4 Advanced Comprehension Strategies to use with Adolescent Readers

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Abstract

Reading comprehension involves an intricate interaction between the reader and attention to the text. Teachers should employ reading strategies to increase comprehension skills required by adolescent students to address the increase in use of informational text and text complexity as stipulated in the newly adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Four advanced reading comprehension strategies that teachers can use to help their students navigate the increase in higher level comprehension skills stipulated by the CCSS are presented here. Also, presented are a justification for why to use the strategy, information on how to use the strategy, research that supports the strategy, an example, and helpful websites to reference for templates and further information. The last strategy of the four can be amended and used as an evaluation tool for any strategy.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS) specifies that, to prepare students for the demands of their future college and career goals, teachers must incorporate an increasingly higher level of informational texts with increasing text complexity of materials into their classrooms (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2009). For the content area classes of social studies, science, and technical subjects particularly, this can mean more critical and analytical reading of primary/ historical sources like news reports on developing scientific knowledge, new bills being introduced by congress, or even historical accounts of the constitution. The U.S. Department of Education stated that "reading ability is a key predictor of achievement in mathematics and science, and the global information economy requires today's American youth to have far more advanced literacy skills than those required by any previous generation" (Kamil et al., 2008). Technology has made interaction with a global market place and across cultures possible, but many lack the critical literacy skills needed to participate (International Reading Association (IRA), 2012). The ever-expanding global market is going to expect our students to be proficient in self-direction and instruction using strong reading comprehension skills. Schools need to transform instructional strategies to be culturally responsive to all and make this possible (Jones-Goods, 2015).

Increasing Use of Informational Text and Text Complexity in All Subjects

Many adolescent readers begin to struggle with the idea of having to read before they even begin. History has proven to them that reading is hard, especially in reading to learn or form an opinion, and provides little or no enjoyment (Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010). As adolescent students read, they may struggle from either the linguistic or non-linguistic components of comprehension. Students may lack vocabulary, prior knowledge, or may spend so much effort reading due to complex text structures, that meaning is lost, making the more complex comprehension tasks demanded by the Common Core increasingly difficult to achieve.

The Common Core State Standards are written in a way to incentivize moving students into higher levels of comprehension. This is evidenced by explicit use of explanations within the standards like:

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analyze [text] development over the course of a text, delineate and evaluate the arguments of [a text], integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats. Just as Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) indicates, these words and stipulations within the standards clearly point to moving students beyond mere remembrances and into the experiences of analyzing, applying, and creating text for their own use to address real world problems. (See Text Box 1 for CCSS definition of Text Complexity)

To address student concerns as well as increased comprehension skills required by students to address the rise in information/ expository text as well as text complexity, teachers should employ advanced reading strategies. Reading comprehension involves an intricate interaction between the reader and intentional attention to the text. Adolescents need teachers who provide instruction in literacy strategies that meet the comprehension demands of different disciplines (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013; IRA, 2012). Teachers and reading specialists/ coaches who have prepared themselves to teach students reading strategies using purposeful and systematic instruction have students who have enhanced understanding and achievement in reading comprehension (Ross & Frey, 2009).

Teaching reading strategies arms students with the knowledge of how to aid themselves in the metacognitive awareness of ways to succeed in the comprehension of reading materials (Williams et al., 2002). Strategy teaching involves instruction on how to choose and employ strategies for comprehension within context where the teacher models the strategy, guides the students in attempting the strategy, and gives opportunity for independent practice of the strategy within content (Lapp, Fisher, & Grant, 2008). This allows teachers to observe students in practice as well as reinforce and clarify strategy use where necessary. However, not all strategies are created equally. Teachers should focus on the acquisition of strategies that are evidence-based. Simply put,

evidence-based reading instruction is nothing more than a reading strategy, program, or practice that has had a statistically valid record of success (Jitendra, Burgess, & Gajria, 2011). Being a careful consumer of reading strategies can assist teachers in choosing the correct strategies for their students. Four advanced reading comprehension strategies that teachers can use to help their students navigate increased text complexity in materials particularly for informational/expository texts are presented here. Also, presented is a justification for why to use the strategy, research support for the strategy, information on how to use the strategy, an example, and helpful websites to reference for templates and further information are presented in this article. The fourth strategy can additionally be used as an evaluation tool for any strategy.

