

Theories on reading comprehension: A theoretical review of models

Teorías sobre la comprensión lectora: una revisión teórica de modelos

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Abstract

This study conducted a rigorous literature review focused on theories of reading comprehension developed in the last five years. The main objective was to systematize and describe the main theoretical approaches related to this phenomenon, as well as to present the most recent findings in the field. Given the concerning decline in reading comprehension observed among school-age children and adolescents, largely attributable to the excessive use of digital devices—which, while facilitating certain learning processes, also act as sources of distraction and hinder the effective assimilation of content—this research is relevant for various stakeholders, particularly educators and families, with the aim of optimizing academic performance. The analysis was based on an exhaustive review of literature obtained from specialized databases such as Scielo, Web of Science, and Scopus, from which 21 relevant studies were selected. The results highlight the fundamental importance of understanding and differentiating the various theoretical perspectives on reading comprehension, so that students can develop adequate comprehension skills and, consequently, achieve effective and meaningful learning.

Keywords: reading comprehension, models, theoretical review.

Resumen

En el presente estudio se llevó a cabo un análisis bibliográfico riguroso centrado en las teorías sobre comprensión lectora desarrolladas en los últimos cinco años. El objetivo principal consistió en sistematizar y describir las principales corrientes teóricas relacionadas con el fenómeno, así como exponer los hallazgos más recientes en la materia. Considerando la preocupante disminución en la comprensión lectora observada en escolares y adolescentes, atribuible en buena medida al uso excesivo de herramientas digitales que, aunque facilitan ciertos procesos de aprendizaje, también actúan como fuentes de distracción y dificultan la asimilación efectiva de contenidos, esta investigación adquiere relevancia para distintos actores sociales, particularmente educadores y familias, con miras a optimizar el rendimiento académico. El análisis se sustentó en una revisión exhaustiva de literatura obtenida de bases de datos especializadas como Scielo, Web of Science y Scopus, a partir de la cual se seleccionaron 21 estudios pertinentes. Los resultados evidencian la importancia fundamental de comprender

y diferenciar las diversas perspectivas teóricas sobre comprensión lectora, de modo que los estudiantes logren desarrollar una competencia comprensiva adecuada y, en consecuencia, un aprendizaje efectivo y significativo.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora, modelos, revisión teórica.

Introduction

Reading comprehension (RC) constitutes an essential process in the educational development of students, as it conditions both their learning and their active participation in society. The issues associated with reading comprehension present significant differences between countries with varying levels of resources. In nations with high resources, such as Finland and Canada, students have access to advanced pedagogical methodologies and quality teaching resources, leading to high performance in reading comprehension (PISA, 2021). Nevertheless, these countries also face challenges, such as diversity within the classroom and variations in family support, factors that can affect individual performance in this area (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2020).

On the other hand, in countries with medium resources, such as Peru and Colombia, difficulties are more pronounced. According to UNESCO (2020), limited access to educational resources, insufficient teacher training, and adverse socioeconomic conditions contribute to concerning rates of low performance in reading comprehension. In the case of Peru, for instance, only 30% of primary students achieve adequate levels in this competency, which restricts their educational opportunities and personal development (MINEDU, 2021). This reality underscores the urgent need to implement effective strategies aimed at improving reading comprehension, especially through a deep understanding of the theories that support it.

The knowledge and application of these theories offer multiple benefits for both educators and students. First, they enable teachers to design more effective pedagogical interventions tailored to the specific needs of their students, fostering the creation of an inclusive and meaningful learning environment (González & Melero, 2022). Second, understanding these theories helps students develop autonomous learning strategies, enhancing their ability to tackle complex texts and fostering an interest in reading that transcends the school setting (Baker et al., 2021). Finally, addressing the barriers that hinder reading comprehension from a theoretical perspective allows for the design of more effective educational policies that promote improvements in reading performance across different socioeconomic contexts (Leu et al., 2020). Reviewing the theories on reading comprehension not only provides a solid theoretical foundation that guides effective educational practices but also highlights the urgency of addressing the difficulties associated with this competency in diverse socioeconomic realities.

In an increasingly digital and computerized world, reading comprehension stands out as an indispensable skill that demands prioritized attention and appropriate strategies at all educational levels. Within this framework, and considering previous research alongside the variable analyzed, the following question arises: What are the theoretical approaches related to reading comprehension developed in recent years? Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the various theories linked to reading comprehension over the past five years on a global scale.

Methodology

This theoretical review was conducted following the guidelines established by PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). To this end, the search sources, eligibility criteria, study selection procedures, information extraction, and analyzed outcomes were clearly defined.

