Rethinking Reading Comprehension
Definitions, Instructional Practices, and Assessment

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Introduction

A significant amount of research conducted on effective reading comprehension strategies has focused on the cognitive operations readers employ when constructing meaning in transactions with texts (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 2000; Pressley, Block, & Gambrell, 2002). This focus on the cognitive operations readers draw upon can certainly be considered an expanded perspective compared to the behavioral research on comprehension instruction conducted previously (Fitzgerald, Robinson, Farone, Hittleman, & Unruh, 1990). However, a primary focus on the cognitive aspects of reading comprehension does not adequately address the social and cultural aspects of reading (Gee, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2001).

Research on reading comprehension and comprehension instruction has produced a menu of cognitive strategies, including, but not limited to: a) visualizing, b) predicting, c) summarizing, d) asking questions, e) monitoring comprehension, and f) determining important information. These strategies have been referred to as “goal-directed cognitive operations” taught through teacher-directed instruction that typically includes two components; direct explanation and scaffolding (Sinatra, Brown, & Reynolds, 2002). These reading strategies have been conceptualized as cognitive operations that can be employed across a variety of texts and contexts. In other words, the cognitive operation of visualizing is touted as an effective reading strategy regardless of whether you are reading a poem, a newspaper article or a job application.

Expanding current perspectives on reading comprehension is essential if educators are going to move beyond cognitively-based strategy instruction to consider socio-cultural aspects of reading comprehension. In order to do so, educators need to expand their definitions of reading comprehension to include
socio-cultural, historical, political, and pragmatic aspects of reading. Cognitive-based reading comprehension strategies need to be reconceptualized as contextually grounded reading comprehension strategies that take into account the immediate, socio-cultural, and historical contexts of reading text.

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing various ways of defining reading comprehension with the intention of expanding the perspectives considered. Next, I will discuss how an expanded definition of reading comprehension might affect the instructional approaches one employs in classrooms. Finally, I will consider how these changes in definition and instructional practices effect how we assess readers’ abilities to understand what they have read. It is my contention, as one’s definition of reading comprehension is expanded to include perspectives beyond decoding and cognitive strategies, instructional approaches, and the assessments used to determine whether a reader has comprehended what was read, will expand as well.

Rethinking Definitions of Reading Comprehension

It was once assumed that reading comprehension was simply a combination of decoding and oral comprehension skills (Hoover & Gough, 1990). That is, if readers could decode the words on a page, they would be able to monitor what was being read to themselves orally and understand what they were reading. However, contemporary research in reading comprehension has suggested that understanding what one reads involves more than decoding plus oral language comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2000). Just because readers can decode words does not mean that they have understood what they have read. In fact, as readers progress into more complex texts, their ability to decode becomes less and less an indicator of their ability to comprehend. Hammerberg (2004) iterates, “… the construction of meaning is an interactive process, more so than merely decoding the words, saying them aloud in your head, and assuming comprehension ‘happens’ when the words are heard” (p. 650).

Research on reading comprehension and the cognitively-based comprehension strategies used by proficient readers conducted by Pressley (Pressley, 1999; Pressley et al., 2002) and P. David Pearson (Pearson & Anderson, 1984; Pearson & Fielding, 1991), among others, has shown that readers who comprehend:

- are active processors of text
- connect texts to their experiences and prior knowledge
- set expectations or goals for their reading
- attend to the elements and structures of literature
• monitor their understandings
• ask questions of the text as they read
• preview or skim texts before reading
• attend to vocabulary
• are able to articulate and negotiate meaning
• construct meaning as they read through texts
• read selectively, choosing texts that serve their goals and purposes

From a cognitive or psycholinguistic perspective, comprehension is viewed as a process of constructing meaning in transaction with texts (Goodman, 1996; Smith, 2004). However, a focus on individual readers and the cognitive strategies they employ may conceal the impact and role that immediate and socio-cultural contexts play in the act of reading. To understand the effects these contexts play in the act of reading requires a shift from a psycholinguistic perspective to a socio-psycholinguistic perspective (Gee, 1992; John-Steiner, Petoskey, & Smith, 1994).

