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Changing student teachers' views of comprehension instruction through the use of a comprehension instruction framework

Abstract

Literacy statistics show that South African learners' comprehension ability is generally poor and in some cases seems to be getting poorer. At the same time research shows that little, if any, explicit and continuous strategy instruction takes place in classrooms. Reasons seem to include a lack of proper teacher training in comprehension instruction, teachers remaining unconvinced about the value of strategy instruction, and concerns that strategy instruction is time consuming and difficult to learn and teach. This article reports on the effect of a reading comprehension instruction course on university student teachers' lesson planning, strategy use and views about comprehension instruction. The course formed part of a teacher training module and centered on a reading strategy instruction framework designed to enhance comprehension instruction across all subjects in an easy-to-use manner. The article shows that strategy instruction can be taken up successfully in a relatively short time period, and that most existing concerns about strategy instruction can be addressed through in-depth training.

Keywords: reading comprehension instruction, reading strategies, comprehension instruction framework, teachers and comprehension instruction, reading strategy instruction

1.   Introduction

Reading to learn is, without doubt, one of the most important skills that need to be developed in young children. Dreyer & Kopper (2004: 95) describe reading as a skill "upon which success in every academic area is based". However, developing the ability to read successfully is not a simple process and is about much more than the ability to recognise letters and decode words. Reading is ultimately about constructing meaning from written text, in other words it is about *comprehending* what is being read. Goodman and Goodman (2009: 92) go as far as saying that "the study of reading is the study of reading comprehension". During the past 20 to 30 years, research has shown that comprehension "can be increased significantly when it is taught explicitly" (Paris & Hamilton, 2009: 49). Much research exists in particular about the value of using reading strategies to improve comprehension, ranging from as early as Durkin's classroom observations in 1978 to 1979 to Palincsar and Brown's (1984) Reciprocal Teaching to more recent work by Pressley (2001, 2005), who recommends the use of a "repertoire of comprehension strategies", Block and Duffy (2008) and Williams (2008), to name a few. Various comprehension instruction-related frameworks which incorporate reading strategies have also been developed over the years, such as Palincsar and Brown's (1984) Reciprocal Teaching, Pressley et al.'s (1992) Transactional Strategy Instruction, Guthrie's (2003) Concept-oriented Reading Instruction, McNamara, Ozuru, Best and O'Reilly's (2007) Four-pronged Comprehension Strategy framework and Hedgcock and Ferris' (2009) view of intensive reading.

However, it would seem that despite their proven benefit for comprehension instruction, teacher training courses do not actively utilize either individual strategies or any of the existing frameworks for training teachers, nor do teachers implement them voluntarily in schools. In fact, Pretorius (2010: 340) states that "[r]eading as a knowledge-based discipline hardly features in the teacher training curriculum, and an evidence-based approach to reading instruction even in a degreed teaching qualification is practically non-existent". This study reports on the implementation of a research-based comprehension instruction course for a B.Ed teaching qualification. The course applied a comprehension instruction framework (Klapwijk, 2011; 2015) which was designed specifically to address this gap, namely creating a research-based approach for comprehension instruction as part of a higher education teacher training course.[1]

1.1   Teachers and comprehension instruction – why doesn't it happen?

The PIRLS 2011 results (Howie et al., 2012) show that South African learners' reading comprehension levels are poor, and yet it seems that little, if any, formal comprehension instruction exists in schools (Zimmerman & Smit, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014; Pretorius, 2010; Dreyer & Nel, 2003). It seems that in many classrooms it is assumed that if learners can decode they can comprehend, so very little attention is given to reading comprehension (Pretorius and Mampuru, 2007; Strauss, 1995; Macdonald, 1990).

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[1]   A research-based course for reading instruction in the Foundation Phase has also been implemented by Dr R.R. Nathanson at Stellenbosch University

Where comprehension *is* taught teachers claim that they are still not sure how to do so and are often not aware of existing comprehension instructional frameworks for teaching. And despite ample research evidence about the value of reading strategies, there continues to be very little, if any, explicit and continuous strategy instruction in classrooms (Klapwijk, 2015; Zimmerman, 2014; Pretorius & Lephalala, 2011; Nathanson, 2009) and teachers remain reluctant to take on reading strategy instruction. Generally teachers "teach" comprehension by compiling questions based on the text and consider this sufficient and effective comprehension instruction, and seem reluctant or unable to try alternative methods.

Pressley (2001) states that "there is a great need to know just how much of an impact on reading achievement can be made by instruction rich in all the individual components that increase comprehension", but also warns that "such instruction might be overwhelmingly complex". Pressley's fears seem to have been well grounded: existing literature about comprehension instruction highlights a variety of reasons why teachers do not take up reading comprehension instruction in general and reading strategies in particular, but the main issues seem to include: firstly, the perception that strategy instruction is a difficult concept to teach and learn. Research shows that teachers require a great deal of support to understand and implement comprehension-strategies instruction and that without professional development teachers will have difficulty implementing comprehension instruction (Zimmerman, 2014; Pretorius, 2010; Pressley and Beard El-Dinary, 1997; Block & Duffy, 2008: 23). In a South African study, Klapwijk (2011) found that teachers not only seemed overwhelmed by the multitude of new strategy instruction concepts, but also required specific underlying linguistic knowledge in order to teach strategies effectively.