Regarding the eligibility criteria, the following inclusion parameters were established: (1) observational studies, including cross-sectional designs, case-control studies, and cohorts, as well as book sections; and (2) studies that described a theory related to the development of reading comprehension in the educational context. Conversely, narrative and theoretical reviews, studies involving non-human populations, case reports, conference abstracts, and letters to the editor were excluded.

The search focused on indexed publications up to October 4, 2024, in the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Scielo databases. The search strategy in Scopus and WoS was: ("reading comprehension") AND (theory OR theories). In Scielo, the Spanish terms "comprensión lectora" and "teorías" were used, applying basic Boolean operators (AND, OR). No language restrictions were imposed. Additionally, the bibliographic references of the included studies were reviewed to identify additional publications that met the inclusion criteria.

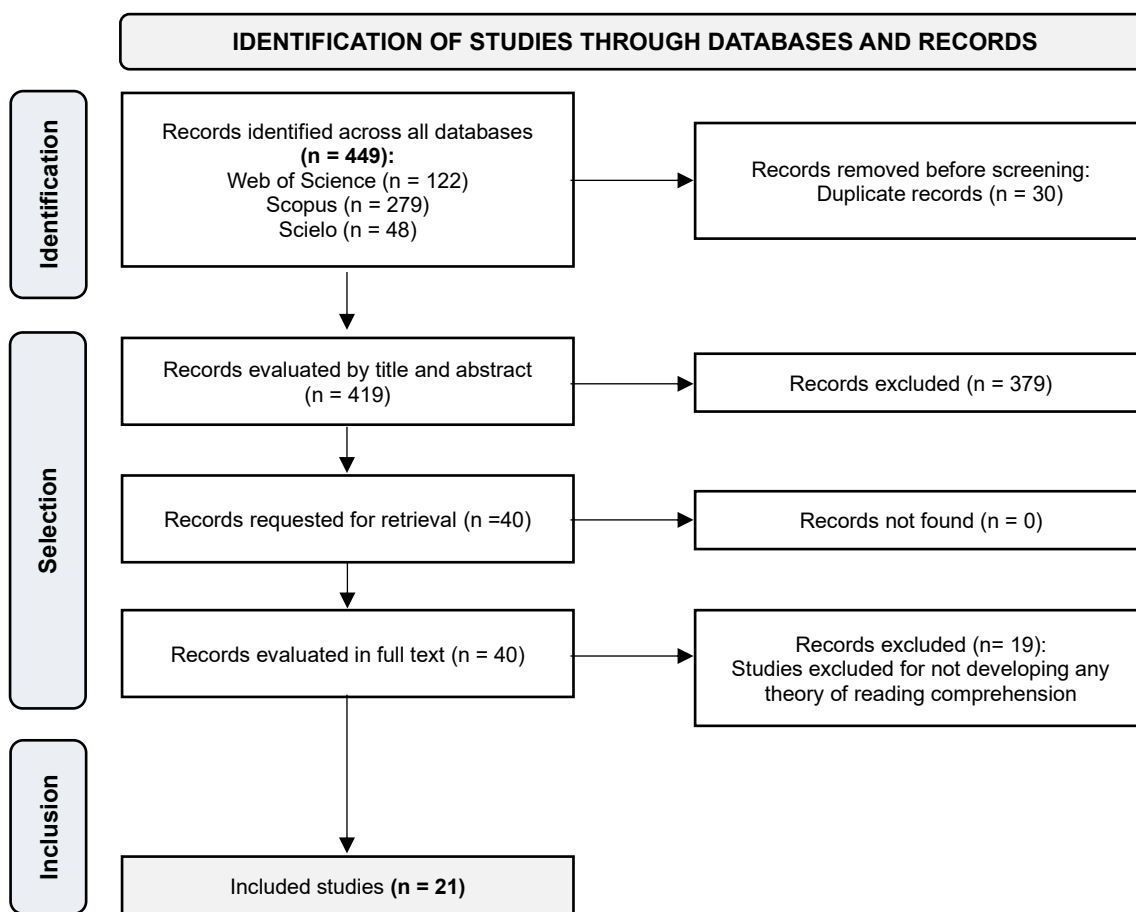
For study selection, the results obtained from each database were exported to EndNote X9 software, where duplicate records were removed. Subsequently, Rayyan QCRI software (Ouzzani et al., 2016) was used to conduct an initial selection process based on titles and abstracts. Finally, the inclusion criteria were evaluated through a complete reading of the selected texts.

