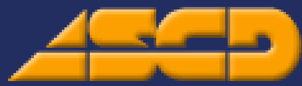

Literacy Strategies for Grades 4–12: Reinforcing the Threads of Reading

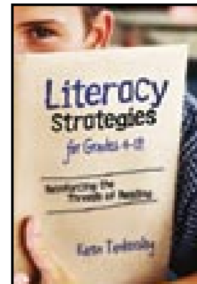

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. The Struggling Reader

The Brain and Reading

Wolfe and Nevills (2004) describe the brain as a hierarchy of low-level decoding skills and high-level comprehension-making skills. They write that at "the higher levels are the neural systems that process semantics (the meaning of language), syntax (organizing words into comprehensible sentences), and discourse (writing and speaking). Underlying these abilities are the lower-level phonological skills (decoding) dedicated to deciphering the reading code" (p. 26). All of these systems must function well in order for individuals to read quickly and make meaning from the text.

Dyslexia and Poor Readers

Dyslexia is a reading disability that can affect those who otherwise demonstrate the intelligence, motivation, and education to develop into good readers (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). It affects 80 percent of people identified as "learning disabled," and is believed to affect an estimated 5 to 17 percent of Americans (Shaywitz, 2003). Dyslexia is genetic: 25 to 50 percent of those with a dyslexic parent also have the disorder (Scarborough, 1984). According to Shaywitz (2003), dyslexia affects boys and girls equally, but boys tend to be identified more frequently as having the disorder due to their more disruptive behavior in the classroom. However, this conclusion has recently been disputed by the research of Dr. Michael Rutter at King's College in London, which found dyslexia to be present in 18 to 22 percent of boys and only 8 to 13 percent of girls (Tanner, 2004).

As a result of new technology, neuroscientists are learning more and more about how the brain operates and what causes dyslexia. Because reading is a complex brain activity, a lot can go wrong as children develop into readers. Each potential problem area must be examined when reading difficulties occur so that the right solutions can be provided. Because reading begins with visual input, any vision problems can inhibit the ability to process print effectively. Some poor

readers may have subtle sensory deficits in visual processing, such as poor visual acuity or slower-than-normal eye movements (Berninger, 2002). In addition, any type of hearing impairment, such as chronic ear infections during the preschool years, can harm the language development of young children. Those who cannot process sound quickly enough can have trouble distinguishing similar consonant sounds (such as *p* or *b*). Training in sound-symbol correspondence and aural acuity will help these children improve their ability to process the sounds they hear and read.

A deficit in the language systems of the brain seems to be the problem that most frequently affects struggling readers. There are three main areas in the brain devoted to reading:

- The inferior frontal gyrus, or Broca's area, situated at the front of the brain and responsible for articulating speech;
- The parieto-temporal area, situated at the back of the brain and responsible for analyzing and sounding out parts of words; and
- The occipito-temporal area, also situated at the back of the brain and responsible for synthesizing all information related to words and sound, and thus for recognizing words instantly.

According to Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004), functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) reveals striking differences in the ways that dyslexic and nondyslexic readers process what they read: Whereas nondyslexic readers experience activity in the left Broca's area and the left parieto-temporal and occipito-temporal areas of the brain, dyslexic readers display over-activity in the frontal area, but very little activity in the left rear areas of the brain that nondyslexic readers use. These findings suggest that the brains of dyslexic readers try to compensate for an inability to use the left rear parieto-temporal and occipito-temporal areas by over-activating Broca's area on both sides of the brain.

Although the dyslexic readers often learn to read, the task was slow and laborious, and the patterns of over-reliance on the inferior frontal gyrus continued into adulthood. Exciting new research is now changing the long-held belief that a child with dyslexia is destined to become a dyslexic adult.

