The Teachers' Guide to Literacy Research

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Part II. Reading Comprehension

Literacy Research
LIRIL
In Indian Languages

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Azim Premji University

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An Introduction to Our Research

We are all aware of the worryingly low reading levels of children in the country. In order to be able to improve the teaching and learning of literacy, we need to understand *why* children are facing difficulties. A research study called LiRIL (Literacy Research in Indian Languages) was designed after a national consultation on Early Literacy in 2011 to investigate this.

The LiRIL study tracked over 700 children from the beginning of Grade 1 to the end of Grade 3 in government schools in Wada block, Palghar, Maharashtra and Yadgir block, Yadgir, Karnataka. Our broad objective was to understand how children learned to read and write in Indian scripts and contexts, particularly children studying in government schools in very socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of the country. During this study we assessed 360 students per site, twice a year, for three years, on a range of skills and sub-skills of literacy. In this way, we could understand how children were learning to read and write Marathi and Kannada, and the challenges they faced in the process. We also analysed curricula, interviewed and assessed teachers, and observed classroom instruction. In addition to this, we worked with 48 of these children (24 per site) closely to understand specifics about how they engaged with and comprehended texts. Finally, we carried out three case studies to look deeply at children's lives at home and their connection or disconnection with the school.

In these Teachers' Guides, we share three select topics from our research that are relevant to classroom teaching and learning. These are:

1. Teaching and Learning the Script
2. **Comprehension**
3. Children's Writing

We hope that our learnings will help to make your teaching of language in classrooms stronger, as you understand the reasons behind children's difficulties.

Along with our findings, we will also share some strategies that you can use in the classroom. Please use these as beginning tools as you develop your own techniques to improve your children's reading and comprehension.

Introduction

Introduction

A Comprehension Lesson

The class sat on the mats and gunnysacks that lined the classroom floor around their teacher. "Today, we're going to read this story," said Ma'am, holding up this storybook cover for the whole class to see.

The Flower and the Butterfly

"But before we begin reading, I want us all to think about something.

Today when we think, we are all going to close our eyes and let our minds see where to take us. Have you ever thought of being someone else? Sometimes when I'm sad or bored, I see someone who has a lot of fun and I wonder if I could be them. Has that ever happened to you? Let's close our eyes and try to remember."

The teacher and children closed their eyes.

In a calm, soft voice the teacher said:

"Try and remember a time when you felt it would be easier if you were someone else.

Imagine that you could be someone else. Another person, another animal, another creature. Who would you like to be? See that person and what they are doing."

The teacher paused for thirty seconds, as the students thought with their eyes closed.

"What feels good about this different life? What feels scary or bad about it?" The teacher waited quietly as the children thought. After a while, she said:

"You can open your eyes."

"Let us take turns and talk about what we imagined we could be. Get in pairs and tell your partner what you imagined you would be. You can also tell your partner why you thought it would be fun or nice to be this."

The pairs were given five minutes to share what they imagined with each other.

"Now, we'll share with the whole class and take turns, one by one, telling each other what we imagined we could be."

"In Diwali time, we light fire crackers. My mother got me only few crackers. And then I saw that how many crackers my neighbour friend, Pratap, got. I felt very bad. I wanted to be like Pratap," said Ajay.

Geeta spoke up: "In our school we get lunch every day. But, my cousin goes to a private school and she takes her lunch in a tiffin-box from home. I want to bring my lunch in a tiffin-box also."

"I want to be a squirrel and run in the trees and drop nuts onto people when they come near," said naughty Vinay, with a twinkle in his eye. The children laughed.

"A cat!" said someone else. "I would jump on your ankles when you walked into the classroom!"

More children joined in imagining naughty animals they would like to be. The teacher listened to the children's responses and animated conversations.
Then she said: "Today, we are going to read a story about someone who wished she could change. We are going to read the story of *The Flower and the Butterfly*.
The teacher showed the children the cover of the book again.
"What do think this story is about?"
"I think they [a child said pointing to the characters on the cover] will be great friends."

The teacher began to read the book. While she was reading, she kept the book upright facing the children so they could see the words and pictures.
"One day, a butterfly was roaming here and there. While flying, it sat on a flower. The flower envied the life of the butterfly. It said to the butterfly, "How lucky you are! You can go anywhere you want. I am bored of sitting in one place. Will you please give me your wings? Then I can fly somewhere like you."

The teacher stopped reading. She asked the class, "What do you think is going to happen next?"
"The butterfly won't give its wings," said Payal.
"Yes, because what will it do without wings?" asked Myalli.
"Aah." The teacher looked at Myalli and nodded slowly. She showed him that she was considering his point.
"Let's see what the story says," she said.

The teacher continued to read:
"The butterfly gave its wings to the flower. The flower started flying and the butterfly sat on the tree. While flying, the flower went and sat on a rock. A frog sitting beside the rock thought that it was a butterfly. The frog jumped up and tried to catch it. "[The teacher jumped up from her chair pretending to be scared. She continued reading, showing the children the book, now standing.]

"Frightened, the flower flew off and sat on a tree. There, a chameleon started chasing it. Somehow, the flower escaped with its life and returned to its tree. It

said to the butterfly sitting there, "Here! Take back your wings! I don't want to live as a butterfly!" And it went back to living as a flower."
The teacher closed the book and waited for a moment. Then she asked, "Did you like the story?" The children responded, yes, no, yes, but…, no, but…. The teacher listened patiently.
Then she asked: "Can you tell me what happened in this story?"
"The flower did not like the wings," Ravi said.
Kajal added: "The flower first felt that if I get the wings, I will be able to fly here and there. It will be so much fun. So, she took it. But after that, her life became in danger so she said, 'Take back your wings!'"
Ajay: "Ma'am, I think the flower will be able to fly without the butterfly's wings."
"How?" asked the teacher.
"I will pluck it and throw it in the air," said Ajay.
"For that to happen we need to make a little boy called Ajay go and live in the story. Has Ajay gone into the storybook?" the teacher asked looking around, searching.

Ajay laughed, "I'm here Ma'am".
"OK. I see you. Remember, Ajay, when we are talking about a story we are talking about another world with different people. We can read about that world and enjoy that world. We can get to know about different animals, plants and people. Sometimes that world can make us think about our lives. But, we cannot enter the storybook, can we?"
Ajay and some other children shook their heads.
"So when we read, it is good to imagine what we would do if we were in the story. But, let us also try to understand what actually happens in the story."

"Shall we get back to understanding the world of the story? Why do you think the flower gave the wings back? Why didn't it want to stay a butterfly?"
Payal: "Because of the wings, its life was in danger."
Amar: "The chameleon, frog. Many were trying to eat it."
Ravi: "If the danger from one place is over, a new danger comes."

Teacher: You all have so many ideas about the story! I am afraid I will forget if I don't write it down. Let's try to write it together. We'll draw three compartments of a train. In the first compartment, we will write what happened first. In the second compartment, we will write what happened next. In the last compartment, we will write what happened at the end. OK?
The teacher proceeded to draw three train carriages on the board and write the beginning, middle and end of the story down. The class ended.

The next day, the teacher reminded them about the story they had read together. She said:
"If you remember, it was a scary thing to become someone new. Now imagine that you became what you thought about before we began reading the story. Do you think you would miss something about being you?
Ajay: "It's good the way I am."
"Why?" asked the teacher.
Ajay: "Ma'am, you know why? Pratap's mother gives him work 24 hours. The moment he is at home, he is given work."
"I still want to be in a school with a tiffin-lunch," said Geeta, "There is nothing scary about that!"
The teacher listened and encouraged the children as they shared their responses.

Then, she said: "Now we will write our own stories using these words. To write our stories we are going to follow these steps. First think about what you imagined you wanted to be".
The teacher wrote on the board:

1. Who did you want to be?
2. You were lucky enough to become this creature. What did you do?
3. Do you think something might make you frightened? What will you miss about being you?
4. In the end, will you decide to stay as a different person or become you again?

She asked the children to write and draw their own stories using the sentences on the board.

Here are a few stories from the class:
Amar's writing:
I wish I were Pradeep Narval (a famous kabaddi player). Wow! I am Pradeep Narval. Then, I went to the Bombay and made 300 points and my team won because of me. But I got frightened of losing next time. I missed playing with Ajay. I decided I would come home and play kabbadi with my friends.

Geeta's writing:
I wish I went to a school with a tiffin lunch. My parents put me in my cousin's school. Then, every day, I tell *aayi* what to put into the box. Sometimes, I get *bhakri* and *achar*. Sometimes I take *dal-chawal*. I was frightened that I would forget my tiffin one day and be hungry in school. So, I told *aayi* to remember to pack it every day for me, and she agreed.

There are many ways in which teachers can make reading and writing meaningful for children. The example given at the beginning of this guide is not very difficult to do. Sadly, this is not the way in which most children are introduced to meaning-making in classrooms across India. In this guide, we are going to look at what we learned from the LiRIL project about students' difficulties with comprehension, and what we can do to help them.

What are we going to learn about in this teaching guide?

This guide is organized into four main sections.

In Section I, we try to understand what we mean by the term "comprehension". How did the teaching of comprehension evolve over time? What are the processes behind good comprehension?

In Section II, we look at how students in the LiRIL research project performed on a variety of comprehension tasks. We present rich examples from our data to show exactly what children struggle with while reading texts and why many of them fail to make meaning.

In Section III, we look at how teachers observed by the LiRIL researchers taught meaning-making to their students. We discuss why some of these strategies do not work.

In Section IV, we provide recommendations for how we can teach comprehension strategies from the early grades to develop strong readers and thinkers.

Section 1

What is Reading Comprehension?

Section I: What is Reading Comprehension?

Most educators would agree that children should comprehend or make meaning of what they are reading. But, how is meaning made?

Think of the titles of two stories: "The Flower and the Butterfly"; and "The Ghost and the Dragon". Which story do you think will be scary? Why?

When a reader reads a text, they often have some prior knowledge about what they are reading. They may not even be aware of the prior knowledge they have about the topic before they begin reading, but at some level, it influences their expectations about what they are going to read about. Of course, if you have never heard about a ghost or a dragon, you would not know what to expect at all! Otherwise, your prior knowledge will guide your new learnings about what you are reading.

