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An Analysis of Year 8 Poor Comprehenders' Responses to the PAT Reading Comprehension Test

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Abstract

Despite years of literacy learning, a group of students continue to struggle with reading in their final year at primary school. Many of these students show adequate decoding skills but perform poorly on comprehension tasks. This study reports on the results of a study into the linguistic skills and cognitive processes of a group of thirty one poor comprehenders and twelve proficient comprehenders in Year 8. An analysis of the poor comprehender group found issues with some foundation language skills persist beyond the junior levels of primary school. Syntactic and morphological awareness were found to be less developed in the poor comprehender group when compared with their more skilled peers, while phonological knowledge was not implicated in reading difficulties. The poor comprehenders were also asked to retrospectively consider their incorrect question responses on the Progressive Achievement Test of Comprehension (PATC) in an effort to understand the reasons behind their choices and further find where breakdowns in comprehension were occurring. The PATC is widely used in New Zealand primary schools and measures silent reading comprehension using a multiple choice format. Tests conducted silently do not allow the processes of comprehension to be revealed, rather they can only tell us if understanding was successful of not. The results of this retrospective analysis highlighted several key areas of difficulty in the poor comprehender group including inferencing, vocabulary knowledge and the use of prior knowledge. Additionally, the use of poor test-taking strategies was highlighted. These included students using a key word matching 'search and destroy' technique to find answers, and employing timesaving measures to avoid a complete reading of the text. Finally an analysis of the questions in the PATC was undertaken to find if certain types proved more challenging for students. Results showed individual questions proved difficult to answer due to their high cognitive demands, but no question type was more difficult to answer. The study indicates the need for assessments to reflect the cognitive aspects of reading comprehension and to include foundation skills until the Year 8 level. In addition to teaching comprehension strategies and vocabulary, teachers need to focus on improving the test-taking skills of students.

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