



What is reading comprehension? What is it like to be a good reader?

2.1 Introduction

When we started to think about this book we wondered, what does it mean to be a good at reading? When we reflected back to childhood, one of us remembered reading books and even encyclopaedias (there were no wikipedias at that time) as early as 6 years of age, and even reading Mum’s romance novels. This would have required a good level of decoding skill, and this seems to have been there. The background knowledge and cognitive development to understand those romance novels and encyclopaedias were almost certainly not there.

This makes sense when we think of decoding skills as *skills*; that is, there is the possibility to learn them quite early. As for knowledge of the world, this takes a very long time to develop, and for most of us a lifetime. This explains why teachers often find they have students who can read but not understand what they are reading. It may well be that they have peaked in terms of decoding skills but still have much to learn in order to be able to understand books that have content well above their current understanding. The National Standards documents refer to decoding skills as “constrained” (i.e., they can be learnt early) and comprehension knowledge as “unconstrained” (i.e., it is built up over many years).

2.2 What is reading comprehension?

One of the most popular models of reading comprehension is the simple view (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Other researchers have cited it in their papers 343 times according to the search engine Scopus. This is a very high citation rate. The authors of the model argue that there is a simple way to define reading comprehension, which is that there are two components to reading. The first is decoding skill. This is the ability to pronounce words fluently while reading printed text. The second is language comprehension. In an English-speaking environment this is the ability to understand spoken English. The simple view once had it that these components were quite separate. The decoder’s job was to identify words on the page and read them fluently, and the language comprehension processor constructed the meanings conveyed by printed words.

Recent research has modified the model so that there is now a link between language comprehension and decoding via the part of language comprehension that is vocabulary knowledge. The argument now is that vocabulary knowledge can make it easier to become good at decoding (Tunmer & Chapman, 2011). The student who can partially decode a word with complex spelling is more likely to identify the word if that word is in

their vocabulary. This new version of the simple view highlights the benefits of vocabulary knowledge. The new simple view makes a lot of sense, but it is disheartening for the concept of social justice because it privileges those with a depth of vocabulary, who are usually those from more advantaged homes. On the other hand, it is also a positive signal to those who believe in the power of reading, because it means that if we get students off to a good start in reading and fill our classrooms and homes with lots of reading, then we know they will learn many thousands of new words that way.

Decoding is a constrained skill, which means it is possible to reach a high level of expertise in it, and very quickly (Ministry of Education, 2009c; Paris, 2005). This means we can very early acquire the ability to read words accurately and effortlessly, leaving the door completely open for our cognitive resources to focus on comprehension. This is a very positive thing because it means that children will have access early on to the world of books, and in that world is a huge amount of knowledge, grammatical sophistication and vocabulary, all of them essential for comprehension.

In contrast to decoding, language comprehension is “unconstrained” in that we will be expanding our knowledge of the world, our grammatical sophistication and our vocabulary all our lives. In terms of vocabulary, for example, the English language has more than a half million words, and even our best readers will struggle to acquire anywhere near that many. There is no upper limit to language comprehension. Knowledge of the world, grammatical sophistication, vocabulary knowledge are not learnt quickly. They come on-stream gradually.

This book argues that it is worthwhile to teach comprehension strategies. The reason is not just that they are important study skills in themselves, but they can also help students to do better in reading comprehension. The reason is that students armed with a small set of useful strategies will think about what they read in a more strategic and organised way. This will help them when they are sitting reading comprehension tests and in understanding content area reading material.

Before launching into the main part of the book it is important to have a clear idea of where we are starting from and what we are aiming for. In other words, what is it to become a good reader? In the rest of the chapter we will explore what it means to be good at reading. We do this by presenting case studies of a good reader, a middle reader and a struggling reader. The case studies show the positive consequences of developing good reading skills, and the not-so-positive consequences for readers who do not develop good comprehension and decoding skills.

2.3 What does it mean to be good and not-so-good at reading?

To answer this question we looked in depth at three case studies taken from a larger study (Nicholson & McGregor, 2011). We selected from this group three students with different levels of skills. The first is a good reader, the

second a middle reader and the third a struggling reader. Students completed a questionnaire about their attitudes to reading, and their parents completed a questionnaire about their child's "strengths and difficulties". We were interested in strengths and difficulties to explore the link between reading and behaviour. The students' answers to the questionnaire are in the text boxes below. After each box is a summary of their parents' responses about strengths and difficulties, and a general interpretation of the responses.