But, prior knowledge alone cannot help you to construct meaning. Old knowledge encounters new information in the text. Let us say that you assumed that ghosts are scary. But, the story you read tells you about a kind, protective ghost who helps children fight and defeat the mean dragon. Now, your prior knowledge about ghosts has been changed! You realize that not all ghosts we read about in stories need to be scary; they could also be kind!

"Reading comprehension" is a complex process where readers take and build meaning from texts. It is an active, "constructive" process — which means, it involves more than repeating what is in the text. What is in the text is interpreted by the reader based on her prior experiences, knowledge and opinions. A new representation of the text is formed in the reader's mind, based on the reading.

If that is the case, then how did reading comprehension come to be treated as such a passive process in most Indian classrooms?

THE STORY OF READING COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension in society. Until quite recently, reading and writing were not used by most people in their daily lives. Sometimes, they were used for functional purposes such as account keeping and record keeping. At other times, they were used for religious purposes—to read religious texts, understand their meaning, and pass it on to others. In oral cultures like those found in many parts of India, it became important to ***correctly pronounce words,*** to ***accurately remember what was read,*** and to ***remember the meaning of the text that was taught.*** After all, everyone was not expected to correctly understand the meaning of religious texts! Only experts could understand them! So, the common people started expecting the experts to "tell them" what the text meant.

This may have worked well when most people in society did not rely on reading and writing in their daily lives. But, this is no longer the case. In modern-day societies, reading and writing are used everywhere! And we don't always have "experts" to tell us how to understand the texts.

In a democracy, it is important for individuals to form their own opinions, thoughts and reactions to what they read. We are no longer reading only religious texts — we are reading newspapers, and job advertisements, novels and blogs, and a whole host of other things! Making sense of reading is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Reading comprehension in schools. An American educator, Dolores Durkin (1978-79) observed several American classrooms in the 1970s. Based on her observations, she noted that comprehension is often assessed, but rarely taught in classrooms. What does this mean? It means that many teachers assess whether children "have understood" the lesson; but they rarely teach children ***how*** to understand. Teachers often ask questions based on the lesson or story read, but they don't teach children how to make sense of what they are reading.

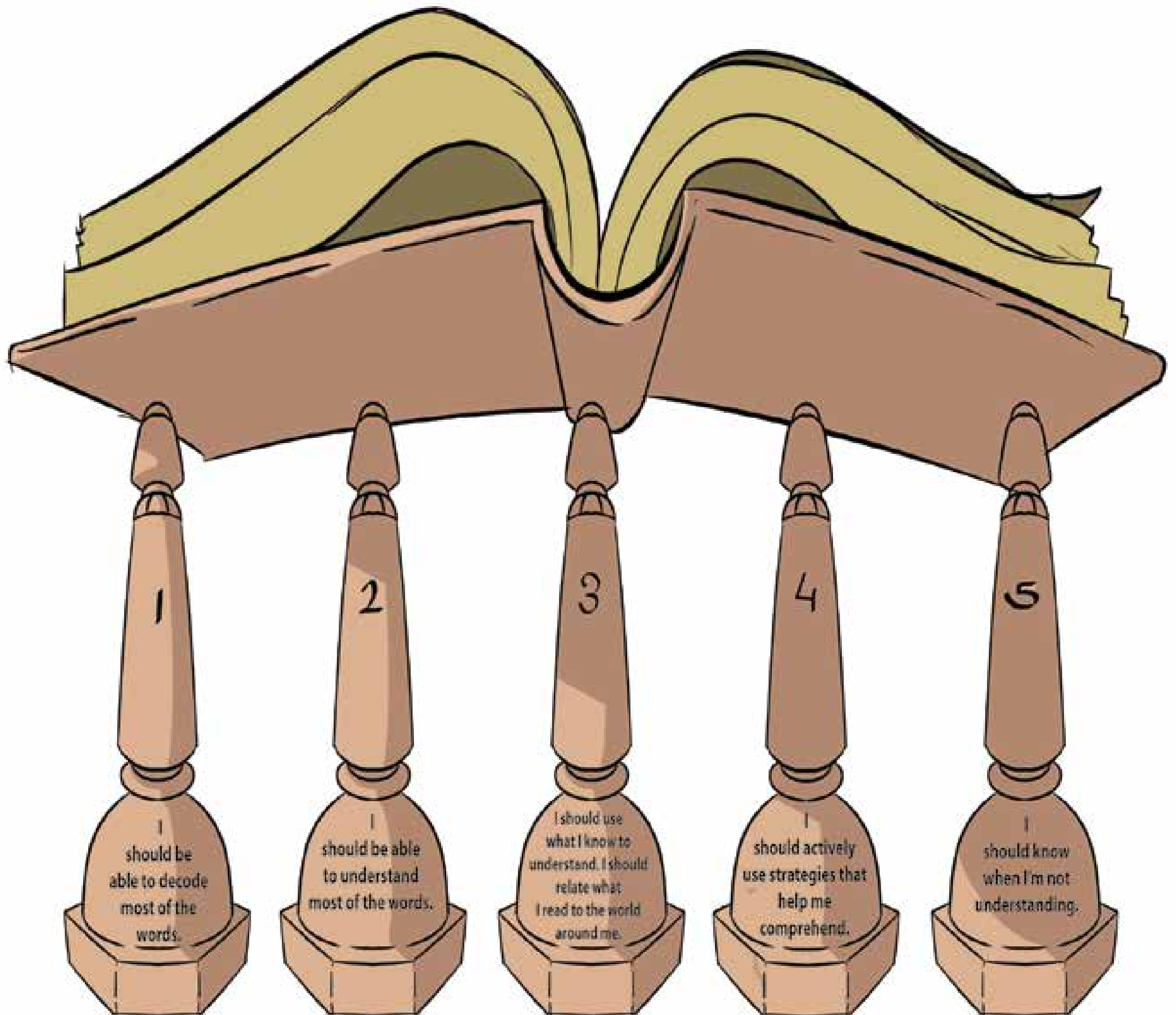
Comprehension research. Educational researchers have been very interested in understanding what goes on in the mind when people read and comprehend. This interest peaked in the 1970s and 1980s when researchers started investigating what good readers do while reading. Researchers found that most good readers used certain "strategies" while reading (Duke & Pearson, 2002). It was also found that these strategies could be taught to children to help them improve their comprehension (Pressley, 2001)!

This shift in understanding became very important for teachers and their classrooms. Classroom practices in Western countries started to change as people embraced the truism that "comprehension is taught, not caught". This meant that comprehension could be made accessible to all learners. Michael Pressley (2001) summarized three decades of reading comprehension research into five skills that all good comprehenders use.

The five pillars of good comprehension

What are the five aspects that enable people to comprehend texts better?

1. Decoding and Fluency
2. Vocabulary
3. World knowledge
4. Active comprehension strategies
5. Monitoring

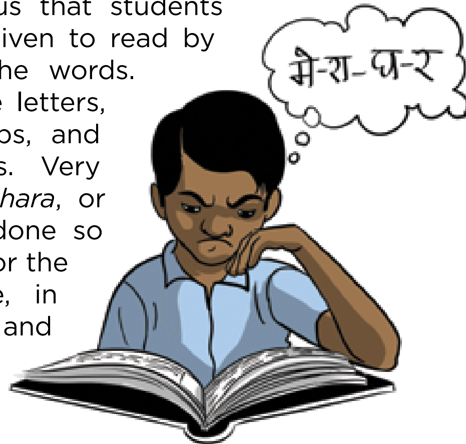


This framework is taken from Pressley's article, *Comprehension Instruction: What makes sense now, what might make sense soon* (2001). Let us look at each of these areas, what they mean and why they are important.

It is very important to understand that all these processes can be carried out from the time children begin school. We MUST NOT think that children first need to learn the script and only later learn to comprehend! If anything, our research has shown us that ***not including comprehension processes in early grades makes it even more difficult for learners to understand their reading later.*** So remember: comprehension is important right from the earliest grades.

Now, let's move on to the description of the five aspects that underlie and support comprehension.

Decoding and Fluency. It is obvious that students cannot understand texts they are given to read by themselves, if they cannot read the words. Decoding is the ability to recognize letters, understand letter-sound relationships, and correctly recognize written words. Very young children read *akshara*-by-*akshara*, or word-by-word. When decoding is done so slowly, the meaning of the sentence or the passage is usually lost. Therefore, in addition to recognizing *aksharas* and words, children also need to be able to read fluently — that is, with appropriate pacing and expression.

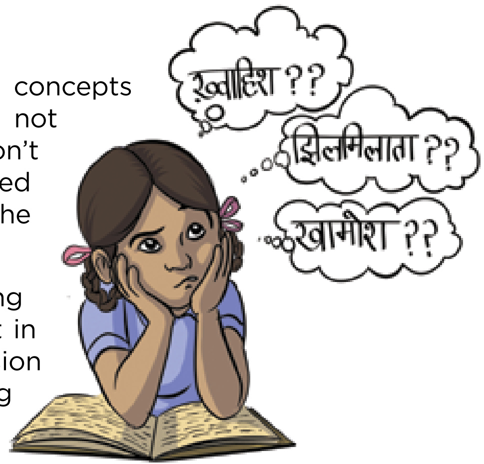


Teachers should bear in mind that being able to sound out a word does not mean that the child will comprehend it. Along with teaching children to recognize *aksharas* and words, therefore, we must also teach children to ask themselves if what they are reading makes sense. Children should know that they can misread words and be ready to read again if they do not understand what they are reading. In this way, learning the script and searching for meaning can go hand-in-hand as children get more and more exposure to reading on their own.

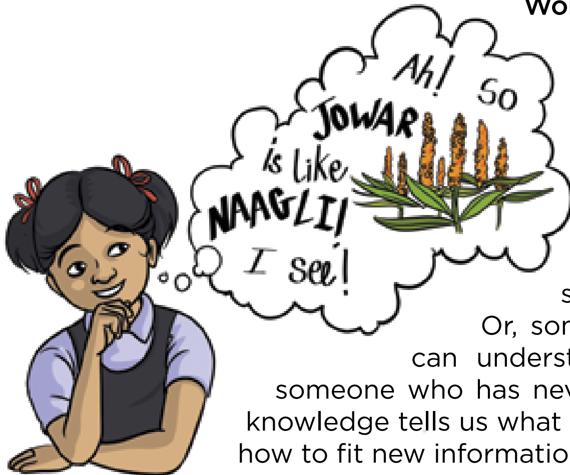
Vocabulary. It is widely known that good readers have good vocabularies. It is a relationship that works both ways. The better your vocabulary, the more you understand what you are reading. The more you read, the better your vocabulary becomes.

