

Understanding and supporting comprehension

Summary

We know that comprehension is critical to learning, but it has wider implications. How much students comprehend affects how much they engage with, enjoy, and benefit from classroom activities and their interactions with peers and teachers.

When students communicate using spoken language, they can tell you if they don't understand, or you can work it out by the way the students ask and respond to questions. However, when students are communicating mainly in ways other than speech, it can be more difficult to gauge their comprehension. By observing carefully and systematically adjusting classroom activities, you can learn a lot about how much a student is understanding.

This practice contains some practical tips to help you work out how much your students are understanding, particularly those students who communicate mainly in ways other than speech.

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers related to this practice

- 1.6 – strategies to support the full participation of students with disability
- 3.5 - use effective classroom communication
- 4.3 - manage challenging behaviour

For further information, see [Australian Professional Standards for Teachers AITSL page](#)

Preparing to Teach

What is comprehension?

Comprehension is the term used to describe students' understanding. While we generally use comprehension to refer to students' listening and reading, in this practice we think of comprehension in the broader sense - making sense of other people and the classroom environment. This includes listening and reading, as well as engagement with activities and interaction with peers and teachers throughout the day.

Why does it matter?

Comprehension lays the foundation for learning and participation. The more a student 'understands' the more they will be able to learn, participate in, and enjoy classroom activities. If students are struggling to understand, then activities become more difficult and less enjoyable for them. This in turn places more demands on you and other teachers, as you work to support the student's learning.

Assessing and adjusting to students' comprehension

As teachers, you align the way you teach to the strengths and needs of your students. This includes adjusting your approach based on your student's comprehension. However, being able to do this relies

on you having an accurate picture of how much each student is comprehending about other people and their classroom environment.

3 Strategies

Here are 3 strategies to help you figure out how much a student is comprehending in the classroom when they are using minimal speech:

- 1. Look beyond words - Students will show you through their actions what and how much they understand.**
 - Sometimes students may not be able to tell you, or show you, what they comprehend through talking. Looking beyond words for other communication modes provides insights into the students' level of understanding. Three key communication modes for autistic students, beyond spoken communication, include facial expression, physical actions, and individual and augmentative communication.
- 2. Look for differences in students' engagement in different classroom activities that may reflect different levels of comprehension.**
 - Looking for patterns across the day rather than only focusing on one point in time, a single activity, or a single situation can help you to work out how much a student understands. This involves considering routines, the timing of activities during the day and the week and considering external factors that may impact comprehension.
- 3. Adjust to Assess - Making minor adjustments to classroom activities to gain clues about students' comprehension.**
 - Sometimes when things don't work as expected it can be tempting to discard the activity and start again. This strategy is about making one small adjustment to an activity at a time to assess the impact on students' comprehension. Sometimes one minor change can create a big difference to a student's comprehension.

It works better if you:

- Observe over time. Every student has different strengths and challenges, and responds differently to different supports in different situations. Use observations of students over a series of lessons or a period of time to inform the supports you put in place. This will help you to gather the information you need to identify the right type of support for the student, the activity and the session.
- Discuss with others. Seek input from others as well as using your own observation skills. The student's parents, siblings, and your colleagues will all have invaluable insights.
- Record these for other teachers and support staff in some way, such as in a communication dictionary.

It doesn't work if you:

- Make assumptions solely based on previous experience working with other students. This can be very risky as making assumptions about a student's comprehension can affect their learning, self-esteem, and well-being.



A disclaimer: Seeking support

Before we go further, it is important to note that if you suspect a student is struggling with comprehension, it is important that you seek the relevant support within your school. Beyond the school teaching team, speech pathologists and psychologists specialise in these aspects of students' development and should always be considered when it comes to seeking additional support.

In the classroom

Strategy one: Look beyond words

When students can't tell you, or show you, what they comprehend through talking, look beyond words to all the other ways they are communicating. Three key communication modes for autistic students, beyond spoken communication, include facial expressions, physical actions and augmentative and individual communication.

Facial expressions

A confused facial expression can be helpful clue that a student is not comprehending. However, many students won't show this through their facial expressions. Fortunately, there are many other expressions that provide clues to comprehension.

Watch the student's expressions when you talk about a topic they're passionate about.

