

Emergent Comprehension and its Significance in Early Years

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Abstract

Various contemporary reading theories favour the view that literacy is developmental in nature. Hence, children's early experiences of reading and comprehension are equally valuable in the development of reading comprehension before they begin going to schools. The present paper builds this view by reviewing and reflecting on various related researches and practice relation. The paper also discusses the quality of early reading and comprehension practices in the Indian context in the light of related theories.

INTRODUCTION

“In every enterprise the beginning is the main thing, especially in dealing with a young and tender nature (Mason, 1984, p. 505).”

In the light of this statement, understanding comprehension in early years of one's life is of great significance. The quest for meaning based reading instructions is not new. The great Indian thinkers like Tagore and Gandhi also stressed upon reading with meaning. The

construct used to understand comprehension in early years of life by modern researchers is 'Emergent Comprehension'. This paper presents researches about the importance of young children's early experiences with comprehension.

Smith (1977) argued that reading is not a matter of decoding but consists of bringing meaning to print. Reading comprehension consists of two cognitive insights that written language is meaningful and that

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written language is different from spoken language. For a long time, comprehension was the focus of studies on higher grades. Emergent literacy researchers started focusing on meaning making by children while studying primary grades and the period even before that. However, early comprehension was not overtly studied by them. According to Morrow and Tracey (2002), Duke and Carlisle (2011) and Dooley and Matthews (2009), very little effort was made to understand the development of comprehension in young learners prior to their entry into formal school settings. Therefore, it is clear that comprehension was a neglected area in the studies on early years of life which is a matter of concern because the roots of reading comprehension are laid very early.

Early experiences play a crucial role in children's progress towards effective literacy learning including comprehension. Heath (1991) also described how children involve in functional aspect of literacy in their communities without any access to books or stories, they just learn from one's personal experiences of using language. Yet, the first years of schooling break these patterns of using language for functional purposes and instead present simplified language in the form of lessons. Most successful readers are those who acquire the strongest literacy foundation during early childhood years. Dooley (2010) shared the view that comprehension emerges along with other literacy skills

and should not be ignored. Therefore, it is significant to understand what comprehension means in early years of life; how young learners make meaning and how early experiences of comprehension contribute to their literacy development. To transact with written texts, readers integrate language cueing systems—the semantic /pragmatic system (meaning cues), the syntactic system (grammar cues) and the graphophonic system (graphic and sound cues)—with their knowledge of the world to infer and predict meaning.

Historically, progressive thinkers like Tagore and Gandhi emphasised upon reading with meaning. They believed that literacy development is a route to human emancipation; therefore it has to be based upon meaning making. However, researches in the Indian context reveal that reading is primarily taken as decoding (Aggarwal, 2001, Kaushik, 2004; Sinha, 2010). Comprehension instructions are often disregarded in primary grades in India. Focusing on the skills related to decoding at the cost of comprehension has led to severe consequences like poor comprehension in content area literacy. A similar point was raised by the National Focus Group paper on the 'Teaching of English'. It states that the burden of language is the burden of incomprehension. When language is taught as a set of forms and rules and not introduced as the carrier of meaning, "it becomes another subject to be passed" (p. 5). Understanding

reading in early years is of great significance and comprehension is a crucial aspect of reading.

According to Dooley and Matthews (2009), “Emergent Comprehension is the period when young children prior to conventional reading, engage in meaningful experiences that stimulate the development and use of meaning making strategies with potential to affect later reading comprehension” (p. 269). This paper focuses on the questions like what is comprehension, how emergent literacy theorists view comprehension and its significance, what is Emergent Comprehension, and how is it linked to the conventional reading comprehension and whether comprehension should be focused upon in early grades or not. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section explores the term ‘comprehension’ wherein ideas of various theorists regarding comprehension are reviewed. The second section explores the term ‘emergent’ with the help of Emergent Literacy perspective. The third section is about Emergent Comprehension, what it means and how researchers have studied comprehension in early days. The fourth section focuses on the debate on role of comprehension in early years of life. The last section explores comprehension within the Indian context.

Understanding Comprehension

To understand the construct ‘Emergent Comprehension’, it is important to understand the two terms involved in

it — Emergent and Comprehension, separately. This section discusses comprehension and is further divided into three sub-sections — reading process; changing definitions of comprehension and comprehension through the lens of Reading theories.

