



Expanding Educational Horizons

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND YOUTH

LITERACY MINIGUIDE

Topic: COMPREHENSION

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Introduction

Dear Teacher,

Test results show that comprehension is one area where many children are failing. Teachers also complain that they have difficulty getting students to comprehend well. Since explicit instruction is necessary in the area of comprehension teaching and learning, this mini- guide targets the development of comprehension skills and strategies.

In this guide you will find instructional ideas and strategies that may be used to develop the comprehension ability of children especially at grades 1-4. It is our hope that you will be able to modify these instructional suggestions to suit the specific needs of your students.

Sincerely Yours,

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A. What is comprehension?

Comprehension involves understanding and making connections with one's experiences and with the ideas and facts presented orally or in print.

The ability to comprehend is affected by:

1. The readers' prior knowledge. If the reader has experiences similar to those in the text, it is easier for that reader to understand the text.
2. The readers' ability to use cues in the text, e.g. pictures and word context and word and phrase cues. Word contexts are words and or phrases used by the writer to guide the reader in getting specific meaning from the text. Pictures also help the readers to decode and understand words.
3. The readers' ability to decode words. The ability to rapidly recognize and decode words helps the reader to pay more attention to understanding the text rather than stopping to decode.
4. The difficulty level of the text.
5. How interesting and relevant the text is to the reader.
6. The interest of the reader.
7. The clarity and presentation of the written text.
8. Cognitive development and reading experiences of the reader.

TASK 1

Think about any reading experiences that you might have had where your comprehension was affected by any of these factors. Write one example and a brief analysis of why your comprehension was affected.

What comprehension skills should we teach?

There are ten main comprehension skills listed in the table below and some instructional strategies to help your students develop each skill.

Table 1: Comprehension Skills and Instructional Strategies

Comprehension Skills	Instructional Strategies
1. Identifying main ideas and supporting details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As children read short passages, help them locate specific information that provides the answer to who, what, why and when questions. Show them what cues to look for such as proper names, dates etc. ▪ Help children identify important information about characters, setting, mood, theme and story plot.
2. Using Context Clues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have students read ahead, re-read, look at pictures, titles, and cue words such as however, next, so, but and after. ▪ Have students use their own experiences to help them understand the meaning of the text.
3. Recognizing Cause and Effect Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teach students to use signal words such as <i>but</i>, <i>as a result</i>, <i>consequently</i>, <i>however</i>, and <i>because</i>.
4. Identifying Sequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teach signal words such as first, next, following, then. ▪ Identify events according to the order in which they happened. ▪ Arrange numbers, letters of the alphabet days of the week etc, in order. ▪ Follow instructions in order.
5. Discriminating Facts from opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help children differentiate what is true from what could not be. ▪ Direct them to sources of information and sources of opinion e.g. newspaper, call in programmes, children's report of community and school and class events. ▪ Children examining direct quotes.
6. Summarizing information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children retell stories or parts of stories. ▪ Use graphic organizers to capture key points. ▪ Make reports on specific bits of information. ▪ Make links with main ideas in text and stories.
7. Drawing Inferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make connections with information in text and personal experiences. ▪ Ask questions that would require different sources of information. ▪ Ask students questions such as: ▪ What do you think will happen? What makes you think so?

Comprehension Skills	Instructional Strategies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who do you think did it? What makes you think so? ▪ What is a suitable title for the story? Why? ▪ How will the story end? Why do you think it will end this way?
8. Recognizing multiple meaning words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Give practice in using words as different parts of speech e.g. <i>water</i> as in noun and <i>water</i> as in verb. ▪ Use words in context to show different meanings e.g. principal meaning money, head of an educational institution and main component.
9. Recognizing literary elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help children to identify where the story took place, when the story took place, characters in the story, how the story developed, and mood of the story, how the story ends and the message in the story. ▪ Engage children in character study, changing different elements of the story, dramatizing.
10. Understanding figurative language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Brainstorm the meaning of common phrases in children's everyday experiences e.g. <i>broke as a church mouse</i>. ▪ Asafa ran <i>as fast as lightning</i>. ▪ Don't <i>chicken out</i> on us now. ▪ Identify figurative expressions in text and discuss personal experiences relating to these phrases e.g. when and why they are used. ▪ Children draw literal representations of the expression. ▪ Children make guesses about the meaning of figurative expressions.

