the learner gives oral responses, the learner has read the text on their own and their responses therefore reflect how well they have understood the text they have read.

The assessment of reading comprehension is best done via a formal written assessment from Grade 3 onwards. This can be done as a whole class assessment, where each individual learner is given the same text to read on their own, silently, and required to answer questions in writing based on the text. This is a more rigorous assessment, provided that the text is appropriate for the grade and the questions cover a range of literal as well as higher-order questions (as discussed in Unit 3).

Guidelines for drawing up reading comprehension tests for the class

It is better for teachers to select or design reading comprehension tests as a group rather than for each grade teacher to use their own tests. A team effort enables one to discuss the possible flaws and strengths of different questions that can be asked of a text at different levels, saves time in the long run, usually produces a better, more reliable assessment tool and ensures that reading comprehension is being assessed consistently within a particular grade at a school.

Maintain a balance between reading comprehension assessments that are easy and ones that are difficult. There must be a mix of questions across all levels of assessing comprehension. When selecting or designing reading comprehension tests for your learners during the year, bear the following points in mind to ensure that the assessments are rigorous:

- Select a text appropriate for the grade level. The language and the vocabulary must not be too simple, but neither should it be too advanced and complicated.
- Alternate between using narrative and information texts as the basis of your reading comprehension assessment. Learners usually find it easier to comprehend narrative texts, but you need to assess their reading comprehension on both narrative and information texts.
- Increase the length of the text used in the reading comprehension assessment. For example, at the beginning of Grade 3 the text you select may be quite short e.g. 260 words (as in the Tortoise text in Unit 4) but increase the length of the text so that by Term 3 of Grade 3 you are using a text of at least 400-500 words long. By Grade 4 learners in the Intermediate Phase should be able to read texts of 500 words and longer. (In the PIRLS assessments, the texts aimed at assessing Grade 4 reading comprehension in English range between 450-900 words in length.)
- Include at least 6-10 reading comprehension questions for shorter texts, and between 12-18 questions for longer texts. (In the PIRLS assessments, the number of questions per text range from 12-18.) Reading comprehension assessments that are short and contain only a few questions do not provide reliable information on the reading comprehension strengths and weaknesses of your learners.
- Include a range of questions that consist of both easy and more difficult questions. For example, if using the PIRLS framework, then at least 60-70% of RC questions should be from the easier Levels 1 and 2 and the remaining 40-30% from the more challenging Levels 3 and 4 for Grade 2. For Grade 3 you can decrease the number of easier questions

in Levels 1 and 2 to 50% and increase the number of more difficult Levels 3 and 4 questions to 50%.

- You can vary the format of questions that you use. For example, some questions can be multiple-choice questions, and some can be open written response questions where the answer requires at least a sentence in response. These formats can be used across the four difficulty levels (i.e. a multiple-choice question can be used to assess comprehension at any of the levels, as can written response questions).
- Keep a record of your reading comprehension assessments throughout the year. Shanahan (2019) suggests that you should have a record of the following information: the genre of text used, the topic, the total text length, the total number of reading comprehension questions asked, the number of literal questions, the number of straightforward inferences (within sentences, or between adjacent sentences), the number of complex inferences (across the text), the number of questions requiring integration of information across the text, the number of evaluative questions and the class average for the test as a whole as well as the class average on the literal and inferential question types.
- PIRLS is transparent in its framework and assessment procedures, and releases examples of narrative and information reading comprehension assessments and their memoranda after each cycle for teachers to use. You can download these tests from the PIRLS website free of charge. Study these assessments carefully to see how international standardised reading comprehension assessments are designed so that you become familiar with international standards and expectations.
- Administer the reading comprehension assessment with integrity. Instil a culture of honesty and make sure the children do not copy from each other. Do not read the text aloud to them. They must learn to read a reading comprehension test on their own and silently and keep their eyes on their own work.
- Mark the reading comprehension test with integrity. Mark the tests yourself: draw up a memorandum beforehand and mark consistently according to that. Draw up a class list and enter each score independently. Afterwards work out the average score for the class. Study the data carefully to see how each child is performing in relation to the average: who is performing poorly (i.e. well below the average), who is performing close to the average and who is doing well (i.e. above the average)?
- Reading teachers need to know what successful reading looks like in order to interpret the results of the reading comprehension tests that they administer in class and provide appropriate feedback and remediation. As was discussed in Unit 2, while getting 50% or more for a test is often regarded as a general rule of thumb for passing a test, reading with comprehension requires a high level of reading skill. This means that learners who perform below 70-75% on a reading comprehension test are not yet skilled readers. Understanding only 50% or less on a reading comprehension test indicates frustrated, struggling readers who understand very little of what they read.