In a study by Shaywitz et al. (2003), researchers provided 2nd and 3rd grade struggling readers with 50 minutes of daily individual tutoring on how letters and letter combinations represent the sounds of speech. This explicit tutoring, provided by specially trained, certified teachers, was given in addition to regular classroom reading instruction. After eight months (105 hours), the students in the study demonstrated significant gains in reading fluency. Scans of their brains showed new activity in the left rear parieto-temporal and occipito-temporal areas that had not been present prior to the tutoring. One year following the study, the students were reading accurately and fluently without any additional tutoring, and fMRI scans revealed that all three

left-sided areas of their brains were now much more activated as in a normal reader. A control group that had received nonphonological reading instruction did not show reading improvement or changes in brain function. This exciting study shows that dyslexia may be affected through appropriate instruction at an early age.

The Gap Between Good and Poor Readers

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that children who are read to three or more times per week are more likely to know their letters, count to 20 or higher, write their own names, and actually read when they enter school (Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 1999). The center also found that white children were read to more often than black or Latino children (NCES, 2003). According to Yarosz and Barnett (2001), the educational level of students' mothers and the wealth of their families were among the factors most strongly associated with reading frequency: 74 percent of children living in poverty were read to by family members before entering kindergarten, as compared to 87 percent of more affluent children.

Juel (1988) reports that by the end of 1st grade, students proficient at reading will have seen an average of 18,681 words of running text, whereas those who are struggling will have only seen 9,975. It is no wonder that, given half as much practice as their more proficient peers, struggling readers lost ground in decoding, automaticity, fluency, and vocabulary growth. The problem was not that the children were not developing skills—they were—but rather that they had fallen behind their classmates and were never able to catch up. By high school, many of these students will have fallen behind their peers by as much as four years (Shaywitz, 2003).

Sometimes students who make adequate progress in the early grades begin to struggle again around the beginning of 4th grade—what teachers refer to as “the 4th grade slump.” Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) identified a drop in the reading scores of students between the 3rd and 4th grades, particularly those with low incomes. The researchers suggest that reasons for this could include the appearance of fewer picture clues in 4th grade texts, the abundance of new vocabulary words, and an expectation that students absorb information from the text rather than simply read for plot. They also point out that around the 4th grade, teachers shift their focus from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” in the different content areas. However, Hirsch (2003) disagrees that the gap widens in the 4th grade. He suggests that “reading tests make the comprehension gap *seem*much greater in fourth grade because the texts used in earlier grades are heavily focused on testing early reading skills (like decoding) and do not try to measure the full extent of the vocabulary differences between the groups” (p. 10).

It is certainly no surprise, given their years of frustration, that struggling readers typically are anxious about school. They tend not to be very motivated, and often lack self-confidence regarding their ability to read (Kos, 1991). Struggling readers often attribute their problems to the difficulty of the task, interference, too much noise, vision problems, or unfair teachers; seldom do they acknowledge that their own lack of skill is at the heart of the issue. Many give up

trying to improve altogether, believing that it is hopeless for them. In turn, teachers attribute the reluctance of these students to participate in activities as either defiance or lack of motivation, and do not know how to address the problem.

Older struggling readers, who have experienced many years of frustration and failure, are often skilled evaders who try to either "hide out or act out" so they can avoid reading in front of their peers. Cope (1997) notes that unrehearsed oral reading was the *single* most negative experience reported by adolescents about their entire school experience.

Researcher Mary Ellen Vogt (1989, 2000) examined how students perceived as either high or low achievers by their teachers were treated in class and came to some startling conclusions. In classrooms where students were perceived as high performers, Vogt found that teachers

- Talked less and encouraged more interactions among students,
- Allowed for more creative and generative approaches to learning,
- Offered opportunities for independent work,
- Had warmer and more personal relationships with students, and
- Spent little time on behavior or classroom management issues.

On the other hand, teachers working with perceived low performers

- Prepared more structured lessons,
- Allowed fewer opportunities for student creativity,
- Covered less content,
- Rewarded students for "trying hard" rather than for "good thinking,"
- Spent a significant amount of time on behavior and management issues, and
- Had less congenial relationships with students due to their heavy emphasis on discipline.