A second concern highlighted by research, is the perceived time demand required for preparing teaching material related to strategy instruction and the fact that strategy instruction takes a great deal of classroom time (Pressley & Beard El-Dinary, 1997; Pretorius & Lephalala, 2011). In addition to this, teachers remain unconvinced that the time investment really produces positive effects on their learners' results (Gersten et al., 1997).

Thirdly, the absence of proper teacher education: while ample attention is paid to the professional development of teachers for teaching *reading*, little attention seems to be paid to the professional development of *comprehension instruction*. As Sailors (2008: 647) states, new teachers still enter schools "with the understanding of how to teach comprehension […] based on how they were taught to read" (course reflections from students in this study confirm this). Pressley et al. (1998) report seeing little comprehension instruction other than teachers posing post-reading comprehension questions, a fact confirmed by Zimmerman (2014), Zimmerman & Smit (2014), Pretorius & Lephalala (2011) and Pretorius (2010). In other words, as stated earlier, teachers consider "asking questions" as adequate comprehension instruction, since this is how they were taught.

Based on the abovementioned concerns about reading comprehension, this article will show that while student teachers do seem to view comprehension instruction in the way they were taught at school, and even voice some of the concerns highlighted by research, it is a view that can be changed through explicit instruction and sufficient structure provided by an instruction framework, combined with repeated practice and application of the concepts, even over a relatively short period of time (12 weeks). The article will also show that a course in comprehension instruction should be a *non-negotiable component of teacher training* – for all teachers, not only future 'language teachers' – a fact pointed out by Van der Walt & Ruiters (2011), and highlighted in the Western Cape Education Department's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy which states that ideally "language learning does not only take place in the language subject class, it takes place in every lesson and every subject of the day".

2. Aim of the study

This study aims to address the issue of the non-uptake of reading comprehension instruction through the application of a comprehension instruction framework designed specifically for (South African) teachers. Through the explicit instruction of the framework and its strategies to student teachers over a dedicated time period, the study will show whether student teachers change their views about comprehension, and how the course affects their lesson planning and strategy use (if at all). In closing, the existing concerns about the poor uptake of comprehension instruction will be revisited.

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology. Data were gathered through written lesson plans produced by student teachers (see *3.3*), through observations of their practical application of course content in class, and through written feedback and assignments at the end of the 12-week course.

3.1. Participants

The study participants comprised 30 third-year and 29 fourth-year university students enrolled in a B.Ed degree at a university in the Western Cape. All students were aged between 20 and 22 years, except one who was 29 but had no previous teaching experience. All students were able to compile lesson plans with ease and had spent periods at schools for practical experience. All students had selected English as one of their main subjects; the English course addresses different aspects of language teaching with each aspect taught by a different lecturer. The reading comprehension instruction (RCI) module used for the study intervention was taught as one aspect of the overall English course, and consisted of two one-hour lessons per week over one academic quarter (12 weeks).

