CHAPTER 8

Comprehension: The Bottom Line

Ask any teacher "What's it all for?" and we're sure he or she will tell you that the end goal of all reading instruction is for the students to be able to comprehend what they read. Highly proficient readers, having developed a functioning reading process system, will automatically and flexibly apply that system to any text in order to understand it. Our job is to see that every student eventually develops a reading process system (see circle chart, Figure 2.1) that will help him or her comprehend texts and fix up any problems that arise while reading. As we explain in this chapter, many average readers will need some support to do this throughout the elementary grades, and struggling readers will need a considerable amount of support.

In recent years, several authors—Keene and Zimmermann (2007), Tovani (2000, 2004), Miller (2002), Harvey and Goudvis (2007)—have brought the comprehension strategies to our attention. The information has helped teachers name what our brain does as it makes sense of text. Readers make connections, question, visualize, draw inferences, critique the text, and so on as they read. But there are also numerous cautions in the literature on this topic. Some literacy experts worry that naming and isolating strategies for students will interfere with fluent processing. Others warn that trying to simplify how reading process works can lead to misinterpretation by teachers. Still others caution that all this strategy instruction is taking the pleasure out of reading. Such worrisome information can confuse any teacher. As Harvey and Goudvis (2007) write, "Comprehension strategies are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to understanding. Our classroom instruction must reflect this" (33).

We have seen and heard some misinterpretations related to comprehension strategy instruction—schools that divide the strategies among the grade levels; others that designate which books should be used solely for which strategy; or schools where teachers seem to be going through the motions of strategy instruction without having a watchful eye on what the students might actually need. Here is one cautionary tale.

When Pat's grandniece, Colleen, was in fifth grade, she was an avid reader. Her teacher, in her second year of teaching, assigned the students a half hour of reading each night. In addition to the reading, students were told to write a paragraph about a connection, another paragraph about a mental image, and a third paragraph with questions they wondered about while reading. The teacher had obviously heard something about the strategies that readers use. There is no doubt she made the assignment with all the best intentions, trying to encourage reading at home and having a response page that let her know that the reading was actually done. But, needless to say, this assignment was ruining the pleasure that this voracious reader used to get from hours of nightly reading. If she already comprehended well, what purpose did the assignment serve?

Shari Frost (2009) alerts us to problems circling around strategy instruction. She attributes these to lack of long-term staff development, knowing that to fully understand strategy instruction would take hours of training: "Deep

understanding of comprehension instruction will require at least a year of focused professional development." Frost describes some teachers as having only "awareness level knowledge of strategy instruction" (2009). Despite the many misinterpretations, Frost asks us *not* to throw out strategy instruction or discount it entirely. She still believes that quality instruction is possible. And so do we.

While facilitating conversations with elementary school teachers around the topic of strategy instruction, we have found that these kinds of questions frequently arise:

- Which students need strategy instruction? All? Some? And do students need to be metacognitively aware of which strategies they are using?
- What does integration of the strategic actions mean?
- If strategies are the in-the-head thinking that readers do, then can we really *teach* a strategy?
- What does comprehension strategy instruction look like when it is done well?
- How can teachers help students make the leap from guided practice to using their system of strategies independently?

In this chapter we examine the thinking and the teaching behind comprehension strategy instruction. We show ways to safeguard against misinterpretation by answering the preceding questions. We also illustrate effective teaching that supports many readers, not just struggling readers, as they build their own network of strategic actions to help them comprehend texts.

Who Needs Strategy Instruction?

For some of us, it took until high school or college to build an efficient reading process system and figure out ways to help ourselves comprehend more difficult texts. Pat actually witnessed this firsthand in college. If you saw her grades through elementary and secondary school, you would have thought she was a top reader. In actuality she was barely average. She and her classmates were not expected to think beyond the literal level of text. In fact, many of them were quite surprised when one quirky high school English teacher suggested that *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick* were about more than runaway boys and hard-to-catch whales.

When Pat entered college, she naively took philosophy as an elective her first semester and ended up in a class with seniors reading Descartes, Nietzsche, Kant, and others. Completely lost doesn't even describe how she felt when reading these authors. For the first month she just read words with no comprehension whatsoever. Then when confronted with her first D ever on a midterm, she knew she had to do something. She immediately spent hours in

the library rereading all the assignments, stopping to paraphrase what she read, making connections when she could, posing questions and searching for answers, inferring, and so on. No one told her this was what she needed to do. In fact, she can only put names with the strategies she applied now that she's looking back on the experience. Pat figured it out because she had a functioning reading process system and knew that when the going got tough, she had to put it to use.

The truth is that most of us became competent readers without ever having anyone name the comprehension strategies for us. However, Pat wonders if she had had teachers who made her more aware of self-monitoring her comprehension, would she have caught herself sooner? If teachers throughout her schooling had shown her ways to fix up her confusion, would she have implemented those strategic actions from the start?