The studied outcomes consisted of the qualitative description of theories on reading comprehension applied to the teaching of basic sciences. The extracted data were recorded in an Excel 2016 spreadsheet, including the study title, lead author, year, country, objectives, approach, and results. In cases where additional information was needed, the corresponding authors were contacted via email.

A qualitative description of the results was planned, complemented by quantitative analysis of variables through frequencies and tables. Since this review only considered published information and did not involve the direct participation of individuals, the approval of an ethics committee was not necessary.

Regarding the results of the systematic search, 279 articles were found in Scopus, 122 in Web of Science, and 48 in Scielo. For selection, the content of titles, abstracts, and keywords was reviewed. Three consecutive filters were applied to ensure rigorous selection. Initially, 30 duplicates were removed, resulting in 419 studies for analysis. In the second filter, through reading titles and abstracts, 40 articles related to reading comprehension and associated theories were selected. Finally, after a thorough reading, 19 studies that did not meet the focus were excluded, resulting in the final inclusion of 21 articles that addressed the research question (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Flow diagram of search, selection, and inclusion of articles (PRISMA 2020)



Note. Flow diagram created according to PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021)

The systematic review identified five key theories in the field of reading comprehension:

1. **Comprehension Model by Snow (2002):** This model posits that reading comprehension results from the interaction among three fundamental elements: the reader, the text, and the activity. The reader brings prior knowledge, motivation, and skills; the text presents characteristics that may facilitate or hinder comprehension; and the activity depends on the reading objectives and the

context in which it occurs. Snow highlights the influence of the sociocultural context, where the reader's experiences and cultural environment condition their comprehension.

2. **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory:** According to Vygotsky, learning is a deeply social process, where skills are developed through interaction with others. In the realm of reading, this translates into "scaffolding," a process whereby students receive support from more experienced individuals to interpret complex texts. As the student gains autonomy and confidence, this support is gradually reduced until they can read and comprehend independently. This theory is particularly valuable in contexts where collaborative learning is essential, such as in language teaching.
3. **Approach by Freebody and Luke (1990):** These authors define four roles of the reader in reading comprehension: "code breaker" (decoding), "text participant" (understanding meaning), "text user" (contextual adaptation), and "text analyst" (critical evaluation). To achieve comprehensive understanding, students must assume these roles according to the type of text and the context.
4. **Kintsch and Van Dijk's Construction-Integration Model:** This model proposes that reading comprehension involves two phases: first, the construction of initial ideas from the text; second, the integration of these ideas with the reader's prior knowledge. This model emphasizes how readers generate coherent mental representations through inferences and the integration of new information with what they already know. It is particularly useful for developing inferential and critical skills in advanced students working with complex texts.
5. **Constructivist Theory by Smith (1978):** From this perspective, reading comprehension is an active process where the reader constructs meaning based on their prior experiences and context. Rather than passively receiving information, the student actively participates in creating meaning by connecting the text to their own knowledge. This theory is applied in the classroom through activities that promote reflection and self-regulation, fostering a more personal and meaningful interpretation of the text.

Results and discussion

From the 449 studies retrieved from the databases, a complete reading of 40 articles was conducted, and ultimately, 21 research studies were included in this review.

Table 1

List of studies selected for the literature review related to theories on RC

Author	Year	Title	Contribution
de-la-Peña & Luque-Rojas	2021	Levels of Reading Comprehension in Higher Education...	Based on Kintsch/van Dijk; students reach literal level but struggle with inferential and critical skills.
Herrenkohl et al.	2022	From a Social Constructivist to a Decolonizing Critical Sociocultural Approach	Highlights reading comprehension dependent on social scaffolding according to Vygotsky.
Aliyu & Yakubu	2019	Implications of the Sociocultural Theory on Students' Reading Comprehension	Applies Snow and Freebody & Luke to show the influence of the sociocultural context.
Yawiloeng	2021	Peer Scaffolding During EFL Reading Activities...	Shows that peer support improves comprehension in English students.
Vásquez Sierra	2022	Reading Comprehension: Theoretical Foundations and Strategies for Approaching Texts	Describes interactive-compensatory, construction-integration, and transactional models.
Blaži Ostojić et al.	2023	Reading comprehension processes: a review based on theoretical models and research methodology	Review of models and their use in transparent orthography languages.
Osterhaus et al.	2024	Unlocking narratives: Longitudinal associations between theory of mind and reading comprehension	In 112 nine-year-olds, evaluated the relationship between ToM and RC. Only social reasoning predicted RC in fourth grade.

