

Teaching Reading Comprehension in Primary School Through Phonics and Meaningful Understanding

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Abstract. *This article explores methods for developing reading comprehension skills in early grade students, with a focus on transitioning from technical reading to meaningful text understanding. It analyzes the theoretical foundations of reading comprehension, the role of phonics in decoding, and the importance of vocabulary and background knowledge. Special emphasis is placed on pedagogical strategies and practical techniques that support the development of meaningful reading. The article provides specific methodological recommendations for primary school teachers, including pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading strategies, individualized instruction, and the fostering of reading motivation. It aims to improve the effectiveness of teaching reading at the primary level and to enhance students' functional literacy.*

Key words: *reading comprehension, primary education, phonics, vocabulary development, text understanding, teaching methodology, reading literacy, reading strategies, early grades, reading pedagogy.*

Formation of reading comprehension skills in primary school students is one of the key tasks of primary education. The ability not only to read a text, but to comprehend its content, extract meaning, draw conclusions and apply the information received is the basis for successful learning in all subjects. In the context of rapid changes in the education system, increasing requirements for functional literacy and active implementation of international standards, the issue of effective teaching of reading with understanding is becoming especially relevant.

In recent years, the results of international studies such as PIRLS and PISA have shown that many students have an imbalance between the technical side of reading (decoding the text) and its comprehension. Many children can read a text quickly, but have difficulty answering questions about it, are unable to identify the main idea or draw logical conclusions. This indicates the need to revise the methods of teaching reading in primary schools - from an emphasis on technique to the integration of semantic analysis.

Modern psychological and pedagogical research emphasizes that reading comprehension is not formed spontaneously, but as a result of systematic, targeted and step-by-step work. In this case, the connection between phonetic skills (mastering sound-letter correspondences) and meaningful perception of the text is especially important. A competent combination of these components gives students the opportunity to move from "reading by syllables" to a deep understanding of the content, to reading as an intellectual process.

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process based on the interaction of various levels of linguistic and mental activity. In the context of primary education, this means that a primary school student must not only pronounce words correctly, but also understand their meaning, establish

connections between sentences, interpret information, and use personal experience and background knowledge to more deeply understand the text.

One of the basic approaches to theoretical understanding of reading comprehension is the “Simple View of Reading” model. According to this model, successful text comprehension is formed as a result of the interaction of two components: decoding skills (i.e. technical reading) and language comprehension. A deficiency in even one of these components significantly reduces the level of overall comprehension.

Another important theoretical contribution is the Reading Rope model, which conceptualizes reading as a multi-component process involving phonological awareness, fluency, vocabulary, grammatical awareness, background knowledge, and cognitive strategies. These components gradually weave together into a robust system that enables meaningful reading.

It is also worth noting the importance of schema theory (RC Anderson), according to which understanding of a text largely depends on the reader’s previous experience and knowledge. It is the presence of “schemes” in the mind that allows new information to be linked with what has already been learned, thereby deepening and clarifying the understanding of the text. Effective teaching of reading with understanding should be based on a comprehensive consideration of cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural factors. This involves not only the development of technical reading skills, but also systematic work on the development of speech, thinking and reading experience.

Phonetics plays a key role in the process of mastering reading skills and developing reading comprehension at the early stages of learning. Mastering sound-letter correspondences, merging sounds into words, and developing phonemic hearing provide young students with the basis for accurately and fluently decoding text. Without this foundation, full comprehension of what is read becomes difficult or impossible.

In primary school, children first master the mechanisms of reading, and the phonetic approach becomes the most important tool in this process. It allows students to learn to recognize and sound out written words, which in turn reduces the cognitive load when reading and frees up resources for semantic processing of the text. The faster and more accurately a child reads, the more attention he or she can pay to understanding the content, rather than the decoding process itself.

Scientific research, including the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), demonstrates the high effectiveness of systematic and consistent phonics instruction at an early stage. It is especially useful for children with learning difficulties and for students whose proficiency in the language of instruction is insufficient. However, limiting reading to phonics alone can lead to a narrow perception of the text. If a student has learned to read technically, but does not develop semantic analysis skills, he or she will not be able to use the text as a source of knowledge. This is why the phonics stage should be integrated into a broad system of developing reading competence, where decoding, vocabulary, oral speech, analytical and interpretive skills are equally developed.