3.2. Reading Strategy Instruction course used in the study

The reading comprehension instruction course used in this study is based on a framework specifically designed to improve reading comprehension instruction through the application of an easy-to-use combination of reading strategies. The framework is called the EMC framework (Klapwijk, 2011; Klapwijk, 2015), an acronym derived from the first letter describing each of the three phases of the framework (see Figure 1). The three stages are: [E]stablishing the meaning-making process, [M]aintaining the meaning-making process and [C]onsolidating meaning making.
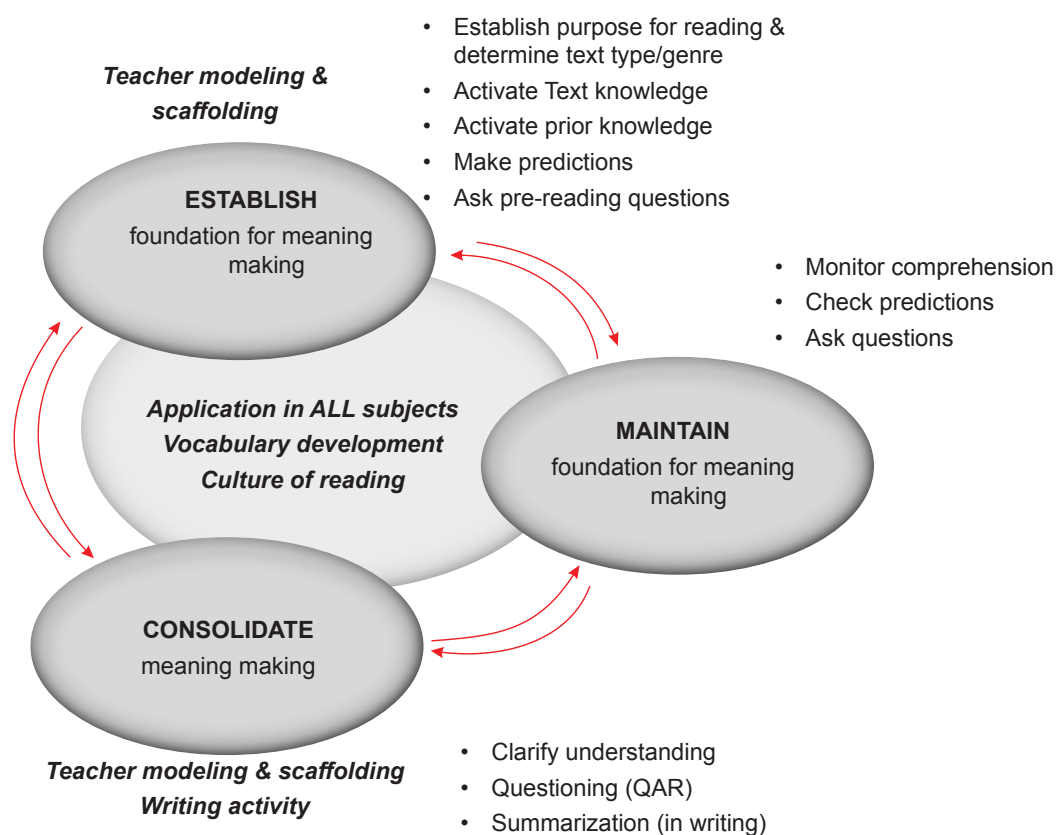
Teacher modeling & scaffolding

ESTABLISH
foundation for meaning making

- Establish purpose for reading & determine text type/genre
- Activate Text knowledge
- Activate prior knowledge
- Make predictions
- Ask pre-reading questions

- Monitor comprehension
- Check predictions
- Ask questions

Application in ALL subjects
Vocabulary development
Culture of reading

MAINTAIN
foundation for meaning making

CONSOLIDATE
meaning making

Teacher modeling & scaffolding
Writing activity

- Clarify understanding
- Questioning (QAR)
- Summarization (in writing)

Figure 1: EMC framework for reading comprehension instruction (Klapwijk, 2011)

The framework utilizes specific reading strategies in every phase. These strategies, although recommended in the framework, are not prescriptive and can be supplemented or replaced by other or similar strategies. The framework consists of three phases: before reading, during reading and after reading. However, it must be emphasized that the phases were used and named this way to facilitate learning of reading strategy instruction for teachers new to the concept. The framework is first and foremost aimed at teaching teachers to teach comprehension, and because it is a complex construct,

providing some structure (at least during the initial phases of learning) is necessary. The phases do not imply that the meaning-making process consists of a set of sequential before, during and after steps. Just like the reading process comprises an interaction between reader, text and (socio-cultural) context, and reading comprehension results from "an interaction among the reader, the strategies the reader employs, the material being read, and the context in which reading takes place" (Edwards & Turner, 2009: 631), the framework was constructed along the same principles: using reading strategies in a fluid and continuous cycle, but with the ability to adjust to the recursive nature of the reading process through identifying the appropriate strategy/ies according to each unique reading instance. In other words, the framework provides teachers with the tools and opportunities to help learners unlock their own socio-cultural schemata and increase their comprehension ability, and provides teachers with 'boundaries' during the process of learning to use reading strategies (and ultimately, to act as a guideline in lesson planning).

The framework was presented to the student teachers in two lessons per week over the course of 12 weeks. The instruction consisted of explicit modeling of reading strategies by the lecturer, scaffolded instruction through opportunity for repeated exercises by students and the practical application of the strategies in class by students (in an official, graded lesson format) after the completion of each framework phase.

3.3. Procedure

On the first day of the English course at the start of the academic year (before students had received any instruction) the students were given a text (fiction at Grade 5 level), and asked to compile a comprehension lesson plan based on the text. Thereafter, in the second lesson of the course, the reading comprehension instruction (RCI) module was started.

At the end of the RCI module the students were asked - as part of their final assignment for the module - to compile a lesson plan on the same text, but this time by applying the knowledge gained during the RCI module. Students were also asked to provide feedback about how the RCI module and framework had changed their views of comprehension instruction (if at all).

4.   Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis allows for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). In this study data were analysed inductively according to the categories *lesson preparation, reading strategy use* and *views about reading comprehension instruction* based on the course objectives. The focus of this study was to teach student teachers to use reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension instruction against the backdrop of addressing the

main, research-based reasons for the slow uptake of RCI by teachers. The aim of the qualitative analysis was, therefore, firstly to identify to what extent changes occurred in the predetermined categories in the pre- and post-course lesson plans, and secondly to substantiate or negate the concerns about RCI highlighted by existing research. The analysis is supplemented by extracts from students' lesson plans and post-course reflections.