Little wonder that struggling students find school less than an encouraging place to spend their time.

While many low-performing students shun outside reading, not all of them do. Some read music, sports, or pop culture magazines regularly. They spend hours researching their favorite pop or rap singers on the Internet, and frequently spend many hours reading online. Clearly, young people can motivate themselves to read what interests them. For this reason, our classrooms must become inviting places that make students want to partake of what we offer. Reading must be seen as helpful, interesting, and a means to achieve the big-picture goals in their lives.

Motivating Struggling Readers

Motivation is strongly affected by two variables: whether we expect to be successful at a task,

and how much value we place on that success (Wigfield & Asher, 1984). People generally believe they are successful because of one of three reasons: ability, effort, or luck. Highly successful people tend to believe that they succeed because of ability and fail due to lack of effort (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Poorly motivated people, on the other hand, tend to attribute success to luck and failure to a lack of ability instead of lack of effort (Weiner, 1979). After many encounters with failure, some individuals may begin to believe that they are not capable of success, and give up without even trying. Teachers must continually reinforce the connection between effort and achievement with struggling students. An environment where success is possible and students set reachable goals can have a profound, positive effect on struggling students (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

Unfortunately, we often have to present content to our students that is outside their realm of interest or prior experience. It has been demonstrated time and again that when we are interested in a subject, we are better prepared to relate to the information being presented to us. Rasinski (2003) calls this the "Michael Jordan effect." To get where he wanted to be professionally, Michael Jordan had to undergo many long hours of tedious practice to become an expert in his sport, and was self-motivated to do so. The task for teachers, then, is not selecting work that is particularly exciting, but rather work that is meaningful and helps students to be self-motivated. Students have to know what's in it for them before their interest can be maximized.

If we want struggling readers to improve, we have to help them see reading as a bridge to learning more about the things that matter to them. For example, one fun way to introduce students to the concepts of grammar is the book *Idioms for Aliens: A Grammar Revue of Plays and Verse* by Ed Butts (2004), which helps students to learn about grammar while participating in a Reader's Theater or choral reading experience. The verse is fun, and makes learning seem almost incidental.

Another idea is to have students write diary entries based on biographical information about a historical figure they have studied. The entries should include not only historical facts, but also the characters' thoughts and feelings about the events of their time.

Because most students today are computer literate, yet another option is to have them develop Web sites on the topic they are studying. Have students view examples, consider the type of information they'd like to share with visiting guests, and provide links to relevant sites. Many districts now provide space for student-developed projects on their servers; for those that do not, many free Web hosting services are available.

Taking Away Excuses

Word-by-word readers often concentrate so hard on decoding that they do not absorb the meaning of what they read. These students must be reminded that when this happens, they

have to stop and use a fix-up strategy such as rereading, considering the context, or asking for clarification. Many struggling readers simply quit when the going gets tough. We must help them learn that all readers have lapses in understanding, and that the difference between good readers and poor ones lies in what they do when comprehension breaks down.

Struggling readers must be exposed to a wide variety of text genres and types, including newspaper and magazine articles, novels, and Web sites. Understanding the features specific to different genres and types of text allows students to better predict what comes next and how the text will be presented. Conducting read-alouds and walking students through thinking aloud about what they read can also be of help.

Many struggling readers are unfamiliar with everyday terms that the rest of us take for granted—terms such as *compare, contrast, infer*, and *discuss*. For these students, we must provide specific modeled lessons coupled with guided feedback on their performance. For example, we must help them learn how to compare two concepts, or to summarize a text and see how it connects to events in their own world. We must take away students' excuses for not understanding what they read by providing the guidance and solid skills to overcome their difficulties.