After mastering basic phonetic skills, primary school students need to move from mechanical reading to meaningful perception of the text. This stage requires the use of special pedagogical strategies aimed at developing the skills of semantic analysis, the ability to draw conclusions, make predictions and interpret content. In this case, the teacher acts not only as a bearer of knowledge, but also as an organizer of cognitive activity, facilitating deep interaction between the child and the text.

An important element is working with keywords, headings, illustrations - before, during and after reading. Such techniques activate the child's cognitive schemes and help to connect new content with existing knowledge. At the same time, special attention is paid to lexical work: explaining new words, discussing synonyms and antonyms, contextual clarification of meanings. An integral part of developing understanding of the text are self-control strategies: paraphrasing, retelling, highlighting the main idea, making questions about what has been read. Their training should be step-by-step and systematic, relying on examples, step-by-step instructions and collective analysis.

For a sustainable result, teachers should use a variety of work forms: reading aloud, paired and group reading, dramatization, creating illustrations for the text. Such forms not only develop understanding,

but also increase students' motivation, create emotional involvement. The transition from technical reading to meaningful reading is possible only with targeted training in comprehension strategies. This forms in younger students not just a reading skill, but a full-fledged ability to extract, process and use information from the text.

Understanding what is read is impossible without sufficient vocabulary and relevant background knowledge. In primary school age, these components play a key role, since they allow the student not just to mechanically read the text, but to deeply comprehend its content, establish connections between concepts, contexts and personal experience. The richer the child's vocabulary and the broader his understanding of the world around him, the higher the level of understanding of what is read.

Vocabulary provides access to the meanings of words that occur in the text. Insufficient knowledge of vocabulary leads to misunderstanding or distorted interpretation. Therefore, in the process of teaching reading, it is important for the teacher to systematically expand the active and passive vocabulary of students. This can be achieved through direct teaching of new words (explanation of meanings, use of words in different contexts), games with vocabulary, work with synonyms and antonyms, and the use of visual supports (pictures, diagrams, video clips).

Background knowledge is the child's general awareness of the topics, phenomena and events described in the text. If the text concerns a subject with which the student is familiar, the probability of understanding it increases significantly. Therefore, an important task of the teacher is preliminary work to update knowledge before reading, as well as creating conditions for expanding children's horizons: through the integration of various academic disciplines, excursions, project activities, discussion of life situations.

Of particular importance is the selection of texts that correspond to the level of development of students, their interests and cultural context. It is necessary to avoid lexically overloaded and thematically alien texts, replacing them with adapted ones, close to children's experience and filled with useful vocabulary.

Effective teaching of reading comprehension in elementary grades requires a systematic approach, clear planning and a flexible combination of different methods from the teacher. Based on modern research in the field of psycholinguistics and pedagogy, we can highlight several key recommendations that will help the teacher develop stable skills of meaningful reading in primary school students.

First of all, it is important to ensure a gradual learning process. At the initial stage, you should focus on developing phonetic skills and automating the decoding process. At the same time, phonetic training should be accompanied by parallel work on vocabulary, articulation, intonation and the meaning of what is heard. This creates conditions for a gradual transition from reading technique to its content. The teacher should actively use pre-text work techniques: discussing the title, viewing illustrations, formulating hypotheses about the content. This activates the students' background knowledge and creates motivation for reading. During reading, effective techniques include "reading with stops", asking clarifying questions, discussing new words. Post-text work should include retelling, reflection, creating questions about the text, analyzing the structure and semantic load. Particular attention should be paid to the individualization of the learning process. Not all students master reading skills at the same speed and depth. Differentiated tasks, reading in pairs and groups, support using visual aids (diagrams, reference cards) allow each student to advance in their zone of proximal development.

It is also important to develop children's reading initiative - to offer to choose books according to their interests, to keep reading diaries, to discuss what they have read in a free form. This helps to develop personal motivation and turns reading into a significant part of school and extracurricular life.

Thus, the methodology of teaching reading comprehension should be holistic, multi-level and adapted to the characteristics of primary school students. Competent implementation of these approaches in

pedagogical practice will contribute to the formation of a thoughtful, active and independent reader already in primary school.

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