5.   Discussion of results

The analysis of students' lesson plans before and after the course was done in three categories, namely (1) Lesson Preparation, (2) Reading Strategy Use and (3) Views about Reading Comprehension Instruction. (*Note: extracts from and examples of students' work will focus largely on the Before Reading phase, due to space limitations and because this was the instructional phase that showed the most growth in terms of comprehension instruction*.)

5.1. Lesson preparation

This category relates to how students changed their approach to lesson preparation for comprehension lessons in particular, and included their own interaction with the text. The pre-course and post-course lesson plans showed a considerable difference in lesson preparation and text interaction. The first and most obvious difference was in the length of lesson plans. The pre-course lesson plans were considerably shorter than the post-course lesson plans, with an especially big difference in the amount of attention paid to lesson preparation for the Before Reading (BR) phase. In terms of the BR phase of lessons, student teachers' pre-course lesson plans focused mainly on physical preparation, logistics and finding 'props', such as pictures, sound files or videos related to the topic. Students commented on making sufficient copies of the text and having dictionaries on hand in the classroom. For example, as the *total sum* of BR lesson preparation, examples of students' preparation comprise the following:

"*Photocopy the text for the learners. Print pictures depicting the story. Ensure there are dictionaries for the learners to use*"

"*Photocopy the story [and] make a list of possible words that learners might not understand*"

"*Make copies of text for each learner. Collect dictionaries. Create worksheet for after the lesson as homework assignment*"

"*Record the story onto CD using different voices for narrator and characters. Use sound effects such as the bowl breaking.*"

The During Reading phase of students' lesson preparation consisted solely of handing out the text and reading it (either out loud by the teacher or by selected good learner readers). The After Reading Phase consisted solely of either (1) learners answering questions on a worksheet, and/or (2) the dramatization of the text (learners acting out characters in the text).

No student teachers mentioned any deep engagement with the text itself during the preparation phase (e.g. determining the purpose for reading the particular text, identifying the text type, learners formulating pre-reading questions, predictions, etc.), other than doing a brief reading of the text (even this was very rarely explicitly mentioned) and focusing on the more obvious, surface aspects of the text such as the title, main characters and outcome as drivers for their preparation. As a student wrote during the post-course feedback: "*I never considered pre-reading activities and have never come across it befor*e". Another commented "*I was surprised to learn of the extensive process before actual reading of the text commences, as I had never experienced anything similar during my own school career*". There seemed to be little engagement with the text itself as a source of creating and discovering meaning, other than regarding it as an object that needed to be handed out, read and finalized by answering questions set by the teacher. As one student put it "*I thought comprehension was to read through the text once, then read the questions, then read the text again and answer the questions*". What stood out strongly in the pre-course lesson plans was the fact that lessons were teacher driven – very little input was required from learners, other than answering questions after reading the text.

The post-course lesson plans, on the other hand, showed a distinct shift in student teachers' approach to lesson preparation. Firstly, lesson plans were significantly longer and more detailed, and the Before Reading and During Reading phases in particular showed much development in the application and understanding of newly-acquired strategy use knowledge. There was a marked shift away from viewing the text as an almost one-dimensional part of the practical and physical preparation for a lesson, to student teachers' active interaction with the text itself. The text became a source of knowledge and meaning, rather than simply a source for teacher-driven questions. Instead of merely focusing on practical issues (making copies, etc.), student teachers instead engaged with the text itself and focused on identifying the text type (see Annexure A for example), how the purpose for reading differs with different text types and how this affected their lesson preparation. The post-course lesson plans further showed a shift away from the belief that only the teacher brings meaning to the learning situation; rather the focus shifted to activating learners' prior knowledge (see example in 5.2), asking learners to formulate questions and predictions into their lesson planning (in other words, the active use of reading strategies) and interactive rather than teacher-led discussions.

5.2. Reading strategy use

It speaks for itself that an intervention aimed specifically at the incorporation of reading strategies will in all probability show an increase in knowledge and use of strategies upon completion of the intervention; therefore this category relates not to *whether* they

were applied, but to *how* reading strategies were applied. In the pre-course lesson plans, some student teachers did refer to the use of reading strategies, although judging from classroom interactions during the course they were not aware of the concept of reading strategies. Students' 'use' of strategies before the course included Activating Prior Knowledge (APK), (after-reading) Questioning, and isolated instances of Creating Mental Images.

Overt and covert mention of the Activate Prior Knowledge (APK) strategy was made in references such as:

> "*Learner prior knowledge is important because it makes them feel valued and that their opinions count towards the lesson*".

> "*Get learners to talk about their grandparents by sharing a personal story. Encourage learners to share life lessons that their grandparents told them or mottos they lived by. Talk about death, illness and impact on the family*".