Why is that so? Vocabulary does not refer only to knowing the "word meanings" or dictionary definitions of words. At a deeper level it refers to

the ability to understand the concepts represented by the word. If we do not understand key words in a text, we won't understand key concepts being referred to, and hence, we will not understand the text itself.



So, if we focus only on building vocabulary, will it automatically result in good comprehension? No. Comprehension depends on several factors- decoding and vocabulary are just two of them. They are necessary, but not sufficient for strong comprehension.



World knowledge. Readers who have knowledge about the texts they are reading, do better at reading than their peers who do not know much about a topic. This is often called "prior knowledge". It makes sense that someone who understands farming will be able to understand crop comparisons better than someone unfamiliar with this terrain. Or, someone who knows how to cook well can understand a complex recipe better than someone who has never stepped into a kitchen. Our prior knowledge tells us what to expect from the texts we read, and how to fit new information into the old.

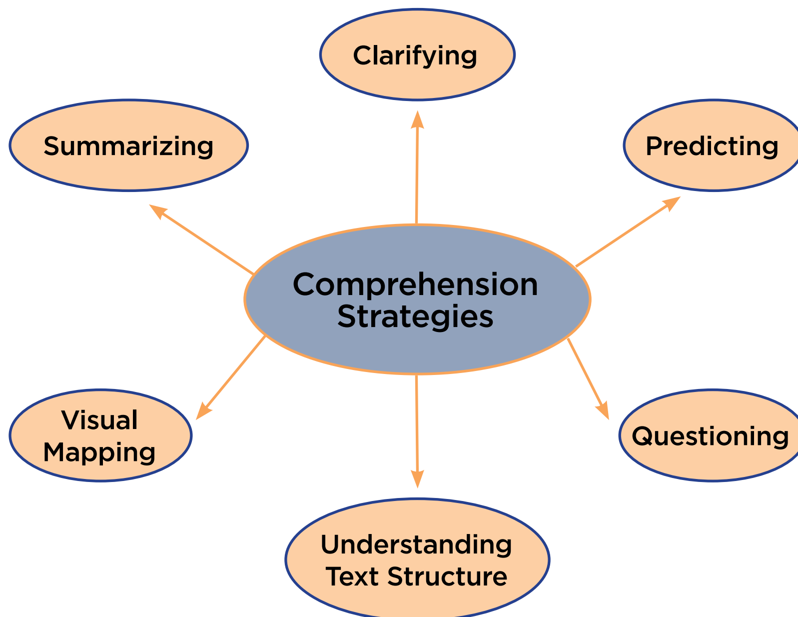
However, comprehension research has also shown that young readers often do not use their prior knowledge in sense-making while reading, unless oriented to do so, or prompted by the teacher. Many teachers ask questions connecting the texts with students' lives before beginning reading. But, the LiRIL study shows that it is not sufficient to ask students to relate the text to their lives before beginning reading (we will give examples of this point later in the document). It is important to keep asking students to *make sense of the text using their prior knowledge*, rather than simply connecting different aspects of the text to their own lives.

Encouraging children to read widely will increase their world knowledge on a large number of topics.

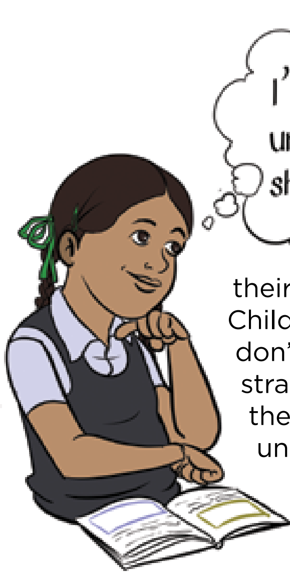
Comprehension skills and strategies. Good readers do not read passively, but are very active and alert when they read. Here are some of the things that they do:

- Good readers are aware of why they are reading a text. Their reading has a clear purpose.
- Good readers glance through the whole text before they start reading. Then they choose what to read carefully based on the overview.
- Good readers make predictions about what they will encounter in texts.
- When good readers come across information that is different from their prior knowledge, they revise their knowledge based on new information.
- Good readers underline, reread and make notes to remember important points.
- Good readers review important points when they are done reading.
- Good readers think about how what they read will be useful in the future.

Reading researchers have found ways to teach these "comprehensions strategies" to young children. The strategies that are most helpful are (Duke & Pearson, 2002):



1. Predicting what will happen next in the text
2. Summarizing what has been read
3. Understanding how different kinds of texts are organized or structured. Many stories have a fairly predictable structure, as do many non-fiction texts. Children can be taught what to expect in different kinds of texts they read.
4. Asking different kinds of questions about what they are reading.
5. Seeking clarifications about doubts and confusions.
6. Using visual maps and diagrams to consolidate understandings of texts



Monitoring. Good readers constantly monitor their own reading. They know when they need to put more effort into understanding a text. Good readers check to see whether the text is making sense to them. They go back, reread and see whether they need to revise their previous ideas if the text is not making sense. Children need to be taught to (a) be aware of when they don't understand what they are reading; and (b) use strategies to "repair" the loss of meaning — for example, they could re-read the text, guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from contexts, consult someone else, or, use a dictionary.

Now that we have an idea about what good comprehension means, let us have a look at how students in the LiRIL sample performed in these areas. What can we learn from this about how comprehension efforts in the classroom are succeeding and where they are failing?

Section II

Students' Performance on Comprehension

Section II. How did Students Perform on Comprehension?

We conducted several tasks on the LiRIL study that give us insight into children's comprehension.

1. 360 students at each site were assessed twice each year on various early literacy tasks. One of the tasks was to read a passage and answer explicit and inferential questions related to it.

2. At the end of Grade 3, we gave all students *The Flower and the Butterfly* passage to read at the end of Grade 3. We estimate that the passage is approximately at a Grade 3 level in terms of complexity of ideas, decoding capability and vocabulary. We asked students several questions based on this passage, related to explicit and implicit questions, making predictions, vocabulary and re-telling the story. A total reading comprehension score was generated for the passage.

3. We studied 24 students per site more deeply. When these students were in second grade, we gave them a wordless picture book *(The Story of a Mango, NBT)*, and asked them to look through it and tell us the story. This was not an assessment of reading (since they were not asked to read the book), but of their ability to look through the pictures of a book and make sense of it.

4. The same second graders were on a different occasion given a picture book *(Out!, NCERT)* and asked to look through it. Then, we read the story of this book aloud to them, and asked them questions about the story. This was a test of listening comprehension.

5. When these 24 students were in third grade, we gave them a picture book *(The Catty Ratty Tale, Pratham Books)* and asked them to read it aloud. We asked them various questions before, during and after reading the story.

In this guide, we present select findings from these tasks, focusing on our key learnings about children's difficulties with comprehending texts. Most of the findings we present here are from when the students were in Grade 3, towards the end of our project.

So, how did the students do on *The Flower and the Butterfly* passage that we gave to all children in our sample at the end of Grade 3? Figure 1 shows how students performed on this task.

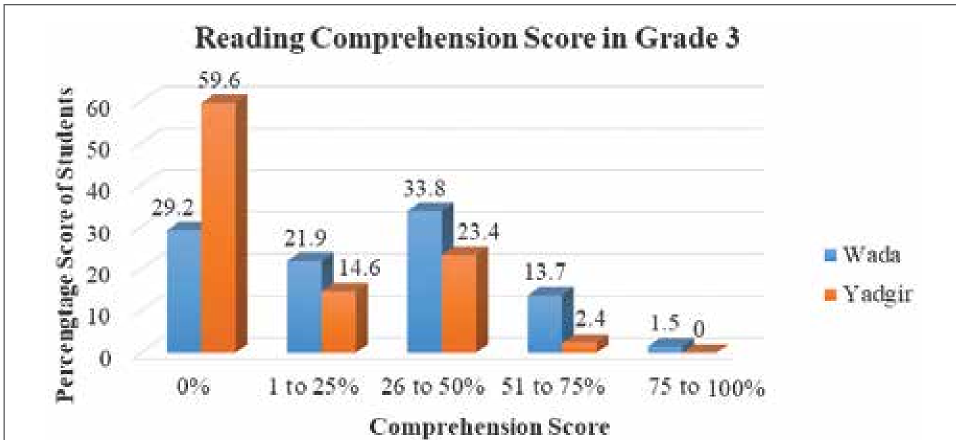


Figure 1. Student percentages and reading comprehension scores.

Figure 1 shows us that in Yadgir close to 60% of children could not answer a single question of this passage—they got scores of 0%. Only 2.4% of students in Yadgir could somewhat comprehend this passage and managed to score more than 50%. While the situation was a little better in Wada, 85% of students still scored below 50% on the comprehension questions. The overall picture from this figure is clear. Students struggled with comprehension, even after three years of being in school!

If we gave students an extremely simple passage with short two-to-three-*akshara* words, would their comprehension improve? We gave students a passage that is approximately at the level of a child in Grade 1. What did we find?

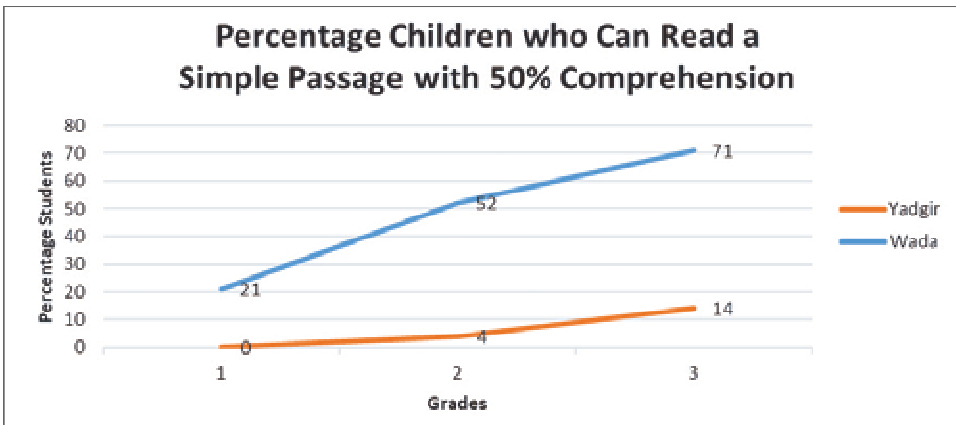


Figure 2. Percentage of students who can read a simple passage (at the level of a 1st grader) with 50% comprehension.