All four components, the text, the author, the reader, and the immediate and socio-cultural context play an important role in every reading event in addition to the cognitive strategies readers employ. The text presents written language, design and visual components to be considered and interpreted, the reader constructs meanings based on their knowledge of language, text and the world, the author constructs the written text, acting as rhetor bringing intentions and purpose to the act of writing (Kress, 2010), the publisher designs the layout and typographic elements of the text itself, and the immediate and socio-cultural context provides the cultural and pragmatic aspects of why one is reading and how the text is to be comprehended.

Readers should no longer be viewed as solitary explorers trying to uncover the single main idea hidden in the bowels of a classic novel or as “passive consumers of authoritative interpretations” (Faust, 1994, p. 25). Readers are active constructors of meanings, transacting with texts in particular times, places and contexts (Rosenblatt, 1978). Readers come to the act of reading with their prior cultural, linguistic, literary, and life experiences. They draw upon these experiences as each reading is, “situated in dialogue with and in extension of other readings” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 141).

In addition to reconsidering the role of the reader, a reconsideration of the concept of text would help expand our understandings of reading comprehension. Drawing on modernist literary theory (Serafini, 2003), the text has been conceived as a conduit, a neutral container for the transmission of messages and knowledge from author to reader (Bogdan & Straw, 1990; Mosenthal, 1987). From this perspective, a text is encoded by an author to be decoded by a reader. In describing comprehension strategies, both Keene and Zimmerman (1997)
and Snow (2002) suggest the text is capable of containing meaning. This text as conduit metaphor is made apparent by the ways in which texts are described in writings on reading strategy instruction. For example, Keene and Zimmerman (1997) state one of the reading strategies readers need to acquire is the ability to determine the most important ideas and themes in a text. Further, Snow (2002) suggests that comprehension is the simultaneous construction and extraction of meaning from a text. If meaning is to be extracted, then it must reside within the text a priori so readers may be able to efficiently extract it.

Considering the prepositions used in describing reading comprehension, and how these prepositions construct the concept of text, is vital to understanding the various theoretical perspectives being drawn upon in reading comprehension. When theorists and educators write meanings: a) come from the text, b) are found in the text, or c) are constructed with the text, they are referring to very different processes and epistemological stances. The first two phrases suggest that meaning is interred a priori within the text to be found or discovered by the effective reader, or what has been referred to as the “meaning incarnate” (Bruner, 1986). The text is conceived as a neutral conduit for the encoding of the author's message, and implicates a more passive role for the reader. The third phrase suggests a more active role for the reader, constructing meaning in transactions with texts. What the reader brings to the reading event is just as important as what the text brings. These ways of describing the reading process construct various epistemological assertions about where meaning is located and how or whether it is constructed, and must be considered as one expands the definitions that support instructional and assessment practices.

From a post-structuralist or socio-cultural perspective, there is no meaning that simply resides in a text until a reader with the requisite knowledge and skills constructs the meaning with the signs on a page (McCormick, 1995; O'Neill, 1993). The dual focus of the construction and extraction metaphor offered by Snow (2002) may serve as a balancing mechanism in a field of varying political allegiances, but it could also be construed as a form of theoretical schizophrenia trying to accommodate incommensurate views on meaning and comprehension.

Making a shift towards a socio-cultural model of reading comprehension, Freebody and Luke (1990) proffered an expanded conceptualization of the resources readers utilize when reading and the roles readers adopt in a post-modern, text-based culture. The four resources model and its associated “four roles of the reader” expanded the definition of reading from a simple model of decoding texts to constructing meaning and analyzing texts in socio-cultural contexts. Their goal was to shift the focus from trying to find the right method for teaching children to read to determining whether the range of resources available and the strategies emphasized in a reading program were indeed covering and
integrating the broad repertoire of practices required in today’s economies and cultures (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

The model, which includes the following roles: reader as code breaker, reader as text participant, reader as text user, and readers as text analyst, provided educators, researchers, and literacy theorists with an expanded perspective focusing on what it means to be a successful reader in new times. Readers were expected to draw upon the various resources available to develop and sustain the four roles necessary to be a successful reader.

An expanded definition of reading comprehension should address the process of generating viable interpretations in transaction with texts, and one’s ability to construct understandings from multiple perspectives; including the author’s intentions, textual references, personal experiences, and socio-cultural contexts in which one reads. In addition, reading comprehension should be viewed as an orchestration of the following four processes: (1) navigating textual elements, including written language, design features, and visual images and other multimodal elements, (2) generating meanings in transaction with texts, (3) articulating one’s ideas and meanings within a community of readers, and (4) interrogating the meanings constructed in a recursive, socially grounded process.

