

# Instructional Enhancements to Improve Students' Reading Abilities

It was not long ago that three of the four authors of this article were participating in an end-of-conference panel during which we responded to questions posed by several English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in the large meeting room. One particular participant's question caught everyone's attention, including ours. The question had to do with teaching reading and the small changes that teachers could make in an already full reading curriculum to help students become better readers. More specifically, the participant asked us what he could do in just ten minutes per week to enhance his reading instruction, not disrupt the established curriculum, and, more importantly, help his students become more confident and skilled readers.

The question was (and is) a good one and reflective of most teachers' situations. Most of us teach in language programs with already established curricula, textbooks selected by others, and exams to be given at set increments. In many of our instructional

settings, daily lesson plans are provided to keep teachers on track, maintain consistency across sections of the same course, and distinguish one level from another. In fact, many of us have few opportunities to make major adjustments in the courses that we teach. But we oftentimes have at least ten cumulative minutes a week to bring in innovative classroom practices or modest instructional enhancements to meet our students' ever-evolving needs.

In this article, we focus on five types of modest instructional enhancements that teachers can integrate into their teaching to help their students become better, more confident readers. But before we turn to these easily adaptable instructional ideas, we juxtapose what we perceive to be common approaches to teaching EFL reading with key elements of comprehensive reading curricula.

## **Common approaches to teaching reading as a foreign language**

The typical EFL reading class revolves around a textbook reading

passage. The lesson may start out with pre-reading questions, during which the teacher taps into students' background knowledge and teaches some key vocabulary. Sometimes students are asked to preview the passage at this point and predict its contents. Students often preview by looking at the title, the photo and caption accompanying the passage, and section headings, if they exist. Students are then asked to read the passage on their own, most commonly at home but sometimes in class. After reading the passage, students almost always answer a set of post-reading comprehension questions (often in true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, or short answer formats); complete vocabulary and/or grammar exercises; and engage in what we might call "personalization" activities in written or spoken form, during which they state an opinion about the reading or connect some aspect of the passage to their own lives (Nunan 2003). The teacher and students go over answers to comprehension questions, exercises, and activities. Then the teacher directs students to the next chapter, and the cycle begins again. Alternatively, in even more traditional EFL classes, the teacher reads the passage aloud in class (after having assigned it for homework) while explaining grammar points and vocabulary items as they appear in the text. Students typically listen passively to the teacher's read-aloud and commentary.

In multi-skill courses with all-purpose course books, reading passages (in the form of dialogues or short texts) are often assigned to showcase or review a target grammar point. Students are typically asked to read the text, but the amount of reading that takes place is minimal. In such classes, little attention is paid to helping students develop into skilled readers. Rather, the passage is used to transition to a grammar lesson, vocabulary review, and/or other skill practice related to speaking, listening, and writing.

Of course, not every reading lesson is exactly as depicted here. Some variation inevitably exists before teachers transition their students from one textbook chapter to the next. That variation is dependent on a number of factors, including course objectives; the mandated textbook (and its reading passages and accompanying exercises);

students' reading levels and their engagement with reading-passage topics; teachers' confidence in their own abilities to teach reading and their understanding of the reading skill; and the actual time that teachers can devote to the chapter. What rarely occurs in EFL courses, however, is a lot of reading in class or at home. The absence of actual silent reading time (as opposed to time spent on reading exercises and discussions of answers) is unfortunate because *students become better readers by reading a lot and reading often* (Grabe 2009). Furthermore, there is likely to be more *testing* of reading (most often in the form of post-reading comprehension questions) than *teaching* of reading, the latter aimed at helping students become better and more critical readers (Anderson 2008, 2009).

Although students' reading abilities can improve gradually under these classroom conditions, students benefit from *explicit* reading instruction that aims to develop skilled and strategic readers (Anderson 2008, 2013b; Grabe 2009; Grabe and Stoller 2013). Because so many students these days need to become better readers (e.g., to succeed in English-medium schools, to read textbooks and/or journals in the target language for academic and/or professional purposes, to access information on the Internet), it is worth reexamining one's approach to EFL reading and considering small or large instructional modifications that can be made to assist students in becoming better readers.