Reading Process: the Reader, the Text and the Context

Ruddell and Unrau (1995) provide an explanation of how the reading process occurs in the classroom context from a sociological model. In this model, the reading process consists of three major components in the classroom context—the reader, the teacher and the text. These three components are in a state of dynamic change while meaning construction takes place. The ‘Reader’ means previous life experiences, beliefs and knowledge. It can further be divided into two parts — affective conditions (all the factors affecting the motivation to read) and cognitive conditions (areas, such as background knowledge, language, text processing strategies and understanding of a classroom). The ‘Teacher’ includes teachers’ beliefs and knowledge. This also has two parts — affective conditions (based on life experiences) and cognitive conditions (teaching strategies, personal knowledge). The third component is the text and the classroom context. It accounts for the learning environment in which meaning negotiation processes occur. This process represents a fusion of meaning between a reader, a

teacher and classroom contexts. The text and the classroom context are important as it is this where students and teachers initiate the process of meaning construction.

Anderson (1994) helps us to understand the role of schema in comprehending the text. In order to remain engaged with the text, a reader has to constantly connect the text to his/her prior knowledge. Also, a reader should be aware whether they are comprehending or not and take corrective measures when they fail to comprehend (Brown, 1980). Duke and Carlisle (2011) assert that comprehension is truly a dynamic constructive process. They provide three characteristics of comprehension development which are as follows.

- Comprehension as a growth construct rather than being a mastery construct. This means that as a growth construct, comprehension can never be mastered, we can always become better at it.
- They distinguished between strategies (more deliberate actions) and skills (more automatic, smooth running processes). It is suggested that more experienced and effective comprehenders employ skills more often and strategies less often than developing comprehenders.
- Some aspects of comprehension change gradually. However, instructions can influence comprehension development.

Now, it is a widely accepted fact that comprehension is a complex process that develops over time. Comprehension is a complex “interplay between the knowledge and capabilities of the reader, the demands of the text, the activities engaged by the reader and the socio-cultural context in which the reading occurs” (Wilkinson and Son, 2011, p. 359). It also differs from other reading competencies. For example, decoding skills can be mastered through highly effective teaching instructions. But the ability to comprehend can never be achieved just by mastering a basic set of skills. It keeps developing with more focused attention and self-guided thinking through every reading experience.

Comprehension through the Lens of Reading Theories

Transactional Theory of Reading—Rosenblatt

Sinha (2009) shared views on Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading. The transactional theory provides the foundation to understand literary meaning making. It explains how the reader transacts with texts to create meaning. It proposes that readers approach texts with unique purposes and knowledge, hence, no reader creates exactly the same meaning with the same text. Interpretations of experienced readers generally overlap because they have shared assumptions, common cultural perspectives and similar experiences

with texts. They may construct text meanings that vary widely from more experienced readers. Due to insufficient experience with texts, with literacy events and social activities around texts, young readers' responses to texts and retellings may vary widely from the interpretations of mature readers. Thus, alongside providing instructions for strategic meaning making, it is equally important to show trust that young readers' responses are tentative and developmental.

RAND Heuristic for Comprehension

The RAND reading study group provided a detailed work on comprehension in 2002. It was an

extension of Rosenblatt's theory of reading, wherein the socio-cultural context of reading was added. It provided a heuristic for describing the comprehension process of conventional readers. As shown in Figure 1, the RAND group explained that readers construct meanings in ways unique to their background knowledge, experience, beliefs, motives and dispositions. It presents the socio-cultural context influencing all dimensions of comprehension. Scholars are in agreement that comprehension is influenced by the cultural and social contexts in which it occurs (Vygotsky, 1978 and Heathe, 1991).

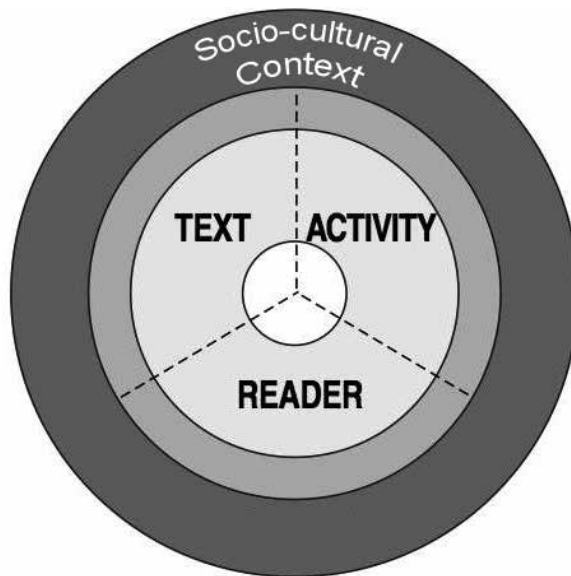


Figure 1. RAND Heuristic for Reading Comprehension

Source: Dooley (2011, p. 170).