- *How do they show you they understand and are interested?*
 - *Is it something about their eyes or their smile?*
- *Does their mouth open a little, do they tend to look from the side, do the corners of their eyes raise?*

It is often difficult to describe exactly, but when you see how they respond using facial expressions to something they know and love, it will help you to be sensitive to similar expressions when it comes to other classroom topics, activities, and interactions with other students and teachers.

Physical actions

It is helpful when students use gestures such as raising a hand or shrugging their shoulders if they don't understand, but often we need to look beyond these modes for students who are communicating mainly in ways other than speech.

Pay close attention to the student's body language during different activities and interactions, to observe how they show you they are listening, understanding, or engaging.

When the student is engaged in a preferred activity observe their behaviour.





- *Do they sit or stand, are they close to other people or at a distance?*
 - *Do they face other people or look away?*
- *Are they mirroring the other person's body language, are they still or moving etc.*

Focusing on how they engage during preferred activities and interactions, will help you to be aware of and recognise changes in their physical actions that indicate their comprehension may be waning during less preferred or more difficult activities.

Augmentative and individual communication

Augmentative forms of communication such as the use of pictures, sign language, and communication devices are all important and equal forms of communication.

Students use of and preference for these modes of communication should be supported. There are also individual and unique ways of communicating. Understanding what these are will help you make sense of and monitor students' comprehension.

By seeing, expecting to see, and valuing these individual ways of communicating you will be in a better position to gauge the student's comprehension. Keeping in mind that the way one student shows they are comprehending may be quite different from another student.

Strategy two: Looking for differences

Look for differences in students' engagement in different classroom activities that may reflect different levels of comprehension.

One of the best ways to work out how much a student understands is to look for patterns across the day rather than only focusing on one point in time, a single activity, or a single situation. The school day is full of routines, and this is a great support to working out a students' comprehension. From the moment the student walks through the school gate, there are routines,

- before school e.g., putting bag down,
- throughout the day e.g., within and between classroom activities, and
- when it is time to leave in the afternoon e.g., packing away, preparing to leave.

Routines help students to make sense of their world. They can be:

- Structured e.g., the same process for lining up for class after lunch each day
- Flexible e.g., the weekly music lesson might follow a general structure, but will differ each week in terms of who is using a particular instrument and whether they are working individually or in groups.

Does the student find it easier to follow the routine for lining up, but have more difficulty with the unstructured activities? If so, this might suggest that the consistency and familiarity is supporting their comprehension.





Do you see a difference when the activity is group-based or involves copying your work, compared to an individual project that is entirely creative? If so, this might indicate that comprehension is easier when there are other people to observe and work with, and the teacher's example to copy.

By looking for these differences in engagement in different classroom activities, you will start to see patterns that will help you understand the student's strengths in comprehension, as well as where they are having difficulties.

Strategy three: Adjust to assess

We say 'adjust to assess' because you can learn much about a student's comprehension by trying some adjustments and seeing what difference they make. As a teacher, you are constantly being creative, trying new things, and tailoring your teaching. Implementing this strategy doesn't require any additional work, just a very deliberate approach to how you go about it.

If you want to know how much a student understands, you need to look for differences in engagement and participation, as well as task progress and completion as you increase and decrease supports across the day, within and between activities.

Step	Example / Elaboration
1. Select a classroom activity to focus on.	Subject area: Math Topic: Learning how to use graphs Type of activity: individual
2. Observe how the student is currently engaging in the activity	Is this a new task or have they done a similar task? Are they enjoying or engaged with the task? Do they know what they have to do? (Understanding the instructions is different from understanding the task) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are they able to start the task?• Are they able to complete the task?• Are they seeking assistance, looking around, not participating?
3. Identify what can change in the activity and what must stay the same.	For example <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The task could be changed from individual to pairs or small groups• Students still need to do their own sheet





	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students can work together – share ideas and discuss• Choose one
4. Modify and observe Choose one element to focus on.	Does the student find it easier and more enjoyable when their comprehension is better supported (e.g., more structure, other people to observe, an example to follow)? or Do they find it easier when there is less structure because there are fewer demands?

These types of observations will give you clues to the student’s comprehension and the supports needed. Enabling you to modify the tasks and increase and decrease supports as needed.

Tips and strategies

Begin with an observation plan:

- Record your student’s engagement, involvement, and interactions with different activities throughout the day.
- Take note of the types of activities that worked best - structured, familiar, individual group etc
- Choose one area to focus on – Make some adjustments before you assess

Materials informing this practice

See the [practice page](#) for Evidence base under the Resources section.