The following are some assertions based on a socio-cultural perspective on reading:

1. There is no unmediated access to texts, there are only particular readings that are privileged over others, no god’s eye view or transcendent authority is available as an objective reading to compare other readings with.
2. Texts are social artifacts, created by authors and read by readers that are embedded in particular social contexts and practices.
3. Meaning is always socially constructed.
4. Meaning is always historically embedded in local and particular contexts.
5. Meaning is always political, working towards particular interests.
6. Each reading has particular cultural capital, some readings are more privileged than others in the context of the classroom.

Based on these assertions, meanings constructed during the act of reading are socially embedded, temporary, partial, and plural (Corcoran, Hayhoe, & Pradl, 1994). There is not an objective truth about a text, but many truths, each with its own authority and its own warrants for viability aligned with particular literary theories and perspectives. The meanings constructed by readers at any one point in time are plural and open for reconsideration at another time when transacting with the text.
Research from a socio-cultural perspective focuses on the types of meanings that readers construct, how these meanings are affected by the social context and reading practices that readers are located within and the purposes of constructing particular responses (Gee, 1992; John-Steiner et al., 1994; Weaver, 1994). Readers construct readings (plural), not as originators of meaning, but as human subjects positioned through social, political, and historical practices that remain the location of a constant struggle over power. Every classroom is a site for the production of meaning, and every interpretive community has some alignment with a particular literary tradition or perspective (Fish, 1980). The shift from a cognitive to a socio-cultural perspective assumes that cognition is constructed by the social context, not just embedded within the social context (Lewis, 2000).

In addition, it may be useful to reconsider the term comprehension (as noun), referring to comprehension as a commodity that is individually acquired, or some amount of knowledge that is literally taken away from every successful reading event. Instead, it may be more appropriate to use the term comprehending (as verb), to suggest reading is a process, a recursive cycle of generating meanings that changes each time readers transact with a text across particular contexts. This shift from comprehension as a noun to comprehending as a verb would also require comprehension assessment to take place during the act of reading and discussing a text, rather than simply measuring how much of a pre-determined amount of meanings a reader accumulated and could represent after reading a text.

In summary, students are constructed as readers of particular types by the reading practices available to them and by the discourses which locate and situate reading practices and readers. As we expand our definition of comprehension to include the socio-cultural, political, and historical aspects of reading, we are better positioned to reconsider the instructional approaches and assessment frameworks that would best support readers in their development. Teaching readers to simply employ particular cognitive strategies without consideration of the social and cultural contexts in which they read is myopic, if not theoretically antiquated.

Rethinking Reading Comprehension Instruction

In a classic study on comprehension instruction, Durkin (1978) demonstrated that classroom teachers rarely, if ever, directly taught reading comprehension strategies. Unfortunately, her research also demonstrated that classroom teachers spent a great deal of time assessing comprehension by asking questions at the end of each reading selection. This focus on assessment pushed the teaching and demonstration of comprehension strategies used by proficient readers during
the act of reading to the periphery of the reading curriculum. What was once considered instruction in reading comprehension, was exposed as assessment of literal details and events contained within a text.

Since Durkin's study, research on explicit instruction in reading comprehension has increased dramatically. Pressley and colleagues (2002) conducted research that confirmed Durkin's findings, namely that teachers were not offering explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. This realization was surprising given the overwhelming evidence gathered by numerous researchers investigating reading comprehension instruction. Research on reading comprehension, primarily focusing on cognitive aspects of the reading process, has demonstrated that teaching the reading comprehension strategies used by proficient readers to novice or less successful readers improves their reading comprehension abilities (Braunger & Lewis, 1997; Dole et al., 1991; Kucan & Beck, 1997; Pressley, 2000).

Fielding and Pearson (1994) described four primary components of effective comprehension instruction: a) time to read and engage with texts, b) explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, c) opportunities for peers to collaborate while reading, and d) time to respond to and discuss what readers are reading. Unfortunately, many literacy educators have focused their attention on the role of explicit instruction on cognitive strategies to the detriment of the other three components described above. The role of explicit instruction is to provide demonstrations of the strategies proficient readers use, call readers’ attention to various aspects of text, and make reading processes “visible” so that novice readers can acquire these requisite strategies (Serafini, 2004). Explicit instruction, when combined with a supportive classroom environment, access to quality reading materials, attention to students’ motivations to read, and assessment that supports teaching and learning, are the basis of effective literacy instruction (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Serafini, 2004; Serafini & Youngs, 2008).

