

Special Report

How to Increase Reading Comprehension in the Classroom

by Adam Waxler and Marjan Glavac

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Introduction

Hello Busy Educator,

Let me introduce myself and Adam Waxler, the author of this report.

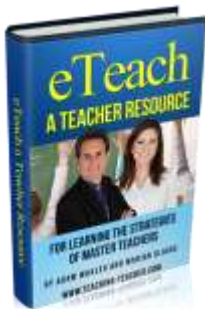
My name is Marjan Glavac. I am Adam Waxler's new publisher. Before I became a publisher, I taught for twenty-nine years in elementary and middle schools before my retirement.

I have known Adam for almost a decade. All his eBooks, special reports and websites are amazing teacher resources.

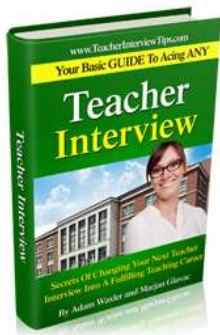
Adam Waxler recently retired as a middle school social studies teacher at Carlos E. Haile Middle School in Bradenton, Florida and also as an adjunct education professor at Manatee Community College.

Adam also played a big role in teacher recruitment as well as new teacher training.

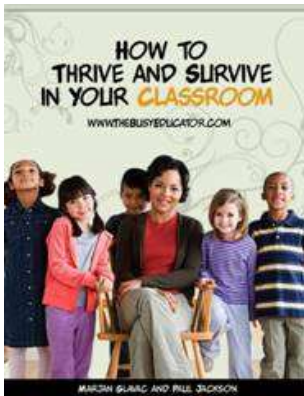
For information on some of his other work (and my own work) please make sure to visit these web sites:



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[How To Thrive And Survive In Your Classroom](#)



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Introduction

Reading is much more than simple word identification, *reading* is a process of making sense of print.

Efficient reading is creating that comprehension with the least amount of effort.

However, while we read in order to comprehend, comprehension is *not* the end goal, or the peak of the pyramid, in the reading process.

In fact, there is no end goal. Comprehension is not the summit of a mountain that a reader tries to climb. If this were the case then once that summit, or goal, were reached there would be nowhere to go but down.

On the contrary, the reading process cannot have comprehension as its peak, because once comprehension is reached, it becomes part of the reader's new "theory of the world". The reader will then relate all new information to this "theory of the world" in order to construct further meaning.

Therefore, instead of viewing the reading process as a pyramid, or a mountain to be climbed with "comprehension" at its peak, it is more accurate to view reading as a cyclical process.

While comprehension may be a goal of reading, that comprehension then becomes the foundation on which future meaning can be constructed. The ultimate goal, or rather the ultimate by-product, of this reading process is actually *life-long learning*.

Nevertheless, in order to increase the likelihood that comprehension will occur when transacting with texts, a foundation of four basic building blocks must be in place.

This foundation includes the *reader him or herself, reading strategies, classroom environment, and student interest*.

The Reader

The first block in the foundation, and arguably the most important piece in comprehension, is the reader.

Both Frank Smith (1994) and Ken Goodman (1996) refer to the background information that the reader brings to the text as the readers' "prior knowledge" or "non-visual information".

Goodman and Smith, as well as many other reading experts such as Andrea Guillaume (1998) and Lettie Albright (2002), stress the important role that students' *prior knowledge* has in understanding reading.

Goodman claims that what readers bring to a text is as important as anything they use from the text. Likewise, Frank Smith claims that, "there is only one way in which language can be understood, that print can be comprehended, and that is by having meaning brought to it" (p.31). It is the brain, Smith claims, not the eyes that determines what we see.

The more prior knowledge, or non-visual information, the reader has, the less visual information the reader needs.

Without sufficient prior knowledge a reader becomes more dependent on the visual information which may result in "tunnel vision" where the reader actually sees very little (Smith, 1994).

Therefore, when there is insufficient prior knowledge, reading can be difficult, even impossible

Having students draw on their prior knowledge will not only increase comprehension, but may also increase *student interest*, the second building block in the reading process.

Student Interest

We cannot downplay the role that student interest and motivation play in constructing meaning.

Louise Rosenblatt, in her transactional theory, explains that readers read for two purposes, efferently (for information) and aesthetically (for feeling).

However, both types of reading may occur at the same time and, in fact, there are significant advantages in doing so, particularly increasing student interest and motivation.

For example, song lyrics, political cartoons, poetry, trade books, and even picture books, provide a great opportunity for students to read for both efferent and affective purposes.

The result is an increase in student interest and motivation.

However, teachers should also encourage both efferent and affective *responses*.