Motivational Strategies for Struggling Readers

Varied Texts

When the current school system was conceived back in the late 1800s, schoolchildren were being shaped for life in the Industrial Age. Workers were needed who could sit at assembly lines and complete their tasks in isolation, without interacting with others. For this reason, schools were organized around independent work, and competition among students was seen as productive. But times have changed, and we need to bring our instructional practices into line with the skills necessary for success in today's society. Nowadays, employers want people who can be good team players, working collaboratively rather than in isolation. Even educators, who historically have worked independently, have become aware that they can learn much from interacting with their peers.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a social process, so classrooms must be social places. Vygotsky says that what we know and are able to do independently can be increased significantly through peer interaction and strong teacher modeling and support. Students need to discuss what they are learning with others. The best classroom environment for struggling readers is one where they can think and talk aloud with their classmates and the teacher about their ideas and questions. The focus of the classroom should not be on the reading itself, but rather on the process of making meaning and creating understandings about content.

If we are to pique the interest of our students, textbooks cannot be their main sources of information—especially for struggling readers. As Moore, Moore, Cunningham, and Cunningham

(2003) tell us:

> "Traditional content area textbooks are like freeways. They move you through a lot of territory, but they do it so quickly that you are unable to obtain close, personal insights into the area. In order to genuinely know where you are and have been, you need to exit the freeway and travel the connecting roads. The connecting roads of subject matter are materials such as library books, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, and computer software. These materials provide multiple avenues to thinking and learning." (p. 64)

Let's examine how this might work in class. Instead of beginning a high school science class with, "Open your books and read page 215, then discuss the questions at the end of the chapter," I might start by reading a chapter or two of Richard Preston's *The Demon in the Freezer* (2002), a book about the eradication of smallpox and the threat of biological weapons that provides students with a great deal of vocabulary and new background knowledge. Following the reading, I might ask the students to choose a virus strain to study in teams and then report to the class. Specific instructions on the format, content, and presentation of the reports will guide the teams' work for the rest of the period. In addition to their textbooks, students will use the Internet, scientific articles, magazines, and books on viruses that I have collected for them as sources of information. During the course of the unit, students will also research and conduct a debate on whether the use of biological weapons is ever justified, and write persuasive letters to their representatives in Congress on whether scientists should be allowed to keep active viruses in storage. Because the information is more relevant to current issues and the task gives students a choice in their work, learning will be in-depth, long-term, and meaningful.

We must help students see that reading is the bridge to the ideas in the text. As teachers, we must also understand that textbooks are resources to be read selectively, not cover to cover. If we want students to care about the knowledge we offer, we must show our students how it connects to their world. The sooner we use the textbook as one of many sources, rather than as a sole source, the sooner our students will learn the content we want them to learn.

Student Choice

Allowing students to choose at least some of what they read in class can improve their motivation. Interest inventories can help teachers learn about what interests their students and recommend books accordingly. Remember that success breeds success: Be sure to find a book that the reader can read with at least 95 percent accuracy. (A simple rule of thumb is that if there are more than 7 unknown words among the first 100, the book will probably be too difficult.)

For readers who are several years below grade level, there are many "high interest, low

vocabulary" books, and even books on tape for students, available from educational publishers. Many publishers bundle high-interest sets of books together on topics that appeal to both male and female students (e.g. motorcycles, romance). Magazines, the Internet, and picture books can also be great resources for struggling readers. Text that is short and relevant to teens' lives is captivating. The more students simply read, the better readers they will become.

There are many online lists of outstanding books for preteens and teens on every topic imaginable, along with reviews and information on authors who are popular with students. The following sources are particularly helpful:

- Carol Hurst Children's Literature Site (http://www.carolhurst.com)
- The Children's Literature Web Guide (http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/index.html)
- The BookSpot.com "Teen Reading Lists" Directory (http://www.bookspot.com/features/teenreadinglists.htm)
- The TeenReads.com Web Site (http://www.teenreads.com)
- The Young Adult Library Services Association's "Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers" Web Site (www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks)
- The Books for Reluctant Readers Web Site (http://the2rs.com/books_for_reluctant_readers)

All of these Web sites have contributions written for and by kids that can be especially helpful to teachers working with unmotivated students. Teachers should be sure to read the books themselves before purchasing them for class use, however—times have changed regarding what's considered acceptable in teen material. Some books may be appropriate for teens to read outside of school, but not for in-school study and discussion with a whole class. If teachers choose books with controversial content, they should apprise parents of the content prior to using the books with students.