Finally, it is important to note that reading is complex in nature and not all strategies should be applied equally to all learners (McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2013). Using some strategies with more advanced readers may serve to hinder their interaction as it slows them down and removes meaning from their experience. While reading through these strategies, one must remember that not every strategy is suitable for all students. Each strategy should be assessed based on student need and teachers should work to match strategies to meet individual needs.

Think Alouds
Why To:

Think aloud is a strategy that takes the internal aspects of reading and makes them meaningful to the students who are participating through transparency of processing. When good readers are reading, there are many brain functions at work that the reader may or may not be aware **are** happening. Silent reading fluency, checking for comprehension, employing clarification strategies, making inferences, and connecting with the text all happen silently. Using think alouds help to make these functions more

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obvious and observable to the reader and the listener, and can help struggling readers pinpoint what they need to be doing within their own reading experience. In a simpler sense, this could be described as modeling good reading.

Support for the Strategy

The process of reading is a multifaceted activity that requires the reader to constantly monitor his or her own success. Adolescents are motivated to do this by being actively, authentically engaged with the text (Benning, 2014). As good readers engage with the text, they are constantly making changes to their understanding, asking themselves questions, and adjusting their use of strategies. All of these activities happen within the brain, so how do teachers know what their students are thinking? Think alouds. Once a teacher has a better sense of what processes are taking place in their students' minds, the teacher can begin to model and scaffold new approaches and strategies (Smith, 2006). Think alouds can be used with every type of reading, from fables to editorials to everything in between. Smith explains that by using think alouds in a variety of genres and levels of text, readers become aware of the different types of strategies used for different types of reading and comprehension. Senokossoff (2013) even advocates the use of think alouds with picture books to improve comprehension. Think alouds can be used with any age student, but are potentially very helpful for middle school students struggling with increases in text structure and complexity. Because think aloud instruction begins with the teacher reading aloud and making their thinking apparent to students, students can gain access to awareness of another's method of meaning making as the difficulty of both task and material increases beyond their prior knowledge (Walker, 2005). Another benefit to using think alouds is the development of empathic growth and improved metacognitive thinking (Morgan & York, 2009). Additionally, Morgan & York (2009) challenge teachers to expand the role of think

alouds into a form of role-play to help students view and explore texts from multiple perspectives, a tenant of the CCSS English Language Arts standards for middle grades. Students who are exposed to the think aloud strategy are required to stop more to interact with the text and improve self-regulation of reading by employing fix-up strategies when their reading is faulty (Bluestein, 2010; Ghaith & Obeid, 2004; Wilson & Smetana, 2011). Think-alouds also help teen readers make the transition from oral reading to independent silent reading (Fair & Combs, 2011).

How To:

First, choose a text that expands students' exposure to complex texts depending upon their developmental level and appropriate CCSS standard. Then, the teacher or skilled reader reads the passage aloud while simultaneously describing the thought processes that are occurring. Sometimes simultaneously holding a "light bulb" or "question mark" sign while modeling think aloud reinforces the prompt for students. (See Figure 1) The teacher or skilled reader should explicitly point out self-monitoring techniques used and what strategies are being employed throughout the reading. Finally, give the student(s) ample opportunities to read and think aloud while the teacher scaffolds instruction. The teacher incrementally fades support and the student monitors his or her own reading behaviors.

Example

Mrs. King wants to introduce her sixth grade students to the use of visual imagery. While reading a pre-selected passage, Mrs. King stops to ask herself questions about the passage such as, "What does that item represent?," "How will that object be important to the story?," "How will that item be used?," and so forth. After Mrs. King has modeled the think aloud strategy, students may volunteer to try. When first starting the think aloud strategy, it may be helpful for students to work in small groups and question understanding together or reciprocally.

Helpful Websites

ReadWriteThink.org has an interesting lesson to help get teachers and students started with think alouds. It includes a two-part lesson plan and reproducibles for completing a think aloud about poetry. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/building-reading-comprehension-through-139.html?tab=3#tabs

Opinionnaires

Why To:

Opinionnaires are a tool used to grab students' attention and immediately engage them in a reading before it occurs. They include provocative statements with which students are usually asked to agree or disagree. Some formats allow students space to write explanations of why they feel the way that they have marked. Because opinionnaires can contain sensitive information about controversial topics, students should be asked to share only info with which they are comfortable**.** The rest of the information is between the teacher and the student. Opinionnaires are most commonly used as a prereading exercise, but can be revisited at the end of the lesson to make determinations about changed feelings and opinions. Although very similar to the anticipation guide, opinionnaires are used with more emotional or controversial topics like those frequently addressed with middle school readers who are tackling inference, author's intent, and purpose of a complex topic or text as suggested by the Common Core State Standards.

