

Embedding and Comprehension: a resource for ACE

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Embedding and Comprehension introduces strategies that will enable ACE tutors to help learners get more meaning from the texts they use on ACE courses.

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What is comprehension?

Comprehension is the process of getting meaning from texts. It is about understanding. Learners need to read many different texts as part of their daily life — as well as in an ACE course. A text is anything with which we make meaning, including books, handouts, instructions, notes on a whiteboard, websites, a YouTube movie clip, a map, smells, a poem, graphs and charts, a dance sequence, textures, a piece of weaving.

What do learners need to be able to do to understand what they read?

Good readers engage actively with what they are reading the whole time they are reading it to get the most meaning they can out of a text — and they usually do this without thinking about it. Less skilled and confident readers need to use active reading strategies consciously to make sense of what they are reading. They need to:

1. **make connections with their prior knowledge**, that is, what they already know about the subject and the wider world.
2. **predict** what might be in the text. Predicting is using what we know to make a guess before we read, or while we are reading. Learners might predict based on the title of the text, how it looks, who published it, or the subject matter. This helps them formulate questions and to think actively about the text before they begin to read it, or while they are reading.
3. **check their understanding as they go along**, using a variety of approaches such as re-reading sections that don't make sense, asking themselves questions about the texts, or reading on to the end of a sentence, paragraph or section if they are not sure to see if they can get more meaning.
4. **review** what they have learned, to check their understanding overall and identify any gaps in knowledge.

How can tutors help learners understand more of what they read?

While teaching subject knowledge, tutors can explain to learners that practising different ways to get more meaning out of texts will help them both during their ACE course and in the future when they read other texts.

Strategy 1: Make connections with prior knowledge

Adults, especially, find it easier to understand texts about new subjects when they can relate what they are reading to what they already know or have experienced.

Checking out what people know at the start of sessions is important. Tutors need to build in ways to connect to prior knowledge at the start of new topics because some people may need encouragement to talk about what they already know. Tutors need to be aware that learners from diverse backgrounds and cultures will draw on different knowledge and experiences.

Sometimes learners may not have the prior knowledge to make sense of a text; for example, someone who has never been fishing may struggle to understand instructions about fishing (but may be able to get clues on what they mean from a photograph).



Here is a suggestion for making connections with prior learning:

At the start of a subject or topic, ask learners to talk in pairs or small groups about what they already know about it.

Making connections in a parenting class

Sue is starting a ten week parenting course. The second session is on sleep — always an issue for new parents. She intends to give out written notes but wants the group to think about their own experiences first. She asks the group to talk in groups of three about what they believe regarding babies and sleep. She gives them some prompt questions to get them talking :

- Are little babies rocked to sleep or put down by themselves?
- Are babies left to cry when they don't sleep? Where do newborn babies sleep?
- What about six month old babies? What time are babies put down to sleep in your family?

When the groups report back to each other, Sue summarises their experiences and records them on a flip chart.

Strategy 2: Predict what might be in the text



Here are some suggestions for predicting text:

1. Hand out a text and ask learners to look at the title, any headings, layout, illustrations, and other text features to get an initial idea of the content before they start reading it fully.
2. Ask your learners an open-ended question to direct their predictions about the content or perspective of the text. Useful questions could be, 'Given this title, what do you think the passage will be about?' or, 'What might be covered in this text – and what might not?'

Predicting in a parenting class

At the start of Session Three, which is about managing toddlers, Sue handed out copies of an article she downloaded from the Internet, called *Taming Temper Tantrums: Tips that Really Work*. She asked course participants to say, by looking at the title, what ideas might be in the article; then turn to their neighbour and tell them.

The learners predicted this article would give them practical tips for managing tantrums. A few people wondered if it would give useful ideas for managing tantrums in older children. The website was from mumsontop.co.nz, so others wondered if both mothers and fathers could use the same techniques.

Then the group read the first three paragraphs. Sue stopped the group and asked learners to predict again what might be in the rest of the article.

Strategy 3: Check understanding



Here are some suggestions for checking understanding:

When tutors get learners to look at a course text, they can:

1. Clearly explain what the learners are to do with the text; for example, read to get a few key points, read to get the instructions to learn what to do next, read to get in-depth knowledge of a subject.
2. Ask learners to stop at the end of a section and talk over the main points of what they have understood with the person next to them.
3. Read aloud parts of the text that are difficult or ask for a volunteer in the group to do this. Discuss why the section is difficult and re-read if necessary so it makes sense; for example, by using different phrasing or taking account of punctuation.
4. Ask everyone in the group to focus on one sentence or paragraph. Ask everyone in the group to answer silently for themselves “I think this means.....” Wait for a minute and then ask people to share their understanding.
5. Get learners to underline unknown words or circle words they don’t understand. Put learners into groups of four to come up with definitions and meanings for those words.
6. Provide a glossary of key terms for this subject for learners to use, as well as a dictionary or other resources, so learners can look up words they don’t know. This could be built up as learners identify other words they don’t understand during the sessions.
7. Encourage learners to re-read, or to continue to the end of the sentence or paragraph if they are not sure, to try to get meaning.
8. Encourage learners to guess at unknown words based on clues like the first few letters of the word and what might make sense.

Checking understanding in a parenting class

Sue hands out a copy of an article from the web about family routines and celebrations. She explains that it contains some new ideas about setting family rules that will be useful for the next two sessions.

In order to model how learners need to create questions in their heads while they are reading Sue reads the first three paragraphs aloud, stopping periodically to ‘think aloud’ as she reads,

‘Mmm that’s a new word. Not sure what it means. I’ll read the next paragraph and see if they explain it.’

*She keeps reading aloud but then stops, re-reads a sentence and says,
‘I think they mean ...’*

Strategy 4: Review what has been learned using K—W—L

K-W-L is a simple strategy for tutors to use that combines linking to prior knowledge, actively reading with a purpose in mind, and reviewing what has been learned. It helps learners identify what they know already, work out what they want to learn, and keep track of what they have learned. K-W-L also helps a tutor work out if there are subject knowledge gaps to fill.

1. Start with a brainstorming exercise or an activity in pairs or small groups. Give them a starter question such as ‘what do you already know about this subject?’.
2. Next, have learners think about and record what they want to learn from the text.
3. While they are reading, get readers to record what they are learning.
4. At the end, have learners review what they have learned and what else they need to know. This is a good topic for learners to discuss in groups.

A K-W-L chart can be created on a whiteboard, on a flip chart, in a handout or be included in a course workbook, for example:

K: what we know	W: what we want to learn	L: what we learned

Know—Want to know—Learn in a parenting class

Sue uses K—W—L as the basis of her last two sessions on managing behaviour. Parents work in pairs. Sue has articles on toddlers, pre-schoolers and managing teenagers. Each pair takes an article that related to their family and fills out the K—W—L chart before they read, while they read and at the end. After each pair works through the chart, the pairs get into groups of four and share what they have learned. They may add to their notes. There is a group discussion about the K—W—L process.

K: what we know	W: what we want to learn	L: what we learned
Setting limits for our kids is important but hard; its easy to get angry Families set different limits What I am doing now is not working because I am always shouting but they still don't do what I want.	Ways to get our children to do the right thing without getting angry or frustrated How to handle our kids at different ages	To use time out when the kids don't do as they are told To leave the room if we are getting angry and go away to think Have to praise their good behaviour more Need to focus on one thing at time, not give them long lists of things to do all at once