TASK 2

Work with your colleagues to expand on the ideas presented above and to identify other strategies that could be used to develop the comprehension skills mentioned.

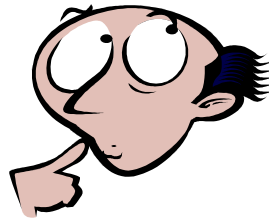
C. Helping students to become better at comprehending

There are five major principles for teaching comprehension.

1. **The teacher must have a clear understanding of the strategy.** This includes how and when it should be used. For example, students make guesses about what the text is about. To do this they can use the pictures, titles, phrases, headings and subheadings of a text. Children should be encouraged to make predictions as they read.
2. **Frequent demonstration/ modeling of the strategy.** Teachers first model the strategy then a competent student models it for the class. The teachers and students doing the modeling can use the Think Aloud strategy. In the Think Aloud strategy the teachers demonstrates, by talking out loud, how they process and sort out ideas.
3. **Shared use of the strategy by teacher and students.** Students and teachers share in making predictions about the text and in justifying their predictions by reading relevant sections from the text. As students read they confirm their predictions, make further predictions or change previous predictions.
4. **Guided practice of strategy.** Students work in groups, making individual predictions and justifying their predictions within the groups. The teacher provides support to individual member and helps the group to arrive at a consensus.
5. **Opportunities for independent use of the strategy.** Students engage in silent reading of the text and use the strategies learned, that is, they make their own predictions, without support from others. At this stage the teacher gets an opportunity to know how much each student has grasped.

Here are some questions that can guide the student as he tries to monitor his understanding of the text.

1. What is the author's message?
2. What experiences do I have that I can connect with the text?
3. Does this information make sense? Why, Why not?
4. What did the author miss out?
5. Did the author provide the answer?
6. Where else can I find the answer?



D. Explicit teaching of comprehension skills involves:

1. Making predictions about the text
2. Thinking Aloud
3. Summarizing
4. Generating questions
5. Drawing inferences
6. Questioning the author

E. Setting Questions

It is important that students in grades 1-4 learn to ask and answer questions at three different levels: the literal, inferential and evaluative levels. The answers to literal questions are directly stated in the text. The answers to inferential questions are indirectly stated. Evaluative questions require readers to give a response based on their opinions.

TASK 3

Read the short passage that follows and then look at the questions. Can you identify the different levels of questions? The answers are in parentheses following the questions.

Vehicles from Japan.

Many Toyota and Honda vehicles are made in Japan.
Some of these vehicles are stronger and cheaper than
vehicles from other countries.
Many Jamaicans import Japanese vehicles.

Questions

1. Name two types of vehicles made in Japan.
2. Why do many Jamaicans import Japanese vehicles?
3. Would you buy a Japanese vehicle? Why or why not?
4. What is the meaning of import?
5. Do you think the title is suitable for the passage?
6. What is the title of the passage?
7. Give the passage another title.

Which of the above are literal questions? (1, 6)

Which are inferential questions? (2, 4, 7)

Which are evaluative questions? (3, 5)

TASK 4

Choose a passage from a class reader. Write 2 questions at each level. See how well your students can answer these questions. Are they more able to answer questions at a particular level? Why do you think this is so?

F. Comprehension Strategies

The KWL, DRTA and QAR strategies have been proven to be effective in facilitating comprehension. In the sections that follow, we explain each strategy, offer a sample lesson plan, and then encourage you to experiment with a strategy. As you read, notice what information you already know and what is new to you.