Reader's Theater Productions

Students love Reader's Theater productions, in which they write and perform scripts based on what they read in class. There are many guides to such productions available; one particularly good one is Chris Gustafson's *Acting Cool: Using Reader's Theater to Teach Language Arts In Your Classroom* (2003). There are also many ways to turn content-area materials into scripts: in science class, for example, students could create a performance in which the planets of the solar system are the main characters. Social studies class is filled with wonderful stories that could easily be turned into scripts (see Appendix A for an example).

Poetry Coffee Shops

Another way to make reading fun is to turn your classroom into a version of the local coffee

shop, complete with mood lighting. Invite parents, administrators, and fellow teachers to visit your coffee shop, enjoy a brew (even if it is only cocoa), and hear your students practice poems, Reader's Theater presentations, or readings of their own writing. Students love it and present individually, in pairs, or in small groups. The more unusual the material, the better. Some good poetry books are Paul Fleischman's *Joyful Noise* (1988) and *I Am Phoenix* (1985), and of course all of the Shel Silverstein poetry books. Once students get excited about the coffee shop idea, they will find many more books of inspiring or whimsical poems to perform.

Lucky Listener Comment Form

After students have practiced a particular text, have them take a copy of it home and read it to a friend or relative. When they're done reading, they should ask the listener to comment on the reader's rendition by providing feedback and signing a Lucky Listener Comment Form. Once the students have gathered several reactions, have them turn in the comments for extra-credit points. Each signature might get the students a predetermined number of bonus points toward their quarterly grade.

Choral Reading

Have fun with choral readings of text passages or poems. Invite students to get creative with how they read: for example, a poem can be read by having one person start a line, a second person joining in on the second line, a third on the third line, and so forth until the entire class is reading together. Alternatively, the class can begin by reading in unison and then slowly decrease by one or two readers until only one lone voice reads the last line.

Experiment by having individuals, small groups, and the whole class read certain lines to help students hear the lilt of voices responding together like an orchestra. Students can also read by rows, by gender, or by any other category that you can think of to create interest and variety; they will continue to amaze you with new and more creative renditions of pieces that they like to read. The poem “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” easily found in children's nursery rhyme books, is one example of a text you might experiment with using different voices and contrasting patterns. Other possibilities from content-area curriculum include the Preamble to the Constitution, Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” speech, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Organizing the Classroom to Meet the Needs of All Readers

Learning is a social process, and adolescents are social creatures who like to talk and interact with their peers. Students learn most from actually “doing” their reading, rather than from drills and worksheets; for this reason, continue reading aloud to your struggling readers whenever possible, even if it is only for five or ten minutes per day. Rasinski (2003) reports that when adults are asked about their most memorable moments in learning to read, “Without question, the number one answer that comes from students is being read to—by a parent, a grandparent,

a primary grade teacher, or other adult. Sometimes students report memories of being read to by a middle- or high-school teacher. These instances might be rare, but they are also among the most memorable and most enriching reading experiences" of older students (p. 19). Hearing adults model fluent reading helps struggling readers and English-language learners to develop an ear for the sounds and flow of the language.

Modeling good oral reading helps students see that the meaning is conveyed not only through the words, but also through the way those words are expressed, grouped, and emphasized. Poor readers often describe "good reading" as reading every word in the sentence without any mistakes. These students are sometimes so concerned with reading each word accurately that they read in a flat, expressionless voice. It is no wonder that when they finish, they have little comprehension of what they've read. Without good phrasing, expression, and pacing, written words bear little resemblance to the spoken ones that students hear in their world.