Affective responding, such as writing poetry, writing letters, writing journal entries, or even creating skits may motivate children to read and this may lead children to become independent readers.

There are many different reading strategies that can be used by teachers to access and build on students' prior knowledge, and increase student interest. These *reading strategies* are the third building block in the reading process.

Reading Strategies

K-W-L charts, discussion webs, and other prediction strategies are a great way to tap into students' prior knowledge.

In a study by Lettie Albright (2002), starter questions were used prior to reading that focused on making predictions about the text. She noted that not only was she able to activate students' prior knowledge about the subject matter but also increase their interest in the topic.

By activating students' prior knowledge and increasing student interest, students will be less dependent on the visual information of a text, students will *want* to learn, and the likelihood that comprehension will occur will increase.

An extremely effective strategy that activates students' prior knowledge and stimulates student interest is to provide hands-on experiences *before* reading.

Too often, teachers use labs, activities, and films *after* reading, when these activities should actually be done first.

Andrea Guillaume (1998) argues that providing these hands-on activities prior to reading will remove "concept deficiencies", and will become part of the students' knowledge thereby making future reading easier to comprehend.

Teachers should also teach reading with content area texts so students are reading for a purpose.

There are many strategies that can be used in the classroom that both activate students' prior knowledge as well increase student interest and motivation. However, all of these are worthless without the fourth building block in the reading process: a positive *classroom environment*.

Classroom Environment

First and foremost, students must feel comfortable taking risks in the classroom. For that to take place, an atmosphere of mutual respect must be in place between teacher and student as well as between the students themselves.

With an atmosphere of respect there can be a high degree of interaction between students and between the teacher and student.

However, the *physical environment* does have an effect on the nature and types of interaction that will occur. While straight rows are conducive for lectures, students need to have an opportunity to share information with their peers and learn from one another.

Therefore, the layout of the room must change depending on the lesson to make the most efficient use of social interaction.

The room should change from rows to pairs to groups to circles and so on depending on the social interaction expected in the lesson.

While this may drive the janitors crazy, it will certainly increase student interaction and involvement in the lesson.

This student-centered classroom offers students the opportunity to share information with their peers, thereby reinforcing what they already know, and quickly clearing up any misunderstandings. Students are then much more likely to participate in class.

Still, teachers must also create an environment that reduces student anxiety. Severe anxiety can result in poor performance; can interfere with attention to, learning of, and retrieval of information (Woolfolk, 1998).

Teachers can reduce anxiety by making instructions clear, avoiding unnecessary time pressures, and providing alternate assessments for students. When teachers reduce student anxiety and create an atmosphere of mutual respect, students will feel more comfortable taking risks.

The classroom environment is a crucial piece in the foundation of the reading process, for once this student-centered classroom is established,

teachers can freely implement the reading strategies that both activate students' prior knowledge and increase student motivation to learn.

The Four Building Blocks

With the four basic building blocks of the reading process in place teachers can then, *and only then*, add the text to be read.

Text includes traditional textbooks, trade books, realistic fiction, and other print sources such as newspapers, letters, magazines, the internet, etc. (essentially anything in print).

Regardless of the style of text, in and of itself, the text is nothing more than "visual information".

With the four building blocks in place, the reader becomes less dependent on this visual information and is more likely to be an efficient reader.

As stated earlier, reading is more than simple word identification; reading is making sense of print. When the four building blocks of the reading process are in place, readers are able to focus more on the semantic cueing system, the system that involves the meaning that is constructed by the reader.

This is the deep structure level, where readers read for meaning and comprehension.

When teachers activate students' prior knowledge, use various reading and teaching strategies, create a positive classroom environment, and increase student interest, classroom readers will be less dependent on the visual information of the text.

On the other hand, dependency on visual information may lead to "tunnel vision" in which the reader actually comprehends very little.

Therefore, by decreasing the dependency on the visual information, comprehension will likely increase.

That new comprehension then becomes part of the readers' "theory of the world" that they will bring with them in making sense of other, future readings.

Therefore, comprehension can be seen as much as a *beginning* in the reading process as it can be seen as an *end*.

Applying the Reading Process in the Classroom

To examine how the reading process is applied in the general education classroom, the following information will focus on an eighth grade social studies lesson on the Panama Canal.

The lesson is a forty minute lesson that is part of a larger unit on Foreign Policy.

Keep in mind, that in order for the reading process to be effective and maximize comprehension, the four building blocks must all be in place.

The actual reading is done at the end of the lesson and is only a short section from a traditional textbook. However, the goal here is to show that when the reading process is implemented correctly, student comprehension will increase.

The students will be able to make sense of the printed text at the *end* of the lesson because of the things that take place *before* the reading.