> "*Ask learners to ask parents to tell them a traditional story from their own childhood. Parents are to explain why they remember this particular story and what they learned from it*".

In the first example above the student mentions the APK strategy by name, but does not show understanding of the aim of the strategy, namely activating learners' existing knowledge to enable more sufficient learning of new knowledge as encountered in the text – rather the reason for using the strategy is to "make learners' opinions count". Students' use of the APK strategy related mostly to their concern with practical preparation issues (as highlighted in 5.1). By comparison, the following is a description of the APK strategy in a post-course lesson plan (note: this excerpt describes the use of *one* strategy only (APK) as part of the overall Before Reading phase of the student's lesson (see Annexure A) – compared to one or two sentences for the *entire* Before Reading Phase in the pre-course lesson plan):

> "After the text type is discussed, I will ask the learners the following questions, in order to illuminate the connections made between the text and the learner's personal experiences (Text-to-Self), the text and the texts the learner has read in the past (Text-to-Text), as well as the text and something that occurs in the world (Text-to-World):

•   Do we normally use a wooden bowl when we eat? Why not?

•   What are the bowls we eat out of usually made of?

•   What makes the material of the bowl we usually eat out of, different from
        a wooden bowl? Is it more precious? Is it breakable?

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- How would your parents react if you broke your glass or ceramic bowl while eating?

- How would you feel if you had to eat out of a wooden bowl? Why do you feel this way? Are these feelings positive or negative?

- Who usually eats from a wooden or other non-breakable bowl? Why is this?

- What does the picture reveal about the short story?

- Is the person eating from the wooden bowl in the picture, young or old? What is the significance of this? How will this change the tone of the story?

- What does the footnote tell us about the short story? How does this contribute to the story being fictional?

Answering these questions, learners must show prior knowledge. They will have to draw upon past experiences, as well as on information they have accumulated, to answer these questions effectively. Learners will also realize that the story they are about to read, might be relatable in some way, making it more appealing to actually read and enjoy".

The post-course lesson plans showed detailed and effective use of all strategies used in the framework. The Before Reading Phase showed the biggest change in students' understanding of the need to help learners create meaning from the text through establishing a reading purpose, identifying the text type, the use of APK, making predictions and formulating before-reading questions. Not only did they apply these strategies well, but they demonstrated real thought about the concepts. Three separate students commented "*I have learnt to be more aware of my own reading strategies*" and "*Comprehension is not something that just happens*", and "*I never took into consideration all aspects of reading – I just assumed it happened automatically*". In addition, although the post-course lesson plan was based on the prescribed (fiction) text, during the practical application of strategies in class many students felt comfortable enough to use non-fiction texts taken from content subject handbooks – a sign that they were comfortable enough with the comprehension concepts to move away from the use of 'stories' (fiction), and their growing realization of the need to include comprehension instruction in all subjects.

Students' questioning skills also showed considerable improvement in their post-course lesson plans, not only in the use of Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) question types, but in the quality of questions, and their application of questioning throughout the lesson. Whereas in the pre-course lesson plans the use of questions had been restricted to teacher-developed, mostly literal questions, post-course lesson plans showed students understanding of the importance of questioning throughout the lesson (i.e. in all phases), formulating questions at literal and inferential level and allowing *learners* to formulate questions. As one student put it: "*Before [the course] I would probably have ploughed right into the text itself*", while another said: "*My views of questioning have changed*

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dramatically" and a third declared that she "*genuinely believed a reading comprehension lesson consist[ed] of […] getting questions on the text to complete and then the teacher going over the correct answers with the learners*".

As mentioned earlier the RCI framework is divided into three phases, mainly to provide structure and direction for learning to apply the strategies. However, ultimately the aim is for teachers to realize that the reading process is a continuous, repetitive and recursive process which does not always occur in a linear fashion, and although the reading strategies used in the framework have an interrelated and interdependent relationship, they do not necessarily all need to be applied in every lesson, and can be replaced by other, similar strategies. Ultimately, teachers should learn that the application of the framework and its content is driven by the learners and the text, and that each reading situation is, therefore, unique. However, although the structure of the Before, During and After phases of the framework was successful in facilitating the learning process and easing student teachers into learning to use and teach reading strategies, even after 12 weeks of explicit instruction and practice they tended to stick to the boundaries of the three phases. It seemed clear that only the sustained application of RCI would enable true integration of RCI concepts in teachers' minds.

5.3. Views about reading comprehension instruction

The *Lesson Preparation* and *Reading Strategy Use* sections described the increase and application of strategies. This section will provide excerpts of students' written comments as evidence of the change in their views of comprehension as a concept and its instruction.