We present these portraits of three different readers to give insight into the incredible benefits of learning to read well and the awful cost of not doing so. We feel it gives a sense of urgency and necessity to the work of the reading teacher. It is so important for us to deliver literacy to the highest levels we can, so that all our students can have access to the joys and the positive benefits of reading, and to make sure that we lock no one out of this wonderful opportunity.

Case study 1: A good reader (#156)

This Year 7 girl, 11 years of age, attended a decile 3 intermediate school. According to the National Standards for reading, by Year 7, students like this girl should be at level 3 of the national curriculum, and reading part 3 *School Journals* that have reading levels in the 10–12 age range. The only data we have for this pupil is from a norm-referenced test where she read words on a list with no context help at all. On this test, she scored at post-high school level, in the 99th percentile, and at stanine 9, which is at the top of the range. She was able to read accurately words like *bibliography*, *irascible* and *terpsichorean*

The questions and her written answers are in the text box.

How good a reader do you feel yourself to be? Alright. I read books like the Hobbit, Kingdom by the sea, etc. Most people my age don't.

How do you feel when your teacher reads a story to the class? In suspense. He only reads one chapter at a time.

How do you feel when it is your turn to read out loud to the teacher? Nervous. I sometimes speak too fast, it's slightly embarrassing. Slightly.

How do you feel when you come to a new word while reading? Curious. I enjoy finding the meaning of words by putting them into context.

How do you think your teacher feels when you read? I'm not sure.

How do you feel about writing a story for the teacher? Neutral. Reports are normal school work, creative writing is a fun off-activity.

How do you feel when you have to spell a new word that you don't know how to spell yet? Mixed emotions. Want to get the word right yet not really caring.

How do you feel about getting a book for a present? Happy. I enjoy reading.

How do you feel about going to school? Bored. I prefer holidays.

How do you think you'll feel about reading when you go to high school? Mixed emotions. I love reading yet I hear that in high school you sometimes have to read.

Would you rather watch television or read? Read. Reading is more educational than most kids shows.

Would you rather play with your friends or read? Read. I somehow feel that I want to read every book in the world, and that there isn't much time.

Would you rather clean your room or read? Read. Reading is fun, cleaning is monotonous.

How often do you read at home by yourself? Every day. I love reading.

How long do you read for at home after school is out and before you get to bed? More than an hour. I can never get around to doing work when there's a good book calling.

How much time do you spend watching TV each day? 75 minutes. Roughly. At home we have an entire wall of videos, they are all excellent.

How many books do you have at home (just your own books, not your family's books)? [more than 20] passed down from my sisters.

When do you do most of your reading at home? Early afternoon, early evening. Those are my free times.

Can you remember the name of a book you read recently? Kingdom by the sea.

Do you like to read? Yes. I like plots turned to words.

Do you like writing stories? Sort of. I like thinking of plots but I don't like writing them.

An assessment by her parents of her strengths and weaknesses in emotional, social and behavioural terms, through a parent questionnaire, reflected some of her own comments—that she is never complaining, worried or unhappy. Conduct indicates she sometimes loses her temper, but she is obedient, never cheats, bullies or steals. She is not restless or easily distracted. In peer relations there is a tendency to be solitary and play alone, but no one bullies her, and she has at least one good friend. In terms of prosocial behaviour, she is considerate, helpful and kind.

Here is our interpretation. Reading her comments about herself as a reader, there seems to be a quiet confidence. She knows she is a good reader. She has read *The Hobbit*. She enjoys the teacher reading a book to the class. She feels nervous about reading aloud to the teacher, but only because she thinks she reads too quickly. When she comes across an unfamiliar word she is not annoyed or upset; she is “curious”. She enjoys new words. She is not sure how her teacher feels about her reading, but this is not necessarily a negative thing in that the teacher may just let her get on with it without checking too much on her progress. She is not too excited about writing factual assignments, but she enjoys creative writing. When she has to spell a word she says she prefers to get it right. She gives an unqualified thumbs-up to getting a book for a present. This, along with several statements that she loves reading, suggests a very good reader. She says she is bored at school, but this may be positive in that she needs a challenge. She has mixed emotions

about high school, but this relates more to a concern that she will not have the same freedom to choose what she reads.