There are three dimensions of this heuristic, the reader, the text and the activity. The 'reader', as the RAND model describes, are the reader's discourse, linguistic knowledge, knowledge of vocabulary and topics. They are important tools for comprehension. The 'Text' means all kinds of objects, especially narrative texts, which are symbols of meaning for children. The third dimension, the 'Activity', refers to the readers' goals and purposes for reading event. This dimension provides an insight into how the immediate context of reading can guide the purpose for how meaning is

constructed. When readers advance in ability and experience, "they self-monitor and choose strategies most likely to accomplish personally set purposes for reading" (Dooley and Matthews, 2009, p. 285).

As stated earlier, these dimensions are useful to describe the meaning making process of conventional readers. Dooley and Matthews (2009) used and modified this model to describe the meaning making process of young pre-conventional readers who are in the process of becoming conventional readers, as shown in Figure 2.

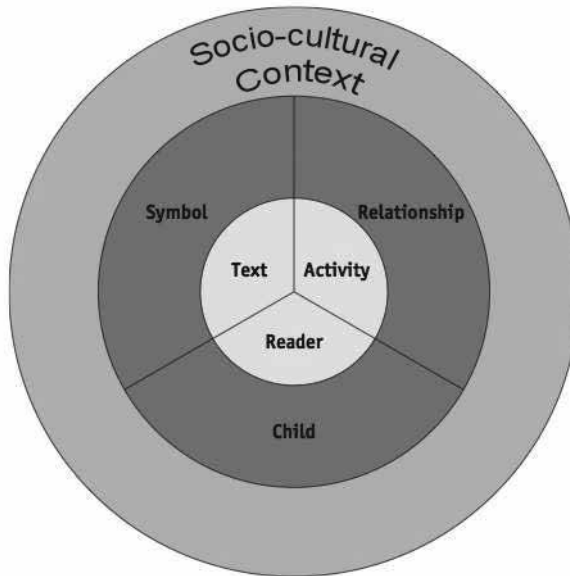


Figure 2. Emergent Comprehension
 Source: Dooley (2011, p. 171).

This adapted framework identifies the child's cognitive, relational and symbolic interactions from which meanings are made. It shares three principles of Emergent Comprehension:

1. Children transact with text in ways different from adults.
2. Young children's symbolic understanding (symbols like objects, events, actions) develop across time, with experience, via interaction with significant others.
3. Meaning construction is influenced by the presence of and interaction with primary caregivers and other important adults in young children's lives.

According to Dooley and Matthews (2009) and Dooley, Matthews and Champion (2009), young learners engage with significant others to interpret their intentions. When these relationships develop, they begin to include text objects (books, phones) in interactions. Gradually, young learners learn socially acceptable ways to interact with objects and construct meaning through shared interaction with the object (text) and an adult, in the case of printed text. Therefore, the comprehension development of young children depends upon aspects like their relationship with significant others, their unique approaches to learning and their potential yet developmental understanding of cultural symbols (Dooley and Matthews, 2009).

Understanding the Term 'Emergent'

In the Indian context, the NCF-2005 cognizes the fact that children begin constructing knowledge before entering a formal school. This fact was first given attention by emergent literacy theorists with regard to reading and writing (Teale and Sulzby, 1996, Clay; 1991). The Emergent Literacy perspective provides the view that literacy development follows a continuum, as opposed to the Reading Readiness Perspective which held the maturational view that children need to wait to read until they are mature. Emergent literacy perspective considers a child as knowledgeable about the ways in which print works. The term Emergent Literacy means all the processes, knowledge and skills which are exhibited by young children and are related to later development of conventional reading (Teale and Sulzby, 1996).

