

The Skill, Will, and Thrill of Comprehending Content Area Texts

Understanding content area texts is a challenge for many students. Our profession has spent decades trying to figure out which instructional supports teachers can use to improve students' understanding of the complex informational texts required of social studies, science, and technical subjects. Researchers have developed models of comprehension (e.g., RAND Reading Study Group, 2002) but not of comprehension instruction. We have come to believe that students' ability to read and understand complex texts is limited when their teachers treat comprehension strictly as a skill.

Of course, there are skills in reading that students must develop, such as decoding and fluency, but comprehension requires the "cooperation of many forces" (Thorndike, 1917, p. 323). It is not as simple as teaching main idea, for example, and then asking students to identify the main idea in all of the texts they read. There are any number of variations required for students to determine the main idea of a given text, and they will need practice in a wide range of increasingly complex texts to develop this ability.

Hattie and Donoghue (2016) suggested that instructional strategies could be organized along a continuum across skill, will, and thrill, which sparked our thinking about reading. We hypothesize that this simple organizational tool might be key to a model for comprehension instruction. We believe that students need experiences with texts that address the skill, will, and thrill of comprehension. In this article, we outline what that might look like in elementary classrooms.

The Skills of Reading Comprehension

As we have noted, we do not believe that comprehension is easily parsed into a set of skills. Having said that, however, there are a number of skills required for students to comprehend text. Obviously, students must be able to decode the words and ascribe meaning to those words if they are to understand the text. They need to read fast enough to maintain the ideas in their mind but not so fast that they miss important parts of the text. They also need sufficient back-

ground knowledge to connect the text with what they already know. Also, they can probably use some generic comprehension strategies, such as monitoring, predicting, visualizing, and inferring, to help them with the text. Thus, at the skill level, teachers would be wise to focus on decoding, background knowledge, vocabulary, fluency, and some generic comprehension strategies.

There are countless numbers of studies focused on skill development for students. Effective approaches seem to be direct instruction, teacher modeling, and wide reading. At the skill level, students need their teachers to show them the skill and allow them to practice it. In addition, they need to learn science and social studies content so that when they encounter ideas in the text that require background knowledge, they are more likely to have it.

The Will of Comprehension

Knowing how to read, and even understand, a text does not ensure that students actually do so at deep levels. Thus, the limited focus on the skills of comprehension has not had breakthrough results for students. At this level, students need to experience motivation and engagement. There are specific teacher actions that help students develop the will to read, including choice, relevance, and inquiry.

When teachers increase choice of reading materials, the will to read is increased. Providing choice does not guarantee that students will gain a will to read, but it does increase the likelihood. The students in Marla Hampson's (all teacher and student names are pseudonyms) class were studying Johnny Appleseed. Working with her library media specialist, Ms. Hampson collected a number of books that provided information about Johnny Appleseed. Students were allowed to choose which texts they would read. Some students selected texts that caused them struggle, and Ms. Hampson reminded them about their rights as readers, which include abandoning a text with reason. She also noted that students could get help from others if the words

were complicated or if they were not sure about some of the sentences.

Each day, students were invited to select a text to read, either as part of their after-school program or at home. As students' background knowledge grew, so did their ability to read more complex texts. They also noted similarities between texts and areas where the information seemed to contradict. As second grader Javier said, "Not everything about him is true. There are some stories that are made up to make him more important. But he did some good things that helped people."

In addition to choice, relevance increases the will to read. Making reading relevant requires that teachers talk about the why question: Why are we reading this? When the reader wants to know something, to figure something out, to create something, or to explain something, relevance and the will to read are increased. The sixth graders in Andrew Fallon's class were focused on plate tectonics. They understood the role that the plates played in earthquakes and volcanoes. Living in the "ring of fire" made that part of the unit highly relevant for them. However, the standard required that students understand the distribution of fossils, rocks, and ancient climatic zones as evidence for plate tectonics.

