Reading comprehension to me is about the gradual release of responsibility to the students as they gain expertise. It is about teaching the children strategies of great significance and depth over time, and giving the students time, choice and the opportunity to have a voice. I love introducing children to the fantasy world of books by describing the scene from the Mary Poppins film where the characters literally ‘jump’ into a chalk drawing. It is a portal type world of fantasy and imagination and I use the same sense of magic, awe and imagery with children when introducing a text. We look at the pictures and delight in the use and play of words.

Books to relish and become lost in for me include Wombat Stew, Where the Forest Meets the Sea, Where the Wild Things Are, There Was An Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly, Possum Magic and The Giving Tree. Some chapter books I love to immerse children in include anything by Roald Dahl, The Magic Faraway Tree, The Goosebumps series, and anything by Paul Jennings. I actively invite the children to respond to texts through creative reflection, conversation and collaboration.

Proficient readers construct meaning through activating a range of strategies. These strategies include prior knowledge, creating images, drawing inferences, asking questions, determining significant events and synthesising. So to guide my students to become great readers I navigate my teaching to gradually release the students towards independence.

After reading a couple of pages of ‘Where the Forrest Meets the Sea’ by Jeannie Baker, I paused and asked the children to lie on the floor with the lights off. I played a CD of tropical jungle noises including birds, waterfalls and insects. I asked the children to imagine they were the boy in the story embarking on a magical adventure in the Daintree Rainforest. I asked them to smell, feel, see, taste and hear the rainforest. At this point I even caught little smiles and a giggle on a couple of absorbed faces. Later when I asked the children what they were giggling at, one child replied, ‘A butterfly tickled my nose!’ Another child replied, ‘Fish were playing chasey with my toes in the stream!’ I knew by creating images, the vision or ‘portal’ into the world of the book became more alive for them. Later the children drew on their experience in the rainforest when explaining the creating images strategy of comprehension.

I believe modelling and explicit application of a strategy is of paramount importance. Children need to learn to articulate and become aware of what goes on inside their heads when they read. They need to understand the importance of internal dialogue and how to bring it to the fore, to think aloud the mental processes. To do this I ask deep questions to help children articulate thought processes. It also allows other children those ‘light bulb’ moments and helps to build vocabulary.

Children then need time to practise these strategies, to put their own twist to it, see how it fits and changes over time. They need to have conversations with others in groups and be able to ask questions. They need to be supported with feedback in a supportive environment.

Children will gradually become more independent using the strategies and will need time to practise more autonomously in their own reading. I like to converse and chat with students as I hear them read to encourage them when they have used a strategy correctly. I like to support their think aloud strategies and correct any misconceptions using honest feedback creating common language.

The children’s thinking becomes more flexible and open minded when reading comprehension strategies are instilled. I find that children can apply their learning of strategies to different text types and other curriculum areas. For example during a unit of work on Anzac Day, students made connections from the book ‘What was it like in the War Grandpa?’ with their own family experiences.
recalling stories passed through the generations.

In my classroom Silent Reading is replaced by what we call ‘Book Projects’. Book Projects is a designated time where reading is fostered in a fun, interactive way and where the children have ownership in responding to the text at varying levels of complexity. This is just perfect for my 2/3/4 multi age classroom. It is open ended and engaging. The children are excited and enthusiastic to read, even many of my reluctant readers!

After initially finding Silent Reading a chore and constant battle to keep the time ‘silent’ I decided to forgo the traditional rules of Silent Reading and adapt it to what I now believe is a much more meaningful way to enjoy books and understand them.

Book Projects begin with the children selecting a book to read, either on their own or in a small group. The books can be selected from the library, the class levelled books, or books from home. This stage of the process is a sight to behold! Groups of children all taking turns to choral read, putting on the most dramatic of character voices is invigorating for any teacher. Even watching the way they read non fiction books is amazing. Many like to play ‘teachers’ and use my pointer to look at the labels, diagrams and information boxes.

Next the children record in their ‘Book Project Journals’ the title of their text, a short book report and then the title of the project they have chosen to show their understanding of the book. This is where the reading of a text truly comes ALIVE! This gives me evidence of the child’s understanding of plot, character and setting as well as their literal and inferential understanding of the story line.

The children have:
- Written plays
- Made dioramas
- Created claymations
- Made PowerPoint slideshows
- Written Sing Star songs
- Authored poetry
- Written the next chapter
- Filmed and interviewed a character
- Written and performed puppet shows
- Made Find-a-words using key words from the book
- Written a postcard to a friend telling them about the book
- Written who am I clues for characters in the book
- Researched the meaning and origin of interesting words
- Retold the story as a comic or an advertisement
- Written an email to the teacher
- Retold the story and given it a rating
- Created a spell search e.g.- finding all the ‘ai’ words
- Retold the story from a different point of view
- Retold the story as an autobiography
- Made a story quiz for a friend
- Painted a portrait of the main character
- Written a promotion campaign for a movie about the book
- Written a letter to the author of the book
- Recorded a radio advertisement on the Interactive White Board
- Compared versions of the same story
- Constructed a Lego setting of the story
- Designed a travel brochure,
  - And many, many more

The children are animated, lively and bursting with eagerness during this phase of Book Projects. The classroom is a buzz with collaborative learning, peer teaching and unbridled enthusiasm.

Once the children have had time to make/do a project about their book, there is share time. Share time is a really powerful and important piece to this lesson. Share time allows the children to talk about books, authors and comprehension of reading in a fun, non threatening way. The children love looking at what others have done and often the sharing sparks interests in other books by the same author, a genre, or a series. This provided the opportunity for rich conversations which led to deeper awareness
I love how engaged my children are during Book Project time. They are learning in ways that are meaningful to them through Multiple Intelligences and Blooms Taxonomy activities. They are learning to be critical, independent and invigorated by reading. This twist on an old favourite allows all the new technology to be incorporated such as the IWB, video, digital camera, recording and more.

When setting up Book Projects, I would read the class a book and model some of the activities the children now choose independently. For example one of the first books we read together was ‘Wombat Stew.’ I then modelled how to write the title into the Book Project Journal and the short book report. I then told the class we would all be doing the same activity until we were independent enough to choose our own. I had bought vanilla and chocolate custard, mint leave lollies, jewby lolly bugs and other yummies that the book details. We sang the song and into a big pot we added the ingredients. The children wrote the recipe and enjoyed some ‘Wombat Stew’. I modelled lots of Book Project ideas based on Multiple Intelligences and Blooms’ to show the children’s comprehension of texts before they scaffolded their own learning and became independent.

It is a lot of fun and you will see that even your most reluctant of readers will participate. Some of my more reserved boy readers can’t get enough of Book Project time! Book Projects are open ended, non-threatening and allow children of varying academic levels to succeed and show their understandings in an engaging way.

And with all the seriousness with which teachers approach reading, has the magic and joy been lost? This is my attempt to find that magic and joy again, I create a working, literate environment to get children to think, question, read and write with delight whilst instilling a deep understanding of reading comprehension strategies.

I am passionate about the acquisition of Literacy in young children and I believe children need to feel connected to the task. It must be meaningful, achievable and have an obvious purpose for the child. Implementing Book Projects in my classroom has provided this opportunity for my students.

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