Dooley and Matthews (2009) suggest bridging the early real world experiences of young meaning makers to the desired outcome of becoming effective constructors of meaning. Marie Clay (1991) in her pioneering research studied the young learner's progress from non-readers to readers. According to Clay, young children develop various language processing systems (syntax, semantics, pragmatics and graphophonemics) as a consequence of their early life experiences. Clay believes that children's early non-print related interactions and systems

are important starting points for the development of print related systems and to understand print. Therefore, we need to acknowledge the significance of children's early experiences related to non-print and print forms of texts. Teale and Sulzby (1996) believe that "these behaviours and knowledge are not pre-anything. It is not reasonable to point to a time in a child's life when literacy begins. Rather...we see children in the process of becoming literate, as the term emergent is indicative" (p. 19).

Thus, there is ample evidence that comprehension abilities develop shortly after birth. Early age exposure to rich language experiences in the home and other environment serve an important function in that person's ability to comprehend the text. A literacy rich home environment shows advantage in comprehension ability. Large number of books available, parents frequently reading to children, frequent visits to a library and book stores and access to written material help children develop concepts about print (in the case of printed text, reading goes from left to right, top to bottom, books have titles and so on).

Children build various concepts and their perspectives about literacy while participating in literacy practices with significant others. Such personal engagement with reading and writing results in literacy learning. But their literacy learning is not limited to this. They also develop attitudes and beliefs about what counts as literacy and

who is considered literate. Goodman Flurkey and Goodman (2007) stated that 'becoming literate' is the result of social literacy experiences (p. 10).

To sum up, it can be said that emergent literacy experiences enable rich and multimodal comprehension experiences in early years of life. Such experiences lay the foundation to literacy development which reading comprehension is a crucial part of.

Understanding Emergent Comprehension

After a brief overview of the two terms 'emergent' and 'comprehension', one gets an orientation about what emergent comprehension could be. In the term 'emergent comprehension', 'Emergent' means same as when applied to emergent literacy—a continuum of development, progressing towards a known point (Teale and Sulzby, 1996). According to Dooley and Matthews (2009), emergent comprehension is taken as meaning making, not just limited to print but also includes other domains, such as play centers, dinner preparation or morning greetings. Therefore, emergent comprehension is "unfolding of a child's understanding first of her tangible world of people, places and objects as well as intangible values, norms and learning processes" (Dooley and Matthews, 2009, p. 291).

Early meaning experiences are essential to comprehension development, children's early experiences and strategy use are

considered as the foundation upon which text comprehension can be supported later. Emergent comprehension explains the relationship between personal experiences and reading. These early engagements with objects within contexts represent young children's initial movements into understanding their world. The phrase 'emergent comprehension' demonstrates the intent to tie the early, meaning-construction experiences of these young children to later more familiar print-based experiences (Dooley and Matthews, 2009). The three studies described in the following section, investigated emergent comprehension with respect to children's approaches to books.

Sulzby (1985) studied young children's favourite storybook reading. She found that at age two, most children refused to read but would talk about the stories in an oral language like form. At age three, children used more oral language to narrate the storybook. Eventually around age four, these children narrated with more written language like inflections and storybook reading (like, "once upon a time"). Dooley (2010) studied young children's approaches to books. He found that at age two, children approach books as props and treat them like other playthings. At age three, they approach books as invitation wherein they attend to content, images and recognise print in a limited way. At age three to four, they treat the book

as a script, attend to content and image, mimic read aloud gestures and intonation and use image to guess parts of the script. At age four, they approach the book as text, where concepts of print begin like some indication of word by word recall.

These studies investigated what meaning children construct when they encounter books. These meanings demonstrate their emergent comprehension of print material. Yaden, Smolkin and CONLON (1989) inquired about preschoolers' questions about pictures, print conventions and story text during reading aloud at home. It was found that most children's first questions were about pictures. Then, most questions were inquiries about story meaning followed by questions about word-meaning. Questions about graphic form occurred least frequently for most of the children. The research concluded that story reading provides the child with a wide range of information about processes and functions of the written language and meaning making was central in all these questions. Also, story reading aids in developing children's awareness of various aspects of print. It was also concluded that there was a developmental change in the question types, like by age four, children started asking more questions on the main content of the story than pictures, hence children started paying more attention to the story itself.