Mr. Fallon created a series of simulations to introduce his students to these ideas. They experienced the movement of the simulated plates and immediately started talking about an earthquake. Mr. Fallon interrupted them:

Yep, you're right, there probably would have been an earthquake had this happened. But I want you to take a closer look at the little tiny shells that have moved around and how the different colors, which represent types of rock, are moved. What are you noticing?

As the students started talking, Mr. Fallon placed various fossils on students' desks. They begin to talk about these items, and Mr. Fallon said,

I borrowed these from the natural history museum. They're replicas for teaching. Next week, we're going to the museum to see the real ones. Before we do, I want to make sure that we all understand fossils and how they provide evidence for tectonic plates. We have a few readings about this that we'll focus on over the next couple of days. We'll use our regular partner reading strategy [also known as dyad reading; Brown, Mohr, Wilcox, & Barrett, 2018].

The guidelines were posted on the wall (see Figure 1) and students were paired up, with a stronger and

Figure 1
Guidelines for Partner Reading

- Share one book.
- Sit side by side.
- Track the words with one smooth finger.
- Read aloud together.
- Keep eyes on words.
- Don't read too fast or too slow.
- Write down unknown words.
- Have fun!

Note. From "The Effects of Dyad Reading and Text Difficulty on Third-Graders' Reading Achievement," by L.T. Brown, K.A.J. Mohr, B.R. Wilcox, and T.S. Barrett, 2018, *The Journal of Educational Research*, 111(5), p. 555. Copyright 2017 by Taylor & Francis. Adapted with permission.

weaker reader working together. They immediately got to work, reading the assigned text for the day and talking about rocks and fossils.

Inquiry also increases the likelihood that students will choose to read. For example, essential questions can be used to guide students' thinking while reading, especially when students vote on questions that they are interested in. The fourth graders in Herb Allen's class were sad that one of their classmates had moved. During morning meeting a few days after their friend had moved, Giovanni asked, "Why do people move?" The students spent several minutes talking about this, each sharing ideas and experiences. Then Brianna said, "I think this should be our next question. We should find out some answers and share." The class agreed that this was a worthy question, and Mr. Allen committed to finding information for them.

The collection of readings included information about migration and immigration, witness protection programs, and personal narratives about moving to a new city, among others. Students pored over the titles, identifying books they wanted to read. All of the reading was done at home, but class time was reserved for students to share their thinking about the question. Abdullahi said,

I think a lot of people move because of opportunities, like for a better life. It can be sad for the people who don't go, but it can be both sad and happy for the people who move to a new place.

Of course, there are other ways to create inquiry opportunities for students, but essential questions seem to help with the will to read.

The Thrill of Comprehension

Thus far, we have noted the value of both skill and will when it comes to reading comprehension. These are important considerations, but we do not believe that they are sufficient to ensure that students deeply comprehend complex texts. Reading has to be a thrill, and we believe that means students need to do something with the information they have gained from the text. In other words, content area texts need to serve a purpose for the student. This is not simply a passive, consumer approach to reading. Comprehending means that students become active producers.

One way to accomplish this is to ask students, “What are you inspired to do?” after they read a text. Again, choice matters. The range of options might be limited as students learn and experience the thrill of reading comprehension. Over time, choices can be expanded and students can think about what they are inspired to do as a result of their reading. Of course, there are times when you need to assign a writing task, but imagine if the door was opened and students were able to identify what inspired them. Maybe they would want to engage in a debate with others or make a presentation or do research. Who knows what students will be inspired to do when given a chance?

