

Teaching Reading Comprehension to Students in Grades 4-6

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This article covers instruction in teaching intermediate grade elementary children how to be proficient in applying the English language arts, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension INFUSED into the content subject areas of science, social studies, math, language arts, and literature. This is known as teaching language fluency for the sake of elementary students becoming proficient in all aspects of using the English language across their academic work.

This method of instruction for teaching reading comprehension and speaking proficiency builds from the previous articles covering instruction for teaching intermediate grade students literacy (see Weih, 2015c, 2015d, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f).

Reading Comprehension and Speaking Proficiency

Reading comprehension refers to elementary children's levels of understandings of written text. Building on Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), children can understand text at various levels including the literal, inferential, application, and evaluation.

- At the literal level, they understand the-who, what, where, when-types of information in texts.
- At the inferential level, they understand the intended message the author (the “why”) is trying to convey through the text.
- At the application level, they understand that they can take the information the author conveyed and apply it to what they know about the topic they are reading about or to what they have learned about the topic (the “how”).
- At the evaluation level, they understand that they can take the information gained from the text and use it to think in new ways (form new opinions), create something new, or investigate a “what if,” type of scenario.

Building on the levels of reading comprehension, elementary students become engaged in discussions related to their understanding, which serve to increase their speaking proficiency in the English language as well as enhance their social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).

Reading Comprehension Activates Brain Activity

Reading comprehension activates children's brain activity in order to reach the four different levels of thinking and understanding presented in the previous section. This knowledge supports the following pedagogical assumptions:

- The most important thing about reading is comprehension.
- Reading comprehension is the construction of meaning within the child's mind.
- Reading comprehension occurs before, during, and after reading events.

Every reader constantly experiences a stream of unique thought, images, and emotions during his or her reading which plays a role in reading comprehension, in other words, reading comprehension requires active brain activity (Piaget, 1926).

Just assigning reading comprehension questions does NOT teach reading comprehension to children.

Best practice calls on teachers to purposefully plan and instruct their students to engage them in the processes that will lead them into language proficiency with the four levels of reading comprehension. This processing of text is described in the next section.

Reaching the Four Levels of Reading Comprehension

First, it is important for teachers to realize that the four levels of reading comprehension can be reached by children at any age, NOT just when they are able to read text on their own. Very young children can reach all four levels of understanding written text when it is read aloud to them. The main differences between reading comprehension instruction from the early grades to the intermediate grades is that the text is increasingly being read by the children on their own, so that by the intermediate grades, by most accounts, children are reading text without the teacher reading it aloud to them.

Consequently, whether children are listening to the teacher or reading the text on their own, the processes of reaching the four levels of reading comprehension can occur through the following thought engagements (Piaget, 1926):

- The act of reading text or listening to text being read aloud can create sensory activity in children's brains that can cause them to experience mental images and emotions as they think about the meanings of what is being conveyed through the text.
- Children make mental connections, which includes emotional connections between the text and their own, individual background experiences and information, which is called prior knowledge.
- In processing text, then, each child relates to the text through his or her individual perspective or lens, based on his or her culture, i.e., family and community; and exposure to every form of other texts, videos, and films (Rosenblatt, 1969, 1978, 1982).
- New information is learned through this process and attached to the old information, and so the process continues throughout their lives (Piaget, 1926).

Best Practices for Curriculum and Instruction to Promote Reading Comprehension in a Content Literacy Program

The most important factor involved in planning for and delivering strategies that engage children in growing in their reading comprehension is MOTIVATION. The most important factor in this tenet of pedagogy is the teacher. Research has shown repeatedly that if the teacher is highly motivated regarding reading comprehension, her or his students are also highly motivated as well. Think of a coach inspiring her or his athletes to do their best to win the game, so, too, do teachers inspire their students towards reading comprehension. If children cannot connect personally in some way to the reading text, chances are they will not reach the four levels of reading comprehension.