1. The KWL Strategy

This is a content area strategy which provides the students with a high level of autonomy for their learning. It actively engages them in determining what they would like to learn. Students are asked to indicate what they already know about a topic (**K**), pose questions about what they would like to know about the topic (**W**), and after reading the text, state what they learned (**L**) in response to the questions. They also need to state what they still need to learn. When the KWL strategy is used, students engage in active discussion, construction of graphic organizers, summarizing and categorizing of information, reading and writing and analyzing of data. It can be used in any grade, with individuals, with small or large groups or as a whole class activity.

Now look at the sample lesson in the box below. Remember that it may take more than one session to complete this lesson.

A Lesson Using the KWL

Title of story: *All about Owls*

Owls are nocturnal creatures. They like to go out at nights as they see very well in the dark. They are feathered creatures with large rounded heads, flat facial discs, sharply hooked beaks and two toes pointed forward and two backwards.

There are various kinds of owls- The Great Horned, Short Eared, Screech, Barned and Snowy. Owls feast on rodents such as rabbits, weasels and mice. Their other preys are insects, birds and snakes.

You will find owls in habitats such as deserts, old buildings, grassland, parks, marshes, dry lands and deciduous forests.

Steps

1. Introduce the story by reading the title. Have a discussion on the title. (In stories where there are pictures on the cover of the book, discuss the pictures on the cover of that book.) These discussions provide background information and give the students a sense of what the story is about.
The teacher may also lead the students in a *picture walk* where they talk about the pictures in the story to see how these pictures help them to understand what the story is about. Picture Walk provides background information to students.
2. Following the introduction of the text, ask students to say what they know about owls. Write students' responses in the **K** column of the strategy sheet. Students may also be encouraged to "share the pen" with the teacher. In sharing the pen the students do the actual writing at some point. This promotes the development of writing skills.
3. Find out from students the sources of their responses. (This allows students to recognize that there are several sources from which they can get answers. The

QAR comprehension strategy speaks to this.) Encourage students to challenge each others' views, where appropriate.

4. Discuss the meanings of some key words that might create difficulty when students begin to read the text. Use these words in context. Allow students to identify key words in the sentences that help them to know the meanings.

Examples of sentences

The owl is a nocturnal bird. It comes out at nights and sees well in the dark.

Bats live in caves. These caves are their habitats.

Lions kill their helpless prey such as deer and sheep.

Rodents such as mice and rabbits use their large front teeth to gnaw.

5. Ask students to suggest questions about owls for which they would like answers.
6. List these questions in the **W** column of the strategy sheet (See Strategy Sheet in Figure 2 below.) Here students can also share the pen with teacher.
7. Discuss with students why these questions are important to them.
8. Have students read independently to answer the questions. Reading and answering of questions may be done as a paired or mixed ability group activity. (As a group activity the able readers can offer support for the struggling reader or learner).
9. Have students record their answers in the **L** column of the strategy sheet.
10. Discuss students' responses to the questions. Students are to provide supporting evidence from the text.
11. Have students re-examine the information in the **K** column to see whether their initial views about owls were confirmed or disconfirmed by the text.
12. Summarize and categorize students' responses. The teacher may use a Graphic Organizer such as a Semantic Map to organize students' responses.
13. Assign students to find answers, elsewhere, for questions that were not answered by the text. Talk about the likely sources from which they will get responses to these unanswered questions.
14. Have students talk about other interesting information they learned, from the text, for which they had not sought answers.

As an extension activity, students may use the information learned to create their own stories. Also be sure and use every opportunity to engage children in reading and writing while using this strategy.



TABLE 2: KWL Strategy Sheet

What I Know (K)	What I Want to Know (W)	What I Learned (L)

Task 5

Plan a KWL Lesson for a Grade of your choice. Teach the lesson then share with a colleague how the lesson went. Note that often teachers engage students in the K and W portions of the strategy but overlook the L section. Be sure to include ALL sections of the strategy sheet.

2. Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA)

This strategy encourages readers to make predictions while reading the text. After students read specific portions of the text, they stop, confirm or revise previous predictions and make new predictions about what they will read.

