Top tips for helping to develop and deepen comprehension skills

Expert advice from Nikki Gamble

In the Oxford Reading Tree Story Sparks Handbook, Series Advisor Nikki Gamble explains why good quality comprehension is so important. Nikki shares the challenges and her top tips for developing strategies and activities that promote the component skills of comprehension.

1. Vocabulary
Children need to be able to work out what the words on a page mean.

**Challenges:**
- Encountering words that are not part of their spoken vocabulary
- Technical vocabulary in non-fiction texts
- Archaic language in narrative texts, e.g. ‘beloved’
- Words that have more than one meaning, e.g. ‘wild’

**Tips:**
- Ask children to note interesting words in a ‘word journal’, putting the definitions in their own words
- Encourage children to look at words in different contexts to understand nuances in vocabulary

2. Sentences
Young readers need to be able to understand the meanings created by word order.

**Challenges:**
- Children’s spoken and written language is not always constructed in the same way
- Children who don’t start reading from an early age have more difficulty understanding the structures of written grammar

**Tips:**
- Read aloud to children
- Teach grammar in the context of reading

3. World knowledge
As well as reading the words on the page, children need to bring their prior knowledge to the text.

**Challenges:**
- Some children have limited world knowledge as their life experiences are not broad

**Tips:**
- Help children to relate texts to their world knowledge
- World knowledge is also acquired through interaction with others, so encourage children to talk with peers and share their experiences

4. Memory
To make meaning from text, readers need to use both long-term and working memory.

**Challenges:**
- Long-term memory (which stores background knowledge) can be limited in young readers
- Working memory (which helps us to process new information as we read) can become overloaded

**Tips:**
- Introduce some background information to children before they read a text
- Encourage children to take their time reading a text, and to re-read difficult sections
5. Inference

Inference is an ever-present process where children fill in gaps to make meaning.

**Challenges:**
- To make inferences, children need to relate their existing knowledge to what they are reading

**Tips:**
- Encourage children to make predictions about the characters and events in a story
- Ask children to discuss the text in groups, focusing on any questions they have

6. Comprehension monitoring

Children need to monitor their own understanding of text – when they come across something they don’t understand, they stop and question why.

**Challenges:**
- If children cannot monitor their own understanding, they will not become self-reliant readers

**Tips:**
- Encourage children to ask themselves questions as they read
- Aim for a balance between keeping the story moving and stopping to ensure the children have understood what is happening

7. Reflection

Discussion after reading enables children to develop reflective skills and a more analytical approach to their reading.

**Challenges:**
- Getting the balance right between asking too many questions and not probing enough

**Tips:**
- Ask one key question to probe children’s understanding and guide them towards deeper reflection
- Introduce an alternative discussion, such as talking about the different meanings a text might have

If you are looking for a reading series that helps to develop your children’s comprehension skills in line with the expectations of the 2014 National Curriculum, take a look at *Oxford Reading Tree Story Sparks*.

Visit [www.oxfordprimary.co.uk/StorySparks](http://www.oxfordprimary.co.uk/StorySparks)