As this lesson takes place two months into the school year much of the positive classroom environment is already established. The students are comfortable sharing information with their peers and taking risks.

The basis of the positive class environment revolves around the one classroom rule: Respect People, Respect Property.

The rule is simple and positive and applies to everyone including the teacher.

The desk arrangement changes from day to day depending on the activity and on this day the desks will be arranged in pairs so students can easily interact with their partner.

In an effort to reduce anxiety, the students are clearly told the days' agenda (to review foreign policy and study the Panama Canal) and the objective of class (to be able to argue what type of foreign policy the United States was using in constructing the Panama Canal).

With the agenda and objective of the class made clear, the classroom environment is established and the teacher can now work on the other three building blocks of the reading process.

Keep in mind that none of these "building blocks" works in a vacuum and are *all* actually interconnected.

The class begins with the teacher activating students' knowledge on foreign policy by having them define the four basic foreign policy choices learned in previous lessons. Afterwards students, share their definitions with their partners before discussing them as a class.

This discussion time allows students to check their answers with their partner, both reinforcing their knowledge of the content while at the same time increasing the likelihood that they will share their answers with the class.

Once the foreign policy definitions are reviewed, the teacher displays a political cartoon on U.S. imperialism in Panama and the students answer a series of questions based on the cartoon. Again, students are given the opportunity to share their answers with their partner before discussing them as a class.

The political cartoon not only reinforces their foreign policy definitions, but also piques their curiosity and stimulates their interest in the topic.

Following the introduction to the lesson, the students watch an eight-minute video clip from a documentary on the Panama Canal.

The order of these activities is significant.

It is common for teachers to want to show the video clip at the end of the lesson. However, by showing the video clip first, the teacher increases student interest and motivation, removes concept deficiencies, and creates a foundation of new knowledge to which the students will be able to relate the upcoming reading to.

The video is followed by a short geography exercise in which the students work with their partner to interpret a map of Panama and then answer a series of questions that reinforce information from the map and the video.

The four building blocks of the reading process are now in place. There is a positive classroom environment, the teacher has used a variety of teaching strategies that both activate and build on students' prior knowledge, as well as increase student interest and motivation to learn.

Now the teacher can add the text reading.

While a variety of methods can be used to read the material in class, in this particular case the teacher uses a read-aloud. A teacher reading aloud can be an extremely effective way to convey the powerful meaning of a text.

However, to make sure the students are reading and listening for a purpose, the teacher does three things:

1. The teacher restates the objective of the class.
2. The teacher explains that the students will use this information to help them write a letter to President Roosevelt about his foreign policy.
3. The teacher explains that roughly half way through the reading the students will stop to do a "think/pair/share" in which they share one thing they learned with their partner.

These three simple reading strategies keep the students on task and reading for a purpose.

However, reading strategies to increase comprehension do not stop once the reading is over.

Upon completion of the reading, students begin their closure/homework assignment, in which they write a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt as if they were living in the United States during the early 1900s.

The letters must include the following: the date, the type of foreign policy Roosevelt was using to build the Panama Canal, whether or not the student agrees with this foreign policy and why, and any emotions or concerns the student may have regarding Roosevelt's foreign policy.

The letter is designed to encourage both efferent and affective responding.

Once again, the order of the activities of the lesson is of extreme importance. Many teachers may be concerned that it would be difficult to motivate children to work *after* the video and that the video needs to be held over their head in an "if your good we'll get to it" type of way.

In fact, the exact opposite is true. The video, as well as the other activities, spark the students' interest in the topic and actually motivates them more. The students are not only enthusiastic about the text reading, but they are actually eager to start writing their letter.

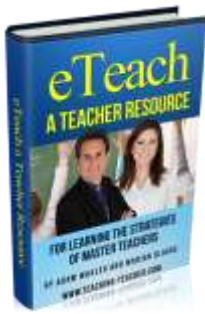
The proof that the students were able to construct meaning from the printed text (and that this reading model is accurate and viable) is obvious when reading the students' letters to President Roosevelt.

Author's Note

I truly hope you enjoyed *How to Increase Reading Comprehension in the Classroom*.

Remember, an effective teacher is constantly changing, growing, and improving. To continue to be a truly successful teacher requires an arsenal of effective teaching strategies that you will continue to add to your repertoire throughout your career.

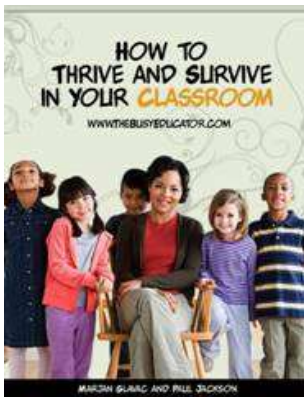
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