Richard Anderson (personal communication, June 30, 2018), a pioneer in reading research, argued that we needed new metaphors for the purpose, or thrill, of reading, such as storyteller, explainer, or arguer. Let’s return to the class studying Johnny Appleseed. Ms. Hampson used these three roles to inspire her students. As she explained,

When we finish all of our reading about Johnny Appleseed, you’ll have some choices. You might want to be a storyteller. That’s a person who uses true information, like the information from the books we’ve read, and then adds information to make the story come alive. Not all of the information has to be historically true. You can use your imagination to write dialogue. But it has to be reasonable. It would not be reasonable to say that Johnny Appleseed was captured by aliens or that he sailed to America on the *Titanic*. Storytellers provide us with information, and they help us imagine the experience.

Ms. Hampson continued,

Or you could be an explainer. Explainers stick to the facts. They teach us things that matter and they make sure that we understand the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the information. They make sure that they explain it in a way that we can remember. Explaining to a younger sister, brother, or cousin is different from explaining to Ms. Jimenez, the school librarian. Explainers need to know a lot of stuff because people like to ask explainers questions.

Finally, Ms. Hampson explained the arguer:

You can also be an arguer, but you have to start with something that is not simply a fact. It wouldn’t be very effective to argue that Johnny Appleseed planted grapes or corn. Arguers select topics that have some controversy or differences in ideas. Arguers have an opinion and provide reasons for that opinion. They try to get the rest of us to agree.

The students in Ms. Hampson’s class selected from these three roles and knew that they would have time the week following their readings about Johnny Appleseed to share with their groups. They were inspired to reread texts, take notes, collect information, and prepare for the experience the following week. They became active producers and selected their roles carefully. In doing so, students better comprehended the texts they were reading.

Combining the Skill, Will, and Thrill of Comprehension

We have focused on each aspect of reading comprehension instruction in turn, but that may leave you thinking that these are discrete and separate activities that are linear in nature. To dispel that myth, let’s take a look inside Bridget Gengler’s third-grade class. They were focused on the upcoming Veterans Day. As Ms. Gengler explained,

It’s more than a day off school. It’s a holiday to recognize some very specific people. Unlike holidays that recognize people who have died, this holiday focuses on people who are alive. Are you interested to know who gets a holiday in their honor?

The students were excited to get started, in part because Ms. Gengler was enthusiastic and made the information sound interesting to them.

There were a number of skills that were taught and practiced throughout the unit. Ms. Gengler had

modeled annotation, for example, and students annotated the complex texts that they read. The students had been taught how to take notes and to create graphic organizers (see Figure 2 for a sample). They had previous lessons on fluency and vocabulary, including word solving. The students knew that when they encountered an unfamiliar word, they could use context clues, word parts or morphology, or resources. They also understood how to summarize information and ask questions. All of these skills were put to the test when they encountered a complex piece of text that explained veterans and Veterans Day.