Reading comprehension interventions: matching assessment data with remediation

As we have seen from the different stages of reading, children's failure to understand written text can arise at different stages in their reading development and for different reasons. An intervention is defined as action taken to improve a condition or situation. When a reader is unable to understand the message of a text, it is expected that teachers should do something about it. Learners who are experiencing comprehension problems can improve if they are given appropriate support, and appropriate support depends on the teacher understanding the source of the comprehension difficulty. Teachers need to identify the source of the problem to help learners read successfully.

The following are some characteristics of effective interventions. Interventions should:

- be implemented as soon as a learner is lagging in the development of skills or knowledge critical to reading growth;
- significantly increase the intensity of instruction and practice, which is accomplished primarily by increasing instructional time or reducing the size of the instructional group or both;
- provide the opportunity for explicit (direct) and systematic instruction and practice along with cumulative practice opportunities to ensure mastery;
- provide skilful instruction, including good error correction procedures, along with many opportunities for immediate positive feedback and reward;
- be guided by, and responsive to data on learner progress;
- be motivating, engaging and supportive – a positive atmosphere is essential.

Remember, the purpose of a reading comprehension test is not to comply superficially with curriculum requirements and pretend to assess so that the teacher can look good and please the HOD, the principal or subject advisor. The purpose of the reading comprehension test is to assess each child fairly and with integrity, to identify who is struggling, who is plodding along and who is excelling, and to use that information to inform your teaching and adapt your interventions accordingly so that you can help each learner improve from where they are at.

- If children perform poorly on a RC assessment, check their ORF. It is highly probable that poor comprehenders are still reading slowly and inaccurately. Put them in the same ORF ability group and make sure that you give them practice in improving their fluency. They will only really benefit from explicit reading comprehension instruction once their ORF scores improve.
- For the average children who are plodding along in the middle, give them a mix of ORF activities as well as explicit RC instruction. What kind of questions are they struggling with, at which level? Are some of them still getting some of the easier Level 1 and 2 questions wrong? Go over the questions and text with them, discuss them and show

where the answers to the questions come from. Do text work with them in future reading activities.

- For learners who are excelling (getting at least 75% or more on a RC test), what kinds of questions did they get wrong? Work through the questions and text with them again and discuss the process of finding and formulating answers with the learners. Do text work with them in future, focusing in particular on Level 3 and 4 type questions, encouraging their inferencing, integrative and evaluative skills.

Do a whole class reading comprehension test each term to see if the class average is improving. Involve the learners in their reading achievement and give them a sense of pride in reading. Put the **average** class score up somewhere on the wall (do not display individual results), discuss the results with the class and ask the learners what achievement they would like to see next time – make sure it is a realistic goal. (If the class average for reading comprehension is 45% in Term 1, then aiming for 50% in Term 2 would be more realistic than 60%.) Encourage them to work at their reading and to read as much as possible, both inside and outside of school. Remember that there will always be some learners who struggle, some who plod along and some who excel. Even so, as a teacher it is your responsibility to encourage the learners at each level to compete with themselves and to aim to improve their own score with each assessment. If you have shifted a struggling reader from 20% to 40%, and prodded a plodder from 45% to 58%, and inspired a good reader to fly from 75% to 90% in the course of a year, then as a reading teacher you have done well and can give yourself a pat on the back.

Conclusion

In this unit various aspects of reading comprehension assessment were discussed. Information from both informal and formal reading comprehension assessments can be used to inform reading instruction in the classroom. Guidelines were supplied for drawing up reading comprehension tests. Guidelines for a balance between literal, inferential and higher-order type questions for the different grades were proposed. The importance of matching remedial instruction with test results was also highlighted.