It is important to remember that they are children, not adults, and because of this, they are dependent on the adults in their lives to inspire, motivate, and guide them. In other words, if the teacher is excited about what she or he is teaching, the children will be as well, and this is the most important aspect of best practice that leads children into the text processing necessary for reading comprehension. Children, in many cases are the expressions of the important adults in their lives.

Content Literacy Instructional Strategies that Promote Reading Comprehension

Teachers can build upon children's educational knowledge regarding what they have previously learned in the early grades about the English language with reading fluency by continuing with some best practices for instruction in reading comprehension. These best practices of instruction include the following but are not limited:

- Teachers implement content literacy planning and delivery through the Content Literacy Strategy Lesson Plan Format (see Weih, 2015a).
- Plan and deliver instruction through topic and thematic units whenever feasible.
- Engage elementary students in reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension in the content subject areas through the Guided Practice and Checking on Understanding phases of the strategy lesson format design (see Weih, 2015a) while students are working in small, mixed ability groupings.

There are many reading comprehension strategies, however, most can be categorized into the following categories:

- Category One: before reading strategies
- Category Two: during reading strategies
- Category Three: after reading strategies

Each category is very important to teach because they build developmentally upon each other. The following subsections of this article cover strategies that are included in each category.

Note: Some strategies work best with narrative pieces and some work best with expository, nonfiction; some can work with both. It is best to match the strategy to the type of text the children are working with.

Before Reading Strategies

It is best practice to teach some of the book or text before children read it for themselves. These strategies set the stage, prepare children's minds, and get their attention. Many such strategy lessons are available online through Google searches. Once these are located, then teachers can use the information to create, develop, and design their own content literacy strategy lessons using the format covered in Weih (2015a; Appendix).

For the sake of giving teachers some guidance in doing their online research into these strategies, I have included below some strategy lesson titles to search:

Before Reading Strategies typically found online include the following:

- Exclusive Brainstorming
- Prereading Plan
- Word Ladders
- Word Sorts
- Word Walls
- Anticipation Guides
- Book Talks
- KWL Charts
- Picture Walks
- QTAR (see Weih, 2017c, 2017b)
- Quick Writes

Note: All of the above strategies work with narrative and expository text.

- SQRWR (see Weih, 2017e)-is used only with expository text types.

During Reading Strategies

It is best practice to help children further understand the reading piece WHILE they are reading it for themselves. These strategies help children think about what is happening in the reading piece, to make personal connections to the piece, to deepen their understandings, to go beyond literal meanings (Bloom et al., 1956), and to see underlying themes.

During reading strategies that typically can be found online that fall into this category include the following:

For narrative text:

- Think Alouds
- Reciprocal Questioning
- Open-Ended Questioning
- Questioning the Author
- Personal Vocabulary Journal
- Free-Response Journal
- Illustrative Journal

For expository, nonfiction text:

- Double Entry Journal
- Leaning Logs

After Reading Strategies

It is best practice to help children further understand the reading piece after they have read it for themselves. These strategies help children think back about what happened in the reading piece, to make personal connections to the piece, to deepen their understandings, to go beyond literal meanings (Bloom et al., 1956), and to see underlying themes. After reading strategies that typically can be found online that fall into this category include the following:

For narrative text:

- Story Retelling
- Sketch-to-Stretch
- Story Boards
- Story Ladder
- Story Map
- Book Boxes
- Quilts
- Open-Mind Portraits
- Context-Clue (see Weih, 2017a, 2017b)
- Story Face

For expository, nonfiction text:

- Venn Diagram
- KWL Charts
- Alphabet Books
- Book Boxes
- T-Charts
- Data Charts
- Context-Clue (see Weih, 2017a, 2017b)

If teachers cannot find online lesson plans for these content literacy strategies, use the Literacy Strategy Lesson Plan format covered in Weih (2015a; Appendix) as your guide to create your own.