Ramírez Sierra & Fernández-Reina	2022	Levels of Reading Comprehension Among Third Grade Students at an Educational Institution in Colombia	Describes literal, inferential, and critical levels in Colombian primary education.
Tompkins et al.	2025	Theory of mind and text comprehension across the lifespan: A meta-analysis	A meta-analysis with 47 samples and 5,123 participants found a significant association between theory of mind (ToM) and text comprehension ($r = 0.33$).
Taboada Barber et al.	2021	The Importance of Theory of Mind in Oral and Reading Comprehension in Emerging Bilingual Students	This study evaluated 84 children from 3rd to 5th grade, analyzing the predictive role of ToM in oral and reading comprehension in English.
Sánchez-Vincitore et al.	2022	Reading comprehension precursors: Evidence of the simple view of reading in a transparent orthography	Confirms the Simple View in Dominican students.
Bogaert et al.	2023	The development of the reading comprehension—Progress monitoring (RC-PM) tool for late elementary students	Reaffirms the construction–integration model as a framework for structuring comprehension.
Bruggink et al.	2022	Theories of Reading Comprehension	Interactive framework between text and reader, with PIRLS criteria (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study).
Lam et al.	2024	A systematic review of factors that impact reading comprehension in children with developmental language disorders	Reviews how language disorders affect reading comprehension.
Poltronieri	2024	Analysis of Reading Comprehension Through Digital Text and the Characteristics of Distance Education Students Enrolled in the Bachelor in Special Education During Modules I and IV of the Third Quarter of 2022 (UNED, Costa Rica)	Studies comprehension in digital modality in Guatemalan distance undergraduate education.
Ebert	2020	Theory of mind, language, and reading: Developmental relations from early childhood to early adolescence	In 231 children, no effect of initial ToM on reading comprehension at age 13 was found, but advanced ToM had a small indirect effect through listening comprehension.
Lara Argüelles & Gómez González	2023	Reading Comprehension in the New Mexican School: A Documentary Study	Documentary review of comprehension in the Mexican educational reform.
Pickren et al.	2021	The Contribution of Text Characteristics to Reading Comprehension: Investigating the Influence of Text Emotionality	Identifies that text characteristics (cohesion, emotional concreteness) explain comprehension in schoolchildren.
Dixon & Oakhill	2024	Exploring teachers teaching reading comprehension: knowledge, behaviors and attitudes	KBAT-RC (Knowledge, Behavior and Attitudes Test for Reading Comprehension) designed with change theories in teachers to enhance reading comprehension.
Duke et al.	2021	The Science of Reading Comprehension Instruction	Highlights key components of the "science of reading": oral, phonological, decoding, and fluency.

The studies presented in Table 1 encompass various educational contexts and academic levels, based on five main theories: The Comprehension Model by Snow (2002), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the approach by Freebody and Luke (1990), Kintsch and Van Dijk's Construction-Integration Model, and the Constructivist Theory by Smith (1978).

In detail, three studies were found that relate to the Comprehension Model by Snow (2002), analyzing how cultural and social context impacts meaning construction during reading (Aliyu & Yakubu, 2019; Duke et al., 2021; Pickren et al., 2021). Meanwhile, five investigations are associated with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing the fundamental role of social scaffolding and collaborative support in the development of reading comprehension (Herrenkohl et al., 2022; Yawiloeng, 2021; Poltronieri, 2024; Lara Argüelles & Gómez González, 2023; Lam et al., 2024). Two studies apply the approach by Freebody and Luke (1990), highlighting the influence of sociocultural context and critical practices in reading (Aliyu & Yakubu, 2019; Herrenkohl et al., 2022). In addition, the Construction-Integration Model by Kintsch and Van Dijk accounts for the largest number of studies, with seven studies using it to assess different levels of reading comprehension and structure teaching-learning processes (de-la-Peña & Luque-Rojas, 2021; Vásquez Sierra, 2022; Ostojić et al., 2023; Ramírez Sierra & Fernández-Reina, 2022; Bogaert et al., 2023; Osterhaus et al., 2024; Tompkins et al., 2025). Finally, the Constructivist Theory by Smith (1978) groups four works that highlight comprehension as an active and interactive process, encompassing both traditional and digital reading (Taboada Barber et al., 2021; Sánchez-Vincitore et al., 2022; Bruggink et al., 2022, 2025).

The joint analysis of these investigations confirms that reading comprehension is a complex and multifactorial process, influenced by both individual cognitive skills and the sociocultural and educational context. The different theoretical frameworks have been contrasted in various settings, evidencing the need to integrate individual, social, and technological perspectives to optimize the teaching of reading comprehension.

