This well-known rubric, which precedes many comprehension passages in textbooks, examination papers as well as a host of other reading materials, has been so over-used that many teachers have taken it as a directive for teaching reading comprehension. This view of comprehension as merely getting students to read the passage and answer the questions given does not take into consideration the many different facets of the comprehension process. Instead, this focus on getting the correct answer is product-oriented; this means we are concerned with "What is the answer?" rather than "How did you arrive at this answer?". The latter is a more important question if we want to understand what thinking process students go through to arrive at their answers. However, the overwhelming concern with the former has resulted in the widespread belief that improvement in comprehension comes from more practice with answering questions rather than with more effective teaching.

Reading and Comprehension

To teach comprehension effectively, we need to understand what the reading process involves. Reading is no longer seen as a static process, and the reader is, similarly, not merely a passive recipient. Reading is seen as a process of constructing meaning through a dynamic interaction among the reader, the text and the context of the reading situation (Wixon et. al, 1987). Meaning is not perceived as something to be extracted from the text. Instead, it is actively created in the reader's mind as a result of the integration of his own prior or background knowledge and the information given in the text. For example, think about reading the daily newspapers. If you did not have some previous knowledge about the political
situation in, say, Indonesia, you would have some difficulty following the issues discussed. Similarly, a child may be able to sound out the words in these reports, but he would have a hard time understanding the content.

The term interaction is used to describe the communicative nature of reading; both writer and reader affect the comprehension process through their knowledge and their skills in presenting and abstracting information. In short, comprehension is dependent on both the writer of the passage and the way he presents the information, as well as on the reader and the way he interprets the information. The interaction is dynamic because it describes the active, variable nature of the reading process, and this means that the reading experience will vary depending on the combination of reader, text and contextual factors.

To be able to see the connection between comprehension and this definition of reading, one needs to understand that no difference exists between reading and comprehension, although school timetables would have us believe otherwise. If you “read” without comprehending, then you are merely “barking at print”, sounding out words but not making meaning. You are not reading in the true sense of the words. Reading involves comprehension, and successful comprehension depends on the reader, the text and the reading context.

The Reader

Research has shown that the prior or background knowledge that a reader has about a topic helps him to understand a text better. For example, a newspaper report on golf or cricket would have little meaning to someone who does not play golf or cricket and has no background knowledge about the games. Similarly, a lay person reading a statistics textbook for the first time may just end up with a headache! A good reader also has knowledge about the reading process – he knows when to vary his reading speed, what to do when comprehension fails and how to read according to the task set. This knowledge comes from experience, and an inexperienced or new reader, will not have this knowledge to help him. Finally, the reader,
for all his skill, is also affected by his self-perception, his interest in the topic and his own expectations for success. Therefore, an interested reader who has expectations for success and sees himself as a good reader will be more successful in comprehending the text read.

What does this mean for the teacher in the classroom? Well, firstly, it means that motivation is important, as a motivated reader is already on the way towards better comprehension. Secondly, building prior knowledge is an important aspect of teaching comprehension. Students may have the knowledge, but they may not know how to link it to the topic at hand. Sometimes, they know very little about the topic. The teacher has to think of ways to provide the background knowledge so that students can make the necessary links. Thirdly, teachers can help students by providing for successful reading lessons. By doing this, students will develop a more positive self-image which, in turn, will help improve their comprehension ability. This may mean that the teacher has to give other exercises that are within the students' ability rather than wholly relying on the ten questions after the passage.

The Text

The text is yet another factor in the reading comprehension triangle. Many of us may have had the experience of coming across incomprehensible passages; we probably knocked ourselves on the head, called ourselves stupid, and re-read the passages many more times but to no avail. On such occasions, we rarely blame the text and the writer for creating the problem, but the truth is, texts can be poorly written. Such "inconsiderate texts" may be poorly organized so that the information is impossible to extract, or the information may be couched in such complex language that only the writer himself knows what he is talking about. Comprehension can, therefore, be affected by the writer and the way he writes. The type of text given is yet another aspect to consider. We now know that narrative texts are different from expository or non-narrative texts; for example, a short story centred around a traffic accident would be structurally different from a newspaper or police report on the same accident. Within narrative texts, fairy tales, mysteries and love stories all have
their own peculiar features to match the conventions governing their genres. Expository texts also vary according to subjects, for example, a scientific text is structured differently from a history text. Familiarity with the conventions of these different types of text does help comprehension.