Support for the Strategy

According to IRA (2012), adolescents should activate their prior knowledge about text and predict/question themselves about what they read. Opinnionaires encourage this as they elicit responses from students to engage them in a reading (Kozen, Murray, & Windell, 2006). Opinionnaires can be used

prereading and post reading and students should be allowed to change their opinions as more information becomes available through the reading (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007). Opinionnaires can help prepare students for potential problems during reading and interpreting and can help to make ideas from the reading pertinent to the students. By guiding students through a reading using an opinionnaire, teachers can facilitate students' engagement, comprehension, problem solving, and synthesis of new ideas and opinions (Johannessen, 1992).

How To:

After a reading selection has been made, the teacher creates a list of statements that contain provocative thoughts or themes from the reading. For example: "Life would be easier and more fair if everyone were the same," or "All people should have to be organ donors." Then, the teacher determines based on student achievement whether the statement will be a simple agree/disagree or a Likert-type scale, and whether or not to include space for students to comment freely about the statement. Likert-type questions, while more difficult for students initially, can also be used as an opportunity for the teacher to model how scaled responses are used in opinion and political polls in real life.

Teachers should allow for plenty of time to issue the opinionnaire, as students may need time to formulate an opinion on tough topics that may be new to them. Time should be allowed, also, for complex discussions about the statements. (See Text Box 2 for more examples) Following the opinionnaire, the reading of the text should begin. As the students read and interact with the text, teachers should remember to involve the statements from the opinionnaire through questioning. Students should be allowed to change their minds about the opinions that they have formed. The purpose is to engage the reader in the thought process and move them up into applying and evaluating new ideas based on inferences about the text.

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Finally, teachers should conclude the reading by revisiting each of the statements as a class to allow students to further analyze their prior assumptions and create new opinions.

Example

Before reading the book *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), Mrs. James administers an opinionnaire to her 7th grade class. Among the questions on the document are: "People should never have to remember bad memories", "If everyone were exactly the same, the word would be a better place", and "People become jealous when others have something better than their own." Mrs. James allows the students to agree or disagree with each statement and give a brief justification. As these topics unfold during reading, the class stops to revisit their opinionnaires. Students are allowed to adjust their opinions as new information is learned.

Helpful Websites

George Mason University provides this helpful page for understanding components of critical reading including opinionnaires. They provide three examples of opinionnaires to get teachers started and other helpful strategies. http://mason.gmu.edu/~ereid1/teachers/tchguidereading.htm

The Vermilion Literacy Site provides information at length about opinionnaires including explanations and examples at many different grade levels. http://www.vrml.k12.la.us/graphorgan/18strat/strat/opinion/opinionnaire.htm

Professor Know-it-All
Why To:

Professor Know-it-All gives students the chance to become the expert of the classroom! By challenging the students to ask a peer questions about a given topic, the timbre of the classroom changes and allows for a different experience in learning. The professor, a student from the classroom with a deep and wide understanding of the topic,

takes peers' questions as if he or she were the professor. Students can take turns judiciously, or be chosen as a reward for good effort. This strategy is generally used after reading as a way to increase engagement in learning and hope in academic achievement as students advance in their academic career and materials (Ryzin, 2011).

Support for the Strategy

Professor Know-it-All is a strategy that involves peer teaching and peer learning. As students try to teach and test their peers, both the professor and pupils strengthen and build their knowledge and acknowledge the expertise present inside the classroom community. One study concluded that students enjoyed using peer tutoring over traditional instruction (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009). Peer-mediated strategies have been used successfully for improving academic behaviors of students of varying ability levels**.** According to IRA (2012), literacy is social, and students who communicate their perspectives as well as listen to the perspectives of others often come to deeper understandings. When using the Professor Know-it-All strategy, students are actively engaged with each other and the text as they respond to question items, synthesize questions, respond to peer and teacher feedback, and receive reinforcement (Heron, Villareal, Ma, Christianson, & Heron, 2006).

How To:

After a reading has been concluded and the students have a firmer grasp of the subject matter, Professor Know-it-All can take the stage. The "Professor" should be a student who is up to the task of fielding other students' questions. The other classroom students are instructed to write down questions that they would like the Professor to answer (See Figure 3). The questions can also be asked for a day in advance for the Professor Know-it-All to review any material they may need before the day they teach. The teacher can also ask questions of the Professor to highlight key ideas or themes. The teacher

now facilitates the activity as the students question the Professor. This strategy can be modified to include a panel of professors (1 per every 5 students or s**o) to** allow more students to participate in being questioned.