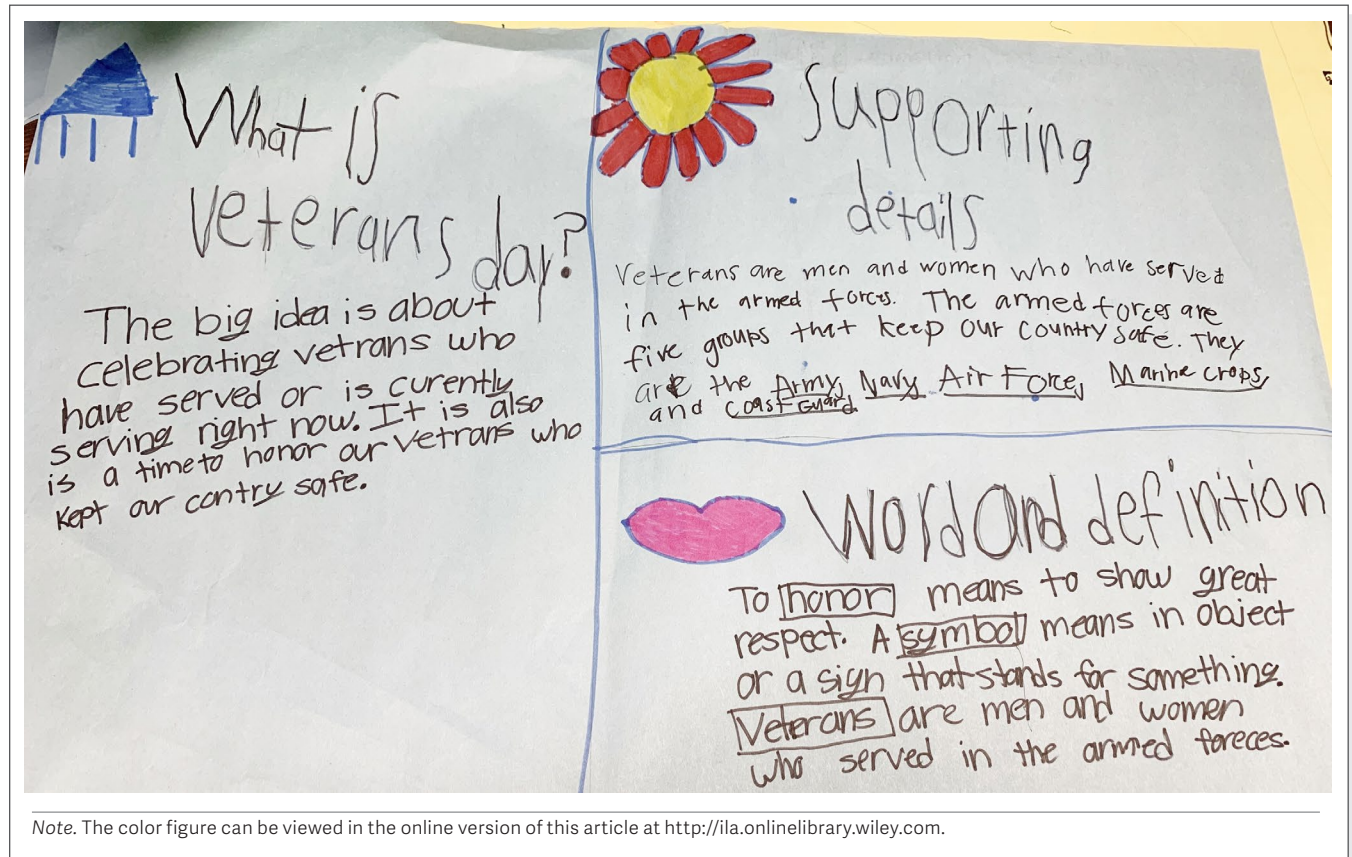
The skill aspect of the learning was not in isolation. Embedded in the experience was a recognition of the need to attend to the will to read. Ms. Gengler's framing of the lesson helped, but so did the fact that students would have a day off of school the following week and no one had really explained why there were specific school holidays. Students

also knew that there was a celebration at their school and that they could present at the celebration if they wanted.

As part of the design of the experience, students understood that they would have opportunities to produce things as a result of their reading. They were invited to write letters. Some wrote to military veterans, and others wrote to explain the day. Figure 3 shows a sample letter written by a third grader to a veteran. Some wanted to present at the school celebration; others did not. Some wanted to share their understanding with family members; others wanted to create posters comparing Veterans Day with Remembrance Day, held on the same day in other countries.