The cognitive strategies found to be most effective are not applied by readers outside of the socio-cultural contexts in which their reading takes place (Hammerberg, 2004; Lewis, 2000). In other words, the cognitive strategies being taught are not universal strategies that readers carry around with them and simply apply to the various texts they encounter. These strategies are grounded in the purposes the reader brings to the text, the textual and design elements of the text, and the socio-cultural context of the reading event. For example, predicting in the context of a mystery novel being read for enjoyment is very different than predicting during a read aloud discussion of an expository text. Based on this, the focus of comprehension strategy instruction should be constructing meaning during the act of reading in a given socio-cultural context, not becoming more proficient with simply applying these various cognitive strategies.
Drawing on the expanded definition of reading comprehension described earlier, instruction in reading comprehension strategies should always consider the reading context, both its immediate, pragmatic aspects, and its socio-cultural embeddedness. In order to support this alternative instructional approach, organizing the reading curriculum around the various cognitively-based reading comprehension strategies may be problematic. This type of instructional organization focuses attention on the strategy itself and not the purpose of, or context for, using the strategy. This focus on a context-free set of strategies tends to push the construction of meanings and the role of textual elements and genres to the periphery of the instructional framework. Organizing the curriculum into units of study (Calkins, 2001) based on the texts being read—by genre, author, format, illustrator, topic—rather than by strategy, provides an intellectual space for instruction to progress. In other words, strategies should be taught in the context of reading a particular text, given a particular task, in a particular context, not as an isolated mental strategy to be used across any context. In this way, the strategies become subservient to the texts, purposes, and contexts in which readers read, not the other way around. The strategies are now used in service of meaning, rather than as an end in themselves (Serafini, 2004).

Classroom discussion plays an important role in the articulation, negotiation, and reconsideration of meanings constructed by readers in the classroom context. Comprehension instruction should help readers participate in an “on-going cultural conversation about meaning, value and significance” (Faust, 1994, p. 31). Classroom discussions should balance the meanings constructed by individual readers in transaction with texts, and the socio-cultural contexts that permeate the meanings constructed.

Discussion also acknowledges the constructed nature of particular interpretations and interpretive conventions. Reading practices are influenced by social institutions and some interpretations or readings are more dominant, influential and appropriate than others (Lewis, 2000). Because of this, reading comprehension instruction should help readers understand texts from a variety of perspectives and learn how each perspective endorses and dismisses particular meanings and interpretations (Serafini, 2009). Reading comprehension instruction is the demonstration of various interpretive moves and the subsequent guided practice and application of these moves by students. These interpretive moves take into consideration the socio-culturally informed definition of comprehending described earlier in this chapter and the immediate contexts in which the reading is taking place. If teachers want students to talk and interpret texts in particular ways, they need to demonstrate possible discourses and allow for students to appropriate these ways of talking and thinking in their instructional approaches.
Rethinking Reading Assessment

Until we re-think our notions of assessing reading comprehension, very little will change in reading instruction. To begin, standardized tests were designed according to a consumption view of knowledge (Crebbin, 1992). According to this view, reading comprehension is viewed as a product, a set of discreet facts and skills to be consumed and carried away from the reading event. Standardized tests were subsequently developed to measure the amount of consumption taking place. From this perspective, comprehension is seen as the accumulation of a value-free body of concepts and understanding that are independent of time, place, and individuals. This view of reading assessment as measurement is closely aligned with a modernist philosophy and supports a factory model of education (Serafini, 2002, 2003).

Too often, comprehension assessments focus on the literal recall of textual elements to determine whether a reader has understood what they have read (Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2002). The focus is on memory and recall, not synthesis or the construction of various meanings. In addition, these standardized assessments rely on a literal interpretation of the text and the assumption that texts have stable, fixed meanings. While it is certainly easier to assess comprehension when meanings are fixed prior to the assessments being conducted, assessment must take into account the constructive nature of the meaning-making process and how meanings reside with the reader and the social context (Bogdan & Straw, 1990).

