



Checking For Understanding

Overview

Rationale for Change Idea: Content area teachers can use this change idea to reassure students that **comprehension snags are normal** and that students can confront these snags by asking themselves some questions, applying “fix-up” strategies, and continuing to try to make sense of the reading. This change idea supports students’ persistence in reading difficult material. Skilled readers periodically check their comprehension or ask themselves whether what they are reading makes sense. Students often do not understand—much yet use—this process. For them, comprehension may seem to be a yes/no issues: Either they do or do not understand what they are reading.

See also the “encouraging students to use different reading strategies” change idea for a complementary strategy.

Who Benefits: All students, particularly those who may not persist when readings are particularly challenging or complex.

When Used and Why?

During every reading activity to help students assess that they understand what they are reading

Time Required

Introducing and explaining the skill to students may take 5 to 10 minutes and reinforcing the idea of checking one’s comprehension should take no more than a minute before making each reading assignment.

Once the strategy becomes automatic, stopping periodically to check on comprehension should not extend students’ reading time by much, and the added time will be rewarded with deeper levels of understanding.

Connection to Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) Goals and Priorities

Understandings and Expectations			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1: Planning standards-aligned content	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4: Evidence of student learning
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2: Equitable instruction	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5: Collective efficacy
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3: Student engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	6: Equitable and inclusive learning environment
English Language Arts Instructional Practices			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Understanding the text	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Critiquing the text
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Responding to the text	<input type="checkbox"/>	Producing text

Note. There are multiple ways to implement the change idea on checking comprehension. The ideas below for teacher preparation and implementation are just one way of thinking about this work.

Attention to Equity			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Reflect on one’s own biases to mitigate negative impact on curriculum selection, instruction, and relationships with students, families, and colleagues. (U6)*	<input type="checkbox"/>	Emphasize assets, resilience, joy, and resistance of historically marginalized groups to provide a more comprehensive representation of their lived experiences. (U6)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use culturally relevant and sustaining approaches across grade levels and content areas for all students, with a critical eye toward serving those from historically marginalized groups. (U1, U2)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sustain students’ cultural, linguistic, and literate practices while providing instruction that promotes flexibility in their ability to navigate different cultures and contexts. (U1, U2, U3, U6)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Position students for success as knowledge producers rather than consumers. (U1, U2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use perspective-taking to develop an understanding of the factors that influence varied points of view. (U2, U3)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Draw on students’ interests and culture to shape curriculum, instruction, and assessment. (U1, U6)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Question the single story/status quo that sustains societal inequities. (U2)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use language to discuss asset-based approaches to teaching and learning. (U6)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Center the experiences, voices, histories, perspectives, and dignity of Native People and People of Color. (U6)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Foster a nurturing and collaborative learning community where students seek feedback from teachers and peers, assess their own learning, and set goals. (U3, U4)		

*LBUSD Understandings Continuum

Checking Comprehension in Social Studies and Language Arts

Content area reading assignments for middle school students often require deeper levels of comprehension than students have had to use in earlier grades.

Even strong readers may not have learned how to read critically and are not familiar with the structural and organizational features typical of content area reading materials.

Social studies and language arts teachers do not have to teach reading fundamentals.

But if students are to do well in these subjects, teachers may have to support their acquisition of more sophisticated critical reading and thinking skills and their understandings of the requirements of reading in the content areas.

Being aware of one's comprehension is the foundation of these necessary skills.

Guidelines for Coaches: Introducing the “Check for Understanding” Change Idea (“Checking Comprehension”)

Why the Change Idea Is Important: Explaining the Change Idea to Teachers

Introduce the change idea to teachers as a way for them to help their students become more expert at the **content area reading skills** that most likely were not taught in earlier grades.

Emphasize that this is not the same as teaching reading fundamentals and that if students are still having difficulty decoding, they may need services from a reading specialist.

Ask the teachers how many students entering middle school can read a map or chart well or know the difference between a simile and a metaphor.