Most professional books about comprehension strategies suggest that we shouldn't just sit back and wait until high school or later for students to figure things out. They propose starting early, making the strategies visible for students at younger grades. Why not let younger students in on the secrets of what successful readers do when confronted with passages they don't understand?

We agree that comprehension strategy instruction has a place in elementary classrooms, but we raise these questions: Is prolonged strategy instruction necessary for every student? and Does the child need to name which strategies helped him or her comprehend? We have heard many stories about top readers in classrooms asking their teachers questions like these:

- I already know how to make pictures in my mind as I read, so why do I need to practice that?
- I already comprehend the story. Why are you stopping me to ask what strategies I used?

In the second edition of *Mosaic of Thought*, Keene and Zimmermann (2007) answer this dilemma by suggesting that teachers use more difficult texts with these extremely proficient readers: "Generally, with children who are avid readers, providing them with more challenging texts is key so that they can experience how consciously using the strategies can help them grasp the material" (43). We have a slightly different perspective on this. To us, these top readers already have a fluent, automatic, subconscious system at work. Even if presented with difficult text, their system would still function, perhaps needing only minimal teacher involvement. Just because a text is more challenging doesn't mean that the child's system will disappear or stop functioning—especially if it's been working like a well-oiled machine all along. Such students will *not* need to know the names of the strategies or consciously perform a strategic operation in order to approach that more difficult text and understand it.

We take to heart Peter Johnston's message that "as teachers we have to decide *what* to be explicit about for *which* students and *when* to be explicit about

it" (2004, 8). For a top reader whose reading process system is operating fluently at a subconscious level, it could very well interfere with his or her processing if asked to slow down, learn about a particular strategy, name it, and learn how it works. Readers don't need to be metacognitively aware of how they were able to comprehend as long as they *did* comprehend. Marie Clay (2005b) warns us not to overdose on requiring children to tell us how they went about self-correcting an error or how they solved a particular problem. She writes, "Asking the child to talk about how he is thinking or acting slows up the in-the-head solving. It interferes with the fast responding that is essential for fluent reading" (114).

If explicit comprehension strategy instruction isn't for top proficient readers, who, then, is it for? We feel that the most effective use of strategy teaching is for the struggling reader who has no idea what the successful readers around him or her are thinking about as they read. This struggling reader is busy calling the words, but not doing the thinking necessary for comprehension. He or she is memorizing a line of text just in case the teacher asks a question. He or she is the one *not* engaged with the text—*not* talking back to it, questioning it, laughing at it, being moved by it, putting himself or herself in the character's shoes, experiencing emotions in reaction to the story line, using background knowledge to make sense of new information, or making pictures in his or her mind to be right there with the characters.

If struggling readers are taught the kinds of thinking that readers do, they could very well add those strategic actions and behaviors to their own repertoire. It isn't always a fast process, but it can be done. In *One Child at a Time*, Pat tells the story of working with Sam for most of his fifth-grade year to get an effective reading process system underway.

Thus far in this section we have focused on two groups of readers, the strugglers and the highly proficient. We recommended the need for explicit strategy instruction for the struggling readers and advised toning down the amount for top readers. Yet, between the two groups—struggling readers and extremely proficient readers—is an incredibly large body of students who could also benefit from exposure to comprehension strategy instruction in doses relevant to their needs. With effective instruction, this group of students could learn to use the following skills:

- Better infer information from text
- Distinguish important parts from nonessential information
- Pick up on subtle humor, sarcasm, or underlying themes
- Make links from one text to another in order to improve comprehension
- Expand their knowledge of various topics by activating and adding to their schema
- Examine an author's perspective or a character's point of view

Sibberson and Szymusiak were driven to write *Beyond Leveled Books* (2001, and 2008, with Lisa Koch) and *Still Learning to Read* (2003) to help teachers

realize that there are many skills and strategies that we can continue teaching students in grades 2–5. Their ideas and lessons are aimed at this large middle group we have just described. "Transitional readers are not struggling readers. They simply need a new set of strategies for reading more complex texts . . . [They are] competent readers who need the support of thoughtful and purposeful instruction" (2001, 3). What we admire about these authors is that they are always careful to follow the students. They don't decide on teaching inferring, or point of view, or special features of nonfiction texts because it happens to be the next item on the curriculum guide lists. They watch their students. They look to see what seems to be confusing the students in their reading and develop the lessons from there.

As you consider strategy instruction for your students, think about why it's necessary and for whom. There is a certain danger in focusing too narrowly on each strategy for six to eight weeks with the entire class. How can every child in the class be in need of only that one strategy for six to eight weeks? Itemizing strategy instruction can be just as ineffective as teaching phonics in isolation. We have to be careful not to run the risk of deconstructing reading process to the point of no return. For students to comprehend, they need to use all their strategies in an integrated way.