Figure 2 presents longitudinal data on this task — what percentage of students could understand a Grade 1 level passage at the end of Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3?

We found that in Yadgir, no child could read a Grade 1 passage with 50% comprehension at the end of Grade 1; 4% could read such a passage with 50% comprehension at the end of Grade 2; and only 14% could read and understand a Grade 1 passage at the end of Grade 3!

The simple passage had only two questions, so, if the child answered even one question correctly, she could score 50% on this task!

In Wada, the figures are slightly healthier. By the end of Grade 3, 71% of students could read a Grade 1 level passage with 50% comprehension. It appears that the majority of children here could read very simple passages with some comprehension by the end of Grade 3, although **most children could still not read a grade-level passage with 50% comprehension in Wada**.

This raises huge questions about what children are learning in school. ***If children spend so much time reading and copy writing but cannot understand most of what is read, what are they learning in school?***

Let us look more closely into the LiRIL comprehension data and examine where exactly students struggle. We hypothesize that the challenges of students in our sample mirror the challenges other students face in schools across this country. Understanding this in-depth, therefore, might be useful for teachers.

A closer look at students' comprehension difficulties

We have described the five aspects that support comprehension in an earlier section. These are:

1. Decoding
2. Vocabulary
3. World or Prior Knowledge
4. Comprehension Strategies
5. Monitoring

In this section, we will look at each of these five aspects. Were our students using these processes? And if so, how?

1. Decoding

As discussed earlier, children need to be able to read words in order to understand what they are reading on their own. The child needs to be able to not just recognize *aksharas* and know how to blend them into words, but they also need to read words with a certain degree of fluency in order to understand.

Look at this example of a child in Grade 3 reading a storybook we gave her.

[Comprehension Reading, Grade 3, Wada]

We gave the child the story *A Catty Ratty Tale*. This story is about a group of cats who invite the rats for a feast with the intention of eating them up. The rats, however, were counselled by their leader to dig holes before they went to the feast to help them escape in case the cats attacked. And so, when the cats start suddenly chasing them, the rats escape unhurt!

The following is an example of a child in Grade 3 reading this story:

The text says: "The leader was very smart. He said, 'You go. But remember that the cats are our enemy. If you go there, dig holes. And if there is any trouble, get into the hole and run.'"

The child reads:

ने ता (उगा) हुशार हो ता तो ... म्ह ना ला जा तुम्ही पन ए क लक्षा त ठेवा मा ज र ही आ प लीं श त्रू आहे ... को णा ला ही इ जा होणार नाही या ची का ळ जी घ्या मे ज वा नी च्या ठी का णी गेलात की प हिल ल्या ना दा बीळ खो... खोदा का ही सं क ट ये त य अ स वा ट ल तर स र ल तर बी ला त घु सू न ती थू न पल का ढा

Except for a few words, we can see that the child is not even reading words. Instead, after three years of being in school, the child is calling out *aksharas*!

After she "reads" the entire paragraph, this is how she responds to questions:

Q: नेता कसल्या संकटाबद्दल बोलत आहे? (What trouble is the leader talking about?)

A: बीळ ... reads again – खोदला. (To dig hole)

Q: OK.. कशासाठी? (OK. But for what purpose?)

A: कारण त्यांना भूक लागली. (Because they were hungry)

Q. Asked once again. नेता कसल्या संकटाबद्दल बोलत आहे? (What trouble is the leader talking about?)

A नेता हुशार होता. (The leader was smart)

In this example, we see that the child was trying hard to answer the questions being asked of her. However, since she did not put together the words in her reading, she was not able to grasp the story or to answer questions about it. So, when asked a question, the child quickly put together a set of words by looking again at the text (we permitted and encouraged children to look back at the text before responding to our questions). Her answers, therefore, had nothing to do with the questions.

Here, we see that the child is not fluent with decoding and this keeps her from comprehending the text. However, we must be aware that even though decoding is very important for comprehension, it is not enough! Let us look at other pillars of reading comprehension.

2. Vocabulary

We gave students *The Flower and the Butterfly* passage (described at the beginning of this booklet) at the end of Grade 3 and asked if they understood the meaning of the equivalent term in Marathi/Kannada for पीछा करना (chasing). This term was important to understand the adventures faced by the flower-with-the-butterfly-wings. It was also easy to guess from the context, in case students had not heard it before. Figure 3 shows how students performed on this question.

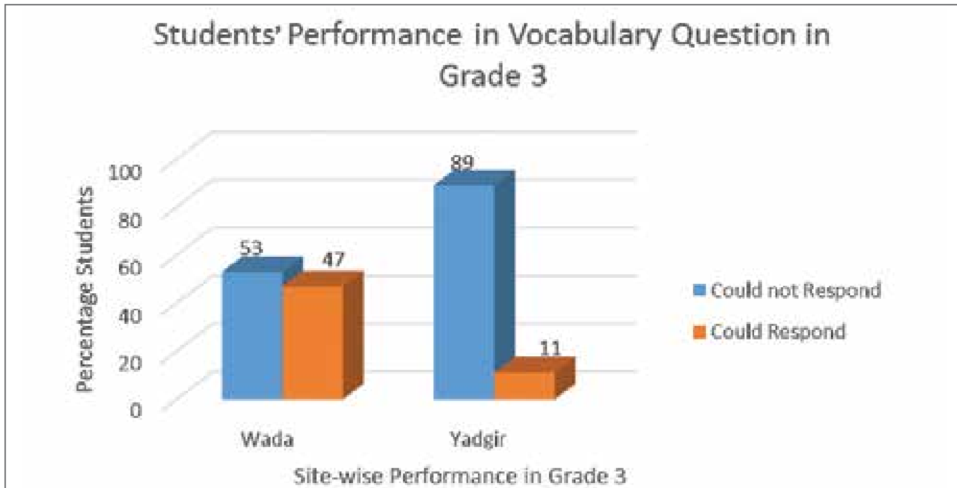


Figure 3. Students' performance on vocabulary at the end of Grade 3.

In Wada, slightly less than half the children knew what the term meant, while in Yadgir, an overwhelming 90% of children could not understand the meaning of the term.

Without understanding it, readers were not likely to understand why the flower returned the wings to the butterfly in the end.

It is not surprising to us that children who did not know the meaning of the term did not try to guess it from the content. In our classroom observations, we noticed that children were not encouraged to find out the meaning of words on their own. In fact, in most classrooms we observed it is the role of the teacher to provide the child with the "word meaning", which must then be written down and memorized. The child's understanding is to come from the teacher, not from their own reading.

3. World (prior) knowledge

The NCF (2005) and most other documents concerning children's learning recommend that educators try to connect what children read in school with their own lives. Why is this so? When we connect what is being read and children's lives outside school, we do two things. First, we make the new learning seem relevant to children. And second, we help children use what they already know, to learn new things.

This is a very good strategy to use, in general. However, we found something very interesting in the way that our students were connecting with life — or using their world knowledge — with texts they were reading. In the West, it has generally been reported that struggling readers find it difficult to connect texts they are reading with their lives. Students in our sample showed no such difficulty — they connected texts very richly with their lives! However, we found that making these connections *was not helping them to understand the text they were reading better*. Why? This is because they were simply connecting things they read, to things they were familiar with, without using what they were familiar with, to make better sense of what they were reading. Let's look at a few examples to make this point clearer.

> [Text Engagement, Grade 3, Wada]
>
> The children were given the story of The Catty Ratty Tale.
>
> The text said: *One day, the cats called the rats for a feast. They made rice, puris and lots more. Everybody's mouth was watering. They invited the rats.*
>
> Q: What do you think will happen now?
>
> A: खिचडी खायला...लापशी खाया, खिचडी खाया. To eat khichdi, to eat lapsi, to eat khichdi.
>
> [The children in this area are used to eating lapsi or khichdi at feasts.]

In this example, the child connected the word "feast" to his experience with what he ate at feasts and talked about those items. The cats and the rats and what was happening in the story were not considered.

We stopped at the very same juncture in The Catty Ratty Tale, and asked a student in Yadgir to make a prediction about the story.

[Text Engagement 2, Grade 3, Yadgir]

Researcher: So now what will happen? Will the rats go to the feast?

Child: The rats will go.

Researcher: Why?

Child: You invite us for dinner, we will come, *na*? Like that.

Again, this child's response to the cats' dinner invitation to the rats is based entirely on her own experience. Her response has no connection to the enmity between cats and rats that has been talked about in the story before this. Here is a third example of the same trend.

[Text engagement, Grade 3, Wada]

In *The Catty Ratty Tale*, the cats decide to start singing to signal that it is time to attack the rats.

When the cat starts to sing the child is asked:

Q: Why are the cats singing?

A: Because it is Ganapati [puja].

Here we see the child is almost oblivious of the story. She responds to the question drawing only from personal experiences of community singing.

These examples show that children are not reading a text and coming away with a coherent representation of what is happening in it. They do not seek or find a storyline. Instead, they connect the text to their lives in disjointed ways. This trend mirrors what we have noticed about how texts are taught — teachers ask for (or provide) connections to children's lives in disjointed ways, without showing children how this could help build a better understanding of what is being read.

4. Comprehension skills and strategies

As described earlier, there are a variety of skills and strategies that children could use to comprehend texts better. In this section, we look at four aspects of children's comprehension and how they performed on them in the LiRIL text engagement tasks.

A. Answering explicit questions (answers can be found directly in the passage)

B. Retelling the story

C. Understanding the structure of narratives

D. Inferring (answers are implied, but not stated explicitly)

A. Answering explicit questions

A basic skill of comprehending texts is to be able to take away information clearly stated in the text. An "explicit question" in our project meant a question with an answer that was "right there" in the text — the easiest kind of question we asked.