Here is a simple procedure to follow when using the DRTA

1. Students read the title of the story (and perhaps a bit of the selection) and make predictions about the story.
2. Students are directed to read specified portions of the story. As they read, students confirm, refine or reject their initial predictions. They identify supporting details in the text to justify their stance. Students then make new predictions.
3. Students read the next pre-selected portion of the text and follow the procedures outlined in step two. Initially the sections are fairly short and frequent. As the students become more involved with the story (based, in part, on their predictions) the frequency of the ‘stops’ to predict or confirm are lessened until the students read enthusiastically to complete the story.
4. Learners must revisit their initial predictions and compare them to actual findings in the text.
5. Follow-up activities such as summaries may be a logical extension of the DRTA as the information that was confirmed provides a basic summary in many instances.

Points to Remember

- The teacher **facilitates** the thinking process by asking probing questions such as, “What do you think?” “Why do you think so?” “What is the evidence to justify your responses?”
- The class summarizes the points that came out of the discussion.

The DL-TA, Directed Listening-Thinking Activity, proceeds in the same manner as the DRTA. However, in the DLTA, the teacher reads to the children. The DLTA is especially suited for very young children and for struggling readers.

Here is a guide which includes some questions, for conducting a DRTA

1. Begin by reading the title. Ask students questions such as:

What do you think a story with a title like this may be about?
Why do you say so?

2. Have the students read (or, for a Directed Listening-Thinking Activity you read to the students) to the first predetermined stop point. A suitable stop point is where there is heightened interest and or conflict in the story. Question students about what they have read, using questions like those below:

What is the story about?
What do you think will happen next?
Why do you say that?

3. Students read through to the next selected point then question students

What has happened so far?
How did your predictions turn out?
What do you think will happen now?
Why do you say that?

Which portion of the story helped you to justify your prediction?
What else might happen?

4. Students read through to the next stop point. Ask questions such as:

What else has happened?
How do you think the story will end?
Why do you say so?

5. Students read through to the end of the story. Ask questions such as:

How did the story end?
How many of your predictions were right/ wrong?

Note that for very young children and for struggling readers, there is a variation of the DRTA, known as the DLTA-Directed Listening Thinking Activity. It proceeds in the same manner as the DRTA, but in this activity the teacher reads the text to children for students to listen, rather than having students read.

TASK 6

Select a passage and try segmenting it into suitable stop points.

What would be the questions that you would use to stimulate predictions for these points?

3. Question and Answer Relationships (QAR)

The QAR is a reading strategy in which students categorize comprehension questions based on the source of answer for each question. Students state whether the information they used to answer questions about the text was (1) explicitly stated (2) implied, or (3) dependent on students' background knowledge/experiences.

Using the QAR will:

- ✚ Help students to monitor their comprehension of the text.
- ✚ Set a purpose for reading the text.
- ✚ Allow students to assess their comprehension of the text.
- ✚ Help students to think critically.

Setting up a QAR lesson

1. Select an interesting text. This could be a fiction or non-fiction.
2. Write questions that would fall into one of the following three categories:

CATEGORY 1

RIGHT THERE — The information that students will need to answer the question is *right there in the text*. Questions that fall into this category are at the literal level.

CATEGORY 2

THINK AND SEARCH — The students will use information in the text in addition to their own experiences (prior knowledge, to form inferences.