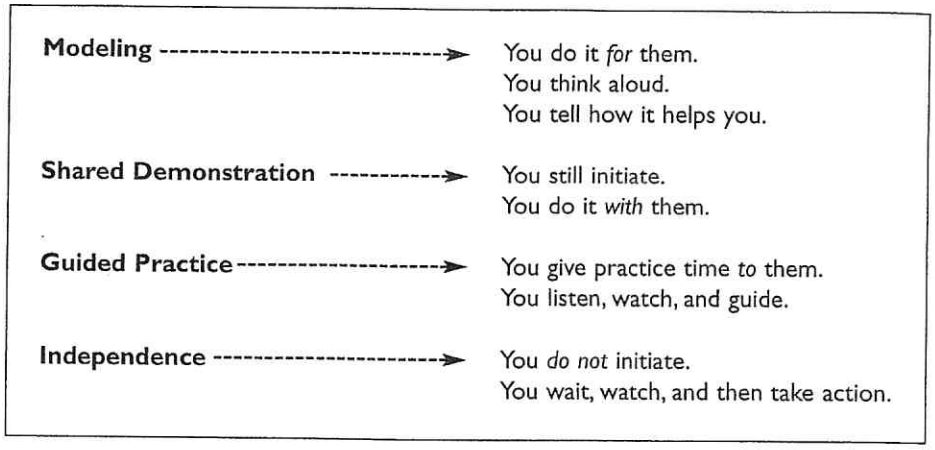
The Integration Factor

It is not that difficult to get a child to practice a strategic action (such as questioning, visualizing, making connections, or searching for further information) when a teacher calls upon him or her to do so. But that is not enough. The aim of an accomplished reader is to have the strategic actions work together in an integrated way (Clay 2001, Lyons 2003, Fountas and Pinnell 2006). Harvey and Goudvis (2007) say, "The last thing we want to do is limit kids' thinking, directing them away from one strategy because we happen to be teaching another" (34). As you focus on one strategy, be sure to encourage children to use the other strategies that they already control.

There is no set way to go about comprehending. A reader does not first activate background knowledge, then make a connection, then visualize, and so on. Remember the metaphor we used in Chapter 2 on page 18 when we asked you to create a web in your mind connecting all strategy words around the circle chart in Figure 2.1. There is nothing linear or sequential about how the reading process works for each individual when it is fully integrated.

In order to have an efficient and integrated reading process system, the child must *self-initiate* the strategies, using them when he or she deems necessary to understand a text or solve a problem while reading. Peter Johnston (2007) says, "The child is the active protagonist who generates strategies and solves problems" (67). We need to constantly teach toward independence in order for students to become these active protagonists.

Figure 8.1
Gradual Release of Responsibility



In the same article, Johnston writes, "The teacher's job is not delivering knowledge, but arranging for the problem to be manageable, sustaining the child's problem solving attempts emphasizing flexibility" (2007, 67). When you *arrange for a problem to be manageable*, you set up opportunities for the students to practice using the strategic action when they are reading continuous text. Guided reading is the perfect place to provide these opportunities. After a book introduction, be sure that there is still enough reading work for the children to do. The students need practice putting their systems of strategies to work. The teacher is present to support the students' *problem-solving attempts.* To *emphasize flexibility,* the teacher gives the children wait time to comprehend text on their own, using their strategies when they need them. The teacher can also prompt a child to consider a variety of ways to solve problems, encouraging flexibility.

Take a minute to examine the chart in Figure 8.1. For all of the first three parts of the gradual release model (explained in Chapter 3) the teacher initiates the strategy application. But during independent reading time, the teacher does not. The teacher waits, watches, converses, and then takes action.

This independent time is allowing the teacher opportunities to see what the children can apply on their own. As the teacher meets with individual students, he or she notices, through discussion about the books, which students comprehend and which cannot. The way the teacher responds to each student will depend on the assessment of how that student comprehends. For students who show evidence of solid comprehension the teacher can take these actions:

- Ask for more information to encourage the child to elaborate on his or her understandings: "Tell me more about the relationship between Will and his grandfather."
- Reinforce a strategy the child used: "When you told me about the type of person [character's name] was, you did a nice job of piecing together information from a lot of different places in the book."

- Compliment the child in a way that lets him or her know that meaning making and original thought are valuable: "Your insight about _____ is topnotch. I'm not sure I would have thought about it that way. You must feel proud of the thinking you're doing while reading."
- Ask for a prediction: "What do you think will happen next? How will [character's name] get out of this situation or solve this problem?"
- Ask the child where he or she will go from here: "What's your plan for tomorrow?"