Closing Comments

This article covered instruction in teaching intermediate grade elementary children how to be proficient in applying the English language arts, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension INFUSED into the content subject areas of science, social studies, math, language arts, and literature. With the aim at teaching language fluency for the sake of elementary students becoming proficient in all aspects of using the English language across their academic work. Reading comprehension and speaking proficiency builds within elementary students' literacy development as they become increasingly fluent in the English language.

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For Further Reading see the Following Reference

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Appendix

Content Literacy Strategy Lesson Plan: Instructing and Engaging Elementary Students in Learning

Teaching involves three main areas of activity on the part of the teacher. First is the curriculum and assessment creation, development, and design; next is the instruction; and finally is the assessment and evaluation. Instruction involves the teacher in the delivery of information to students. Usually the instruction first takes the form of a lesson plan the teacher creates or modifies from one found online or from some other sources. Effective instruction, or the delivery of the lesson plan to students can take many forms, but there is a logical sequence of events, widely associated with Madeline Hunter's design (Hunter, 1982). Most strategies and lesson plans found online can be modified into Hunter's template. The following subsections present this template in a modified version in multipart procedures for curriculum development and instructional delivery.

Preliminary Phase

Before developing, creating, and designing the strategy lesson plan, the teacher needs to engage in some preliminary activities for the sake of developing the necessary content. Typical preliminary tasks are included in the following list:

- Research the appropriate strategy through online search engines
- Determine the content area or focus
- Ascertain the main concepts or big ideas that students will learn
- Gather all the materials that students will need in order to do the strategy
- Determine the related standards
- Develop the objectives
- Determine what perquisite skills students will need for the sake of accomplishing the strategy and teach these prior to teaching the main strategy
- Determine how many class periods instruction will be needed

After this preliminary work has been done, the teacher is ready to create the content literacy strategy lesson plan, which is presented in the next subsections.

Instructional Procedure: Get Student Attention and Review

In this part of the strategy lesson delivery the teacher focuses the students' thoughts upon what will be learned. Teachers think of ways to connect back to a previous strategy lesson or other means to peak the students' interests. Get Attention and Review is defined as a brief activity or prompt that focuses the students "attention" before the actual lesson begins. This activity usually occurs right away when students enter the room or in a transition from one strategy lesson to the next. Examples could be a hand-out given to students at the door, review questions written on the classroom screen, two short problems presented on the screen, an agenda for the lesson written on the screen, a short video clip on the screen, a discussion prompt that engages elementary students in a brief sharing time of background knowledge-the ideas are actually endless, and teachers are encouraged to be creative.

Instructional Procedures: Strategy Definition, Benefits, and Applications

Students learn more effectively when they know what they are supposed to be learning and why it is important to learn it. Teachers also teach more effectively when they have the same information. In this

part of the strategy lesson delivery, teachers tell their students the definition of the strategy; the student benefits of learning the strategy; and how students can use or apply the strategy in their academic work for the sake of enhancing their success.

Instructional Procedure: Content and Modeling

During this phase of the lesson, teachers present the CONTENT, i.e., facts, generalizations, main ideas, and concepts, necessary for student understanding of the strategy along with the instructional directions for completing or doing the strategy. To help students understand exactly what teachers are asking them to do with the strategy directions, they also MODEL, which means they demonstrate to the students how to do the strategy, show them an example, or in some way make it so students can actually see the finished product of what they are going to do.

Instructional Procedure: Guided Practice and Checking for Understanding

For this component of the lesson, teachers have students practice the new content literacy strategy within small groups as the teacher circulates close to students and intently observes their work for the sake of performing the following: guiding students in the right directions, answering questions, giving more content instructions if needed, observational assessment and evaluation of students' performance, and making decisions about further instructional directions.

Instructional Procedures Repeated

The instructional procedures leading to and including the part of the Guided Practice and Checking for Understanding must be repeated for multiple class periods until the teacher is assured most students can demonstrate the new content literacy strategy without teacher and other student support. Even though students are working in small groups on the strategy, each student needs to complete his own work sample. Teachers should constantly assess and evaluate students' work both while they are working, and by collecting the work samples for further assessment and evaluation. When it appears that most students have successfully learned the new content literacy strategy, then the teacher can move on to the next part of the strategy lesson which is called CLOSURE.