When reading her comments about out-of-school reading what comes through is a real love of reading. She prefers reading to television and playing with her friends because, “I somehow feel that I want to read every book in the world, and that there isn’t much time.” She reads every day for an hour. She watches television, but only for about an hour each day. She has more than 20 of her own books at home. She reads in the early afternoon and early evening. She remembers a book that she read recently, *Kingdom by the Sea*. She likes reading and thinks about the books in an abstract way, thinks about the plots. She likes thinking about plots for stories but does not like writing stories. This is not a negative response: writing is hard work. The positive is that she understands story structure, that a story needs a good plot.

The overall impression of this reader is that she loves books, and she does so because she is a good reader with excellent skills. Feedback from the parent questionnaire indicates that she is a happy person who gets on well with others, and is kind and considerate.

Case study 2: A middle reader (#211)

This Year 7 girl, 11 years of age, attended a decile 8 intermediate school. The only data we have for this student are her results on a norm-referenced test where she read a list of words, without any context help whatsoever. On this test she was at the Year 7 level, at the 55th percentile and stanine 5, which is in the middle of the average range for her age. She was able to read quite complex words like *contemporary* and *contagious*.

The questions and her written answers are in the text box (as written by the student).

How good a reader do you feel yourself to be? A very good reader and can understand a lot of very true and hard books.

How do you feel when your teacher reads a story to the class? Sometimes it is very boring because I like to read myself because it helps me understand more.

How do you feel when it is your turn to read out loud to the teacher? I feel excited but nervous because I might muck up.

How do you feel when you come to a new word while reading? I stop, look at the word, and try to pronounce it as best as I can.

How do you think your teacher feels when you read? Interested? Because she wants to know how well you can read.

How do you feel about writing a story for the teacher? Excited because stories are fun to write and theres usually a lot of creatitivy involved!

How do you feel when you have to spell a new word that you don’t know how to spell yet? Challenged but I try my best and get on with it.

How do you feel about getting a book for a present? It depends on what type of book I get.

How do you feel about going to school? I love to learn but socialize—because school is where you make your friends.

How do you think you'll feel about reading when you go to high school? Nervous because you will have unfamiliar faces staring at you.

Would you rather watch television or read? Read because it's really a special relaxing time and its nice and quiet.

Would you rather play with your friends or read? Play with my friends because you could read mags with friends.

Would you rather clean your room or read? Read no one likes to clean their room!!!

How often do you read at home by yourself? Every day. reading is cool, calm and relaxing. Its not always a book it can be a mag or newspaper as well.

How long do you read for at home after school is out and before you get to bed? 2 hours at night.

How much time do you spend watching TV each day? [just one or two shows] There isn't much TV on at the moment and it gets too boring.

How many books do you have at home (just your own books, not your family's books)? (between 10 and 20) I love to read true stories for teenagers but they can get quite emotional.

When do you do most of your reading at home? At night because you cant do much then.

Can you remember the name of a book you read recently? Yes—from darkness to light its my favourite book.

Do you like to read? Yes because it is fun and enjoying.

Do you like writing stories? Yes because you get to use your own creativity.

An assessment by her parents of her strengths and weaknesses in emotional, social and behavioural terms, through a parent questionnaire, reflected some of her own comments—that she is never complaining, unhappy or fearful, but is sometimes worried. Conduct indicates she never loses her temper, is obedient and never bullies, cheats or steals. She is not restless but is sometimes easily distracted. In peer relations, others like her, no one bullies her and she has at least one good friend. In terms of prosocial behaviour, she is helpful, kind and somewhat considerate.

This is our interpretation. Reading her comments about herself as a reader, she comes across as very positive and confident about her reading, has a strong sense of her ability as a reader, but there are some indications that she is less assured about her reading than the girl in the first case study. One indication of this is that she would rather not listen to the teacher read to the class. This might be for many reasons, but her comments suggest she needs the support of the text to get a good understanding. When it comes

to reading aloud to the teacher, she says she is excited but nervous. She is nervous because she might make mistakes. The girl in the first case study was nervous, but it was because she thought she might read too fast.

She is less confident about reading unfamiliar words. When she comes to an unfamiliar word, she says she works out such words “as best I can”; the girl in the first case study was far more confident. When she reads to the teacher it is not to impress the teacher or to make her proud but because she feels the teacher will be weighing up her reading skills. When she writes a story for the teacher she feels “excited”; the girl in the first case study also enjoyed creative writing. When she has to spell a new word she feels “challenged” and says, “I try my best”; the girl in the first case study seemed more confident. This middling word-solver is lukewarm about getting a book for a present; the girl in the first case study was much more open to books as presents. She likes going to school but the social aspect appeals to her more than the learning aspect; the girl in the first case study said she was bored at school, which is not the same thing. When asked about going to high school, she writes that she will be “nervous”, but this has more to do with the “unfamiliar faces staring at you” than the academic challenges.