In general students' lesson plans and comments indicated a more enhanced view of comprehension as a concept and its instruction. Their use of concepts like *schema* became commonplace, and they applied strategies effortlessly. They referred to the text as a text (rather than a *story, paragraph* or *reading piece*), learnt to identify fiction and non-fiction text types and actively investigate the text characteristics and structure, improved their overall questioning skills and applied the QAR principles when formulating questions. Post-course comments (quoted verbatim) such as the following provide an indication of how students' insights had changed:

> [S6] "*I did not think there were so many aspects to teaching reading comprehension […] I now realize there is more to a text than just reading it to the class. If I think back I would probably have understood [my work] better if my teacher guided me in making connections with things I already knew or had experienced. Considering the frustration I experienced as a L2 learner and the content of this course, I find it very important to incorporate these [strategies] into a reading comprehension lesson.*"

> [S4] "*What also stood out to me was that all the reading comprehension I have done mostly tested my memory and not my reading skills. This is not what reading comprehension is about*"

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[S15] "I now look at reading comprehension as a vital part of teaching and learning […] and that I can teach and use it in so many different ways to assist my learners"

[S35] "The most important thing I learned is that […] it […] requires teachers to create opportunities for learners to make meaning of the text. This entails not only viewing the text in isolation, but connecting that which is given in the text to prior knowledge".

[S3] […] reading comprehension is an intricate process that takes place in many stages and is not something that is conducted in isolation […] Teaching RC is not merely the act of the teacher painting a picture of the text for the learners, but rather the learners painting their own picture […] by discovering the meaning and purpose behind the text"

[S25] "Reading strategies are not confined to the language classroom, but should be used during teaching of other subjects or learning areas. I understand that using these [strategies] in any learning area will contribute to the successful comprehension of the subject."

The researcher had the opportunity to witness some of the student' lessons at their official teaching practice schools six months after the intervention; they were all still applying the RCI principles, and had received questions from the in-service teachers about the use of reading strategies.

6.   Revisiting the concerns

The concerns about reading comprehension instruction identified by existing research were described as follows earlier in this article: time constraints, difficulty of comprehension concepts, and proper teacher education.

Time and preparation: early on in the course, when students had not yet formed an overall picture of the RCI framework, they had concerns about time and preparation. One student queried "*Where will we find time to do 'all of this' [strategies] in the curriculum?*" Although this concern was raised early in the intervention it cannot be argued away by simply quoting the benefits of RCI as discussed in the introduction or demonstrated by this study. Implementing RCI requires extensive, sustained practice to the point where it no longer represents a marathon with a far-off finish line, but rather a series of short, fitness-enhancing sprints with a clear end goal. When strategies are applied in a sustained fashion, they become internalized and their interrelated and interdependent relationship becomes clear, and concerns about implementation seem to reduce. In this study, as the course progressed, students realized that learning to apply a particular strategy in order to understand and teach it, may take days or weeks. However, once they understood the concept, applying strategies in their lessons took mere minutes. In-service teachers, however, do not have weeks to attend a course, so it is understandable

that the successful "switch" in understanding and insight that occurred with the student teachers may not occur quickly with in-service teachers, if at all.

Difficulty of reading comprehension concepts – this was a real issue, but again, one that diminished with time and practice. Although students took up RCI well, it did not occur naturally or quickly – all concepts and strategies had to be taught clearly, actively and repeatedly to take hold and to change students' existing perceptions about not only comprehension instruction, but also about how to approach a text. Lecturer modeling was crucial to the learning process, as was extensive practice and repeated exercises on different types of texts (i.e. both fiction and non-fiction). Reassuring students that all and any answers were acceptable during practice sessions in class was crucial to facilitate their ability to let go of old thinking processes and embrace new ones, especially the kind of thinking which implies comprehension is about right and wrong answers, rather than finding meaning. Learning to teach comprehension became a matter of unlearning existing habits and thoughts about reading through extensive practice.

Pre-reading strategies seemed the hardest to learn and grasp: students had to learn to step back from their existing ideas about what can (should) be done before reading or handing out a text. It took them a while to realize that it is possible to discuss a text simply by looking at it (identifying text type & structure), or simply by being given the title (formulating predictions, pre-questioning). It took a considerable change in thinking to learn to ask their own pre-reading questions of a text; then they had to learn to *teach* the strategy. The same difficulties were encountered with predictions. Students had to learn that texts provide direction, rather than (only) the teacher, and that meaning lays within the text, not (only) with the teacher and that learners bring their own meaning to the reading situation and are a rich source of existing information. Students had to learn that learners can (and should) formulate their own questions, rather than simply answer the teacher's (or pre-set) questions, and that when making predictions and answering pre-reading questions, all answers are acceptable (within reason) - this sometimes made students uncomfortable, since they equated it with a loss of control in class.