The purpose of reading instruction throughout Foundation Phase is to ensure that learners can read accurately, fast (commensurate with their grade level), with comprehension and enjoyment. It is clear from all the issues covered in this module that reading teachers need to have a very clear understanding of what reading success entails and the various stages that readers go through to become skilled, comprehending readers. This understanding rests on deep knowledge of what reading is and all its components. The product of successful reading is comprehension, the topic of this module. The module describes reading comprehension as an active process of extracting information from a text but also constructing meaning from it that goes beyond explicitly stated information (Unit 1). The components needed to extract information and construct meaning are described (Unit 2), while the different levels involved in comprehending a text are discussed (Unit 3). Two units in this module (4 and 5) describe various ways in which teachers can

explicitly teach learners to read more deeply to improve their reading comprehension. Unit 6, on reading assessment, brings this module on reading comprehension to a close.

Self-assessment activities

These are 'quickie' assessment activities to check how well you have understood key concepts discussed in this unit and whether you are able to perceive the pedagogical implications of such concepts in the teaching of reading.

Note: The key to these self-assessment activities is given in the Appendix at the end of this module. If you score less twhan 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

1. In each of the statements below provide **the appropriate missing word (or words)**. (5)

   a) According to Lombard (2010) assessment is a cyclic process of gathering, analysing, interpreting, recording and using information about learner achievement to _____ and monitor progress. (1)

   b) Informal assessment of learners' reading comprehension entails _____ during reading activities and taking notes. (1)

   c) The formal baseline reading done at the beginning of the year serves two purposes, namely to establish the _____ _____ of the individual learners and to divide them into _____ groups for Group Guided Reading. (2)

   d) The ORF benchmark in Grade 2 for reading in isiZulu and Sesotho is ___ and ____ wcpm respectively. Children reading below these levels will struggle with reading comprehension. (1)

2. Indicate which one of the following statements is **false**. (1)

   a) Obtaining a 55% mark in a reading comprehension test is not a satisfactory performance.

   b) The best way to assess reading comprehension from Grade 3 onwards is through formal assessment where learners independently read a text and answer written comprehension questions.

   c) It is important to use a mix of questions across all levels of assessing comprehension while also maintaining a balance between easy and difficult assessments.

d) When the teacher reads a text to the learners and asks them questions based on the text, this is a form of assessing the learners' reading comprehension.

3. Indicate which of the following statements is the **correct** one. (1)

a) The reason for conducting reading comprehension tests is to comply with the regulatory requirements as set out in CAPS and the rules of the school.

b) Being engaged, motivated and experiencing a safe environment is essential for implementing reading comprehension improvement interventions.

c) To improve the performance of Grade 4 learners who have obtained a mark of 80% or higher in a reading comprehension test it is best to give them practice in answering plenty of Level 1 and 2 questions.

d) Learners who perform poorly in a reading comprehension test are those who have a low score for ORF.

4. Consider the following scenario and then select **the option** which is **an accurate reflection** of this scenario. (1)

Teacher Hlengi has given a reading comprehension test to her Grade 3 learners in Term 3. It is a narrative text of about 150 words, followed by 5 questions. Questions 1-4 assess understanding of explicitly stated information, while the last question is an inferential question. She got the learners to work in pairs to mark each other's answers and add up the total marks. From these marks she has worked out the class average, which is 54%. She is satisfied with the results and feels that most of the learners in the class have safely passed the test.

a) The test seems to provide a rigorous assessment of Grade 3 learners' ability to read a text with understanding in terms of length of test as well as range of questions.

b) Having learners mark one another's tests and add up the marks can save a teacher valuable time in her busy day and help her gather reliable assessment information.

c) Having only one inferential question suggests that the test is too easy for Grade 3 learners.

d) Based on the average class score of 54%, the teacher can conclude that most of the Grade 3 learners are basically competent readers.

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Appendix A

Key to self-assessment activities

The correct responses to the self-assessment exercises are indicated below.

NB: If you score less than 6/8 (75%) for these questions you are advised to re-read the unit again to strengthen your content and pedagogic knowledge.