### **Comprehensive reading curricula**

Good readers, at a minimum, need to be able to identify main ideas and details; distinguish between facts and opinions; draw inferences; determine author intent, stance, and bias; summarize; synthesize two or more reading passages; and extend textual information to new tasks, such as class projects, oral presentations, and written assignments (Grabe and Stoller 2013). Furthermore, capable readers need a repertoire of reading strategies and the ability to apply them in meaningful combinations, at the right times, to achieve their reading goals (Anderson 2009). Skilled readers also need to be able to read fluently, though at different rates for different reading goals, while maintaining comprehension. For all of this to occur,

students' motivation to read needs to be nurtured (Komiyama 2009). Fortunately, explicit instruction that focuses on reading-skills development can greatly help EFL students become more skilled, strategic, motivated, and confident readers.

For all these reasons, a comprehensive reading curriculum involves much more than simply assigning a set of pages for students to read and later reviewing students' answers to comprehension questions. A comprehensive approach to reading instruction not only gives students plenty of opportunities to read but it also addresses the various aspects of reading that must coalesce for students to become good readers. In an ideal world, reading curricula are built on the following overarching curricular goals:

1. ***Extensive practice and exposure to print:*** In comprehensive reading curricula, students read a lot and often. They read level-appropriate texts, with the expectation that reading occurs in every class. Students also read at home, where feasible. Typically, students are held accountable for more than answers to post-reading comprehension questions. Ideally, students are also exposed to additional print posted on classroom walls, in school corridors, and in the school library or resource center.
2. ***Commitment to building student motivation:*** In ideal reading curricula, we see a commitment to building student motivation for reading. Motivated students are more engaged as active members of the classroom community and more willing to tackle challenging texts. They also read in and out of class because they want to, not because they are told to do so.
3. ***Attention to reading fluency:*** Comprehensive reading curricula recognize the importance of reading fluency. A slow reader, who reads one word at a time, simply cannot be a good reader. A commitment to reading-fluency practice—at word, phrase, and passage levels—is the hallmark of curricula that reflect not only the nature of good reading but also respond to the needs of developing readers.

4. ***Vocabulary building:*** Proficient reading requires a large recognition vocabulary. The most effective reading curricula make a commitment to building and recycling vocabulary.

5. ***Comprehension skills practice and discussion:*** The overarching goal of reading, of course, is comprehension. Yet comprehension is not achieved easily. It requires a reasonable knowledge of grammar, the ability to identify main ideas, an awareness of discourse structure (i.e., how textual information is organized and the signals that provide cues to that organization), and the use of multiple strategies to achieve comprehension goals (Hedgcock and Ferris 2009; Hudson 2007; Pressley 2006). Teaching students *how* to comprehend texts and discussions of *how* comprehension is achieved are important elements of a wide-ranging reading curriculum.

At a minimum, effective reading curricula address these five elements. In many settings, especially those with an English for Academic Purposes orientation, we also see a commitment to the integration of content- and language-learning goals, often through the use of thematically organized reading passages. In such classrooms, the dual commitment to content and language learning prepares students for the demands of English-medium classrooms and workplace settings.

#### **Small changes that teachers can make to enhance their reading instruction**

Few EFL teachers are in a position to radically change their own approaches to reading instruction or their programs' predominant reading curriculum goals. Nonetheless, most teachers can modify their instructional practices in small ways with the ultimate aim of improving their students' reading abilities. Below we offer some easily adaptable classroom practices that teachers can choose from and "squeeze" into their already full lessons to help their students become better readers. Each of the following five sections is aligned with the elements of the comprehensive reading curricula outlined above. We have limited our suggestions to those that do not require more than a ten-minute commitment (though

each could be expanded if the teacher wanted to). Although these suggestions do not require a significant time commitment, when they are implemented regularly, they can make a difference in students' reading abilities, attitudes toward reading, and motivation to become better readers.

### 1. Extensive practice and exposure to print

Because of the simple fact that students learn to read by reading, the ideal is to ask students to read a lot. But in some settings, that can be difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, teachers can take small steps, which take very little time away from instruction, to create print-rich classroom or school environments. The goal is to surround students, to the best of a teacher's ability, with textual materials that students will gravitate toward and be motivated to read independently.

- *Create displays with readings of interest wherever possible (e.g., in classrooms, school corridors, school libraries).* Post interesting student-written work, in addition to book covers from the library, music lyrics, copies of Internet pages that are likely to catch students' attention, informational posters on topics of interest, newspaper and magazine articles, comic strips, and movie reviews. Displaying completed class projects in the form of wall newspapers, posters, PowerPoint slides, reports, brochures, and photo essays can be motivating for other students to read as well.
- *Make age-appropriate print materials available for students to check out.* Ask school colleagues, friends in the community, local tourist offices, and, when appropriate, the families of enrolled students to donate English-language materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines, books) to the school. Make them available for students to check out and read for pleasure.