Proper teacher education – comprehension is a complicated and multifaceted construct. If teachers are not taught explicitly how to teach it, or are not made aware of reading strategies and their role in teaching comprehension, it seems unreasonable to expect them to teach it effectively. The majority of students in the study commented that "[t]he *way I was taught [comprehension] at school was the only way I knew how to instruct reading comprehension".* Joshi et al. (2009: 161) state that teachers cannot be expected to learn the essential components of reading instruction through teaching experience, reading programs, screening tests or even individual pursuit, but rather that pre-service coursework must be improved, since it "increase[s] teachers' reading knowledge and ability when such courses provide explicit instruction and ample practice in each component".

In regard to teacher education, this article proposes a fourth reason for the non-uptake of reading comprehension instruction by teachers: the fact that traditionally the teaching of any skills related to language is deemed to be the domain of the so-called language

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teacher and restricted to the so-called language classroom – which also means teacher-training course objectives are structured accordingly. Teachers of other subjects typically assume that any language-related problems (including comprehension) are the language teacher's problem, or worse, the learner's problem. This article argues that it is not only the so-called language teacher's domain to instruct reading comprehension, and identify reading and reading comprehension problems – it is the responsibility of every teacher. Prinsloo (2008: 6) states that "enough teachers" must leave teacher training institutions as experts in language teaching. This article argues that *all* teachers should acquire specific skills for teaching and learning towards literacy and language acquisition. Comprehension instruction skills must form part of every teacher's skill set and be taken into every class in school every day, regardless of the subject.

7.   Recommendations

"*I would never have thought of asking pre-reading questions. This was never done with me when I was at school*". Comments similar to this one formed a strong refrain in students' post-course reflection, and should be cause for concern to teacher education institutions. These comments were made by third and final year student teachers – why did they still view comprehension in the same way they were taught? Why had these views not been changed, or at least updated, by their university education? The following are two recommendations for addressing the issue of influencing the teaching of comprehension at student teacher level, before they enter permanent service:

1.   Add *explicit reading comprehension instruction in teacher-training courses*. According to Sailors (2008: 647) the development of teachers pays sufficient attention to teaching reading, but is not sufficiently focused "on the professional development of comprehension instruction and classroom teachers". The literature review showed that teachers continue to neglect or exclude the explicit teaching of comprehension. If student teachers are taught to use reading strategies in their own studies, the chances are greater that they will transfer these skills more automatically and naturally to their future teaching practices. It would also mean that new teachers enter schools with an established set of strategies as a starting point for comprehension instruction.

2.   *Add a research component to PRESET, INSET and professional development courses*. Although the need for improved literacy skills has been noted for decades the focus on evidence-based practices in literacy is relatively recent. Pretorius (2010: 354) states that in order to improve the teaching of reading, there is a need for "well-trained and knowledgeable educational policy makers, planners, teachers and researchers", and "informed, evidence-based approaches to reading that acknowledge its complexity". Yet, while research about improving literacy is at an all-time high, the results of such research often do not reach in-service teachers, and neither do they seem to be disseminated to pre-

service teachers in a sustainable manner. It is questionable whether inexperienced student teachers can be expected to promote and practice evidence-based methodologies if they are not taught explicitly and are not given some exposure to some form of research themselves. Including a research component in undergraduate courses could unlock awareness of research in student teachers. Instead of being expected to produce yet another set of teaching aids, students could produce research assignments on specific and pertinent issues related to literacy. A research module could make undergraduate students more aware of evidence-based methods; on a long-term level, it could lead to a shift in attitude towards evidence-based methods in schools as these students become employed as teachers. INSET and teacher development courses have the advantage that teachers who have already experienced problems with reading comprehension could be more willing to attempt classroom-based investigations to improve their own practice.

8.   Conclusion

Overall the intervention used in this study could be considered successful because it was done with student teachers who are a captive audience and not yet affected by practice in schools. The article has shown that if explicit RCI is taught to teachers as a concept integral to all learning, RCI does not necessarily have to consume unwanted time and support. It has shown that although the concerns raised in RCI literature cannot be argued away, they can be addressed effectively with focused, in-depth training over time and internalized in manageable modules and a structured format.

That said, applying the same course to in-service teachers would be more difficult and time-consuming, and in all probability may not have similar effects as in-service teachers tend to have settled into routines and teaching habits. A real understanding of the reading comprehension process needs time, dedicated practice of concepts and involves much more than simply learning a new methodology. It not only involves learning comprehension concepts and strategies in order to teach them, but also affects a variety of teacher knowledge and perceptions: realizing that teaching reading is about more than recognizing words, realizing that comprehension should not be viewed as separate from the reading process, gaining a deeper understanding of questions and questioning techniques, challenging the traditional role of the teacher as the 'owner of meaning', changes to lesson preparation and the teacher's own interaction with and knowledge of texts, allowing learners a greater voice in class, and realizing that teachers' own linguistic knowledge may need development.

Ultimately any comprehension instruction is better than none at all. Any teaching of reading which focuses on activating learners' meaning-making processes rather than dictating meaning to them is better than no comprehension instruction at all. Even if teachers implement only isolated strategies, or focus on improving their view of questioning and their own questioning skills, or change their view of the learner's role in the meaning-

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making process, it will contribute positively to increasing learners' comprehension skills, and ultimately their ability to read for learning.

