

Strategies to Enhance Kindergarten Children’s Reading Comprehension

Chhanda Islam, PhD

Professor, Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education
3213 Alexander Hall, Murray State University
Murray, KY 42071

Mi-Hwa Park, PhD

Associate Professor, Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education
3240 Alexander Hall, Murray State University
Murray, KY 42071

Introduction

The early years are critical in improving reading comprehension (Gullo, 2006). Children in the kindergarten year begin to understand that texts represent meanings and that words are often helpful in conveying information (Jacobs & Crowley, 2010). The children start to develop an ability to comprehend the contents of the books and apply their understanding to new situations on the basis of their background knowledge, vocabulary skills, reasoning and analytical skills, imagination, and judgment skills (Tomlinson, 2014). Engaging kindergarten children in comprehension can increase their ability to be good readers as well as encourage them to enjoy reading books (Jacobs & Crowley, 2010; Tomlinson, 2014). The purpose of this article, therefore, is to offer teachers/families evidence-based recommendations that address the challenges of teaching reading comprehension in kindergarten.

Importance of Reading Comprehension

Comprehension involves the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Listening to others read helps develop meta-cognition skills, such as an appreciation for how a story is developed and familiarity with the concept of print (Bredenkamp, 2011). Kindergarten children can comprehend on a higher level when teachers/families read aloud and expose the children to vocabulary and language patterns that are part of everyday speech. This, in turn, helps them understand the story elements and entices them to become better listeners. The children benefit from hearing an experienced reader when it is regularly exercised.

Like many dispositions and skills, comprehension strategies can build habits of the mind that help kindergarten children interact with texts in active and purposeful ways. Comprehension strategies provide children with a demonstration of phrased and fluent reading (Jalongo, 2013). Reading comprehension develops the listener’s interest in books and desire to be a reader. At story time, the pleasure of a good book gives kindergarten children a reason to think, and that pleasure can then lead them to better comprehend what they are hearing. When the children experience a story, they do far more than just understand each word; they create a mental picture of what they are hearing. Because listeners are so intimately involved with the story, “reading aloud to/with children can begin to develop skills and strategies that lead to comprehension of texts required of competent readers and writers” (Combs, 2006, p. 137). As kindergarten children learn to listen to stories with understanding, they practice comprehension strategies that will also help them to read stories with understanding.

According to Duke and Pearson (2002), “comprehension instruction is best when it focuses on a few well-taught, well-learned strategies” (p. 236). In other words, children need comprehension instruction to internalize the use of comprehension strategies. The value of teaching comprehension strategies is long and consistently endorsed by reading researchers (Pressley, 2002). Comprehension instruction, using evidenced-based strategies, has consistently proven its worth.

Children must have explicit comprehension instruction and multiple exposures to experience the varied and meaningful uses of print (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004). The goal for comprehension instruction is for teachers/families to integrate the early literacy instructional approaches that are appropriate and engaging for kindergarten children and that are explicit and intentional to offer a strong foundation for later reading success (National Center for Family Literacy, 2009). Providing meaningful comprehension activities that children can take advantage of in the classroom can certainly advance their learning of the story elements. The magic of teacher/family storytelling not only improves a child's listening but also broadens his/her interpretations of texts. Teachers/families are able to not only connect stories to real-life experiences but also broaden children's interests and open a new world of discovery. Teachers/families can ask questions, point to objects in illustrations as a model or scaffold, and prompt their children to see details. Teachers/families can become active listeners who add information a little above what the children have knowledge of (Machado, 2013).

Factors Influencing Children's Comprehension Skills

One factor that may negatively affect comprehension is if teachers/families select much higher-level books than the reading level of their kindergarten children. Teachers/families must balance kindergartners' varying abilities and needs while making sure that a chosen storybook fits developmentally and is culturally appropriate for their children. The selection of literature is key to providing an experience that promotes literacy development. Teachers/families must select challenging and achievable books based on a child's level of development, rate of development, and varying interests in order for the child to receive maximum benefit from his/her experiences with literature (Tomlinson, 2014).