Regarding the Construction-Integration Model, various studies agree that students demonstrate greater competence in literal comprehension levels, while facing greater difficulty at inferential and critical levels (de-la-Peña & Luque-Rojas, 2021; Ramírez Sierra & Fernández-Reina, 2022). Additionally, this model has been used as a basis for designing assessment tools in advanced stages of basic education (Bogaert et al., 2023) and for analyzing complex narratives (Ostojić et al., 2023). Longitudinal and meta-analytic studies further demonstrate a significant relationship between theory of mind (ToM) and reading comprehension, indicating that the ability to integrate social and cognitive information predicts reading performance throughout development (Osterhaus et al., 2024; Tompkins et al., 2025; Taboada Barber et al., 2021). These findings align with those of Cain & Oakhill (2020), who emphasized the relevance of inferential processes for achieving critical comprehension.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is well represented. Research such as that of Herrenkohl et al. (2022) and Yawiloeng (2021) shows that social scaffolding and collaborative learning promote the development of more complex interpretative skills. This phenomenon is observed in both English as a second language students and in digital distance education environments, where peer and teacher interaction enhances reading comprehension (Poltronieri, 2024; Lara Argüelles & Gómez González, 2023). Recent reviews also highlight that in populations with language disorders or in contexts with limited resources, social support is crucial to mitigate inequalities and facilitate higher levels of comprehension (Lam et al., 2024). These results converge with those found by Kim (2020), who discovered that social scaffolding in bilingual environments stimulates both motivation and self-regulation in reading comprehension.

On the other hand, Freebody and Luke's role model emphasizes the diversity of functions the reader adopts in relation to the text, from decoding to critical analysis. This perspective emerges from the works of Aliyu & Yakubu (2019) and is expanded in studies highlighting how reading practices are mediated by cultural and educational factors in multicultural contexts (Herrenkohl et al., 2022). These roles are related to model by Snow (2002), reviewed in research such as that of Duke et al. (2021), which evidences the interaction of cognitive, linguistic, and contextual processes to achieve comprehensive understanding. Moreover, Pickren et al. (2021) show that textual characteristics such as cohesion and emotional load significantly influence comprehension levels. Similar findings are reported by Spencer et al. (2020), who conclude that explicit instruction in critical strategies enhances the transfer of reading skills to different types of texts.

Finally, Smith's constructivist theory conceptualizes reading as an active process of meaning construction, influenced by prior experience and interaction with different textual modalities. Studies such as those by Taboada Barber et al. (2021) and Sánchez-Vincitore et al. (2022) emphasize that reading comprehension requires not only basic decoding skills but also the integration of complex information and the application of active strategies. Additionally, Bruggink et al. (2022, 2025) analyze how digital reading presents new challenges for the development of reading skills, demanding additional competencies to navigate various formats. Comparative research, such as that of Delgado et al. (2018), warns that digital reading may negatively affect deep comprehension if not accompanied by metacognitive strategies, reinforcing the need for educational programs adapted to these environments.

In summary, these findings suggest that reading comprehension requires an integrative approach that considers inferential skills, sociocultural context, textual characteristics, and new digital reading modalities. They also emphasize the importance of educational interventions that combine cognitive and collaborative strategies, supported by technology, to strengthen the development of critical skills in diverse contexts. In educational practice, adopting strategies based on social scaffolding, critical text analysis, and adaptation to digital environments can foster significant improvements in comprehension levels. Therefore, future research should explore the effectiveness of interventions that integrate constructivist, collaborative, and sociocultural models, as well as examine the challenges and opportunities arising from digital reading and learning in multicultural environments.

Conclusions

The reading comprehension theories reviewed in this study constitute fundamental frameworks for understanding the processes involved in reading and textual interpretation. The analyzed models agree that reading comprehension requires not only cognitive skills to integrate information but also a social context that facilitates and enriches learning. This comprehensive view provides a solid foundation for designing educational programs aimed at developing critical and inferential skills in students.

Moreover, the comparative analysis shows that implementing strategies such as collaborative learning and adopting active roles in the reading process significantly contributes to improving comprehension in students from diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. These methodologies promote deeper and more flexible learning, equipping students to effectively face different types of texts and reading situations. Additionally, the incorporation of technologies and digital tools within collaborative environments represents a valuable support for students with varied needs, thus broadening the possibilities for inclusive and adapted learning.

Finally, the results of this review highlight that, despite the differences among theoretical models, there is a consensus on the importance of addressing reading comprehension from a perspective that considers both individual cognitive competencies and the sociocultural environment of the student. Consequently, the need for an interdisciplinary approach in reading instruction is emphasized, where the interaction among mental processes, social factors, and pedagogical resources is articulated to promote meaningful and complete learning.

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