Key for Unit 1

1a	Matthew effect	(1)
1b	extracting ….. constructing	(2)
1c	independent	(1)
1d	fluency and comprehension	(1)
2 a		(1)
3c		(1)
4c		(1)

Key for Unit 2

1a	decoding knowledge and skills and linguistic/language knowledge and skills.	(2)
1b	decoding	(1)
1c	morphology	(1)
1d	background knowledge	(1)
2c		(1)
3b		
4a		(1)

Key for Unit 3

1a	constructing … interacting	(2)
1b	local (nearby) …….more distant (further away)	(2)
1c	explicit information	(1)
2a		(1)
3b		(1)
4c		(1)

Key for Unit 4

1a	The teacher	(1)
1b	doing/assessing …… not teaching	(2)
1c	narratives/stories	(1)
1d	Big Idea	(1)
2c		(1)
3b		(1)
4a		(1)

Key to Unit 5

1a	conscious/intentional	(1)
1b	safe	(1)
1c	cognitive …. literacy	(2)
1d	title	(1)
2 d		(1)
3 a		(1)
4 b		(1)

Key to Unit 6

1a	inform	(1)
1b	observing/observation	(1)
1c	reading abilities … ability	(2)
1d	isiZulu is 20 wcpm … Sesotho is 40 wcpm	(1)
2d		(1)
3b		(1)
4c		(1)

Examples of summative questions requiring longer, more detailed responses

The questions given here serve as *examples* of summative assessment questions that are typically given in formal written assignments or examinations.

These are longer essay type questions that require students to demonstrate their content knowledge of reading and its application to classroom instruction in ways that are **clear** and **systematically** presented.

The mark allocation for questions provides a *rough* guide of how long your answer needs to be in relation to the total marks allocated to the examination paper. A question of 10 marks would require at least 1-1½ pages, while a 20-mark question requires a more detailed and extensive

exposition of about 2-3 pages. When in doubt, rather write more than less. Remember, your response to a question is a display of your knowledge, so short answers suggest superficial and inadequate knowledge.

A rubric has been provided at the end to give you an idea of the different aspects of an essay that are taken into consideration – e.g., planning and logic; content, argumentation and examples; use of sources; language usage; technical finishing.

Note: When questions require examples to be provided, it is important for students to give their own, original examples and not simply copy examples from the module. Examples demonstrate whether students understand the content. Students who copy examples from the module will not be given credit for them; only original examples will be accepted.

Question 1

a. Reading comprehension is described as the process of extracting, constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. Explain what is meant by the terms **extraction, construction, interaction** and **involvement**. (12)

b. Explain the difference between oral comprehension and reading comprehension. (6)

c. In order to read with comprehension a reader must have different kinds of knowledge and competencies over and above decoding and language comprehension. Briefly explain what background knowledge, social knowledge and genre and text knowledge entails in the context of reading. (7)

(25)

Question 2

a. A new learner, Thuso, has joined your Grade 3 class. You notice that this boy is really struggling to answer even basic questions based on the passages in two successive reading comprehension tests in his African Home Language. You don't know why this learner is performing so poorly. Explain what steps you would take to determine the underlying cause(s) of the learner's poor reading comprehension. (10)

b. McCormick (1995) identifies four levels of reading comprehension. Name these levels and supply a description of each level. (8)

c. Distinguish between the two main types of struggling readers and briefly indicate from what kind of interventions they would benefit best. (7)

(25)

Question 3

a. A learner's developmental stage of reading can be determined to serve as a guideline to inform the teacher's teaching programme. List the different stages from emergent reader to expert reader, specifying the salient characteristics of each stage and the approximate grade level the learner should be at in that stage. (12)

b. The PIRLS framework for assessing reading competency comprises four processes of comprehension. Name them and explain what each one entails. (8)

c. What is the application value of the PIRLS processes of comprehension? (5)

(25)

Question 4

a. Read the story about Sura and Baya below and then complete the story map of this story. (The story map is given on p. 91 in Unit 5.) In other words, supply the following details about the story: title, setting, main characters, problem, plot–resolution (i.e. sequence of events leading to resolution), and theme/big idea. (8)

The Story of Sura and Baya

Once upon a time there were two animals who were friends. Sura was a shark and Baya was a crocodile. Both of these animals lived in the sea and on land, and although they were friends they tended to fight because they were greedy.

One day the friends went to look for food on land, and Baya saw a goat.

"Mmmm! That's my lunch," said Baya.

"Not at all, that's my food, you're greedy," Sura said to Baya.

Then they started fighting. They collided head-to-head, circling each other while hitting the water with their strong tails. Baya bit Sura's tail. Sura jumped but Baya had already cut off a piece of his tail. This made Sura very angry, and he leaped forward and bit Baya with his sharp teeth. They fought and bit each other until they were both bloody and tired.

