CHAPTER II

READING COMPREHENSION:
A THEORATICAL PERSPECTIVE
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2.1 CONCEPT OF READING COMPREHENSION

"Every man who knows how to read has in his power to magnify himself to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting" Aldous Huxley.

Since it is the aim of all teachers to make the lives of their students "full significant and interesting" the teaching of reading has been of prime concern to educators around the world. And the essence of reading is comprehension.

What is reading comprehension? What is involved in the mental process that begins with the reader's first glance at the print and ends with his understanding of the message which the writer is trying to convey through the printed medium.

Before 1915, when early emphasis in reading was on its oral aspects, reading instruction had no comprehension face. In fact the term "COMPREHENSION" was rarely found in the literature. The corpus of reading instruction up until 1915 to 1925 was that of teaching word recognition. When a child had learned to pronounce the words in reading, the teaching objective had been met.

In the year 1916, Judd and Gray used the expression "Quality of reading" to denote "COMPREHENSION" (5 & 8).

Yoakam describes comprehension as follows, "Comprehending reading matter involves the correct association of meanings with word symbols, the evaluation of meanings which are suggested in context, the selection of the correct meaning, the organisation of ideas as they are read, the retention of these ideas and their use in some present or future activity." (17)
Edwards (3) points out that continuous development towards greater reading proficiency is a process with many phases, the goal of which is the comprehension of ideas. Success in the process depends on adequate motivation, a substantial background of concepts, word preparation skills, and the ability to reason one's way through smaller idea elements and to grasp, as a whole, the meaning of larger unitary idea.

2.2 COMPREHENSION SKILLS

Smith and Dechaut (12) remarks that many writers have suggested the following abilities are the basic to understand and may be called comprehension skills.

1. Ability to associate meaning with graphic symbol.
2. Ability to understand words in a context and to select the meaning that fits the context.
3. Ability to read in thought units
4. Ability to understand units of increasing size; the phase, clause, sentence, paragraph, and whole selection.
5. Ability to acquire word meanings
6. Ability to select and understand the main ideas
7. Ability to follow direction.
8. Ability to draw inferences.
9. Ability to understand the writer's organisation
10. Ability to evaluate what is read; to recognise literary devices and to identify the tone, mood, and intent of writer.
11. Ability to retain ideas.

12. Ability to apply ideas and to integrate them with one's past experience.

Stauffer (14) points out that with respect to comprehension abilities children are distributed over a long continuum; at one extreme are those merely reproduce the exact ideas in the text book at the other extreme are pupils who produce mental constructs creativity and with originality.

Zintz (18) classifies the comprehension skill as literal and a interpretive. He sees critical reading ability as the "application of these skills in reading and applying judgmental, evaluative, and selective skills while reading."

Suzak (6) outlines the major skills in reading comprehension as locating information, remembering organizing, predicting outcomes, extending ideas, and critically evaluating. In his discussion, he does not distinguish between so-called reading comprehension skills and reading study skills. His view is that the major concern should be to delineate purpose or combination of purposes rather than to establish artificial dichotomies between skill types.

Hafner and Jolly (7) are of the opinion that comprehension has taken place to some degree when a pupil can:

1. Answer question of fact and detail on the material that he has read.

2. Follow direction or accurately perform some actions described in the material.

3. Recall and described in his own words what he has read.
4. Recount the sequence of events in a narrative.

5. Discriminate the significant from the insignificant details.

6. Describe the relationship of illustrations, examples, or anecdotes and so on to the points they are intended to clarify.

7. Identify the topic sentences, main ideas, thesis statements in exposition.

8. Describe the relationship of the content read to other context in the same or in a related area.

9. Specify accurate, independent conclusions and inferences from expository material.

10. Describe the organizational pattern of expository selections, time, space, cause-effect and so on.

11. Describe the tone or mood of a selection.

12. Describe connotations and other implied meanings in literary materials.

13. Identify the author's implied motives or purposes.

14. Identify symbolism, figurative language and other subtle language devices and describe their function.

With the emergency of the present new period in reading instruction under the general educational influence of placing emphasis on the thinking skills, comprehension which first stuck its head above the surface in the 1920s seems to have developed many faces, at least vocabulary-wise and it appears to be revolving around so fast that all of the faces are blurred and merging and overlapping, and the features of none are clear-cut
or distinct. We hear of literal comprehension, factual reading, close reading, inference, interpretation, critical reading, creative reading etc. Comprehension has, indeed, become a many faceted thing. Some writers give long list of comprehension skills and sub-skills, while other limit themselves to a few more general areas. (15)

Comprehension as a process is an elusive entity. It is what happens to readers as they read. It is what keeps them going when they read. It involves the intuition comment "Oh sure that makes sense to me." It is what has broken down when we say to ourselves. "It is all Greek to me," or "I can take it any longer", or when we find that we have just skimmed our eyes over two pages and realise that we have not understood one iota of those two pages.