### 2. Commitment to building student motivation for reading

It is not unusual, in many classroom contexts, for students to be assigned passages that are simply too difficult for them, uninteresting, or both. Such reading experiences are frustrating and, sadly, oftentimes demotivate students. Furthermore, many

students enter our classrooms without many reading role models; thus, they do not appreciate the enjoyment associated with reading. The pleasure of reading is even harder for students to achieve when they are overly concerned about their grades and/or competition with each other. Such students' primary reason for reading could simply become obligation—an *extrinsic*, rather than *intrinsic*, type of motivation that is unlikely to promote a deeper understanding of text (Deci and Ryan 1985). Warden and Lin (2000, 539) have labeled this phenomenon "required motivation." Although required motivation could be viewed as negative, under the right conditions it can be positive. The following techniques can encourage students who are not inclined to read on their own and/or who read only to fulfill requirements to become more engaged in the reading process.

- *Strive to make required reading passages interesting.* In the ideal reading classroom, students read passages that are of interest to them. When required texts are not inherently interesting to students, teachers should try to connect readings to students' lives, experiences, communities, immediate goals, future plans, or to texts read earlier. When such connections are planned before class, making these linkages during a reading lesson does not require much class time. When a topic is unfamiliar to students, showing pictures or audiovisual materials related to the topic can stimulate student interest. Nowadays, the Internet allows us to access video and audio clips on a wide range of topics. If teachers can locate such materials ahead of time, showing them in class may only take a few minutes.
- *Give students some degree of choice.* Provide students with opportunities to select some of their own readings, for either in-class or out-of-class reading. Students can be given the option to choose from among several passages in the mandated textbook, select a text of interest in the library, or choose from among three text resources on the Internet. Another way to provide

choice is to let students choose a select number of post-reading questions that they want to answer. When students have some degree of choice, even minimal, it serves as an excellent motivator.

- *Promote cooperation among students.* Include opportunities for students to work together without the pressure of competing with each other. Almost anything related to reading can be shared in pairs or small groups in a few minutes, including answers to comprehension questions, reactions to the day's reading, and reflections on readings completed at home.
- *Set students up for success.* When students experience reading success and can see their progress, they become motivated and engaged. They also begin to self-identify as capable target-language readers.
  - Instead of posing a question about a reading to the whole class and soliciting an oral response from the quickest student to respond (often the same student throughout the school year), give everyone a few moments to write down the answer to your questions. In this way, you can give students who do not typically speak up the chance to share their answers with a partner, a group, or the class.
  - At the beginning of class, give students 1–2 minutes to review the reading that had been assigned for homework. Then ask students to decide which post-reading comprehension question was the easiest to answer. Have pairs or groups of students compare answers to the questions identified as easy. Ask students to explain why the questions were easy. Then continue with other post-reading activities.
  - Teach rather than test. Rather than simply confirming correct answers to post-reading questions, ask students to return to the text to underline or circle the word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph that provides the answer.

- Make sure that students have the opportunity to read texts that are easy for them. This can be done by having students reread already familiar passages for a new purpose or by assigning readings that are at a slightly lower level than their current reading ability.
- Devote a few minutes of class time for students to chart their reading progress. Have students keep records of, for example, what they have read outside class, their performance on fluency activities (rate and comprehension), new words learned in reading class, and/or the number of pages read.

### 3. Attention to reading fluency

It is widely recognized that fluent reading at the word, phrase, and passage levels is essential for efficient reading. However, proficient readers read at different rates, depending on their purpose(s) for reading: reading for the gist (skimming), reading for general comprehension, reading to learn, etc. Despite this variation inherent in fluent reading, it is safe to assert that most EFL readers read too slowly to achieve their purposes. Thus, it is worthwhile to devote some class time to reading-fluency development.