Help teachers identify the skills and strategies they use when they read—either in material related to their content areas or in general.

In addition to learning facts, one of their goals for teaching in their content area should be to help students become better critical readers.

Being a critical reader in social studies and language arts requires that students check their understanding periodically as they read and draw on a set of strategies to “fix up” comprehension when it falters.

Engage with teachers in a discussion about the following realities:

Reading instruction in elementary school may not have attended to the critical reading skills that students need in the content areas.

Questions teachers asked most likely required a surface-level understanding of what was read, and reading materials were likely not focused on content area reading.

Many middle school students read so quickly that they do not check their comprehension and complete assignments without fully understanding what they have read.

Other students read very slowly and miss the thread of what they are trying to read.

Still other readers have convinced themselves that they are bad readers and that reading is not for them.

Something to consider: A conversation with teachers about the different ways in which middle school students often justify their reading challenges can be especially valuable in the context of the Pulse data; it does not have to cover terms such as “mindset” or “passive failure”¹ but should help teachers understand the importance of helping students develop tools and strategies such as these to self-regulate during reading.

Preparing for Implementing the Change Idea With Students

Teacher Preparation to Introduce the “Checking and Fixing Reading Comprehension” Change Idea

Think about your own reading processes, especially when reading difficult texts, and identify strategies you have used.

Focus especially on reading challenging texts, whether they are in your content area or not.

If you have time, actually read a challenging piece of text and think about your reading.

Really **push yourself** because you want to experience what many students encounter when they read content area texts

Do not worry about labeling all the strategies you normally use; just try to describe them in your own words.

- » Keep track of what you do and how having reading challenges makes you feel.

Identify a short piece of content area text that will be conceptually accessible but still challenging to your students.

Be sure that most students will be familiar with the topic being discussed.

¹ Psychologist Carol Dweck was among the first to use the term “passive failure” to identify behaviors that students use to sabotage their learning—for example, they act out, withdraw, or play the class clown. In other words, they have convinced themselves that cannot learn, and they try to avoid the mental struggles of trying and failing at difficult, usually academic, tasks by simply not trying at all. Boys’ displays of passive failure are usually overt and may be disruptive, but girls experience feelings of passive failure as well.

Consider issues such as vocabulary, text density, availability of auxiliary resources such as glossaries, sentence structures, and use of graphics.

Identify the areas of the text that might cause students difficulty and how to model them for students.

Teacher Preparation

Use available data to determine where and when student reading comprehension is breaking down.

Find appropriate selections of texts from the unit that are complex enough that students need to slow down to do a closer read of the text and/or that they need to gather information from the text to do further work.

Read through the text and determine an explicit purpose for reading connected to unit and lesson goals that will guide the strategy work that students will do. Identify specific points in the text where comprehension may break down and anticipate possible barriers and misconceptions that readers might have across the text.

Consider the level of scaffolding required for students based on text and task complexity and students' ability to monitor and fix comprehension as they read. This may include the following:

High support – Teaching students to monitor their comprehension by checking in with themselves throughout a text. Modeling and gradually releasing the use of specific fix-up reading strategies that students do not seem to use on a regular basis. Or modeling and releasing the use of multiple fix up strategies across a text.

Medium-level support – Identifying points in the text that will be most challenging for students and having them stop, check, and possibly fix their comprehension at these points. Or having students pause their independent work to turn and talk with a partner to share when they stopped, checked, and possibly fixed their comprehension.

Low support – Providing a purpose or prompt for reading the text and reminding students of the need to monitor and possibly use fix-up strategies during the reading process. Or after students read independently, have them share either with a partner, small group, or whole class when they stopped, checked, and possibly fixed their comprehension.

Decide how you will introduce the text and task along with the purpose of reading this particular text.

Possible Implementation Routine

1. Introduce the text, task, and purpose for the reading.

Remind students (refer to chart/rubric) of the work they were taught about monitoring and fixing-up reading comprehension and how those skills will be important to today's work.