To avoid further wars, they decided that they would live in different places and hunt for food where they lived. So, Sura went to the sea while Baya stayed on the river. The border was the shore. In order to display your understanding of the PIRLS comprehension levels according to comprehension processes, use the story below and then draft eight sample questions appropriate for a Grade 3 reading comprehension assessment. There must be:

- 3 x questions for Level (1) retrieve explicitly stated information (3)
- 3 x questions for Level (2) make straightforward inferences (3)
- 1 x question for Level (3) interpret and integrate ideas and information (2)
- 1 x question for Level (4) evaluate and critique content and textual elements. (2)

For each question, indicate in which paragraph and sentences in the paragraph the information relevant to answering the question is located. (8)

(18)

NB: For Question 4b you may NOT use any questions from the scenario posed in Unit 3. All your questions must be original, new questions. The text below is a slightly longer version than the one used in Unit 3.

Mphemba's cattle

Mphemba farms with Nguni cattle. He has been farming with cattle for more than 40 years and has become a very successful breeder of Nguni cattle. He cares for his cattle and keeps record of everything. He keeps record of things such as the milk he gets from each cow, the calves born from each cow, the cost and quantities of feed he provides for each cow, the dates and cost of the dipping treatment for the cows, the weekly weight gain of the calves. This information enables him to determine the cost of raising calves and the ideal time to sell them and thus ensuring the profitability of breeding cattle.

He divided his farm into five different camps using fences. He rotates the cattle grazing in the camps to prevent over-grazing. Each camp has its own clean water troughs. Two of the troughs are built in such a way that they provide water on both sides of the fence, thus providing water for two camps each. The water for the troughs is supplied from windmills, each with its own reservoir. The water runs from the reservoir to the drinking trough through plastic pipes that are buried in the ground. The drinking troughs have stop valves installed that allows the water to flow into the trough when the water level drops below a particular point. This system ensures that there is always enough water in the trough for the cattle.

Mphemba's two daughters and two sons take turns looking after the cattle when they are not at school. The daughters check the stop valves regularly and clean the water troughs when needed.

The sons help to look after the cattle generally and assist in milking the cows each evening, weighing the calves each week and dipping the cattle.

(25)

Rubric for essay type assignments

The rubric below can be used to mark summative assignments. The mark allocations are examples only to show how different aspects of the essay are evaluated. They can be adjusted proportionately to the total mark of an assignment.

CRITERIA	Below expectation	Progressing towards expectation	Meets expectation	Exceeds expectation	Score
Planning and logic of exposition	The work lacks proper planning; no problem statement/aim/purpose statement; no logic exposition. Findings reported unsystematically. No conclusion/ recommendations.	Planning mostly lacking; exposition difficult to follow; findings could be reported more clearly. Headings and subheadings reflect some organisation.	Provides a satisfactory exposition and discusses the topic logically and clearly. However, there are areas that need improvement. Not all facets of the topic have necessarily been adequately addressed.	The exposition of the assignment is excellent; the argumentation is logic and absolutely clear; the reader has no problem following the discussion.	
Maximum 20	1-5	6-11	12-17	18-20	
Content, argumentation and examples	The content is poor. The arguments do not build up systematically. Examples are inappropriate.	Parts of the content is relevant. There are instances of staccato-like argumentation. Some examples illustrate the principles well while others don't.	The content is relevant and well structured. The argumentation is systematic. The examples are appropriate for the purpose they have been used.	The content is excellent. The examples have been integrated excellently in the text to strengthen the argumentation.	
Maximum 30	1-9	10-17	18-25	26-30	

Language usage **Maximum 15**	The formulation is clumsy and there are many grammatical and/or spelling errors in the text. Sentences often make no sense. 1-3	The formulation is fair but there are instances of poor sentence structure/ grammar/ spelling errors. 4-8	The language usage is very good. There are no instances of poor formulation or grammatical errors; there may be a few spelling errors. 9-13	The academic language usage is excellent. There are no instances of poor formulation or grammatical or spelling errors. 14-15	
Technical finishing **Maximum 15**	The formatting is poor. The assignment lacks headings; it lacks cohesion; there may be repetitions; punctuation is also wrong in places. 1-3	The formatting is not always good; the headings may be inappropriate or confusing; there are instances of poor punctuation. 4-8	The formatting is very good; headings are appropriately used. There is cohesion and coherence in the text. Punctuation is good. 9-13	The formatting is excellent; headings and subheadings are immaculate; cohesion and coherence are excellent. Punctuation is exceptional. 14-15	
Notes to student:					