In addition to poor fluency skills, struggling readers have trouble visualizing what they read. Good readers often visualize such things as the setting, characters, and action described in the text. (This is why we are disappointed with movie versions of novels when the director's interpretation of a scene does not match our own.) Teachers can help struggling students develop visualization skills by asking them to stop and picture what they're reading. Ask them to describe their view of the setting or characters, or to draw a picture of a particularly meaningful scene.

A 1995 study of 4th grade readers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (Pinnell et al., 1995) found that students with the best oral reading ability also demonstrated the highest skills in reading comprehension—and that students who struggled with one skill struggled with both. When students must divide their attention between decoding and comprehension, the latter skill is not fully developed—and when they are able to read fluently, their comprehension automatically increases (Rasinski, 2003). Chapter 3 provides you with many ideas to strengthen your students' fluency skills; the rubric in Appendix B can help you measure their progress.

Good modeling, reading material at an appropriate level of difficulty, and choice in the selection of reading material can all improve reading achievement among students. In a study of 2,000 middle school students, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that the students' favorite in-class activity was free reading time, during which students were allowed to read material of their own choosing—and their second-favorite activity was read-aloud time. Even older students admitted that being read to made them want to read more on their own. Postlethwaite and Ross (1992) also found a direct correlation between how much teachers encouraged their students to read and student achievement. Krashen (1993) notes that the amount of reading that students do both in school and at home correlates strongly with high classroom achievement.

Book Clubs

Adolescents like to be part of the "in" group and are constantly looking for peer acceptance. A "book club" discussion format can help struggling readers to practice their reading skills while at the same time capitalizing on what they do best—socialize! Knowing that they will be talking about the book with peers, and not wanting to look dumb in front of them, motivates students to complete their reading in time for discussion.

Book clubs take time to develop, however. A teacher cannot simply announce that students will be meeting and discussing books. Teaching students to properly interact in a book club format takes time and proper modeling. Begin by reading to your students and modeling how to ask meaningful questions about the text. Ask open-ended questions about characters, actions, and events that happen in the story: "What do you think of the character of Marney? Is she a nice person?" Other open-ended questions that you might use include: "What strikes you as you read this? What scene did you particularly enjoy reading in this section?" Model your own thoughts and ideas, and get the students to open up about their own impressions. Get students in the habit of referencing page and paragraph for any opinions or comments they make. Ask, "Why do you think this, and what evidence do you have to support your thoughts? Show me something in the book that makes you say this." Opinions should not count unless they can be backed up with evidence from the text.

Asking open-ended questions will help students focus more on the content and meaning of the text and less on the more literal, "What color was the wagon?"–type questions that students have come to expect. Have students respond under your guidance until they master how to answer appropriately. The idea is to help students understand how to discuss a book rather than be the subjects of an inquisition. Once students have a good understanding of how to discuss books in teacher-directed groups, they are ready to move to more student-centered groups under their own leadership.

When moving to student-led discussion groups, begin by selecting several interesting books at different reading levels that focus on a particular concept aligned with your curriculum (e.g., "growing up" or "man against nature"). You can also select books of various reading levels but of the same genre, such as potboilers, biographies, or fantasy. You will need approximately four to six books at various levels of difficulty to accommodate an average-sized class. The Web sites mentioned earlier in this chapter offer some excellent sources for books that older children and teens will likely enjoy.

Introduce each book to the class on the first day of the unit by reciting a short summary that makes the book sound appealing. Place the books on display in the classroom for the remainder of the week so that students can thumb through and look at them. Remind students about the "readability rule": if students encounter 7 unknown words among the first 100 that they read, then the book is probably too difficult for them. At the end of the week, when students have had time to look the books over, ask them each to rank them according to interest. Explain that you will consider many factors in forming the groups, such as who works well together, how the