When reading her comments about out-of-school reading, what comes through is someone who likes reading. She prefers to read than watch television because “it’s really a special relaxing time and it’s nice and quiet”; the girl in the first case study also did this. She prefers to play with her friends but says she can read “mags” with her friends, indicating that “play” with friends can include reading; the girl in the first case study preferred to read than play with friends. She prefers to read than clean her room because, like the girl in the first case study, cleaning is not as enjoyable. She reads every day because it is “cool, calm and relaxing”; the girl in the first case study did this. She reads for 2 hours every night; the girl in the first case study read for an hour. She only watches one or two shows each day; the girl in the first case study had a similar viewing time. She has 10 to 20 books of her own and reads “true stories for teenagers”; the girl in the first case study had more than 20 books. She reads at night in bed before she goes to sleep “because you can’t do much then”; the girl in the first case study read books in the early afternoon and evening. The most recent book she had read was *From Darkness to Light*; the girl in the first case study also mentioned a book. She writes that she likes to read because it is “fun and enjoying” and she likes to write because “you get to use your own creativity”; the girl in the first case study was also positive, but in a more abstract way.

The overall impression this student gives is of someone who likes reading, thinks it is relaxing, reads every day and likes writing, but who knows she is not a good reader. She has good skills but needs more, so she can gain the confidence and assurance of the first case study. Feedback from the parent questionnaire indicates that she is a happy person who gets on well with others, and is kind and considerate.

Case study 3: A struggling reader (#153)

This Year 7 boy, 11 years of age, attended a decile 3 intermediate school. The only test data we have are from a norm-referenced test of his ability to read words in a list, with no context clues. This test put him at the Year 4 level, in the 12th percentile and at stanine 3, which is below the average range. He was able to decode concrete, familiar words like *book*, *animal* and *stretch*, but not longer, less familiar words (e.g., *collapse* as “kolisp”, *triumph* as “astrimp”, and *bibliography* as “bilf”).

The questions and his written answers are in the text box.

How good a reader do you feel yourself to be? Not good as aver peple.

How do you feel when your teacher reads a story to the class? I like listening to story so that I can visualize the picture.

How do you feel when it is your turn to read out loud to the teacher? I feel sede and nevis.

How do you feel when you come to a new word while reading? I feill frustratd.

How do you think your teacher feels when you read? In the miedill.

How do you feel about writing a story for the teacher? Hard but fun.

How do you feel when you have to spell a new word that you don't know how to spell yet? wored and serd.

How do you feel about getting a book for a present? Herd but fun.

How do you feel about going to school? Fun and cool.

How do you think you'll feel about reading when you go to high school? fritin and serd.

Would you rather watch television or read? I would watch t.v then read.

Would you rather play with your friends or read? I would play then read.

Would you rather clean your room or read? I would read.

How often do you read at home by yourself? Never because I ned help.

How long do you read for at home after school is out and before you get to bed? [a few minutes] before I go to bed.

How much time do you spend watching TV each day? ½ hour our mour.

How many books do you have at home (just your own books, not your family's books)? 20 or so.

Can you remember the name of a book you read recently? *Show and Tell*, *Asralyun hidils*.

Do you like to read? Yes but not that much.

Do you like writing stories? Yes but no it dusin min me.

An assessment by his parents of strengths and weaknesses in emotional, social and behavioural terms, through a parent questionnaire, reflected some of his own comments, such as a tendency to be worried, unhappy and fearful. Conduct indicated that he often loses his temper but is not a bully. Hyperactive symptoms included a tendency to be restless and easily distracted. In peer relations there is a tendency to play alone and for others to bully him, but he has at least one good friend. In terms of prosocial behaviour, he is considerate, helpful and kind.