Another factor that may influence children's reading comprehension is associated with how to ask a question. One useful way of enhancing children's reading comprehension is for teachers/families to help children recall the story and use effective questioning and prompts to engage them in comprehension and thinking. Adults can bring the opposite effects, however, if they exclusively focus on making children write book reports, or asking too many questions to check the children's understanding of the contents by interrupting the flow of reading. Thus, teachers/families should remember that children need a wealth of opportunities in which they authentically enjoy reading per se. The fundamental principle is that children must enjoy reading to strengthen their reading comprehension skills. A third factor that can affect reading comprehension is having children read a book alone. Teachers/families are proud of their children when they recognize letters and read books by themselves. However, children comprehend books based on the amount of their prior knowledge and experience. If adults read a book that is beyond their comprehension, they will have difficulty understanding the book. Likewise, if kindergarten children do not have the necessary background knowledge to comprehend a book, they will just read letters superficially without understanding the content. Therefore, teachers/families should build background knowledge and provide kindergarten children with many opportunities to read books together before they can read independently by themselves.

A fourth factor that impacts comprehension is making children read "fast." As children read a book, they need to be able to figure out the meanings inferred between the lines and should feel a sense of interest and joy of reading. They may not enjoy reading if they are expected to read a book as quickly as possible. They are more likely to understand the meanings of difficult words in the context if they are encouraged to read a book at their own pace. Pressuring children to read a book quickly may negate the opportunity to promote their comprehension, vocabulary, and imagination. To promote children's interest and joy of reading, it is more important to provide them with the chance to understand why a book is interesting and how to explore details in the book, rather than measure how fast they read. Finally, comprehension may be affected by the fact that teachers/families tend to give kindergarten children unnecessary praise. If adults give the children too much reading-related praises repeatedly, then the children may only pretend to read books in front of them to get attention and praise. In addition, they may develop an attitude that seeks only external motivation instead of intrinsic motivation.

Interactive Models to Promote Reading Comprehension

Interactive reading provides literacy strategies that enable parents and children to share a positive interaction and to communicate meaning together. Each session is meant to build upon the families and child's knowledge, skills, and relationship - while scaffolding an effective reading strategy. Interactive reading helps children develop thinking skills, use their creativity, express ideas, increase their vocabulary, and understand the relationships between oral and written forms of language. Interactive reading can be conducted in a variety of ways.

1. Reading aloud

Reading aloud is the foundation for reading success (Bredenkamp, 2011). Reading aloud to young children, particularly in an entertaining manner, promotes language development, and supports the relationship between child and family. Teachers/families must read aloud to children so that they can learn about words and language; build listening skills; expand vocabularies; talk about the characters, settings, and plot and then relate them to their own lives; gain knowledge about a variety of topics; gain exposure to a variety of writing styles and structures; develop descriptive language; explore social and moral issues; and learn to monitor their own behavior (Jalongo, 2013). Children who are read aloud to by teachers/families develop language and literacy skills in early years and go to kindergarten better prepared.

Reading aloud, a natural context for making meaning is an important experience for children who are listening. Reading aloud and having conversations help children make personal connections. It is through talk that children learn to make a connection, construct meaning, think critically, and develop reading comprehension. Kindergarten children should be asked to explain how they know and how they make sense of a book being read. Peers can respond to questions and begin to develop a thought process that happens inside the head. While the research on the effects of reading aloud to children is varied, teachers/families are urged to use an interactive comprehension strategy, because in order to get the greatest benefits, “the way books are shared with children matters” (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007, p. 742). Often, research on this topic uses the term *shared book reading* to describe an interactive approach to read-alouds. In this approach, teachers not only carry out the conversations, often to a small group, but they also use a variety of techniques to engage children in the text (National Center for Family Literacy, 2009). The National Early Literacy Panel emphasizes the importance of interactive shared reading strategies when reading aloud to young children (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). In an interactive shared reading, children ask questions of themselves and others in order to (a) clarify meaning, (b) predict what might happen in the text, (c) confirm their prediction, and (d) connect to other texts and ideas.

Sharing a story interactively can take many forms, including before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading strategies. Before reading, children may make predictions based on title, author, cover, and so on, and can generate questions they may have about the text. Teachers/families might ask the following: What do you know about this topic? During reading, teachers/families may stop several times at appropriate intervals and share questions such as these with the children: “I wonder why the animal—.” “I wonder what will happen next—.” After reading, teachers/families and the children can discuss their questions like these: How do the concepts connect with one another? How do the ideas connect to another text that you have read or heard? Answering questions, predicting, confirming predictions, making connections, summarizing, and evaluating help make reading and listening more purposeful (Jalongo, 2013).