THE GREAT DEBATE: PLACE OF COMPREHENSION IN EARLY YEARS

For years, researchers have debated about when reading comprehension instruction should begin with young learners. Researchers earlier believed that decoding skills should be the prime focus in early grades and comprehension instructions should be started once decoding skills are mastered. There are researchers like Clay (1991), Teale and Sulzby (1986), Dooley and Matthews (2009) and Dooley, Matthews and Champion (2009) suggesting that comprehension should be the focus shortly after birth as it begins before formal schooling starts.

Before the rise of the cognitive revolution, scholars used to believe that comprehension skill needs to be practiced separately within balanced scope and sequence. Many emphasised the importance of phonics instruction as a precursor to comprehension instruction based on the belief that early literacy is most dependent on phonemic understanding. Brock and Van (2009) examined the development of oral language and decoding skills from preschool to early elementary school and their relation to beginning reading comprehension. The findings extend the view that two clusters of skills develop early in a child's life and are sole predictors of successful reading ability in later years of life.

Emergent Literacy researchers disagree with such views, like

Dooley and Matthews (2009) believe that comprehension develops simultaneously with other early reading skills. They place primacy on encouraging young readers to search for meaning. Pearson and Duke (2002) shared that the terms 'comprehension' and 'primary grades' do not often appear in the same sentence. Comprehension instruction is not considered an important part of primary grade education by many educators. 'Phonics' and 'word identification' are considered the only priority in primary grades to be able to decode the text. The acceptable belief is that it is not wise to focus on comprehension at this time. On the contrary, Pearson and Duke (2002) believe that comprehension instruction in primary grades is not just wise and beneficial, but 'crucial to overall development'. They claim that 'comprehension and decoding can exist side by side as instructional goals'. Similarly, Ivey (2002) also shared that most of the reading programmes emphasise decoding over reading for meaning specially the ones targeting young learners. Ivey (2002) calls our attention towards the fact that limited decoding ability is not equal to limited ability to think deeply about texts.

A fresh logic for why researchers should focus on comprehension in early years of life was provided by Dooley (2010). He provided a crucial issue whether comprehension should be viewed as a conventional print reading or as a process that allows

for unconventional textual cues (like, social interaction, print concepts) to shape meaning. According to Dooley (2010), “elements of comprehension stem from interaction with texts, such as story books, songs, computer games, prior to conventional print reading. From early interactions, children develop knowledge about how to comprehend in ways that are essential to conventional reading comprehension development” (p. 120). Since reading takes place in a socio-cultural context, comprehension is influenced by this context from the text used to approaches of reading. Now, literature-based reading is considered essential in early years of life for engaging young learners with reading and construction of meaning.

COMPREHENSION IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Researches done to understand reading comprehension in the Indian context are very few in number. Researchers like Sinha (2010), Saxena (2010) and Kaushik (2004) have used the term ‘Emergent Literacy’ in discussing the reading writing of young learners in the Indian context. The term ‘Emergent Comprehension’ is still looking for its place amongst researches within the Indian context. Comprehension in primary grades was focused in researches conducted by Sinha (2000, 2010) and Aggarwal (2001). This section is further divided into two sub-sections—Classroom Practice and Literacy Programmes.

Classroom Practices and Comprehension

The Yashpal Committee report (1993) describes the status of comprehension in classroom setting by saying that burden of incomprehension is much greater than the gravitational burden of school bags. According to Sinha (2010), literacy teaching is primarily traditional. She further said that “the pedagogic practices in the school also unwittingly push students towards non-comprehension” (p. 121). Sinha (2000) focused on the unique case of early primary grades. In India, comprehension instruction is often disregarded in primary education. Further building her argument, Sinha (2010) observed that a ‘Layered approach’ to reading is practiced in Indian classrooms (p. 23). First ‘sounding out the words’ is practiced, less then meaning is given less attention. Sinha (2000) conducted a study wherein 10 primers were analysed. The findings suggested that the lessons were constructed around particular sounds and not themes. Such a constraint of using the words of a single vowel sound (*matra*) ends up with meaningless exercises of sounding out the words. Such reading material lack flow, coherence and are not readable.

The study done by Kaushik (2004) revealed that teachers believe that the most important goal of early reading programme is to get a sequential mastery of letters and learn how to blend them to words. Decoding was

conceptualised as the main goal of reading. Such an approach sacrifices meaning. Although, children's literature is slowly taking the place of primers, but the pedagogy and classroom practice is still a major concern. Engagement with print material does not take place because the entire focus is devoted to explaining the text by the teacher and learning the new words. Saxena (2010) also shared her observations while working with a literacy project, Jan Shikshan Abhiyan in Madhya Pradesh. Classroom observations revealed that literacy instructions adhere to behaviouristic paradigm, learning require drilling and rote memorisation as opposed to engaging with processes of meaning construction.

