

The Reading Edge: Thirteen Ways to Build Reading Comprehension: Third Edition: Instructors Edition

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A Cognitive View of Reading Comprehension: Implications for Reading Difficulties

Panayiota Kendeou
University of Minnesota

Paul van den Broek, Anne Helder, and Josefine Karlsson
Leiden University

Our aim in the present paper is to discuss a "cognitive view" of reading comprehension, with particular attention to research findings that have the potential to improve our understanding of difficulties in reading comprehension. We provide an overview of how specific sources of difficulties in inference making, executive functions, and attention allocation influence reading comprehension processes and outcomes and may lead to reading comprehension problems. Finally, we discuss how the consideration of these potential sources of difficulty have practical implications for the design and selection of instructional materials.

INTRODUCTION

Despite intensive instruction, many children and adolescents fail to reach functional levels of reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is essential for success in life and can be broadly defined as "understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" (OECD, 1999, p. 22). The importance of reading comprehension is also reflected in the extensive and impressive knowledge base that has been established in the fields of psychology, education, and cognitive sciences (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Our aim in this article is to discuss a "cognitive view" of reading comprehension, with particular attention to research findings that have the potential to improve our understanding of difficulties in reading literacy as well as educational practice for struggling readers.

We first present and discuss a cognitive view of reading comprehension. We then discuss developmental and individual differences in three core cognitive processes that may fail in a struggling reader and thus are common sources of reading comprehension difficulties. Finally, we discuss implications of the cognitive view for educational practice with the aim to improve reading comprehension performance by struggling readers.

READING COMPREHENSION: A COGNITIVE VIEW

How do we understand what we read? Reading comprehension depends on the execution and integration of many cogni-

tive processes (Kendeou & Trevors, 2012; van den Broek & Espin, 2012; van den Broek, Rapp, & Kendeou, 2005). To understand a sentence, one must visually process the individual words, identify and access their phonological, orthographic, and semantic representations, and connect these representations to form an understanding of the underlying meaning of the sentence. Similarly, to comprehend a text as a whole, the reader needs to process and connect individual idea units, resulting (if all goes well) in the construction of a coherent mental representation of the text. For these processes to be successful, many factors play a role, including reader characteristics, text properties, and the demands of the reading task (Lorch & van den Broek, 1997; van den Broek & Kremer, 1999).

The complexity of reading comprehension is captured in theoretical models that describe the cognitive and linguistic processes involved. Some models focus on the mental representation that readers construct as a result of the process of understanding words, sentences, and their respective relations within a text (McNamara & Magliano, 2009), whereas others focus on the developmental trajectories of various processes and skills central to reading comprehension (e.g., the Simple View of Reading; Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Although the various theoretical models emphasize different aspects of reading comprehension, they share the central notion that, at its core, reading comprehension involves the construction of a coherent mental representation of the text in the readers' memory. This mental representation of the text includes textual information and associated background knowledge interconnected via semantic relations (e.g., causal, referential, and spatial relations). Semantic relations are identified by the reader through passive and strategic inferential processes (Kintsch, 1988; van den Broek et al., 2005). The passive inferential processes take place automatically but the strategic processes demand readers' attentional and working memory resources. In turn, attentional and working memory resources

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