We gave children *The Flower and the Butterfly* passage at the end of Grade 3 and asked them, "Why did the flower want to take the wings of the butterfly?" Since the answer is clearly given in the passage, this is an "explicit" question — a question with an answer that is "right there" in the text. This is how our students performed on this task.

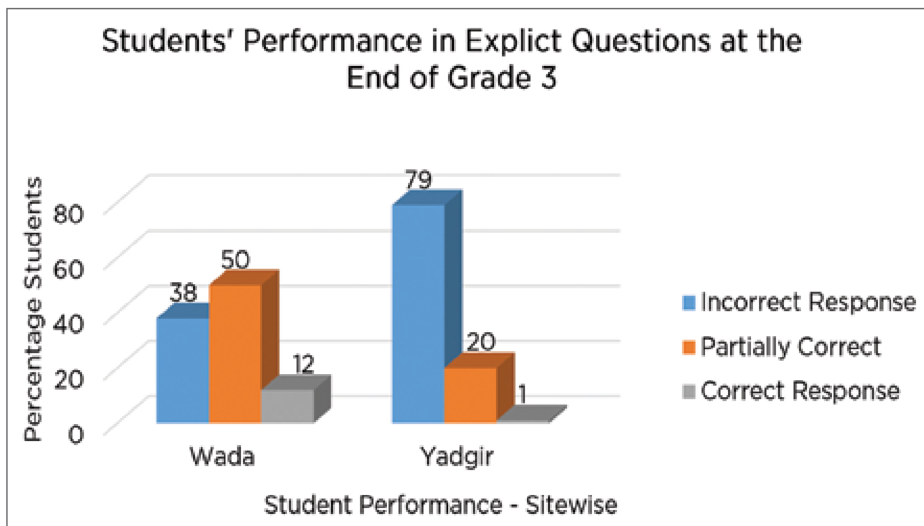


Figure 4. Students' performance on an explicit question at the end of Grade 3.

The answer to this question is very clearly given in the passage. However, the correct responses to this question are so very few (12% fully correct responses in Wada and 1% in Yadgir)! It seems clear that since students cannot answer very basic questions about the text, they are not following along. Children do not seem to be able to read and understand what is happening in this story.

B. Retelling the story

Retelling is an important ability, because it shows that children have understood the text and are able to put it in their own words. Children who retell well are also able to separate out important from less important information — what is critical to the story? What can be left out? Children with good comprehension can do this effortlessly.

Children's retelling of stories was rated along a continuum in terms of how completely and well they retold the story, and whether their retelling was well-organized (in terms of sequence of events, etc.). We rated children's retellings of *The Catty Ratty Tale* (administered during the second half of Grade 3 to 24 students per site). Figures 5 and 6 summarize children's performance on this task.

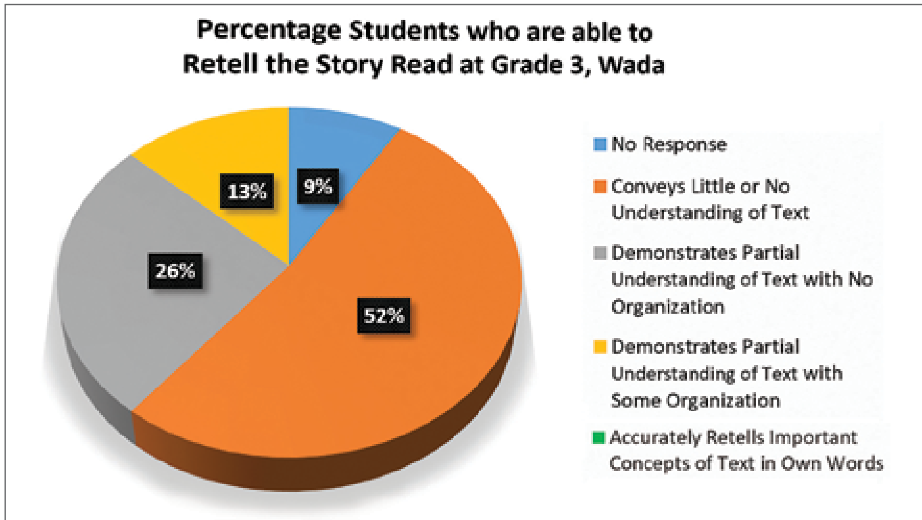


Figure 5. Students' performance on retelling: Wada.

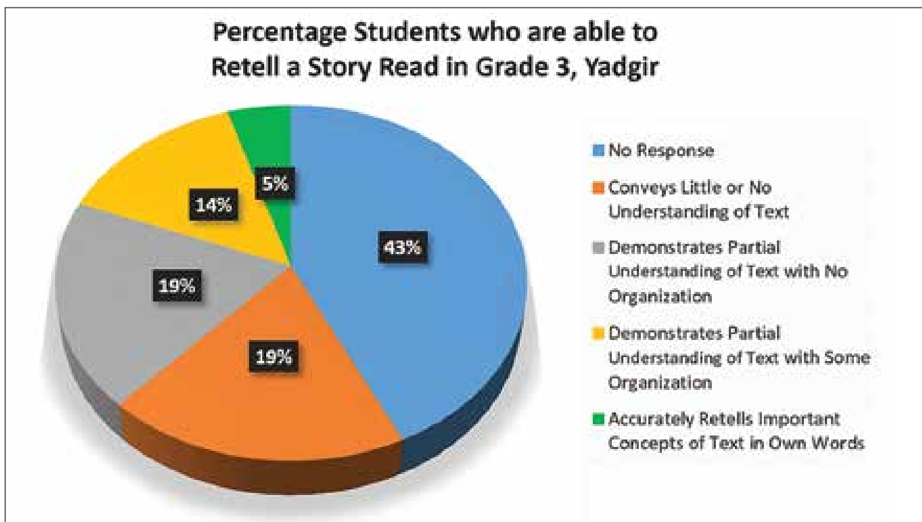


Figure 6. Students' performance on retelling: Yadgir.

Figures 5 and 6 together paint a fairly dismal picture of students' ability to retell a story from a simple picture book read towards the end of Grade 3. 61% of students in Wada and 62% of students in Yadgir either offered no response, or conveyed little or no understanding of the text in their responses to this question. Here are some examples of answers we got.

"There were cats. The rats go into the hole. Their house is inside the ground."

"The cats caught the rat and the rats bit the cats."

"There was a rat. There were two cats. They were thirsty. Something happened. Then they started running. They were hungry and they ate."

We see from these answers that students seem to have a very minimal understanding of what happens in the story. They seem to be guessing at the story and meaning from the pictures and from their own personal experiences. Even children who were able to respond partially, were not always able to communicate details about the text, or organize the information so that it flowed like a story with a clear beginning, middle and end. There is no sense of story structure in their responses.

This is interesting because it reveals a lot about what children think about stories. From this it is clear that:

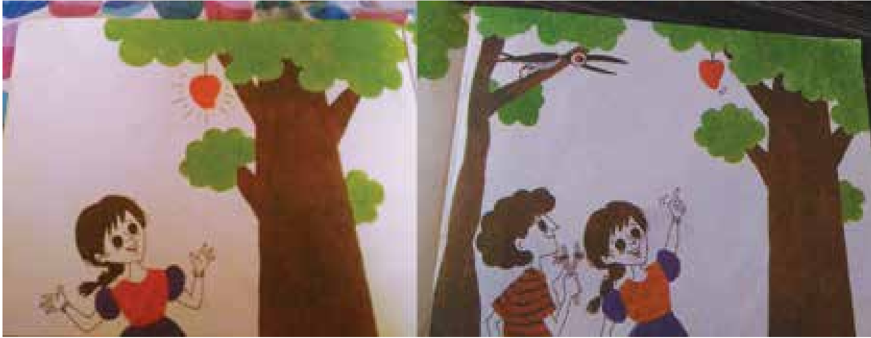
- Children rely mostly on the pictures for their retelling.
- Often, children do not connect information given across pages into a story.
- Children are not aware that a story has a beginning, middle and an end.

C. Understanding the structure of narratives

From our descriptions of how children retell stories, it appears that children are unfamiliar with the idea that stories have a structure, a flow, a sequence. They do not know how to put together information on multiple pages and make one coherent understanding from this. In short, children do not understand what a story is. Here is what we learned about children's reading of narratives.

i. Many children do not see connections in what they read — they read words mechanically without a larger search for meaning. Even when given a picture book, they see each picture as isolated from the other picture, and describe each picture separately, as shown in this example.

[Text Engagement, Yadgir, Grade 2]



When shown the wordless (picture book) of 'The Mango Tree', and asked to describe the pictures, Jyoti responded by labelling each of the elements in the picture, rather than looking for what is happening. She said, "tree", "leaves", "mango", "boy", "girl". When the researcher prompted her to say what else could be seen in the picture, she chose to label the elements even more finely by looking only at the girl in the picture and saying, "hand", "hair", "frock", "face", "nose", "bangles", "ear", "eye" , "eyebrow!".

i. Therefore, children also struggle with sequencing events in a story.

   [Text Engagement, Yadgir, Grade 2]

For example, on the next page of 'The Mango Tree', some children "read" the picture on the right-hand page of the book before looking at the picture on the left. The mango fell down from the tree (in one picture on the right-hand side of the page); the boy and the girl took aim at the mango with their sling in the preceding picture (on the left-hand side of the page).

Teaching children to look for connections and a flow to events in a story appears to be an important concern.

D. Answering inferential questions

Good readers need to be able to make "inferences" — which is, to make good guesses about what happened based on other information provided in the passage. For example, in The Catty Ratty Tale, when the cats invite the rats for dinner, the leader of the rats predicts "trouble." The passage doesn't say what kind of trouble, but from our prior experience with cats and rats, we can guess that the cats are planning to attack the rats. The cats in the story agree to sing when it is time to attack the rats. Later in the story, the cats start singing. The text doesn't say at that point that it is time for the cats to attack the rats, but the reader can guess this from the information provided previously.

We asked students these two questions.

1) What trouble is the rat leader talking about? (He thinks the feast may be a trap to catch the rats.)
2) Why are the cats singing? (The cats decide between themselves that they will sing when it is time to attack the rats.)