Aggarwal (2001) also presented the results of quality of the reading instructions in Indian classrooms. The study revealed that there was no separate reading lesson which form part of the language classes. In language lesson, most time is spent in reading aloud either by the teacher or by the learner. Teachers made attempts to make meaning of the texts or difficult words, students do not get chance to construct meaning. Loud reading is just a mechanical affair without a connection with reading for meaning. Classroom practices, which isolate skills from meaningful reading, make learning to read difficult. Children are not helped to develop inner control and strategic functioning as readers.

NCERT textbooks for early grades provide the text wherein meaning is kept intact, but they are not taught in classes in the manner to aid comprehension (Sinha, 2010). Stories are used to teach various language skills like finding nouns. The focus is again not on comprehension. Either the focus is on reading aloud with correct pronunciation or developing an understanding of phonological awareness. As a consequence, children are forced to shift their attention from the meaning of the text to learning grammar concepts. Wherever meaning making activities take place, one finds teachers as single players in constructing meaning. Children are given readymade explanation of the text without engaging them with comprehension activities.

The quality of reading instruction given in schools, where focus is not on meaning construction, is definitely a matter of concern. According to Sinha (2010), such practices have a link with pre-service training of teachers and its curriculum. Bahuguna (2011) further investigated about the status of reading in various teacher education programmes. She found that none of the programmes have a separate course on reading. In fact, the major teacher education programmes continue to be based upon teaching pedagogy approaches that are influenced by traditional bottom-up approach of reading. Listening and reading skills are considered passive skills. The theoretical foundation of reading is

missing in many such programmes (Bahuguna, 2011). Pupil teachers are imparted the view that fluency and decoding are the main factors responsible for effective reading.

DISCUSSION

The construct 'Emergent Comprehension' is in cognizance with the developmental nature of children's reading abilities. Emergent comprehension is clearer when children are observed in informal and formal meaningful encounters with print. The notion of linear progression from letters to sounds to words to sentences is full of flaws. Unfortunately, the development of comprehension is not given instructional priority until students become fluent readers, rather fluent decoders. This focus on decoding and fluency distracts attention from students' developing comprehension capabilities.

Mason and Sinha (1993) critique the understanding of reading that has long been viewed in a dichotomous manner with 'all' or 'none' phenomenon. It implies that children can either read or they cannot. As a consequence, reading is defined in terms of the ability to decode. Several other activities influence children's language development, literacy development and consequently their comprehension development. For example, language interaction in the home setting, parental teaching of letters and words, parent-child talk while book reading, extending talk during free play and exposure

to print material. All the pre-reading experiences, such as interest in books, observing people to read, shared reading with children and read aloud by parents, all of this contributes to development of literacy and emergent comprehension. The construct 'emergent comprehension' demonstrates the connection between early meaning construction experiences of the young children with later more familiar print-based experiences. The young learners depend on others to provide access to the world. Significant others assist young learners in constructing the understanding of their world.

It is also clear that early reading instruction in India is still closer to the traditional model of teaching learning and is unaffected or partially affected by the research based on constructivist approaches to reading. Observations of classroom practices reveal that children are not given opportunities to engage with literacy. Such poor literacy practices remain unquestioned on a massive scale due to negligible research work done to understand comprehension in the Indian context. Such mechanical knowledge of literacy does not translate into empowerment.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that real reading takes place when comprehension is achieved and encouraged. It is equally significant to note that young learners are motivated to read and comprehend the world. Emergent

comprehension acknowledges the fact that children are capable of reading and constructing meaning in the initial years of learning as they engage in various activities meaningfully. The construct emergent comprehension signifies that comprehension needs to be emphasised in early years of children's lives. The route to meaning construction lies within the child and the actions taken up by the learners. When children read and make

meaning, they come to know various ways of getting the meaning of texts. They need support and opportunities to become independent. As they read along with significant others, they notice more things about print. Such opportunities and efforts are more required in settings like India where classrooms are filled with first-generation learners to make their initial experiences of reading meaningful.

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