The hope remains that as teachers' skills in terms of reading strategies increase, they are more likely to realize that just like reading instruction should not be separated from comprehension, comprehension instruction should not be separated from teaching.

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Annexure A:
Example of a student's post-course lesson plan for the Before Reading Phase

Activating Text Knowledge

By only looking at the title and graphic of the text, I will ask the learners the following questions:

•   What is the title of this text?

•   Judging from the title and the image, do you think this text will be a fiction or non-fiction text? Why do you say this?

•   What do you think the purpose of this text will be? For information, learning, or enjoyment?

By giving learners these limited elements of the text, and asking them these questions, I want learners to try and determine the purpose of the text. This, however, will only serve as a prediction.

I will now ask the learners to turn over the page. The complete text will be seen now, and I will ask them the following questions:

•   What are the characteristics of this text? What is the layout? Are there para-graphs, or bulleted lists? Are there any sub-headings, pictures or diagrams?

•   Taking the characteristics of the text in consideration, is it a fiction or non-fiction text? Were your initial predictions regarding the text type correct?

•   What kind of fictional text is this? Why do you say this?

- What do the characteristics of the text reveal about what kind of text this is?

- What do we use this type of text for? How does this determine the purpose of the text?

- Were your predictions regarding the purpose of this text correct? If not, how did the actual layout of the text contribute to you determining the purpose of the text?

Through these questions, I want to determine the learners' knowledge of different texts. I want to establish whether they can differentiate between text types (fiction or non-fiction), as well as whether they can determine the kind of text we are working with (it being a short story, poem, novel, etc.), by considering the characteristics of the text.

I also want to see if learners will be able to agree upon the use of this specific text, and how its use will differ from a non-fiction text. Through this I want them to realize the purpose of the text, and how determining this purpose when looking at a text, is of utmost importance to them when searching for appropriate texts for personal, as well as educational situations.

Activating Prior Knowledge

After the text type is discussed, I will ask the learners the following questions, in order to illuminate the connections made between the text and the learner's personal experiences (Text-to-Self), the text and the texts the learner has read in the past (Text-to-Text), as well as the text and something that occurs in the world (Text-to-World):

- Do we normally use a wooden bowl when we eat? Why not?

- What are the bowls we eat out of usually made of?

- What makes the material of the bowl we usually eat out of, different from a wooden bowl? Is it more precious? Is it breakable?

- How would your parents react if you broke your glass or ceramic bowl while eating?

- How would you feel if you had to eat out of a wooden bowl? Why do you feel this way? Are these feelings positive or negative?

- Who usually eats from a wooden or other non-breakable bowl? Why is this?

- What does the picture reveal about the short story?

- Is the person eating from the wooden bowl in the picture, young or old? What is the significance of this? How will this change the tone of the story?

- What does the footnote tell us about the short story? How does this contribute to the story being fictional?

Answering these questions, learners must show prior knowledge. They will have to draw upon past experiences, as well as on information they have accumulated, to answer these questions effectively. Learners will also realize that the story they are about to read, might be relatable in some way, making it more appealing to actually read and enjoy.

Making predictions regarding the text

In the next section of the lesson, predictions will be made regarding the given text. I will start by asking the learners to formulate questions or statements, by prompting them with my own (modeling questions and statements):

- I wonder why it is a wooden bowl and not a ceramic or glass bowl.

- I wonder what the meaning of the bowl will be in the context of the story.

- I wonder if the old woman in the picture has to eat out of the wooden bowl.

- Why can't she use a ceramic or glass bowl that other adults use?

- Did she break the bowl?

- I wonder how she felt when she was given the wooden bowl, instead of a breakable bowl.

- I wonder if this is a folk tale.

- Will there be a moral in the story or something I should learn from it?

The following activities will be done to make predictions of the text, but also to test learners' previously accumulated knowledge:

Activity I:

To test prior knowledge, I will give each learner a short Prediction Guide to complete during the *Before Reading* phase**.** This will motivate the learners to read attentively, as to determine whether they got the correct answers to the questions or not.

Activity II:

As an additional class activity, I will put a poster on the wall of the class with the title of the short story, as well as individual spaces for each learner. I will ask the learners to write (in no more than 5 sentences) what they think will happen in the short story. This activity will allow the learners to critically reflect on what has been said and taught during the lesson, and will provide them with an opportunity to pen their creative thoughts. Their prediction of the story will then be pasted in the space under their name. The poster will be used during the *After Reading* phase to determine who has predicted the storyline the best.

With this exercise I plan to motivate the learners to critically reflect on what they have learnt, as well as to promote curiosity, so that they want to read the short story carefully. I feel that this is a fun way to create an element of excitement before reading, and to make the actual reading process more interesting.

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