Here is how the students performed on these questions (see Figures 7 and 8).

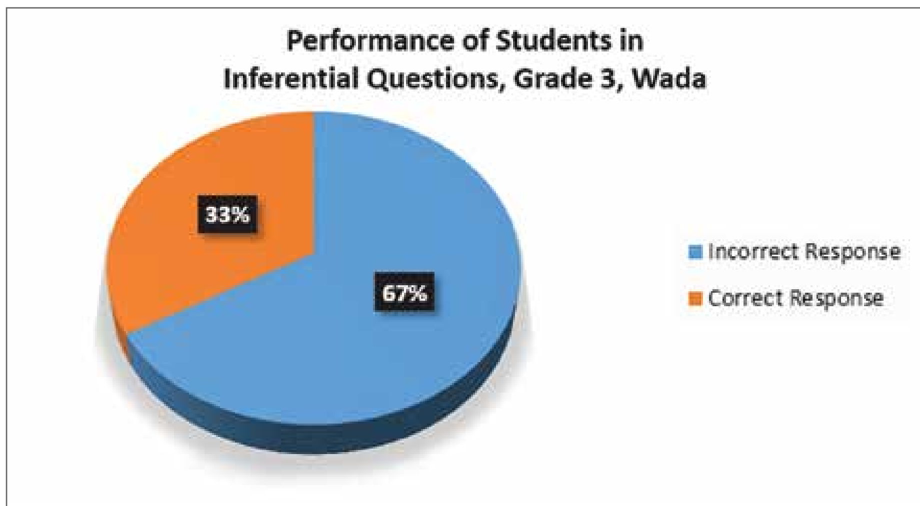


Figure 7. The percentage of students who are able to make simple inferences from text and pictures at the end of Grade 3: Wada.

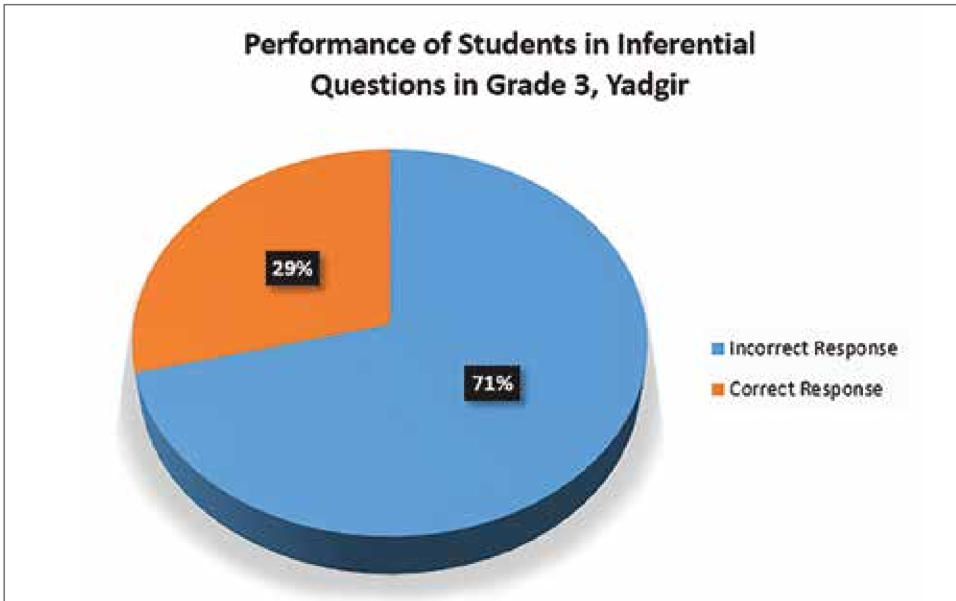


Figure 8. The percentage of students who are able to make simple inferences from text and pictures at the end of Grade 3: Yadgir.

We see that 71% of the students were not able to answer inferential questions in Yadgir, and 67% were not able to answer such questions in Wada. Examples of their responses have been given earlier in the document, where we show how their connections with their lives overpower inferences that can be drawn from the text.

A few more examples are provided here of children's answers to the inferential questions.

Q: "Did the cats catch the rats?"

Child : "No, because we give them (the cats) food to eat."

Q: What trouble the leader is talking about?

C: "The snakes, they swallow the rats."

5. Monitoring Reading

Here we ask, "Are students able to notice whether the text is making sense?" Good readers are able to notice contradictions between what they expected and what they read; they are able to notice when they understand a story and when they don't; and they are able to "fix" comprehension problems through a variety of strategies, such as rereading, asking for help, and so on.

In our work we rarely saw instances of children monitoring their reading. For example, before reading a picture book, we showed the cover to the children. We invited them to look through the book and its pictures. We then asked them to predict what the book may be about. We found that children readily volunteered their predictions. However, when they started reading the text, it often contradicted their predictions. We observed that when this happened, most children in our sample did not notice this, and they did not revise their ideas. Instead, they continued to tell their own story that was entirely different from the one in front of them. We give a specific example here.

[Text Engagement, Grade 3, Wada]

A student was reading the book *The Catty Ratty Tale*. She narrated what she was thinking about as she read the story.

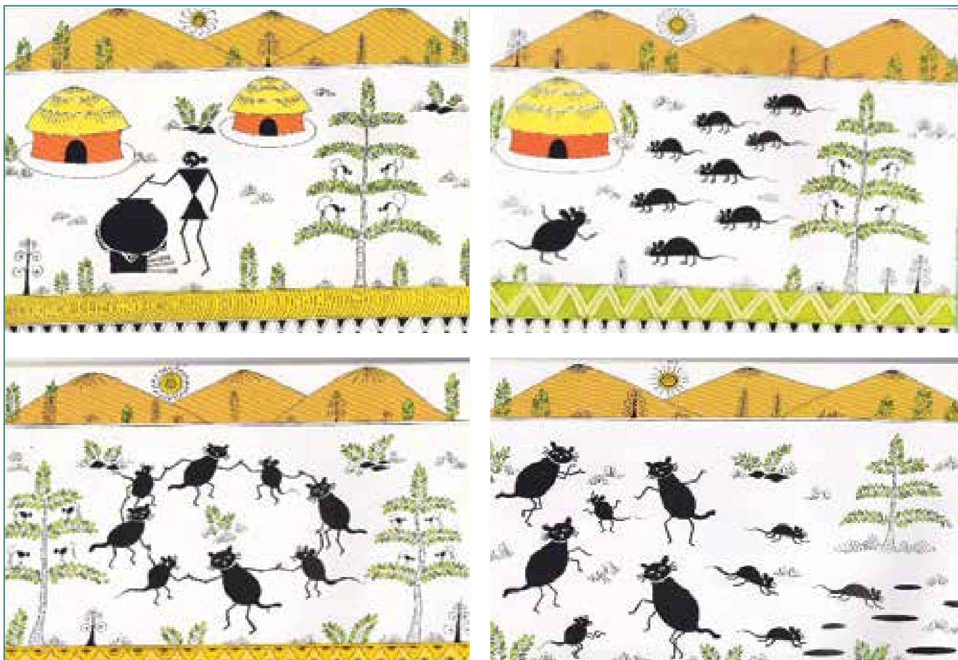


Figure 9. Example of picture reading of The Catty Ratty Tale.

Researcher: What do you think is going to happen in this story?

Child: There is water. She is filling water. She is making rice. The monkeys will be served food. The rats have come. They will go home. Now they are dancing...singing. Now one cat is looking here. The cats and rats are friends. They are hiding in the hole. The old lady has come and is hiding in the hole.

These were the child's predictions. After the child read the story, she did not revise these predictions based on what actually happened.

We believe that the problems children in our sample faced with comprehension are not unique to these settings. We suspect that many students in other classrooms in India go through similar struggles. Table 1 summarizes some of the difficulties children had on specific comprehension skills in our study.

Table 1

Comprehension difficulties faced by students.

Comprehension Skills	Children's Difficulties
Vocabulary	Children often did not understand key words needed to understand the story; and did not pause to ask for the meaning of words they did not understand while reading a story.
Understanding basic plot, ideas about story/passage	Many children can broadly understand what a story is "about" (e.g., a cat and a rat; girl and boy; etc.), but they cannot always retell the story with an accurate sequence of events, or important details. The understanding is typically at a broad level of identifying characters in the story. Some children read the story "picture-by-picture" and don't see any connection between the pictures on one page and the next. Hence, even though they can also identify the characters, they are not able to even recognize a general flow or narrative to the story.
Inferring/ Understanding implicit ideas	Most children cannot understand ideas that are not stated clearly or explicitly in the text. Inferring is a serious problem.
Making connections	Children often connect characters from the text with their own lives. For example, cats and rats they've seen, or games they have played. But, without adequate guidance, these connections become what they remember about the text, and not what the text/story itself was about. We noticed that children's personal connections often overshadowed meaning making about/from the text.
Predicting	Most children are not able to make meaningful predictions based on what has happened thus far in the story; or based on the title of the story. When they do make predictions, they do not go back and correct their predictions as they read along and find that they were wrong. This means that children are not aware of their thoughts while reading.

Section III

How is Comprehension Taught?

Section III: How is Comprehension Taught?

In the previous section, we noticed that students face several different challenges in terms of comprehending what they read. This raises the question: How are children taught comprehension? Like Durkin, we also found that teachers are more likely to *assess* than to *teach* comprehension.

Specifically, we noticed the following trends in teaching comprehension:

1. Delaying teaching comprehension: There is very little comprehension instruction in Grades 1 and 2. Comprehension is focused upon only when students start reading passages, usually in the second half of Grade 2, or, more commonly, in Grade 3.
2. Teaching word-meanings: The meanings of difficult words are written down on the board, and sentences with each word are written on the board. Children copy these down and learn by rote.
3. *"Samjhana"* method: The teacher pauses frequently while reading passages and explains the text line-by-line to children. Children are not encouraged or taught ways to make sense of the text through discussions or thinking, but are "told" the meaning.
4. Connections: The teacher tries to connect the text to children's lives by drawing comparisons. Sometimes, this is done quite well, but at other times, the connections are unnecessary or trivial. Importantly, students are not shown how to use these connections to make better sense of the text.
5. Question-and-answer: The teacher writes down questions from the back of the passage and writes answers down. Children copy these down and learn by rote. This usually happens only in Grade 3.