Instructional Procedure: Closure

When it appears that most students can demonstrate that they have learned the content literacy strategy, then the teacher can have each small group of children share what they have learned or done with the whole class. This constitutes a review of the strategy from the perspectives of the students. There are many ways this can happen, but one of the most beneficial strategies is called "Recorder, Reporter" (see Weih, 2016). In this discussion strategy, each small group of elementary students selects one student to write down the main points of their discussion and then report out the content to the whole class, however, all group members are also required to write down the main points, this keeps all students fully active and engaged in the learning process, and in addition, creates a work sample from all students. After students have determined who is going to be the Recorder, Reporter, the teacher asks the students to respond through small group discussion to a question relative to the content literacy strategy that they just engaged in. After giving students enough time to discuss and write their responses, the teacher calls on each small group's Recorder, Reporter to report out to the class. In the end, the teacher collects all the papers from each individual student for the purpose of assessment and evaluation, but mostly for the sake of determining if it is feasible to move on to the next part of the Instructional Procedures called INDEPENDENT STUDENT WORK SAMPLE, which is presented in the next subsection. If it appears

that many students are still not clear about the content literacy strategy, then the teacher should reteach the strategy as necessary.

Instructional Procedure: Independent Student Work Sample

In this phase of the lesson plan, teachers separate students from their groups and give them a new example of the same strategy that they have been learning and working on for the sake of assessment and evaluation of individual student work samples. The teacher should help students as little as possible. These samples need to be evaluated and any students that are not performing to the degree of success in regards to the objectives for the strategy, the teacher should reteach these students again in the strategy, but this time, in small, teacher-guided groups in which the teacher sits with the group and leads them through the strategy step-by-step.

Next part of the Strategy Lesson Plan: Adaptation and Differentiation

Teachers modify and make adaptations in their strategy lesson plans in order to accommodate the needs of one or a few students in the classroom who, for whatever reasons, are not going to be successful as the majority of students in the classroom will be in doing the lesson plan activity or in learning the strategy. This is called “differentiation.” Each child with special needs is different in what he or she needs in order to learn and demonstrate learned skills. Each strategy lesson plan is different in content and directions. There is not a “one size fits all” method that can be applied to every situation. This is why it is so important for teachers to learn how to think for themselves when it comes to academic curriculum development and instructional delivery rather than learn to follow a textbook, teaching manual, or some other form of what is called “scripted curriculum.” It is crucial for educated teachers to be allowed to develop, create, and design their own curriculum and instruction. The role of textbooks, teaching manuals, and materials found online (including this article) can be used as “resources” to meet the needs that teachers have.

The best way to make decisions about how to make adaptations to strategy lesson plans is to constantly think about individual student needs, and then make the necessary accommodations in instructional lesson plans. It is critical for teachers to do everything they can to help individual students grow and become as independent as possible in their academic learning and work samples. The main point is that teachers make accommodations, rather than ignore the need for them. When children reach the intermediate grades, they are more sensitive to standing out or being different in any way. Knowing this, then, the best and first accommodation should be to plan and deliver the strategy lesson design covered in this article, with the most important part as being Guided Practice and Checking on Understanding happening in small, mixed ability groupings of the classroom children. This way, children with special needs can draw from the benefits that come from social learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers know best how to help their individual students in their classrooms through their daily ethnographic observations.

Next part of the Strategy Lesson Plan: Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation is a continual process of engagement on the part of the classroom teacher as she plans and delivers instruction, thinks back about what happened, and then makes changes based on the new knowledge gained. For information covering assessment and evaluation instruction, see the article “Assessment and Evaluation for Grades K-6” by Weih (2015a, 2015b). Classroom teachers are constantly learning, and their students are their teachers.

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