Celebrate recent student successes with monitoring and fixing up comprehension (i.e., seeing students stop and pause as they read, seeing students annotating, hearing students talk to each other about a part in the text that is confusing)

Students should think about the purpose of reading and how they can plan for monitoring their comprehension as they go.

Teacher provides the appropriate level of support (see above) based on the complexity of the text/content and task and the students' ability to monitor and fix up comprehension.

When students have completed reading the assigned text, have students share based on the required level of support:

High- and medium-level support – Have various partnerships share where they recognized that they had lost meaning or were confused, what strategies they used, and how those strategies helped fix their comprehension.

Medium- and low-level support – Ask text- or content-specific questions that require the students to show their comprehension of the text. As a follow up, you can ask where they may have realized they were not making meaning of the text and how they fixed up their comprehension.

Repeat this process with specific, individual reading fix-up strategies or trying on multiple fix-up strategies with a complex text.

Sample Teacher Implementation Routine

1. **Introduce the “checking for understanding” change idea** as a way for students to become more aware of the challenges they face as they read difficult texts and a way for students to overcome those challenges.

Explain to students that even expert readers often encounter reading challenges, but part of what makes them experts is that they (a) ask themselves what problem they are having and (b) know about and be able to use strategies to address their problems.

Optional: Tell students what you know about your own reading strategies.

To introduce the change idea to your students, find a piece of content-relevant text or a section of the course textbook appropriate for modeling reading strategies.

The text should be accessible conceptually while still presenting some reading challenges for the students.²

Prepare to read the text aloud by identifying places where you will stop to model the strategy use and verbalize your thinking.

Read aloud as students follow along and point out text features such as terms, dates, or vocabulary **while also stopping at more complex components** such as sections where an idea or concept is being developed or a complex rhetorical device is used.

Model that at such points, skilled readers slow down to ask themselves whether they are understanding, whether the text is making sense, and whether they need to apply fix-up strategies.

Emphasize the importance of slowing down, even stopping, because some students think that reading must be smooth and continuous and give up when that is not the case.

Briefly discuss what the fix-up strategies might be and name them:

Rereading

Subvocalizing or “whisper reading”

Maybe even pointing to each word as you read (not allowed in earlier grades but if it helps, then it is good to go)

Checking meaning of unfamiliar words, looking at context, or applying morphemic analysis

Researching unfamiliar concepts, including looking things up on the Web

Checking the glossary or other learning aids in textbooks or online

Asking for help from fellow students or the teacher

Stress to students that sometimes it is essential **to slow their reading down** to check where they are in the comprehension process and that doing so is different from just giving up.

Emphasize that when experienced readers read, they

periodically **stop to check their comprehension**,

do not give up when they are not understanding because they know this is normal when texts are challenging, and

select from a **set of dependable strategies** to fix their comprehension.

² See Alston, C. L., & Baker, L. M. (2014). Reading for teaching: What we notice when we look at literature. *English Journal*, 103(4), 62–67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24484222>

Make it clear that the **number and kind of strategies they use will not be evaluated** in any way but that learning to use fix-up strategies will improve their reading skills and **better reading skills will improve their content area learning**.

Consider displaying the different reading strategies in the classroom to remind students of the strategic options they have when their reading is difficult.

Remind students that they know—and should use—different strategies when they read and that they know strategies to fix up comprehension snags.

Assessing the Change Idea

Students' comprehension should improve, although they may take longer to complete assignments in class because they are actually slowing down and applying different reading strategies. They should also be able—and willing—to talk about their reading processes, the challenges they encountered in their text material, and their strategies for overcoming reading.

Ideally, students will begin to perceive themselves as better, more capable readers. They may still not like to read, but they will likely feel more confident in their abilities in all content areas.

Teacher self-assessment/discussion questions: Reflect on how well the students understood the **concept** that readers slow down and even stop, ask themselves about their comprehension, and apply specific fix up strategies. Reflect on whether students actually begin to adopt this way of reading their content area material.

