

Addressing the Easier Reading Comprehension Challenges: *Empowering Students and Raising Test Scores*

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Imagine if you could move 20% of the struggling readers in your classroom or school to reading proficiency in a matter of a few months. In fact, it is quite doable. Some students in the intermediate grades or middle school struggle to become good readers for a variety of reasons and have different instructional needs. However, there is one profile of struggling readers that can be remediated relatively easily, namely students who have high word recognition scores, are quite fluent, possess sufficient vocabulary, and yet do not comprehend. These students exist and in larger numbers than is often recognized. In their important study on struggling readers, Valencia & Buly (2004) found that approximately 18% fit this profile. On a personal note, my experience of directing a university reading clinic for over twenty-five years showed a similar pattern. Of the 25 or so struggling readers we admitted each semester, we could expect two to four of the students to be fluent with high word recognition scores but low in comprehension. In a fourth-grade classroom of 22 students where 65% or fourteen students are proficient and eight are struggling to some degree, we can expect that at least one student and possibly two or three will fit this profile. Experienced teachers see these students quite often. They “sound good” when reading aloud but don’t comprehend what they read.

Kim, age 11, grade 5, is a good example of this profile. She was referred to our clinic by her parents: her father, a university faculty member, and her mother, a school administrator. Kim was above average in intelligence. On an informal reading inventory, she scored at the 7th grade level in word rec. and a low second grade level in oral reading comprehension and a slightly higher level of 2nd grade when reading silently. When she read orally it was almost a dramatic performance. She loved reading aloud and performing. When we asked her to retell what she had read, she had little or no idea. We got similar results in silent comprehension.

Enrolling her in our semester long clinic, we were able to move her comprehension scores up to a very solid fifth-grade level over a period of about 7-8 weeks meeting twice each week, for a total of about 15 hours of instruction. In subsequent years when her parents brought her to the university when her school was not in session, I would often see her reading novels. Kim is now a successful college grad.

Not all students who exhibit this profile are as easy to remediate as Kim, but many are and even the more challenging ones can make substantial gains in reading proficiency in a regular classroom within a school year or less.

An instructional focus for high fluency, low comprehension readers is relatively straightforward.

Below is a list of instructional priorities.

1. **Think silent reading.** Often students who exhibit this profile view reading as a performance of “sounding good.” Silent reading, in contrast, is for the purpose of constructing meaning. And of course, any state or national assessment of reading performance requires students to read silently.
2. **Read with a purpose or goal of finding answers.** Too often with these students their goal is to simply finish the reading. Teachers are sometimes reluctant to have students read silently because they cannot be assured that some students are truly reading. If the reader has a purpose that they have established, students will read with a focus. It is important that this purpose be the reader’s purpose and not the teacher’s purpose.

3. **Establish pupil/student purposes through prediction and speculation.** When students predict what might happen next in a story, or what an answer might entail in an expository selection, purposeful and focused reading becomes more likely. Teacher language such as, “What do you think might happen next in our story?” or “What do you think the answers might be?” (in an expository text), facilitates this process. Encourage a variety of reasonable hypotheses. Conversations such as these between teacher and students help establish the students’ purposes for reading and serve to motivate and keep the reader in focus. (See Hammond 2023.)
4. **Pause and discuss.** After students have read a portion of a text, perhaps a page or several paragraphs, pause and ask. “What have we learned so far?” Discuss with the students. Acknowledge and celebrate what new information has been learned, but also what questions are still unanswered.
5. **Reread for clarification.** When information is not clear, encourage students to reread and talk about possible confusion and subsequent clarification. As teachers, we need to send the message that when we read a page of text we should know more than we did at the top of the page.
6. **Place the students with this profile in Guided *Silent* Reading lessons with students who are skilled in reading comprehension.** These students of high fluency/low comprehension profile need the experience of seeing how their peers gain insights and learn when they read.
7. **Promote discussion.** Discussion is essential and should center around what has been read, what the reader learned, what was most interesting, what is still unclear after the reading, what the reader was thinking when reading a particular segment, and so on. Emphasis is on discussion, not on a *Question and Answer* format. This can be accomplished best in a small group situation.
8. **Teach metacognitive skills.** Talk to your students about what good readers do when they read, how they begin with what they already know, how they think ahead and predict, how they reflect after the reading, how good readers often reread for clarification. etc. (See Hammond, 2023.) Help students become reflective of their own strengths and challenges as a reader.
9. **Use a modified cloze procedure.** Teachers might try this procedure from time to time. Select a passage and beginning with the 2nd sentence or 2nd paragraph, delete selected words. Tend not to delete more than 12-15% of the words in the passage. Do not make your deletions too tricky or subtle. Ask students to fill in the blanks with the words that would make sense. To complete the task, the students are deprived of the visual information and must think about what words would make sense and make the total passage sensible. This is a good activity for students to work on together in pairs. Promote discussion.
10. **Address listening comprehension.** Many of the same strategies used when students are reading the text can be applied when students are listening to text, such as accessing existing knowledge and predicting on possible answers in expository text, predicting on story events, discussing and reflecting on what has been learned, and so on. Some students who fit the profile of high word recognition and high fluency but low comprehension will be quite skilled with listening comprehension while others may not. Listening comprehension is important in its own right but can also be a foundation for reading comprehension.

11. **Distinguish between the reading of narrative and the reading of expository text.** Students who are skilled in reading comprehension take a different stance when reading a story or narrative vs. the reading of expository or nonfiction. This distinction is not always spelled out clearly in research literature or in instructional practices. We have described these differences and implications for instruction in previous writings. (See for example Hammond & Nessel, 2019.) Sometimes the profile of high word recognition and high fluency readers is relatively strong in the comprehension of narrative but far less so in the reading of expository text. Or students may be weak in both.

Think of the above suggestions on instruction not as a series of lessons but rather a change in culture and perspective. Focusing on the above instructional practices will make a significant difference in the students' comprehension performance in their classroom as well as in formal assessments.

Fortunately, this profile of struggling readers can be corrected in a regular classroom setting at any grade level. All students will benefit from the instructional practices listed above.

In conclusion, struggling readers who we see in the intermediate and middle school grades struggle for different reasons, and they have different instructional needs. Some need effective instruction in phonics. The majority of struggling readers do not! (See Valencia & Buly, 2004.) Other students have adequate comprehension skills but simply read too slowly to be efficient and to score well on timed tests. These students require instruction in fluency and rate. In the profile we have discussed above, the students are skilled in word recognition and fluency but are ineffective in comprehension. Consequently instruction for struggling readers must be focused and targeted. Schools and classroom teachers who come to this realization and address this situation accordingly will soon begin to reduce the number of struggling readers in our nation's classrooms.

References

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