2. Thinking aloud

Thinking aloud is a process of reading in which teachers/families verbalize their thinking while describing things they are doing as they read to monitor their comprehension (Janssen, Martine, & Rijlaarsdam, 2006). It is a good practice to provide kindergarten children think-aloud experiences that are as concrete as possible, something that is especially important when dealing with ideas as abstract as story elements. The think-aloud strategy can help build comprehension because it provides children with a mental map they can use to organize their thinking. By modeling how fluent readers think about the text and problem solve as they read, teachers/families can make their thinking visible. Thinking aloud encourages children to develop the “habits of mind” proficient readers employ. Teachers/families can encourage and support thinking, listening, speaking, viewing, and modeling, all of which reveal the inner conversation children have with the text as they read (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). Teachers/families may think aloud and demonstrate how to point out connections between prior experiences and the story, similarities between books, and any relationship between the books and a larger concept. Kindergarten children need to be shown this type of thinking and then asked to participate in book interpretation. This active involvement gives teachers/families a glimpse into their children’s thinking.

3. Demonstration

Another interactive model to support kindergarten children, particularly those with limited English proficiency (LEP), is to use demonstration to help circumvent language barriers and avoid frustration. Children with LEP tend to perform poorly on content area exams because they often lack English literacy skills and academic vocabulary (Huerta & Jackson, 2010).

By using big books, reading bilingual books, and providing interesting electronic books, teachers/families can help build children's reading comprehension. Differentiating instruction is necessary to meet children's individual needs and to provide additional instruction and intervention. Knowing where individual children are in their reading comprehension helps adults provide the support they need to gain additional skills and strategies in order to help them become successful readers. Note that children with LEP tend to be observant and visual learners, and thus nonverbal communication increases trustworthiness and helps the children visualize the contents of texts and the meanings of words (Park, 2014). In addition, the children are more likely to be comfortable representing their ideas and feelings through demonstration using nonverbal communication. As a communication tool, teachers/families may use nonverbal as well as verbal conversations to increase the children's engagement and understanding of books (Park, 2014).

4. Dialogic reading

Dialogic reading is based on PEER (prompt, evaluate, extend, and repeat) sequences, such as teachers/families prompting a child with a question about the story, evaluating and expanding on the child's responses, and repeating the initial question to check whether the child is comprehending the new information. Adults may build upon children's comprehension skills by encouraging conversations about the story elements unfamiliar to the children. There are five types of prompts known as CROWD (completion, recall, open-ended, wh, and distancing) that are used in dialogic reading to begin PEER sequences. More specifically the prompts used with the story are the following:

- Completion prompts -provide children with information about the structure of language that is critical to later reading. For instance, teachers/families may prompt a child leaving a blank at the end of a sentence and having the child fill it in.
- Recall prompts help children understand story elements or describe sequences of events. For example, teachers/families may say, "Can you tell me what happened to the blue whale in this story?"
- Open-ended prompts help children construct meaning, and build comprehension, and they increase attention to the meaning of unknown words. For instance, while looking at a page in a book that a child is familiar with, teachers/families may ask, "How is Lynn going to carry all these strawberries?"
- What- prompts begin with what, where, when, why, and who questions. For example, the adults may ask, "What do you think *meditate* means?"
- Distancing prompts help children make connections between books and the real world, as well as build comprehension and narrative skills. For example, while looking at a book with a picture of a Barbie house, teachers/families may say, "Tell me about a time when you lost your Barbie doll? How did you feel?"

The use of dialogic reading strategies has been shown to facilitate development of conversational and narrative skills in young children (Hoffman, O'Neil-Pirozzi & Cutting, 2013). The PEER sequences and CROWD prompts involve active engagement and help children develop comprehension skills during shared book reading.

5. Reading favorite books

On the basis of their reading comprehension, children may broaden their interest beyond their favorite books to different topics and a variety of genres including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Allowing children to self-select their reading genres is a powerful motivation to strengthen their growth in literacy, to create a positive attitude toward reading, and to help them become lifelong lovers of books (Willingham, 2015).