Do students recognize the value of using this strategy as a way to increase their comprehension?

Do students say that they apply different strategies as they read?

Are students who apply different reading strategies able to talk at a high level about what they have read, that is, does their discussion show that they have understood what they have read?

Do students who use different reading strategies routinely seem better able to understand **what the class was learning about**?

What proportion of the class seems to understand?

Do students who use different reading strategies seem to feel more willing to share their ideas with peers and discuss their thinking in class (e.g., they offer ideas, refer back to sections of what they have read, may disagree with a classmate or with the author of what they read)?

After introducing and discussing the change idea, how many students overall seem to be more aware of important text features that contribute to comprehension?

What incorrect ideas, if any, do students have about reading (e.g., good readers always read quickly)?

How might you dispel those incorrect ideas?

What objections, if any, did students seem to have about using the change idea?

How might you address these objections ?

What seemed to work well in the way the comprehension monitoring and fix-up process was introduced, modeled, and structured for students ?

It would be helpful to log some responses to these reflection questions in your implementation tracker. (These questions can be discussion points during coaching in addition to the general implementation questions in the coaches handbook)

Rubric for evaluating Checking for Understanding Change Idea

Rubric for Teacher Evaluation of Student Work			
4 – Excellent	3 – Proficient	2 - Adequate	1 – Not satisfactory
Student identifies when they have lost comprehension and consistently apply multiple reading comprehension strategies to fix their reading.	Student is mostly able to identify when they have lost comprehension and can apply a few different reading comprehension strategies to fix their reading.	Student sometimes identifies when they have lost comprehension and applies one or two reading comprehension strategies to fix their reading.	Student rarely identifies when they have lost comprehension and cannot apply reading comprehension strategies with any regularity to fix their reading.
Student is able to comprehend the text fully and consistently refers to the text in talking and writing.	Student is able generally to comprehend the text and often refers to the text in talking and writing.	Student is able to comprehend parts of the text and sometimes refers to the text in talking and writing.	Student is not able to comprehend the text and rarely refers to the text in talking and writing.

(Optional) Discussion Rubric for Teacher Evaluation of Checking for Understanding Change Idea

Possible Rubric for Coaches to Use With Teachers in Discussion (Not a Measurement Item)			
Teacher assessment	Possible student responses ^a		
Students who seemed to understand and to use multiple reading strategies understood what the class was learning about today.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students knew how to use multiple reading strategies and can talk and write accurately about what they read.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students seem to refer to the posted list of strategies and talk in terms of the strategies they use.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students seemed to be using the critical reading skills that have been modeled for them.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%

Possible Rubric for Coaches to Use With Teachers in Discussion (Not a Measurement Item)			
Teacher assessment	Possible student responses ^a		
If students did not understand the text they read today, they seemed to have different strategies to try without prompting.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students who seemed to understand the change idea and use different strategies seemed to feel comfortable sharing their thinking today in class (e.g., offered ideas, disagreed with each other, elaborated on each other’s comments).	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students who understand the different reading strategies took part in classroom discussion .	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students who understand the different reading strategies had little difficulty completing today’s writing assignment about what they have been reading and discussing.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%

^a To the extent possible, estimate the percentage of students who fall into the “< 50%” category and note those who may need extra help or reteaching.

Optional Rubric for Student Self-Evaluation in Social Studies and Language Arts			
Student statement	Possible student responses ^a		
I understood what we were learning about today.	Yes	No	Sort of ^a
I am aware of the different reading strategies I could use to help me understand the text we were reading today.	Yes	No	Sort of
Applying different reading strategies helped me prepare for our class discussion or writing assignment (e.g., “I inferred what the author meant in that paragraph....”	Yes	No	Sort of
When I didn’t understand the text we read today, I knew what I could do to figure it out (either on my own or with help).	Yes	No	Sort of

^a Select “sort of” to indicate “to some extent” or “somewhat but not as much as I’d like or need to.”