When looking at our classroom observations of Grade 3, we noticed a very familiar sequence of instruction at both sites:

- The teacher reads aloud the passage.
- Optional (some teachers skip this step entirely): The teacher stops to explain the meaning of each sentence, or every few sentences of the passage.
- The passage is read and re-read many times by the students, typically in a whole-class format, with each student reading aloud a few sentences. The teacher gives direct and immediate feedback on accuracy of decoding and on pronunciation.
- The teacher goes to the suggested exercises at the end of the passage and typically picks a couple. These usually are: copying down "word-meanings" that the teacher puts up on the blackboard; and copying down answers to questions that are also supplied on the board.
- The teacher "corrects" the children's work, providing feedback on accuracy of copying down from the board. Often, children are asked to re-write incorrectly spelled words five to ten times.

The *samjhana* method

We noticed that many teachers explain the passages in detail to the students. We call this the "*samjhana* method" — where the teacher pauses to explain the text sentence-by-sentence, or chunk-by-chunk. Take a look at this example to see *"samjhana"* in action.

[Wada, Classroom Observation, Grade 3]

Here a teacher (T) explains the lesson मधमाशीने केली कमाल, The Clever Honeybee to the children (C) in his class

T: Have you seen a honey bee or honeycomb?

C: Yes.

T: Now we will read the lesson on the clever honey bee. First, what we will do? What do you mean by 'Clever'? If a person does a special thing, at that time, a special thing means which makes you very surprised and then we say 'he did a clever thing'. Now, all of you read after me.

[The teacher reads the first paragraph of the story.]

T: There was a farmer. He used to work very hard at the farm. He had planted trees around the field. The honeybee, cuckoo, squirrel, sparrow and crow used to stay on that tree. Ants also used to stay around that tree. All of them were close friends. One day, the ant went out for a walk. While walking, she reached a field. There were sunflowers in the field. Yellow and fresh butterflies. The ant loved the flowers. She went to the farmer and said, "You work so hard day and night. Will you do business this time?" The farmer said, ""Yes, I do work. I pluck flowers, bring seeds, sow seeds. I work for everybody." After listening to the farmer, the ant got an idea. He got a flower from the farmer and came home.

The teacher now explains this paragraph:

"What do farmers do? They work very hard. Similarly, this farmer too works hard. And what had he planted around the farm? Trees. Many trees. There are many advantages to having trees. What do we get because there are trees? We get shade, wood for houses, flowers and fruits. There are many more advantages. We'll do those later. So, who all were residing on the tree? The honeybee, cuckoo, squirrel, sparrow and the crow. There are five characters. How many of them are there? Five. There will be many more birds or animals on trees, but in this story, there are five characters. What do they do? They used to play, sit. Around that tree. There were ants, too. They were all friends. We call it friendship. We also have many friends. Similarly, these five were also friends. Just like in our class, we have friends. Similarly, they were friends too. The ants one day went to a farm while they were walking. What was in the field? Sunflowers. How were the sunflowers? We have seen it in the books. Big and yellow in colour. The circle at the centre, it has seeds. How were these flowers? Bright yellow, blooming and fresh. What was its colour? Bright yellow. Bright yellow, blooming and fresh. What are these? Adjectives given to the flower. The ants loved the flowers. They went to the farmer and said, "You work so hard always (सदानकदा). What is the meaning of सदानकदा? It means 'always'. "

In this example, the teacher is "explaining" the paragraph to the children. However, if we look closely, the teacher is not having a conversation with the children. He is doing all the talking, all the meaning-making. The children are listening passively to him. They do not have any chance to think about the story at all. Their thoughts are not a part of the classroom discussion. What happens with teaching in this way is that only the teacher is responsible for making meaning! When the teacher is not around, the students do not know how to understand the text!

Making connections to children's lives

Teachers were often observed connecting the text to children's lives outside the classroom. This is good, since it potentially enables meaning making. However, as noted in the description of the *samjhana* method, the teacher is the one making all the connections. Children passively listen. Let's look at an example.

> [Wada, Class Observation notes, Grade 2]
>
> The following is an excerpt from the teaching of 'The Story of our Roti' from the Grade 2 textbook.
>
> Story synopsis: When Sharad wastes half of his roti, his grandfather addresses this by telling him about the laborious processes involved in growing and making wheat to impress upon him the amount of work that goes in vain with food wastage.
>
> Teacher (reading from the textbook): "On the field, cutting of jowar (wheat) was going on."
>
> T (explaining and connecting): In the field, cutting of what was going on? Of *jowar*. In our area, *jowar* is not seen. But *naagli* is there, no? On *naagli*, a small *gond* (flower) comes. Similarly for *jowar*, you can see. *Kanis* (flower) comes. And then it is cut and then its *jodani* is done, (threshing) and then the *jowar* is taken.

It would have been better if the teacher had paused to ask the children what they knew about the growing of naagli, instead of listing it out for them. Children who come from farming communities might be able to inform the teacher about harvesting crops, having much more experience than the teacher does. Encouraging them to discuss and draw the sowing, growing and harvesting process could get children engaged when the topic is introduced. It would also help to build the point that harvesting crops is a laborious process to drive home the story's message of not wasting food.

The teaching of vocabulary

The main way in which vocabulary is taught is by encouraging students to copy down word-meanings from the board and make sentences with each word. Children have been observed to do this passively, often without any semblance of meaning-making. Here is an example.

> In one of the relatively better-performing schools in Wada, we observed that a relatively high performing student had formed several sentences based on taught words from the text (words whose meanings had been copied down from the blackboard).

Pride: I have seen pride.

Customer: I have not seen a customer.

Hole: My friend's name is Hole.

It is clear from this example that the student has no idea what these new words mean. Since there were no spelling mistakes in her writing, the teacher did not provide her with any feedback, but simply asked her to move on to the next task.

Sometimes, teachers explain the meanings of words in passing as the story is read and explained. Take the instance of how the teacher explains the word "clever" from the example we presented earlier.

[T explaining the lesson — मधमाशीने केली कमाल, *The Clever Honeybee*]

T: Have you seen a honey bee or honeycomb?

C: Yes.

T: Now we will see the lesson on the great honey bee. First, what we will do? What do you mean by "clever"? If a person does a special thing, at that time, a special thing means which makes you very surprised and then we say 'he did a clever thing'.

Of course it goes without saying that the explanation of "clever" is not accurate. However, even if the meaning were correct, it would be extremely easy for the child to forget the new word. It is OK to explain some words like this, as long as at least a few words per passage read are taught in greater depth. Vocabulary can be acquired deeply only when children are given a chance to use the new word in different contexts — orally and in writing.

Feedback to students

A lot of the time, meaning is not considered in the feedback given by the teacher to the students. As shown in the example of the child "making sentences" with new words, the teacher corrected only for spellings and neatness, not for the meaning of what was written!

In order for students to become good readers and comprehend well, teachers cannot ignore the teaching of comprehension. A lot of the time we do not teach comprehension because we, ourselves, have not been exposed to teaching and learning comprehension. In the next section, we provide detailed recommendations of how to systematically introduce and build comprehension in the classroom.

Section IV

Recommendations for Teaching Comprehension

Section IV: Recommendations for Teaching Comprehension

In the previous sections we have identified and discussed several reasons behind children's poor comprehension—the challenges that they have, and how comprehension is taught in the classrooms we observed. Helping children to learn to comprehend is a long-term and complex task. But, there are several things that we can do in our classrooms to support meaning-making.

Before we change our classroom practices, we have to spend some time examining our own beliefs (see Table 2).

Table 2

Common Myths about Meaning Making

Myth	Actually...
Students need to first master the script; only then can they make meaning.	Children need to see reading and writing as meaningful activities from the very beginning!
The child's oral language is impure and incorrect. We need to teach children to speak only in the correct school language. We need to start this process early.	Dialects are not "impure" or incorrect. The child's dialect must be welcomed into the classroom. We cannot teach reading and writing without connecting them to the child's spoken language and the world. School language can be introduced gradually and sensitively.
Comprehension happens automatically once children know the script.	Children need experiences that facilitate comprehension. For example, through teacher modelling of how to make sense; through discussion and role-plays; and also through explicit guidance in using comprehension strategies.
Children become good readers and writers by practicing reading and writing "correctly", that is, by pronouncing and spelling words correctly.	Teachers can definitely explain texts to children from time to time. But, their most important role is to teach children how to become meaning-makers themselves. They can do this by modelling how they make meaning, encouraging students to use comprehension strategies while reading, and encouraging them to monitor their meaning-making.

Myth	Actually...
Some children are just good at reading and writing. It's a talent that some children have and others do not.	Even struggling readers and writers can greatly improve their reading and writing if taught strategies systematically. These are learned skills, not natural talents.
Children from poorer backgrounds are poor readers and writers because their families do not care.	The families care very much, but they may not have the means or the time to coach their children in literate practices. Is that not why they are coming to school? We should not hold children's backgrounds against them in teaching them to read and write.
It is the teacher's role to explain the text to the children.	Children become good readers and writers by being exposed to a wide variety of meaningful texts and meaningful experiences with those texts. Learning to decode and spell words correctly is also important, but cannot be the only focus of the early language classroom.

Creating supportive classrooms

The myths described here were derived from the LiRIL team's work with analysing teacher beliefs about teaching reading and writing. We found that these beliefs help create classroom contexts that are not supportive of meaning-making. We will now present ideas for creating supportive classroom contexts. Most of the suggestions come from Duke and Pearson's (2002) article, *Effective Practices for Developing Comprehension*. However, every recommendation presented here has been judged to be useful for Indian contexts. We first present some general guidelines for creating supportive classrooms; next, we describe a few key comprehension strategies that can be taught; and finally, we describe a model for teaching reading comprehension.

General guidelines for creating supportive contexts

1. Reading comprehension should be taught from the earliest years. Initially, adults can read aloud books to children and have oral conversations with them about the reading. Young children can also be encouraged to picture-read books and discuss what they see. As children grow older and begin to learn the script, the focus on teaching thinking, talking, reading and writing in inter-related ways should continue.