This is our interpretation. There is a striking contrast between this case study and the first two case studies. This boy is much less positive about himself as a reader. He feels that “other people” read better. On a happy note, he enjoys listening to the teacher read and enjoys imagining the text in his mind, as a visual text. He is very anxious about reading aloud to the teacher. In contrast, the girl in the first case study, though nervous about reading to the teacher, was nervous in a good way because she felt she read too quickly. The girl in the second case study was slightly anxious because she was aware of the teacher evaluating her reading, but nowhere near as anxious as this boy. When asked how he felt when he came to an unfamiliar word while reading, he wrote that he did not know what to do and felt unable to cope, whereas the girl in the first case study felt “curious” in a good way, and the girl in the second case study felt confident enough to work the unfamiliar word out as best she could. On a happier note, he thought his teacher ranked him as in the “middle” as a reader, whereas the girl in the first case study did not know how her teacher felt (and did not seem worried). The girl in the second case study thought her teacher was “interested”, in an assessment kind of way, indicating an uncertainty about how good she really was as a reader.

When it came to writing for the teacher, this struggler felt writing was “hard”, whereas the girl in the first case study felt confident but “neutral” about writing and the girl in the second case study felt “excited”. This struggler felt “worried and scared” about spelling a new word he did not know how to spell. He seems highly anxious. In comparison, the girl in the first case study was not too concerned about spelling an unfamiliar word, and the girl in the second case study said she did the “best I can”. This struggler was more upbeat about getting a book for a present, though his feelings seem mixed when he wrote, “hard but fun”. A very happy note was the question about going to school. It is great that he thinks school is “fun and cool”. The prospect of high school elicited a more ominous response: he will feel frightened and scared.

Finally, reading his comments about out-of-school reading, he preferred to watch television and to play with friends than to read, though he would rather read than clean his room, which is one thing he had in common with the girls in the first two case studies. As the girl in the second case study put it, “no one likes to clean their room!!!” He never read at home because, as he wrote, “I need help”. In contrast, the girls in the other case studies wrote that they read every day. He read for “a few minutes” each day before he went to bed. This contrasted with the girls in the other case studies, who wrote that

they read for 1 and 2 hours each day. He watched less television (half an hour each day) than the girls in the other two case studies, so he was certainly not hooked on television. On the other hand, the girls in the other case studies did not watch very much either (an hour or less). He wrote that he read before bed, as did the girl in the second case study, who read “at night”. This boy was different to the girl in the first case study, who read in the afternoons and early evenings. The struggler student read books, which was very positive, and mentioned the books *Show and Tell* and (I think he wrote) *Australian Idols*, but you can’t help feeling that the books are not at the same level of difficulty as the books read by the girls in the other case studies: *The Hobbit* and *From Darkness to Light*. The struggler student had mixed feelings about reading and writing, liking them, but not much. In contrast, the girls in the other case studies were much more positive.

Feedback from the parent questionnaire indicated that he is not a happy person and does not get on so well with others, but is kind and considerate.

Looking at this student’s responses as a whole, it seems like a cry for help. It is someone who finds reading and writing hard and frustrating, who reads very little and who is frightened about the future. The student is very anxious, and why should that be? These are the downstream outcomes of not learning to read well. It doesn’t have to be like this. We hope that by reading the rest of this book, you will gain the skills and knowledge to achieve a little oasis of learning in your school, where “all the children are above average”.

Spelling and reading

Although the present book is about reading, it is interesting to note the differences among the three case studies in ability to articulate ideas through writing. The first girl’s spelling is at an adult level, the second girl has some minor spelling issues but the boy’s spelling is almost unreadable. These differences suggest a strong positive effect of decoding skill on spelling, and its positive flow-on effects for writing and the ability to communicate your thoughts in print.

These differences support a “simple view” of writing as well as reading. The simple view argues that to be a good writer you need to be both a good speller and have good ideas. For example, a pupil may have excellent ideas but without spelling skill will be unable to communicate these ideas quickly, accurately or comprehensibly. The difference in communicative writing skill between the boy and the two girls, even though he had some good ideas, highlights the importance of spelling in a compelling way.

2.4 Review

We began this chapter by defining reading comprehension. As part of this we discussed Phil Gough and Bill Tunmer’s simple view of reading. According to the simple view, reading consists of two components: decoding skill and language comprehension. Both skills are fundamental to reading comprehension. Poor decoding and/or poor language skills result in poor

reading comprehension. In the second part of the chapter we explored what it means to be good at reading. We presented case studies of a good reader, a middle reader and a struggling reader. The three readers portrayed the positive consequences of developing good reading skills, and the not-so-positive consequences for readers who do not develop good comprehension and decoding skills.