What are the implications for the teacher? The teacher needs to consider the type of text she has chosen for reading. Is the information well organized? Are there specific instances of incoherence? Can these dense bits be re-written to make them clearer? Another important suggestion is that teachers should teach their students about text types. It is generally acknowledged that children do have innate understanding about the way stories are structured, but because of a lack of exposure to expository materials, many students have problems with these texts. This is particularly evident when pupils reach lower secondary when the prescribed reading becomes less narrative and more expository in nature. Systematic exposure to and instruction on a variety of text types can help students become more effective readers.

The Context

The last factor affecting comprehension is the reading context, and this includes the setting, the task set, as well as the purpose in reading. These factors have to be considered together as they interact with each other just as they do with the reader and the text. The setting in the class affects comprehension because it has a direct effect on the child's interest and motivation. A threatening situation, for instance, may reduce efficiency in information processing because the child is not able to or not motivated enough to attend to the task set. The purpose for reading, for example, reading for particular ideas or reading to locate specific information, will result in different reading strategies and different degrees of recall. The task set, for example, reading to answer multiple-choice type questions will require a different strategy from, say, reading to summarise the text.
For the teacher then, developing a conducive setting for reading lessons can aid pupils' understanding. Setting questions for written work at the end of every comprehension session can mean creating a test-like situation all the time. Think of the motivation this provides, and also think about what such a task promotes in terms of skills. Yes, our students will certainly be excellent at answering questions when the examinations come, but is that all we want to teach our students, all year round? During instruction, setting a purpose for reading at the beginning of each reading session is a good way of focusing students' reading and encouraging them to develop skills like predicting, skimming, scanning, locating main ideas and details within the reading lesson proper.

What else do these factors suggest about the comprehension process? Because each reader brings with him such different background knowledge and because reading is such a complex interaction of all these factors, we can expect that the meaning that one reader constructs from a text can vary from that of another reader. Try reading the following passage with your friend and individually, write down on a piece of paper what you think is happening.

“Louis slowly got up from the mat, planning his escape. He hesitated a moment and thought. Things were not going well. What bothered him most was being held, especially since the charge against him had been weak. He considered his present position. The lock that held him was strong but he thought he could break it. He knew, however, that his timing would have to be perfect. Louis was aware that it was because of his early roughness that he had been penalised so severely – much too severely from his point of view. The situation was becoming frustrating; the pressure had been grind on him for too long. He was being ridden unmercifully. Louis was getting angry now. He felt he was ready to make his move. He knew that his success or failure would depend on what he did in the next few seconds.”

(Anderson et. al, 1977)
In the original research, the "dominant" or typical interpretation evoked by readers with a non-specific or general background was that of a convict planning his escape from prison. Readers with some experience or interest in athletics interpreted the passage as that of wrestler trying to get free. Our own trainee teachers here, at the Institute of Education, had a whole host of different interpretations, but none resembled the original answers. Different background knowledge and cultures may be a factor here, but do try the next passage and see if you understand what it is all about.

"The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups depending on their makeup. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go elsewhere due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo any particular endeavour. That is, it better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run, this may not seem important, but complications from doing too many can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first, the whole procedure may seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but one can never tell. After the procedure is completed, one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually, they will have been used once more and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, this is part of life."

(Bransford and Johnson, 1972)

Many of our trainee teachers thought the passage contained some advice on how to deal with problems in life. In fact, it is about washing clothes, and those of us who do not wash clothes often may take a little longer to understand the passage than those of us who do.
What does this imply for teaching comprehension then? If different readers reading the same passage can come up with different interpretations, does it mean that there can be more than one answer to any one comprehension question set? Well, yes and no, but it is also important to bear in mind that all of us do have a large pool of shared knowledge as a result of our socialisation process, so the chances of us agreeing on one answer are very high. Generally, however, for literal questions, one answer is likely, but for inferential and application questions, two or more answers are possible (Pearson & Johnson, 1978). As teachers, we should keep this in mind and not insist on the answer we have prepared. This will make marking difficult for us, but to insist on our answer only is not only unfair, but also educationally unacceptable.

An understanding of the factors influencing comprehension can help us obtain some insight into the problems our students may face in attempting to understand what they are reading. Comprehension is a complex process that deserves careful instruction instead of merely telling students to "read the passage and answer the following questions". In addition to effective instruction, the care that we put into selecting and preparing our materials would contribute to successful learning in the reading classroom.

References