2. The child's language, thinking and experiences must be a part of the classroom. Give children opportunities in each class to talk about their ideas and connect with their world knowledge. Often, rather than hearing students' ideas, we try to make the connections to their lives as we explain the text. This is not helpful. By doing this, we actually don't give children the chance to think or speak. Instead, we should help children to develop their own understandings. Remember the classroom interaction that began this guide? Wasn't that way of engaging children far more powerful than the "*samjhana*" method we often use?
3. Teachers must model the meaning-making process for children. When we show children how to talk about texts, we teach children how to connect to their lives; how to hear different opinions; how to appreciate different feelings; how to weigh information and value facts and; how to judge what they should believe, and so on.
4. Children need access to a wide variety of meaningful and rich texts. Teachers, we need to find texts for our children to read beyond the textbook. Children need to read and discuss texts that have scope for them to predict, infer, ask questions and connect to the world knowledge.
5. Teach new vocabulary deeply. While all new words cannot be dealt with deeply, pick a few words from each text that are worthy of closer attention. Teach these words in relation to related words that children already know. Encourage children to use these new words in speech and writing. Play word games that will let children show off their new vocabulary. Encourage children to use these words in conversation with you and their peers, and also encourage them to use these words in their writing.

Teaching comprehension strategies

One of the most powerful findings of comprehension research is that children can be taught strategies that good readers use to strengthen their own meaning-making processes. Here we describe a few of these strategies and then describe a model for teaching them.

1. **Prediction.** Prediction is very important because it allows students to activate their world knowledge as they make guesses about what they are about to read. When teaching prediction, encourage students to go through the texts and do a **preview** of what they are going to read. Also, ask children to look at the sections in the text, so that they can see what they are going to read. Doing an **overview** of the text before they begin reading helps children select what parts of the texts are meaningful and determine their purpose with reading. Children,

therefore, read with an aim and interest because they know what they are getting into. Teachers can model predicting while reading by stopping at particular points and making guesses about what is going to happen next.

2. **Clarifying.** Teach students to notice when they are not understanding, and pause to clarify. Good readers clarify when they don't understand by re-reading the text, asking for help, consulting external resources (e.g., the dictionary, etc.). Model for students to pause after every chunk of reading to clarify doubts that may have risen during the reading.

3. **Questioning.** Teach students to ask questions of themselves as they read. This is different from clarification questions, where they are clearing their doubts. In questioning, we teach children to ask "teacher-like" questions to test their own understanding. Here are some kinds of questions students can ask and answer by themselves.

   A. *Right There Questions.* These are questions with explicit answers provided clearly in the text. For example, "Who did the flower ask for wings from?" is a "right-there" question. Students need to be taught to frame such questions.

   B. *Think and Search.* These are questions that encourage students to infer answers that are not directly given in the text. They will then need to search and find evidence to support their inference in the text. For example, "Why did the flower return the wings to the butterfly?" might be a think-and-search question.

   C. *On My Own.* These are questions that go beyond the information provided in the text. These help children link what they are reading to themselves, or to the world. For example, "Do you think the flower should have given back the wings to the butterfly? Why?" is a question that solicits the reader's opinion. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, as long as it is justified.

   When we teach students to ask such questions of themselves as they read, they will become used to finding answers to explicit and inferential questions and questions that connect to the self and the world.

4. **Summarizing.** Most texts have a lot of information. Good readers know how to pay attention to the most critical information and how to separate this information from the supporting details. This permits them to retell what has been read with clarity. Summarizing helps students to extract critical information from a text. Teachers can model to students to show them how to find key information in the text and how to remove less important information. They can teach students how to organise information so that there is a flow to their summaries.

5. Using text structures. Children should be aware that most texts have a "structure", much like the human body has a skeleton. This is not immediately visible, but it is what holds everything together. For example, most stories have a very predictable structure
   a. Introduction — where the setting and main character are introduced.
   b. Problem — some incident or situation that creates a conflict.
   c. Action (rising) — what happens as a result of the problem or conflict — leading up to a high point of tension in the story.
   d. Action (falling) — this is the resolution of the problem.
   e. Outcome — what happens at the end.

Figure 10 shows how children can be taught to map the structure visually. This helps them to understand the sequence of a story and the flow of events.

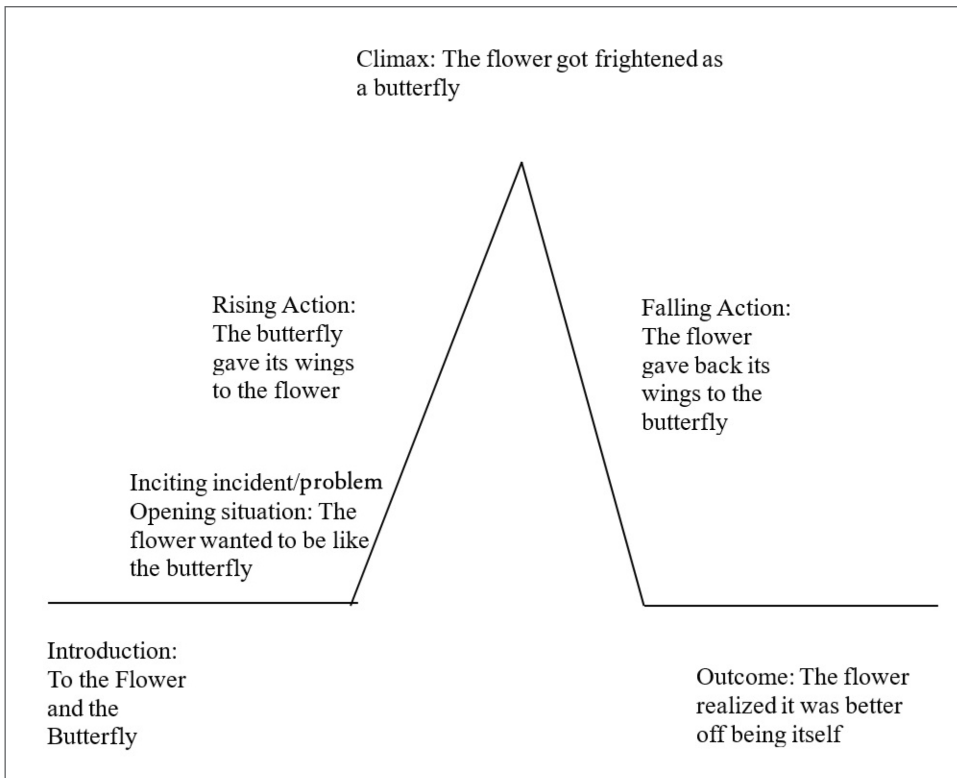


Figure 10. Plotting the story structure.

Non-fiction texts can also be represented visually once the text structure has been understood. For example, Venn Diagrams can be used to compare and contrast categories (or, characters in a fiction text); concept maps can be used to show all the concepts in a text and their relationships to each other; and flow charts can be used to show a sequence of actions and activities. These visual representations will help readers review, clarify and summarize key ideas for themselves in an organised way.

A model for teaching comprehension

Duke and Pearson (2002) strongly recommend that teachers use the "Gradual Release of Responsibility" model for teaching comprehension in the classroom. In this model, teachers first explain and show students how to use the strategy; then, guide them in a variety of ways to use these strategies; and only then expect them to use it on their own. It's a way to support children as they learn to use strategies, where the teacher gradually releases the responsibility of using the strategies to the students.

We will explain how the teacher may begin doing this referring back to the short story at the beginning of this guide, The Flower and the Butterfly.

A. **Explicit explanation of strategy.** *"Predicting is when we make guesses about what is going to happen next in our reading. Good readers often try to guess what they are going to be reading about before they read it. This helps them to imagine what is going to happen next and see if their ideas were correct when they read the text.*

B. **Teacher modelling of strategy.** *"Let me try and guess what this story,* "The Flower and the Butterfly," *is about. Well, there's definitely a flower and butterfly in the story. It looks like this story takes place outside, since there is grass and there are trees in the picture. This makes sense, since we usually find flowers and butterflies outside. I wonder what the two of them are going to do — I think it must be about some adventure they share.*

C. **Collaborative use of the strategy.** Continue modelling the strategy for the students and encourage them to collaborate with you on making the predictions.

D. **Guided use of the strategy.** Stop after the flower has had her adventures and say, *"We have been making some pretty good predictions together. Now, I want you to predict what will happen next. Will the flower keep the wings? Will she return them? Why?"*

E. **Independent use of the strategy.** *"Remember we have been working on predictions. When you read by yourself, keep making your predictions whenever you think something new is going to happen. I want you to write down your predictions for the book you're reading. Next to each prediction, make another column tracking which of those predictions turned out to be correct and which did not."*

Closing Comments

Why teach reading comprehension?

Children are excellent meaning-makers in their daily lives. But what fails when we bring them to the worlds of reading and writing? There seems to be some disconnect — a failure to transfer meaning making skills from life to the world of texts. It is our responsibility as teachers to make these connections happen. Reading and writing with meaning is essential for all school-based learning, and also for functioning as a literate person in the world outside of schools. Actively promoting comprehension is, therefore, not optional. Without it, schools are meaningless. Let's open the world of learning to children in schools by making reading and writing meaningful!

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NOTES

Why Teach Reading Comprehension?

Children are excellent meaning-makers in their daily lives. But what fails when we bring them to the worlds of reading and writing?

Reading and writing with meaning is essential for all school-based learning, and also for functioning as a literate person in the world outside of schools. Actively promoting comprehension, therefore, is not optional. Without it, schooling becomes a meaningless rite of passage.

In this Teachers' Guide, we summarize learnings from the LiRIL project related to the teaching and learning of reading comprehension in classrooms in Maharashtra and Karnataka. We explore specific and interesting questions related to comprehension, such as: 'Can children answer questions that are "right there" in the text'?'; 'Can children make inferences while reading texts?'; 'Do children know that most stories have a predictable structure?'; 'Do children revise their ideas when they come across something new in texts?'.

We also look at how comprehension is dealt with in classrooms through examples from our detailed classroom observations. Finally, we give specific recommendations to you to put to use in your classrooms.

Let's open the world of learning in schools to children by making reading and writing meaningful!

Happy reading to you and your students.