6. Show many picture books

Having picture books with few words will reach children of all ability levels and appeal to both boys and girls in a multitude of ways. In fact, picture books are excellent learning materials to enhance children's reading comprehension. If children look at picture books, posters, signs, charts, and photos on a regular basis, they will enhance their background knowledge and can make connections between texts and their prior knowledge (Lilly & Fields, 2014).

As mentioned previously, children's reading comprehension depends on how much background knowledge they have. Some adults may believe that kindergarten children will be puzzled if they do not have an opportunity to read a book filled with tiny words and long texts. Thus, they are likely to choose a book with complex sentences to help prepare the children for first grade.

This strategy, however, is not effective at all for promoting children's reading comprehension because such a book is not developmentally appropriate, and will not naturally invoke their interest and motivation to read.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some kindergarten children come to school knowing far fewer comprehension strategies than their peers (Bredekamp, 2011). It is important that teachers/families intentionally think about how to provide the children with many opportunities to enhance reading comprehension. They need to teach the children a variety of comprehension strategies that will help them understand and retain what they read and thus become independent, resourceful readers. Constructing meaning while reading can be demanding intellectual work, and teachers/families that get their children's interest may be more effective in helping them to develop good reading comprehension skills. Reading comprehension enriches kindergarten children's language skills, a critical building block on the road to successful reading and writing.

References

- Bredekamp, S. (2011). *Effective practices in early childhood education: Building a foundation*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Combs, M. (2006). *Readers and writers in primary grades*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Duke, N. K., & Pearson, P. D. (2002). Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (pp. 236). Newark, DE: International Literacy Association.
- Gullo, D. F. (Ed.). (2006). *K today: Teaching and learning in the kindergarten year*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2013). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension for understanding and engagement*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Hoffman, B. J., O'Neil-Pirozzi, M. T., & Cutting, J. (2013). Read together, talk together: The acceptability of teaching parents to use dialogic reading strategies via videotaped instruction. *Psychology in the School, 43*(1), 71-78.
- Huerta, M., & Jackson, J. (2010). Connecting literacy and science to increase achievement for English language learners. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 38*, 205-211.
- Jacobs, G., & Crowley, K. (2010). *Reaching standards and beyond in kindergarten: Nurturing children's sense of wonder and joy in learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Jalongo, M. R. (2013). *Early childhood language arts*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- Janssen, T., Martine, B., & Rijlaarsdam, G. (2006). Literary reading activities of good and weak students: A think aloud study. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 21*(1), 35-42.
- Lilly, E., & Fields, C. (2014). The power of photography as a catalyst for teaching informational writing. *Childhood Education, 90*(2), 99-106. doi:10.1080/00094056.2014.894791
- Machado, M. J. (2013). *Early childhood experiences in language arts*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- McGee, L. M., & Schickedanz, J. A. (2007). Repeated interactive read-alouds in preschool and kindergarten. *The Reading Teacher, 60*(8), 742-751.
- National Center for Family Literacy (2009). *What works: An introductory teacher guide for early language and emergent literacy instruction*. Retrieved from http://www.dieec.udel.edu/sites/dieec.udel.edu/files/pdfs/early_childhood_professionals/what-works.pdf
- Park, M. (2014). Increasing English language learners' engagement in instruction. *Multicultural Education, 22*(1), 20-29.
- Pressley, M. (2002). Metacognition and self-regulated comprehension. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (pp. 291-309). Newark, DE: International Literacy Association.
- Shanahan, T., & Lonigan, C. (2010). The national early literacy panel: A summary of the process and the report. *Educational Researcher, 39*(4), 279-285.
- Strickland, D. S., & Schickedanz, J. A. (2004). *Learning about print in preschool: Working with letter, words, and beginning links with phonemic awareness*. Newark, DE: International Literacy Association.
- Tomlinson, H. B. (2014). An overview of development in the kindergarten year. In C. Copple, S. Bredekamp, D. Koralek, & K. Charner (Eds.), *Developmentally appropriate practice: Focus on kindergarteners* (pp. 21-56). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Willingham, D. T. (2015). For the love of reading: Engaging students in a lifelong pursuit. *American Educator, 39*(1), 4-13.

