



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation

Reading Comprehension

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation

Chapter Title: "Reading Comprehension"

Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: February 28, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781506326153

Online ISBN: 9781506326139

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139.n579>

Print pages: 1383-1384

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Reading comprehension generally refers to the intellectual, socioculturally embedded process of making meaning from printed texts. This meaning-making process involves three important factors: the texts to be interpreted; the readers who engage in interpreting; and the contexts of interpreting a particular text, including the historical background, purposes, cultural values, and the linguistic demands of a particular readership. Since the mid-1960s, each of these factors has been emphasized over others in terms of its relative importance to this meaning-making process. Currently, literacy educators and researchers adopt a more balanced model of reading comprehension, viewing all three factors as equally important for successfully comprehending texts. After providing a historical overview of reading comprehension, this entry discusses reading comprehension in the digital age, including implications for schools and classrooms.

Historical Overview of Reading Comprehension

Prior to the mid-1960s, the reading comprehension process was associated with the notion of digging, as if the meaning needed to be *extracted* from the text. As such, the reader uses various textual features (e.g., contextual clues and displayed images) to locate and *dig out* this meaning. The focus on instruction was on the accuracy and immediacy of recognizing words and their association with one another; if readers have the skills to immediately identify the intended meaning of words and the relationships of these words within and across sentences, then the readers will be successful in their excavation. Thus, the purpose of reading during this time was to gain an accurate interpretation of a given text.

During the 1970s and 1980s, notions of reading comprehension shifted away from the text-focused, digging out metaphor toward a model of a reader-centric process. Meaning is assumed to be constructed within an individual reader's mind, and as such, no two readers can interpret a text in the exact same way. Instructional practices during this time emphasized the importance of utilizing prior knowledge for making inferences from texts. That is, using what is explicitly present in texts, readers were encouraged to draw conclusions about a given topic or concept based on their own prior understanding. Furthermore, instruction began to take into account students' thoughts and feelings about what they are reading rather than solely focusing on learning new information from text.

During the late 1980s through the early 1990s, issues related to context and situation emerged as dominant foci of scholarship on reading comprehension. Literacy research was generally concerned with both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, and thus reading became known as a social- or community-based practice. With his view that all forms of learning are socially constructed, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky was a major influence in this social view of reading comprehension. The champion instructional approach as inscribed in literacy research from this period was for teachers and students to engage in *negotiations* about the intended meaning of a given text. Vygotsky's theory emphasized that language in use is ideological or political in nature; people use language to persuade or affirm cultural values and principles. Relatedly, texts were viewed as nonneutral entities; thus, students were encouraged to problematize and critically interrogate texts.

During the mid-1990s, Allan Luke and Peter Freebody developed the four resources model that increased focus on ideological or critical approaches to reading texts. This practice-oriented model is based on the assumption that readers have different purposes for engaging with a text and thus take on different roles depending on their purpose. According to Luke and Freebody, readers will assume one or more of the four possible roles—the code breaker,

meaning maker, text user, or text critic. Each role focuses the spotlight on a particular resource or aspect of the reading activity—the reader, the text, the immediate environment, or the general historical and sociocultural context. The code breakers focused the explicit print features of texts that include the alphabetical letters, the phonological representation of spellings, and the structural conventions and patterns of words within sentences. Code breakers are mainly interested in decoding for the purpose of accurately sounding out words as syntactically represented within a text. Meaning makers are focused on the intended meaning of the text in relation to their background knowledge and past experiences about the general ideas of the text. Text users focus on the pragmatics of reading, using intended messages from text for a variety of purposes; following a recipe, for example, requires a reader to *use* a text for the purpose of making a meal. Finally, the text critic views the text as a source for reflecting on and developing an argument about social, political, or economic issues represented in a given text. Text critics explore potential subtexts to examine the assumption and consequences of notions, events, arguments, and explications presented in text. An example of such critical reading might include a response to a political speech. Freebody and Luke emphasize that students can take more than one role in reading a given text, thus opening classroom discussions to multiple levels of understanding and various interpretations. The four resources model encourages teachers to pay more attention to the *quality* of students' reasoning. That is, producing a line of reasoning (i.e., an evaluative stance or argument based on the ideas represented in text) is preferred over merely offering an accurate summary of a text. Thus, all readers necessarily traverse all four roles, or resources, as each resource is the prerequisite to the ultimate goal of reading comprehension in the form of critical reasoning.

