

# Assessing Reading Comprehension

As with any good instruction, comprehension instruction should be accompanied by reliable assessment that aligns with the instruction. Studies indicate, however, that most comprehension assessments currently are inadequate on several levels. As summarized by the RAND Reading Study Group (2002), most assessments now in wide use:

- Are not based on current understandings of comprehension and inadequately represent the complexity of comprehension.
- Confuse/combine comprehension with other student capacities (vocabulary, word-reading ability, writing ability).
- Rely too heavily on one response type.
- Rely too heavily on students' background knowledge.

The RAND group concludes that such assessments are not useful for teachers and tend to narrow the curriculum (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Nonetheless, teachers do need to monitor students' comprehension. For primary grade students, informal assessment might be done through listening and retelling activities (Johnston & Rogers, 2001; Morrow & Gambrell, 2001). Following a read-aloud, teachers can ask students to recall events and details about characters and settings.

Monitoring of student progress should also be conducted on a regular basis to determine specific areas in which students are or are not making progress and whether instructional approaches are effective or should be modified or changed (Kame'enui, 2004).

For middle and upper grade students, assessment should, for example, examine students' ability to use comprehension strategies appropriately to understand what they read. When assessment shows that a student or students are misusing (or not using) a particular strategy, the teacher should respond with additional instruction or a modified instructional approach. At the same time, students should self-assess by monitoring their own use of comprehension strategies, to become aware of their strengths as well as their weaknesses as developing comprehenders (Duke & Pearson,

2002). Student work, such as graphic organizers and literature logs can also provide a means of assessment (Calfée & Hiebert, 1991).

## **Toward Better Comprehension Assessments**

To provide more useful and accurate measures of student comprehension, assessments should:

- Reflect authentic outcomes.
- Have clear purposes.
- Reflect instruction.
- Show developmental sensitivity.
- Show instructional sensitivity.
- Recognize social, linguistic, and cultural variations.

*(Kame'enui, 2004; Pearson, 2004; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002)*

## Conclusion

**I**t has been almost three decades since Durkin’s studies showed the lack of meaningful comprehension instruction in our elementary school classrooms (Durkin, 1978–79). Over the intervening years, other researchers have looked for ways that comprehension instruction might be made more effective. From that research, we now know a great deal about what does—and does not—work.

From research, we know that well-developed decoding and word recognition skills, vocabulary knowledge, and reading fluency are essential to proficient reading comprehension. We also know that readers who are proficient comprehenders call on a range of comprehension strategies as they read to relate ideas in the text to what they already know; to keep track of how well they are understanding what they read; and, when understanding breaks down, to identify what is causing the problem and how to overcome it.

From research, we also know that to be most effective, comprehension instruction should both help students learn about and practice using reading strategies and learn how to focus on the content of the text they are reading.

Research also points to the importance of reading practice in the form of lots of reading in many different kinds of texts. Good readers spend more time reading than students who do not read well. Students who read widely have bigger vocabularies and more extensive networks of world knowledge. Teachers and schools must provide time and texts for students to read in school and support programs that encourage students to read at home.

Most importantly, research has shown us that by providing students with effective comprehension instruction, we can help set them securely on the path to becoming proficient, lifelong readers who are motivated to read and engaged in their learning.

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