The few second language researchers who consistently endorse a commitment to reading-fluency practice (Anderson 1999, 2008, 2013b; Bamford and Day 2004; Grabe 2010) agree that reading fluency is developed first and foremost when students read a lot. Yet other classroom approaches can contribute to fluency development (see, for example, Anderson 1999, 2009; Cohen 2011; Grabe and Stoller 2011; Nation 2009). In almost any instructional context, a teacher can use a text already covered in previous lessons as a springboard for short reading-fluency activities. Using an already covered text allows students to concentrate on reading more quickly instead of having to focus on meaning and unfamiliar words. Teachers can engage students in fluency practice with activities that center on familiar texts:

- *Repeated oral reading:* Ask students to reread a short passage aloud (but softly) 2–4 times for a set period of time

(e.g., 45 seconds, one minute), with the goal of advancing further into the text each time.

- *Oral paired rereading:* Ask students to work in pairs to reread a text aloud. During this activity, Student A reads the passage aloud for a designated period of time (e.g., 30–60 seconds) as quickly and as accurately as possible with appropriate pausing and intonation. While Student A reads aloud, Student B follows along and assists Student A if necessary. At the end of the designated time period, Student A marks the end point of his or her read-aloud. Then Students A and B switch roles. Student B reads the exact same passage as Student A, starting at the beginning. After the same designated time period, Student B marks the end point of his or her read-aloud. The students then repeat the procedure for a second round, rereading the same exact text from the beginning. The goal of this reading activity is to advance further in the text in the second round. The number of words gained on the second reading is then recorded.
- *Repeated silent reading with a new purpose:* Before moving onto a new chapter, ask students to reread a passage for a *new* purpose (e.g., to prepare for a summary; fill in a graphic organizer; determine author stance; connect information with previously encountered information from a teacher mini-lecture, a field trip, or an Internet site).
- *Echo reading:* Pair a stronger reader with a weaker reader. Ask the stronger reader to start out by reading 1–2 sentences of a longer passage aloud, after which the weaker reader reads aloud the exact same text segment. The students continue in echo fashion for 4–6 minutes.
- *Buddy reading:* Pair students with similar reading abilities. Ask them to take turns, of one minute each, reading aloud a longer but easy text.
- *Teacher read-aloud:* Read a text aloud to students at a regular pace, while students read along silently. The same can be accomplished with the CDs that now accompany some textbooks

(e.g., Anderson 2008, 2013a). Students can also echo read, sentence by sentence, as the teacher reads aloud.

- *Radio reading:* After sufficient practice, ask students to reread a passage aloud while sounding as much like a professional radio announcer as possible. Radio reading works well with non-fiction texts and with more advanced students.
- *One-minute reading* (Iwano 2004): Ask students to reread a text for exactly one minute, once a week. Stop students after 60 seconds and ask them to mark the last word read and count how many words they read. Have students keep a record of their weekly one-minute readings to chart their improvement over time.

#### 4. Vocabulary building

Students are predictably the first to tell us that they need more words. A commitment to vocabulary building is always appreciated by students and can contribute to students' reading development. As students build their vocabulary knowledge, they gain access to more advanced texts. Although many course books have pre- and post-reading exercises that emphasize the key words in the text, teachers can set aside ten minutes or less a week and use the following techniques to assist students in consolidating that vocabulary learning.

- *Encourage students to become word collectors.* Following the reading of a text, ask students to circle five words that they want to learn and make their own. In groups, students can share their word choices and their reasons for choosing them. Students can record those words in a Vocabulary Journal of Words to Own (possibly in the back of their notebooks). At home, students can write in definitions and example sentences. These five words can be taught to others in student groups as an extension activity. Alternatively, students can create flashcards that include the target word, its part of speech, a definition, the original sentence, and a student-generated sentence. In pairs, students can teach and practice the words, using flashcards to initiate the exchange.

- *Ask students to categorize words.* Choose a text with many useful vocabulary words and pick 15–20 words for students to work with. Ask students to sort the words into 2–4 categories provided by the teacher, such as (1) adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs; (2) positive words, negative words, and neutral words; and (3) medical words, technology words, and solution words. Encourage students to look back at the text to decide which words belong in each category.
- *Guide students in analyzing words.* Choose words from students' texts with similar prefixes, roots, and suffixes and instruct them to analyze the words. As they encounter words with the same prefixes, roots, or suffixes in future readings, have students add them to their lists and discuss their meanings.
- *Encourage students to use newly learned words.* Write three recently learned words on the board. Ask students to choose one and write for one minute, using the word at least once.