CATEGORY 3

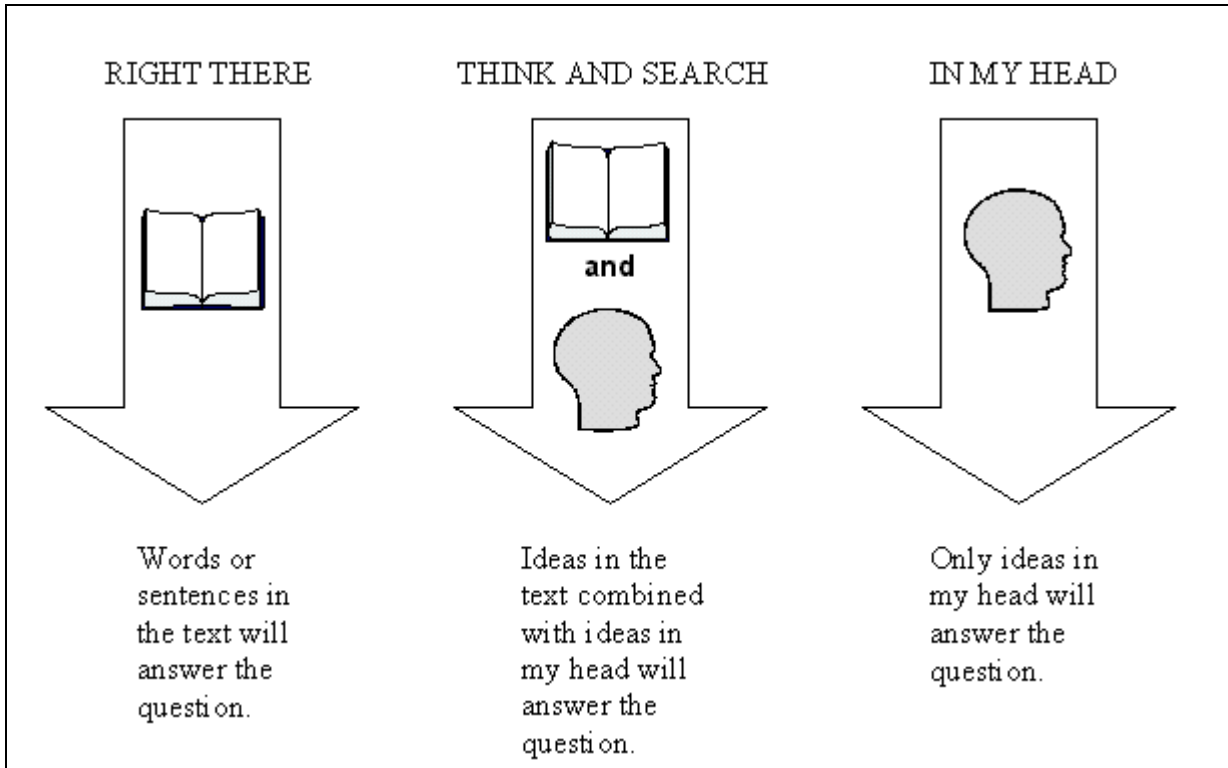
IN MY HEAD — Information needed to answer questions at this level are dependent on students' summary/ evaluation of the text. Answer to the question is therefore *entirely in the reader's mind* but based on the information in the text. (See Figure 1 below for a graphic depiction.)

3. Model, using Think Aloud, how you determine the source of the answer to various questions. Guide students as they determine the source of answers for questions based on a piece of simple text. Discuss with students how answers to questions

come from different places before they begin to read the text. This helps students to think about the questions while they are reading and so provide them with a purpose for reading.

4. After students have read the text, give them clear instructions about each of the three categories mentioned above. Information on overhead projector or handout for students might be helpful to achieve this. Look at the example below.

FIGURE 1: The Three Categories of Questions Used in QAR.



5. Ask students to answer the questions and to state the category of information they need to answer each.
6. Discuss students' responses as a whole class activity. Students should be given the opportunity to respond to each other's contribution by asking questions and discussing other categories to which answers could be assigned. Such rich discussion can promote comprehension skills and extend knowledge.

QAR: A Sample Lesson

Read the story below. It is followed by a variety of questions based on the text. The category in parentheses indicates the type of questions it is. Remember that in using this lesson you

would help your students to answer the questions by modeling, using Think Aloud, or by providing direct guidance.

Mary lived in Jericho all her life. Mary and her family would be moving one hundred kilometres away to the city of Kingston. Mary did not want to move because she would be leaving behind her best friend, Sue Ann, the netball team she had played on for the past year, and the big mango tree in her backyard where she liked to sit or play. She was especially angry because she was moving on her birthday! She would be ten tomorrow. She wanted to spend the day with her friends and to have a party but; instead, she would have to watch her house being packed up and put on a trailer. Mary thought that moving was a terrible way to spend her birthday; No party! No friends with whom to spend the day! "What about what I want?" she sulked. But that was just the problem. No one ever asked Mary what she wanted.