Tuinman (16) remarks that routinely, comprehension is thought of as a very elusive concept, defying any define description. The question "what is comprehension" receives as many answers just because of the way we ask questions about them. Instead of asking what comprehension is, we might ask: How do we use examples of usage of the word, to realise that we seem pretty of asking "can we really measure comprehension" we are better off, more to the point and more productive by simply asserting: "Comprehension really is what we measure".

Person and Johnson (10) believe that comprehension as a product is not so elusive. On the other hand, we wonder about its importance. Comprehension as a product, involves measuring, in some or less objective way, the net result of the process. Typically, it involves evaluating responses to specific questions we may have asked our readers. Comprehension as a product is
what we assess by means of the dazzling array of tests we give to children. It is what we assess when we ask our readers, "Tell me what you remember about (got-out of thought about, learned in) that story". It is what we get when we ask for an outline or a summary of a passage. Now most of us like to think that we can draw references about the processes children must have used on the basis of the products they provide us with. Whether or not such inferences are legitimate is an unsettled issue. However, when we get down to the bottom line, most of us would probably agree that processes are either totally or mostly inaccessible. Hence we are stuck with products as our usual means of evaluating the quality and quantity of students' comprehension processes.

Elusive or not, inaccessible or not the process of comprehending is the crucial one for the teacher for it is during that process, when individual readers are actively interpreting the text according to their knowledge and purpose, that learning is taking place.

In fact it is the appropriate line when teachers might judiciously intervenes for the betterment of the process.

Few would dispute the fact that comprehension is a key factor, if not the key factor, in reading process. Comprehension is the heart of the reading act. Reading without comprehension is no reading at all. It is a paradox, however, that reading comprehension has received so little attention from research works and it is poorly understood even up to this day. The statement "The girl is not comprehending" shows as if "Comprehension were a single general ability which either the girl has or does not have.

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Different writers give different outlines of what is involved in comprehension. In fact, "Comprehension is just a big blanket term that covers a whole area of thought—getting processes in reading," remarks Smith (13) who feels that these different categories call for the use of different mental processes. Depth reading cannot be developed by teaching 'comprehension' as a lump sum. Three categories have been suggested (a) Literal Comprehension, (b) Interpretation, and (c) Critical reading.

Literal comprehension names the skill of getting the primary, direct literal meaning of a word, idea or sentence in the context. There is no depth in this kind of reading. It is the lowest rung in the meaning getting ladder yet it is the one on which teachers of the past have given the most practice. Interpretation probes for greater depth. It is concerned with supplying meanings not directly stated in the text. In interpretation the reader must think back of the mere symbols and inter meaning not directly apparent in the word symbols themselves. Critical reading is the third level in the hierarchy of reading for meaning skills. It involves not only the literal comprehension and the interpretation skills but goes further than either of these in that the reader evaluates and passes personal judgment on the quality, value, accuracy and truthfulness of what is read.

One of the most frequent criticisms leveled against research on comprehension is that it typically uses product rather than reading, which are dependent on memory, to make inferences about processes that occurred during reading. This problem becomes acute if we wish to study readers' control over the activities
involved in comprehending. Do we wish to ask them what they would in a hypothetical situation? Do we wish to ask them to repeat what activities they were engaging in as they were reading? Should we devise other performance tests that will tap whether they were monitoring their ongoing activities? All of these techniques have been attempted but all are subject to problems of interpretation because of fallible memory or inadequate verbal abilities. (4)

When opinions still differ on the concept of reading comprehension, which definition of reading comprehension the test constructor has to keep in mind while constructing a test? What can be measured?

An unsuspecting student also sought to answer this question from an examination of test catalogues, or of the instruments which they describe, might say, "we can measure paragraph comprehension, word meaning, word discrimination, word recognition, word analysis skills, ability to draw inferences from what is read, retention of details, ability to locate specific information, rate of reading, speed of comprehension, visual perception of words and letters, ability to determine the intent of a writer, ability to grasp the general idea, ability to deduce the meaning of words from context, ability to read with understanding in the natural science, in the social sciences, in the humanities, ability to perceive relationship ability to appreciate poetry, ability to grasp the organisation of ideas, ability to read maps, charts and tables" - the list may be extended, if not add infinitum, at least and some seventy or eighty alleged reading skills and abilities. And this, mind you, from an inspection only of tests that are labeled as reading tests, without any consideration of other tests which look very
much indeed like blood brothers to the reading tests, but which mask their familiarities under such beguiling aliases as tests of "critical thinking" of "educational development" or even — actual deceivers of all — as tests of "mental ability", "Intelligence" or "Scholastic aptitude". (9).

In the year 1941, Davis (2) sought to identify some of the fundamental factors in reading comprehension and to provide a means of measuring them. On the basis of a comprehensive survey of the literature, he listed nine supposed categories of basic skills of reading comprehension. He proceeded to develop test questions to measure each of these skills, administered the test to a group of subjects and computed the inter correlations among the nine tests. He interpreted a factor analysis of the results as indicating the presence of nine factors, six of them clearly significant. These latter included word knowledge, ability to manipulate ideas and concepts in relation to one another — "reasoning in reading", ability to grasp the author's expressed ideas; ability to identify the writer's intent or purpose; ability to follow the organisation of a passage' and knowledge of literacy devices and techniques.