### 5. Comprehension skills practice and discussion

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of all reading; that is, the ability to understand a text underlies all reading tasks. Thus, main-idea comprehension should be at the core of all reading instruction (Grabe and Stoller 2013). In most classes, comprehension is tested as the class reviews post-reading comprehension questions. Instead of testing comprehension, we can help our students by *teaching* comprehension. Below are a few ideas that do not require more than ten minutes of class.

- *Ask students to anticipate, predict, confirm, or modify their predictions, and summarize.* Following the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) protocol (Blachowicz and Ogle 2008), help students relate their background knowledge to the text and determine their goals for reading, and engage in a series of prediction and/or summarizing tasks at set, predetermined pauses.
- *Ask how, when, and why questions about reading-strategy use.* Bring combinations

of the following reading strategies to students' conscious attention:

- Preview and form questions about the text.
- Answer questions while reading.
- Identify difficulties encountered in the text.
- Take steps, such as rereading, to repair faulty comprehension.
- Judge how well goals are met.
- Take notes, underline, or highlight main ideas and summarize using notes.

Encourage strategy practice while students are reading for authentic purposes. As a class, talk about how, when, and why the strategy sets are used.

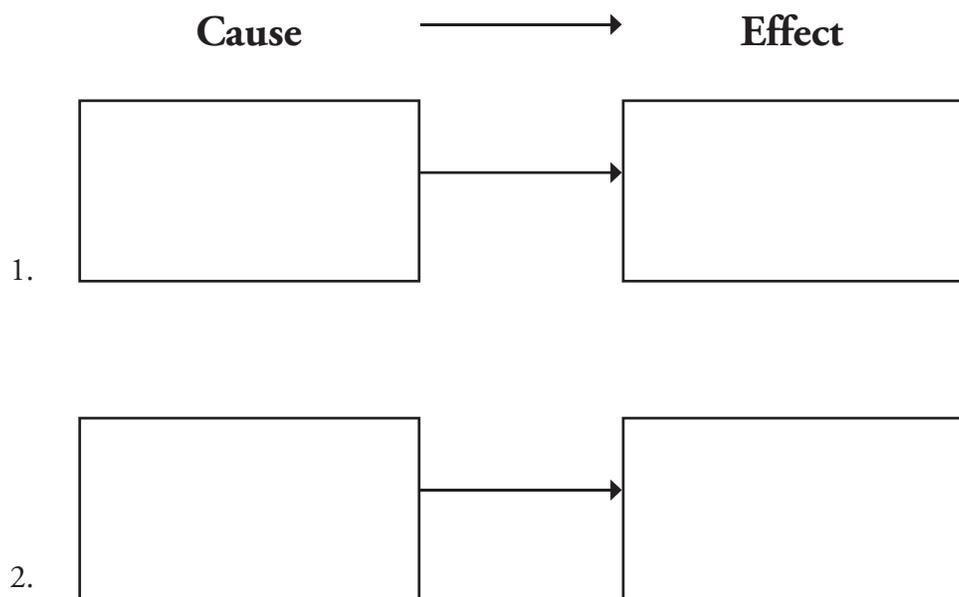
- *Model strategy use.* Consider reading a text segment aloud to students while incorporating the verbalization of strategies. For example, you might comment on reading goals; make predictions; point out contextual clues that help clarify the meaning of key vocabulary; connect textual information to background knowledge or a previously read text; make inferences; and/or reread to clarify a possible misunderstanding.
- *Ask students to follow up initial post-reading question responses with further elaboration.* This can be done by asking students to defend their answers, explain why an answer is appropriate, or point out where the text supports their answers. Guide students in making connections across parts of the text, between two or more texts, or between the text and their own background knowledge.
- *Assign summary tasks.* With more demanding texts, ask students to summarize what they have read or a segment of what they have read. Such tasks provide students with practice in identifying main ideas, articulating those ideas, and establishing links across main ideas and supporting details. Teachers can also ask students to write a one-sentence summary for each paragraph while reading; as an alternative, students could be asked to write a phrase in the margins that captures the main idea of each paragraph.

These types of summary tasks help students not only focus on main ideas but also monitor their understanding of the passage.