For students who are showing evidence of confusion or lack of comprehension, the teacher can respond in these ways:

- Help the child pinpoint where he or she stopped comprehending: "Show me where you started to get confused. Let's look at that part together."
- Encourage the child to focus on a strategy that the whole class had used in an anchor lesson: "Do you remember the other day when we all came up with questions [or some strategy that you think would help at this time] before we started reading that article on tornadoes together?"
- Refer the child to a chart in the room: "Look at this chart. What were we doing yesterday when we made this chart? How did that help us understand _____? Could you use that idea right here where you are stuck?"
- Support the child in making a link from that anchor lesson to what he or she is now reading: "Do you think if you have some questions in mind, like we did the other day, it will help you understand this part better? Let's try it."
- Model for the child right then and there what you want him or her to try; in other words, back up and reteach: "Watch me _____." "Let me show you how I would _____."
- Make note about what the child is unable to do and which strategy or strategies might help this child in the future. Be sure to include the child in additional small group work on the topic.

Can We Really Teach a Strategy?

Clay (1991) tells us that we cannot put the strategies into the head of the child. Each reader constructs his or her own reading process system. So in response to the question, "Can we really teach strategies?" the answer would depend on how you view the word *teach*. If teaching means just *telling* and then hoping the students will catch on, then, no, you can't teach a strategy. However, if teaching, for you, means that the teacher does the following, then, yes, you can teach a strategy:

- Models a particular strategy and makes his or her thinking visible to students
- Continues with shared demonstrations, encouraging student involvement

- Follows that with some guided practice for students who need more focused attention and support
- And finally, allows time for the students to talk about how the strategy helped them comprehend

In other words, your teaching would stay true to the gradual release model described in Chapter 3.

Some teachers ask, "But is it okay to pull out a strategy, one at a time, and focus on just that one for a short time?" They worry that if a reader's network of strategies is supposed to work in an integrated way, then isolating one strategy might not be such a good idea. Keene and Zimmermann (2007) suggest "turning the volume up" on one strategic action for a while; Dorn and Soffos (2005) call it "spotlighting" a particular strategy.

We agree that turning the volume up or spotlighting any of the strategies can be done very effectively. But we are also cautious as we develop lessons because of the warnings from Fountas and Pinnell (2006), who say that sometimes the teaching can become "heavy-handed." So where do we draw the line between *spotlighting* a strategy and doing too much *heavy-handed teaching*?

We see the difference relating to two factors: (1) how the strategy is presented and (2) whether or not the students are given the time, opportunity, and support to internalize the strategy.

1. The teacher needs to begin with a desire to make meaning of a particular text, always keeping the focus on meaning, and then present the strategy as something that contributes to his or her understanding of the piece. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) say, "Readers' attention must be on the meaning of the text rather than on how to make their brains perform a particular operation" (45).
2. The students need to experience the strategic action working for them. If they are not able to feel its usefulness, they will be unlikely to use it at another time.

Take a look at the differences in the spotlighting and heavy-handed examples shown in Figure 8.2. Later in this chapter we present lessons on questioning and visualizing. These show how spotlighting a strategy can be done effectively and not become heavy-handed.

Another way of looking at effective comprehension strategy instruction is to compare it to the kind of teaching we do when encouraging beginning readers to take on early word-solving strategies (see Chapter 4). Here teachers use explicit modeling and the gradual release concept. We teach and encourage students to use a balance of the sources of information; we want them to use meaning, structure, and visual information quickly and without much conscious attention. But their processing is usually slow and deliberate *before* it

Figure 8.2
Spotlighting Versus Heavy-Handed Teaching of Strategies

Spotlighting	Heavy-Handed
Teacher introduction: I'm going to read this poem on the overhead projector and you can follow along. I'd really like to understand this poem as well as I can. One thing I try when I'm reading is to make a picture in my mind of what the words make me think of. I'll think out loud about the images I'm getting in my mind and see if that helps me understand this poem.	Teacher introduction: We've been studying different strategies that readers use. This week I'm going to teach you about visualizing. Visualizing is when you make pictures in your mind as you read. Listen to me read this poem, and I'll tell you about the pictures I'm getting in my mind.
Teacher gives time for students to talk about how the strategy helps them understand a particular part of a story, poem, or article during shared demonstrations and guided practice. The teacher also uses assessment and observation while the students read independently to find evidence that the students have taken on the strategy or behavior.	The teacher treats the strategy as the end goal in and of itself. He or she offers practice time on texts to "do" the strategy rather than emphasizing meaning making of texts. The assessment is done on tasks the child performs *at the request of the teacher* rather than on the strategy use during the child's independent reading.

becomes fast and fluent. It's the same with teaching comprehension strategies. Some children need us to walk them through how a reader actually makes connections, questions, or visualizes as he or she reads. Eventually we want students to use those strategic actions quickly, but again, for some students, the processing may need to be done slowly and deliberately *before* it speeds up.