Davis (2) concluded that at least two factors, the word knowledge and the reasoning factor were measured in this tests with sufficient reliability for practical use, and that adequately reliable measures of three other factors — literal meanings, inference and ability to follow the organisation of a selection — could be developed as a practical matter.
Keeping in view the work done in the area of reading comprehension tests, a test constructor may plan to measure reliably the following components: (i) Vocabulary factor (ii) comprehension of the literal meanings—question on what is stated and (iii) comprehension of implied meaning—question on what is 'meant'.

"Reading Comprehension is a world problem because for centuries teachers around the world assumed that comprehension would be a natural consequence of decoding alone. In fact, the word comprehension itself is still to be invented in some of the languages of the world. In a few countries the word comprehension and the expression reading comprehension have been used by educators for some time, but readers in these countries still do not comprehend what they read as well as they should."

John Chapman (1) "19" comments that there can be little doubt that if teachers wish to improve their pupils' reading comprehension, they must know about what happens when children are actually comprehending the more effective their instruction is likely to be. Yet, paradoxically, over the years, teachers have been concerned, almost exclusively with the end product or the results of reading a passage. More often than not this end product is measured by a series of questions after the reading, thereby drawing attention away from the process of comprehending to its results. For most teachers, comprehension involves both understanding and answering questions which may or may not reveal what happens while the child is reading.

It is worth remembering that the entire learning process depends upon reading skills. Through reading, a child is introduced to the surrounding world. Learning of languages is streamlined to
the extent a child is fluent in reading. Reading has three major dimensions, viz. reading speed, reading comprehension and vocabulary. These dimensions of reading are mutually dependent in the sense that one dimension influences the others. This means that if a child can read with speed, he can comprehend also equally well and so on. In a classroom of a primary school, children study the mother tongue, environmental studies, arithmetic, etc. The achievement in any subject viz. language or environmental studies or science or arithmetic is highly influenced by the speed with which a child can read and the amount of comprehension he has developed. This is true for science, social studies arithmetic etc. In some countries school system lay a lot of stress on developing the reading skills. There is a system of appointing "Reading Teachers" who are concerned with developing the skills of reading. The thinking underlying the special stress on reading is what if a child develop comprehension he can learn other subjects speedily and efficiently. Reading involves skill and it also involves thinking. Considered in its broader sense it affects the entire personality, the world of people and events encountered on the printed page may shape a reader's attitude towards his fellows, towards school, towards parents, and towards life in general. It may heighten his appreciation of the physical world around him or give a sense of excitement about the future. On the other hand it may cause perplexity, fear of anxiety, the teacher bears a great responsibility for exposing the learner to opportunities for selection of appropriate reading matter and for providing expert guidance in the interpretation of what is read.

Especially to the young child in school, successful and happy experiences with reading will determine in great measure his feelings about himself and his social environment.
On the other hand now a days in a school we do not pay any attention to teach Language skills. If we observe primary school time table we do not find periods allotted for teaching of reading skills. Specifically no efforts are being made to develop Reading Comprehension and Reading Skills.

Reading is a challenge to the teacher because it is a complex process. Reading is not a general ability but a composite of many specific abilities. Even then no attention is being given in primary training colleges, to train in reading. What is reading? How to develop reading skills? These factors are completely neglected in training colleges.

2.4 READING COMPREHENSION AND SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT

In young age of primary schooling if the reading skills is not developed then is very difficult for the student to cope up in a secondary school or in a college where they have to rely on the reading by one's own self. Their comprehension and grasping is less because their reading skill is not up to the mark.

Also low ability in reading affects their achievement in other subjects like Environmental study, English, Mathematics, History, Civilize, Geography etc. As their reading skill is not developed they are unable to comprehend the meaning which is being conveyed through written matter.

Even in public examination candidates whose reading is poor, cannot score better for the simple reason that they are unable to express their views because of their poor reading ability.
It is therefore necessary to inquire how well the child is able to grasp the general meaning of a passage how he can differentiate between facts and opinions, how well he can follow directions, how well he can interpret maps, graphs and tables, how well he can organise what he reads and can classify ideas; how well he can visualize what he reads and how well he can locate information.

A single reading skill, a very important one, well illustrates the complexity of reading. Any teacher who undertakes to cultivate for example children's critical discrimination in reading finds that he is dealing with a whole cluster of abilities that often need special attention.

Comprehension is that reading skill that is at the back of all reading ability. Comprehension is affected by the reading speed and it also affects the reading speed. Both speed and comprehension are related to vocabulary. However, comprehension skill is basic and needs to be studied and developed on a priority basis. In Indian Educational System, where reading ability has not received adequate emphasis, developing reading comprehension may lead to developing reading ability in toto and this appears to the demand of the day.

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REFERENCES


2. Davis, Frederick B.: "Fundamental Factors of Comprehension Reading" 1941, PP 185 - 197.