Example

Ms. Brown's eighth grade class has been studying the Battle of Port Hudson. The students get into groups to discuss the major points of the battle. The students are told that they will be participating in Professor Know-it-All and that one student from each of the five groups will be asked to volunteer. Volunteer professors gather at the front of the room. One by one, each of the professors field questions from their classmates. When they answer three questions correctly, they return to their groups. The process can continue in round robin format with students taking turns or it can be an activity readdressed in a different topic with a different expert.

Helpful Websites

The Vermilion Literacy Site has created an interactive page where teachers and students can go to get the ball rolling on Professor Know-it-All. The site provides Power Points and a Word document that can be saved to any desktop and altered for individual use. http://www.vrml.k12.la.us/cc/18str/profknow/18str_professor.htm

Exit Slips
Why To:

Exit slips are an easy and quick way to conduct formative assessments allowing for the teacher to monitor understanding of a passage or concept at the end of a lesson but before moving on to the next idea. By checking for understanding, teachers know that their students are ready to step forward and reach for the next piece of understanding. Exit slips, and other formative assessments, also provide the teacher with information about which students are not grasping certain concepts so that those students may receive additional instruction (McLaughlin, 2012; Roskos & Neuman, 2012). Formative assessments, like Exit Slips, have been proven to be "reliable indicators" of students' performance on standardized measures (Marcotte & Hintze, 2009). The use of exit slips also helps provide a medium for student reflection and supports connections that are being made even after the lesson is concluded.

Support for the Strategy

Adolescents should be assessed in multiple ways to inform teaching and learning (IRA, 2012; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2013). Exit slips are a very quick way to assess students' comprehension after reading or instruction. Once the prompt has been given, they take only a minute or two to complete and can give teachers valuable insight into their students' thoughts. Exit slips are extremely versatile, easy to use, and quick (Kilgore, 2007). According to Firsher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey (2007), exit slips are valuable after reading, to assess comprehension, and in developing students' writing skills. Using exit slips as students are leaving the classroom is an effective tool for encouraging that students continue thinking about the lesson after they have crossed the teacher's threshold. Because the questions are completed tailored by the teacher, they can also be used to encourage students to draw connections to real world applications of a concept.

How To:

There are several ways that a teacher may decide to use exit slips. Exit slips may be reflective in nature or more factual depending on the content or process in which the learners are engaged. Before using an exit slip, the teacher should decide on the purpose of the slip. The slip could be used to check understanding of a key question from the lesson, concept, or strategy. The teacher may also write the slip so that the student must tell missing words, definitions, or phrases related to the essential question. If the focus is more on the learning experience, the slip may use a

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3-2-1 format, where students give 3 things they learned, 2 questions they still have, and one connection they made to the material they would like to share (Kilgore, 2007) or one way this information related to the real world**.** Finally, exit slips can be used to evaluate the delivery of instruction, such as having the students write what the best part of a lab experiment was or the "Aha" moment of the lesson. (See more examples in Figure 2 & 3.) The exit slip can be evaluated using a rubric like the sample included (See Figure 4). The rubric can be used as an opportunity for bonus points or **to** assign a score. The rubric can also be adapted for the type of exit slip utilized or of strategy instead of concept.

Example

After an explorative lesson on the Gettysburg Address, Ms. Hooper poses the following question on an exit slip, "How might this country be different today if the address had not been made?" By reviewing her students' answers, Ms. Hooper can determine the comprehension levels of her students. It is easier to determine if their processes are still at a lower level on Bloom's or are moving into the higher bands.

Helpful Websites

ReadingRockets.org is a great website for examples, research, and information on exit slips. They have several printable templates for teacher to print and use. http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/exit_slips

Conclusion

This document has described in detail four reading comprehension strategies teachers can use to help adolescent students navigate the increased amount of informational text and text complexity with the incorporation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) into state curriculums. As teachers begin to incorporate the components of increased informational text and text complexity into their content lessons,

scaffolding adolescents' learning will be crucial to creating independent learners and thinkers who read to learn. Depending on the needs of a teacher's students, any number of the strategies introduced in this article may be used in tandem to aid in reading comprehension of complex texts. Although four strategies may seem like a large bag of tricks, this is just the tip of the iceberg! While this may be a good place to start, it should be remembered that there are many other strategies available and that matching the right strategy to the right student is key for reading success.

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