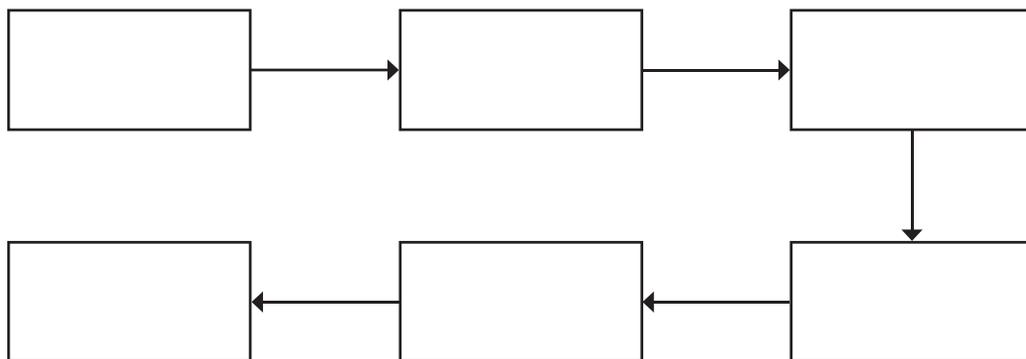
- *Use graphic organizers.* Work with students to fill in simple diagrams on the board with key words and phrases to indicate the discourse organization of a text paragraph or section (see Figures 1 and 2). Texts or portions of texts that are organized around problem-solution, compar-

ison-contrast, cause-effect, or timeline/sequence frameworks lend themselves well to such tasks (Jiang and Grabe 2009). Guide students in a quick discussion of their completed graphic organizers (e.g., the causes and effects of certain actions or the sequence of an event).

- *Give students a list of transition words and phrases that they have encountered and ask them to cluster them into similar groups.* For intermediate-level students,



**Figure 1. Cause-effect graphic organizer**



**Figure 2. Process/sequence graphic organizer**

provide a set of transition word categories followed by a list of transition words and phrases (see Figure 3). The task involves categorizing the transition words into appropriate groups (see the Appendix for a possible response to this task). Following the activity, ask students why they categorized the words as they did. For more advanced students, do not provide the category names. Rather, ask students to generate a name for each category that they create. Point out that some words could be placed in more than one category. Part of the value of this activity requires that students justify the placement of transition words and phrases into categories. The teacher and students can create a

class chart like the one in the Appendix and add transition words as they are encountered.

**Conclusion**

EFL teachers in most classrooms around the world do not have the freedom to make changes in the school curriculum, but we are confident that every teacher has at least ten minutes each week that they could use better to improve students’ reading abilities. The ideas that we have provided here center on five key elements of reading instruction. We believe that if teachers select just one of these activities and experiment with it over a period of time, notable improvements can be made in students’ reading abilities. Students will see the difference, and program supervisors will

TRANSITION WORD CATEGORIES			
To add information and reasons	To show cause and effect	To explain, give reasons	To compare
To summarize	To contrast	To show sequence	To show chronological order

**Sample Transition Words and Phrases:** first, also, still, in summary, subsequently, second, formerly, accordingly, besides, actually, similarly, next, in a word, then, moreover, admittedly, before, likewise, further, on the contrary, for example, equally, earlier, by comparison, simultaneously, in spite of, really, briefly, after, furthermore, in fact, in addition, anyhow, in all, now, certainly, consequently, concurrently, in short, therefore, of course, as a consequence, previously, too, afterwards, as a result, finally, thus, instead, last, otherwise, nowadays, that is, in brief, indeed, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, later

**Figure 3. Categorization task that reinforces discourse organization cues**

notice the difference too. The changes that you will see in your own teaching (and students' learning) will motivate you to choose one *more* idea and implement additional modest changes in your lessons. Often it is not the big things that we do in classes that make a difference, but rather the small things that we do, and do consistently.

We challenge you to choose one of the ideas presented in this article and see what impact it can have on your teaching, and, more importantly, on your students' reading. We also challenge you to find at least one other teacher with whom you can work. This will give you someone to share your successes and challenges with, as well as the progress that you and your learners are making. Do you accept the challenge?

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## Possible Answers for Categorization Task in Figure 3 *(continued from p.11)*

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TRANSITION WORD CATEGORIES			
To add information and reasons	To show cause and effect	To explain, give reasons	To compare
also besides equally further furthermore in addition moreover too	accordingly as a consequence as a result consequently then therefore thus	actually admittedly certainly for example in fact indeed really of course that is	by comparison likewise similarly
To summarize	To contrast	To show sequence	To show chronological order
in all in a word in brief briefly in short in summary	however instead in spite of anyhow nevertheless on the contrary on the other hand otherwise still	first second next then finally last	subsequently later next after afterwards then now nowadays concurrently simultaneously first formerly earlier previously before