The primary role of standardized assessments is to simply record whether readers were able identify the predetermined answers. Passages are read, readers are required to select responses that subsequently align with the predetermined main ideas and answers created by the test designers. However, if one rejects the objectivist epistemological grounds, and the conceptualization of the text as a neutral container of meaning, on which these tests are constructed, then assessments must change to recognize new definitions and assertions set forth.

All assessments require readers to represent their readings and understandings in particular ways. These modes of representations range from narrow representations (i.e., answering multiple choice questions) to more sensitive and open representations (writing in response to reading, oral discussion). However, as we move from controlled responses to more personalized, open responses, our assessments get messier. Each mode of representation limits as well as supports a reader’s ability to articulate their understandings. In addition to answering questions on a standardized test, possible modes for representing comprehension include: (1) thinking aloud during reading, (2) writing in reader response
notebooks, (3) participating in an oral discussion, and (4) constructing art-based responses to what has been read (Serafini, 2010).

Each mode of representation is based on certain assumptions for warranting particular responses. Some possible criteria are: 1) referential adequacy—whether the response is supported by direct reference to the text itself, 2) resort to authority—whether the reader was able to adequately represent the intended meanings set forth by the author or testing authority, or 3) consensus—agreement by a community of readers that a response is adequate or viable.

When assessment becomes a process of inquiry, an interpretive activity rather than simply the measure of predetermined behaviors and responses, teachers will be able to use assessment to make informed decisions concerning curriculum and instruction in their classrooms (Serafini, 2000–2001, p. 392). As educators, we need to find new ways of warranting the validity or usefulness of students’ constructed meanings in ways that go beyond the alignment of responses to predetermined interpretations.

To begin, comprehension assessments should be both formative and summative. The assessment windows that teachers draw upon to understand their students’ comprehension processes need to take place before, during, and after the act of reading (Serafini, 2010). Utilizing observational records, reader response notebooks, discussion transcripts, think aloud protocols, miscue analysis, retellings, and interviews, classroom teachers are better able to understand how readers make sense of texts and to know the supports readers need to improve their comprehension abilities. Only through an opening up of the assessment practices we utilize, the expanded definitions of comprehension we have established and the instructional approaches we provide will be able to address the social as well as the cognitive aspects of reading comprehension.

Some Concluding Remarks

Literal recall of textual elements is no longer an adequate definition of reading comprehension. If we continue to narrow down the definition of reading comprehension we use as a foundation for reading comprehension instruction to readers’ ability to extract a single main idea, we privilege the text and the predetermined, sanctioned interpretations created by test makers over what the reader brings to the text and the socio-cultural contexts in which readers read. However, by expanding the definition of reading comprehension to include the socio-cultural aspects of reading and the construction of meaning by a reader in a particular place and time, educators are better positioned to expand the instructional approaches and frameworks that are employed in elementary classrooms.
In addition, reading comprehension should not be viewed as a centripetal process, a striving for consensus or reduction of meanings to one agreed upon main idea (a socially sanctioned interpretation by a particular authority). Reading comprehension should be seen as a centrifugal process (Scholes, 1985), an opening up of possible meanings that are generated and negotiated in light of the immediate context (physical and social classroom environment) and the more extensive political, cultural, historical, and social contexts. It is more important to investigate the various responses readers construct in their transactions with texts than to determine whether they were able to identify a predetermined interpretation or answer to a teacher’s multiple choice question focused on the literal elements of the text (Serafini & Ladd, 2008).

Lewis (2000) has argued for teachers to consider not only the reader as an individual, but also as a culturally, historically, and politically situated reader that brings not only individual experiences, but socially determined experiences that affect their responses to literature. It is important to conceptualize the reader, not simply as an individual responding to a text, but as a historical, socio-cultural being that brings past experiences, culture, gender, and political history to every reading event.

Readers don’t read in a vacuum, nor do their interpretations arise in one. Readers read particular texts in particular contexts, bringing their historically, culturally, and politically embedded experiences with them to the act of reading. In order to conceptualize readers as historically, politically, and culturally embedded readers, it is necessary to interrogate how particular interpretations are naturalized and seen as commonplace. Texts are written to set forth particular versions of reality, and it is through the interrogation of these realities that readers come to understand the genesis of their interpretations, and how they are positioned as readers in contemporary society.

References