1. What can Mary do to make her moving to a new community easier for her? (*In My Head*)
2. Name the city to which Mary and her family are moving. (*Right There*)
3. Does Mary like to play on the netball team she has played on for the last year? (*Think and Search*)
4. What is the name of Mary's best friend? (*Right There*)
5. Say how moving to a new house and to a new community can be exciting? (*In my Head*)
6. For how long has Mary lived in Jericho? (*Think and Search*)

TASK 8

Now make up some other questions to reflect the three categories above. Have your students demonstrate how to find the answers to the questions you set.

REMEMBER: The category of the question is dependent on the source of the answer

G. Tips for Teaching Comprehension

1. Activate prior knowledge. This may be done through questioning and making predictions based on the title and or pictures in the story. Prediction increases interest and sets the purpose for reading. Allow students to give reasons for the predictions they make.
2. Introduce and discuss the meanings of key concepts before reading the text. Use the key words in context and have students figure out the meanings, using context. Develop a word wall with key concepts.
3. Set a purpose for reading by providing questions to be answered. These questions help students to sort out and focus on important information as they read.

4. Teach students signal words and what they mean. For example, *on the other hand*, *but*, *because*, *however*, etc.
5. In content area texts, teach how to use text aids such as chapter headings, content page, graphics, key, etc.
6. Allow students to ask questions of each other and also of you.
7. Ask probing questions to gain insight as to how students are thinking. Students should be allowed to tell you how they arrive at answers and to provide supporting evidence from text or other sources. For example, ask students to read the section of the story that helps them to arrive at the answer.
8. Teach students how to answer questions at various levels e.g. literal, inferential, and evaluative. The **why questions** are especially important as they require that students think critically.

Examples of questions:

- (a) Give the name of_____.
 - (b) Why do you think that _____?
 - (c) Do you think that John did the right thing when he_____? Give reasons for your answer.
9. Keep in mind that reading involves many skills. These were stated in Table 1
 10. As discussed earlier, the Question and Answer Relationship (QAR) strategy teaches students how to identify the sources of answers to questions. Some answers are explicitly stated in one sentence in the text. For other questions, students might have to read several sentences and paragraphs to find the answer. Students might also have to use their experiences, along with information from the text, to arrive at answers.
The Question and Answer Relationship (QAR) strategy speaks to this.
 11. Using the Think Aloud strategy, model how you comprehend a text e.g. how you figure out an unfamiliar word, how you apply a strategy, how you search for an answer.
 12. Discuss with students what they have read. Find out what they found interesting, what posed a problem, what new information they learned.
 13. Make connections with real life experiences students have had or other stories they have read.
 14. Have students respond creatively to the text. For example, retell a story, react to specific parts or characters, design a poster, create a mural, take on the role of a book character, draw a picture, prepare a comic strip, draw the setting of the story, produce book markers, role play, rewrite the story changing some story elements, for example, characters, setting etc., that will result in a change in the ending of the story.

H. Comprehension Checklist

It is important that you learn to evaluate your own comprehension lessons. Here is a checklist to help you. Tick the appropriate box to indicate the strategies you use when developing comprehension skills in your lessons.

Tick the appropriate box to indicate the activities in which you were engaged when developing comprehension skills in your lesson:

Did I....?

1. Discuss key concepts.	
2. Activate/ build background experiences.	
3. Make connections with students' experiences.	
4. Use context clues to aid understanding.	
5. Ask questions at various levels.	
6. Ask probing questions.	
7. Allow students to ask questions.	
8. Allow wait time for students to respond to questions.	
9. Set a purpose for reading or allow students to set a purpose.	
10. Require students to provide supporting evidence for answers they have given.	
11. Model comprehension strategies and techniques.	
12. Discuss the text with students.	
13. Extend students' understanding of the text.	
14. Get students to tell what they have learned both about the text and about the comprehension strategies they are using.	

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