During the late 1990s, Walter Kintsch developed a cognitively oriented model of reading, the construction–integration (C-I) model, which emerged as a dominant paradigm for conceptualizing what is happening inside the mind as a reader engages in textual reading. This model attempts to account for the neurologically based processes and associated complexities of reading in action. According to the C-I model, a reader first decodes small portions of texts that contain embedded ideas or propositions. Almost simultaneously, the reader integrates these propositions to gain a general, text-based understanding, or key idea, of larger portions of the text. This text-based knowledge is then immediately integrated with the reader's prior knowledge about the indicated topic, issue, or concept. This process happens very quickly and is repeated as the reader proceeds through a text. The integrated process as explained by the C-I model assumes a balanced relationship between the text, reader, and various contextual factors. In the United States, the C-I model serves as a guiding reference for large-scale research, pedagogical practices, and policies for classroom-based reading comprehension activities. The Common Core State Standards, the RAND Corporation of educational research and analysis, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress are examples of influential educational entities in the United States that utilize the C-I model as a foundational framework in various empirical and assessment efforts. Moreover, literacy scholars such as P. David Pearson have suggested ways to integrate the cognitive C-I model with the practice-oriented four resources model in order to further clarify best approaches for supporting reading comprehension development for a variety of purposes and texts.

Reading Comprehension in the Digital Age

Recent studies on reading comprehension have explored the notion of text as more than words on a printed page. Images, diagrams, and even simulations have been recognized as forms of text that necessitate various levels of interpretation for a variety of purposes.

Scientific tables presenting evidence in support of a particular argument, for example, constitute texts which readers interpret and critically evaluate, leading to various actions such as subsequent investigations. This ability to interpret and analyze scientific texts is a key standard within the practices dimension of the recently developed Next Generation Science Standards. As such, literacy researchers and scholars have expanded notions of text in recent years to include such multiple modes of communication.

Another recent development in reading comprehension research is the study of multiple-text comprehension. There is growing interest in learning more about the skills and strategies needed to triangulate information gathered or constructed from multiple sources of text. For example, a reading assessment task for middle school social studies students may involve triangulating key ideas from a primary source (e.g., the original text of a law written in 1882 to prohibit entry of Chinese immigrants), a secondary account of life during a particular time period (e.g., concerning life for Chinese immigrants during the 19th century), and perhaps key images from this time period (e.g., pictures of workers on the railroad) to construct complex understandings based on such sources of text. Such reading tasks have become more prevalent in district- and statewide assessments.

Implication for Schools and Classrooms

The increased complexities of reading comprehension as briefly described herein have significant implications for classroom practices. Teachers need to have more knowledge about the qualities and complexities of various forms of texts and about optimal ways to identify and use the most appropriate texts for various reading activities and assessments. Collaborative approaches to reading have received more attention in recent years as a way to maximize the value of the funds of knowledge and skills that each student brings to the classroom. The approach called Collaborative Strategic Reading, for example, has been found to be effective for such purposes.

Future research on reading comprehension will likely involve investigations into the particular contextual effects of collaborative reading and text qualities on the comprehension of discipline- and genre-specific texts. For example, Diana J. Arya and colleagues' recent studies suggest that genre and linguistic complexity have a direct impact on an individual's reading comprehension process. Future studies may focus on the mediation potential of collaborative reading on such text-specific effects.

See also [Literacy](#); [Readability](#); [Reading Comprehension Assessments](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139.n579>

10.4135/9781506326139.n579

Further Readings

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