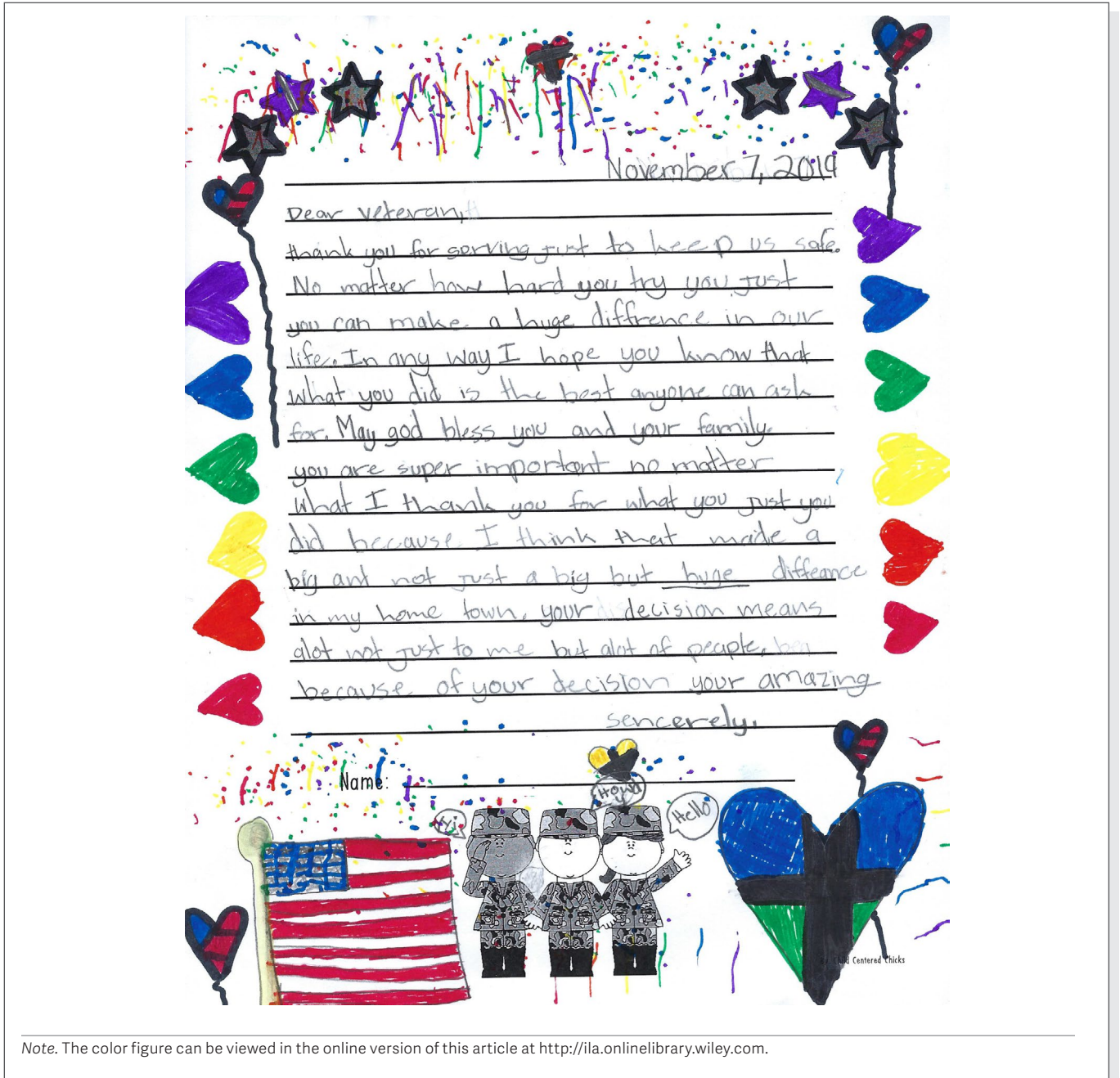
What could have been an ordinary, compliance-oriented task turned into an opportunity to deepen students' understanding about the holiday and, at the same time, allow them to practice their comprehension skills, build background and vocabulary knowledge,

Figure 2
Graphic Organizer for Veterans Day



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Figure 3
Student Letter



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

show them that reading was cool, and reinforce their ability to take action in the world. To our thinking, this is what comprehension is all about. As P. David Pearson (personal communication, June 2018) noted, the goal of comprehension is not comprehension; it is doing something with the knowledge gained. The goal of comprehension is to take action in the world and to

make a difference. This is why we all work so hard to ensure that students can, and do, read informational texts.

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