books were ranked, the number of copies of each book available, and so on. Try to place students in a group devoted to one of their top-three book choices whenever possible. Though you should try not to assign students books that you know are way too challenging for them, do not restrict them from reading texts that are only a bit beyond their current reading level if these books are among the students' top choices. Choice and motivation are powerful factors in getting students to read books that are somewhat difficult for them—especially when they will be receiving comprehension help from their peers. By the same token, do not allow advanced readers to regularly select books that are far below their current reading level. After the groups are assigned, ask students to convene and briefly examine their book. Appoint a discussion moderator and a facilitator for each group. The discussion moderator's job is to ask open-ended questions when necessary to stimulate discussion, reminding group members to support their answers with citations from the text. The facilitator's role is to ensure that everyone in the group is participating and no one is dominating the discussion. For the first couple of book club sessions, you might want to choose the moderator and facilitator for each group, although with time the groups should be able to rotate the roles themselves in a sensitive and skillful manner.

Some teachers feel that reading groups work better when each group member is given a role. If you feel this way, consider adding some of the following roles so that each person has a job:

- *Luminary:* Finds interesting, puzzling, or important sections in the text to read aloud to the group.
- *Connector:* Discusses connections between the novel and events in other stories or her own life.
- *Captain:* Organizes the group, ensuring that all members participate and recording important questions that he thinks the group would like to discuss.
- *Character Builder:* Keeps track of observations made about the main characters, listing personality traits and adjectives that describe them, along with supporting page and paragraph citations.
- *Artist:* Responsible for illustrating meaningful elements of the story, such as characters, problems, exciting scenes, predictions, or anything else of interest.
- *Vocabulary Collector:* Searches the text for interesting words, suggesting probable definitions based on the context. Words chosen should be important, unfamiliar, funny, used in an unusual way, or otherwise of note; the student should provide page and paragraph citations for each.

After the ground rules and roles have been set, ask each group to meet briefly to look over its book and set a goal for how much reading it wants to have accomplished before the first discussion. Some teachers have discussion groups once a week, others only every other week. Either way, allow time during the week for students to read their books in class so that they are

ready for the discussion. If multiple roles are used, remind students that they will need to gather the information prior to discussion day. If the group chooses a large chunk of reading, it is appropriate for members to read outside of class as well. Tell students upfront exactly how much class time they can expect you to allocate so that they can choose a goal that makes sense for the text length.

As students read the material in preparation for the discussion, ask them to use sticky notes or colorful flags to mark interesting things they find in the text—things that surprised or bothered them or did not seem realistic. They can also mark places where they liked the way something was said, did not understand a word, or did not completely understand what was happening. These notes will help shape the group's discussion. The moderator can follow what you modeled during whole-class discussion by asking students to share any interesting parts they marked. If more specific roles are used, students will be searching for the things you have assigned them to highlight.

Establish early on that students must come to class on discussion day having read the agreed-upon number of pages. There is nothing more frustrating for those who have read their material than to have to endure others trying to wing it during discussion. Tell students that they owe it to their fellow group members to complete their reading goals, and that if for some reason they don't they are to politely excuse themselves from the group to go complete the reading in another part of the room. I guarantee that no student will make that mistake more than once or twice.

Some teachers like to offer their students refreshments, such as popcorn or chips and soda, to make the book discussions more fun and social. Each group gets a small bowl of munchies, finds a place to congregate, and appoints the group's leaders. A list of all leader and participant expectations should be posted on the classroom wall.

Your role is to visit each group and listen in on the discussion and help direct any flailing groups. The livelier the discussion, the more students will like it, and the likelier it is that you'll be asked to clarify a point from the text or add your own opinion. As you circulate, be sure that students are discussing their thinking with their peers and not just offering opinions without evidence from the text. Remind all groups as needed to use examples from the text, citing the specific page and paragraph. One way to keep track of the discussions in each group is to collect the sticky notes that the students used to mark pages and transfer them to each student's reader log or file.

At the end of every discussion, ask each student to rank how well she performed in her role, and ask the group as a whole if it agrees with each self-assessment. Reader support and insight will go a long way toward motivating and helping your most reluctant readers view reading as an enjoyable and socially acceptable activity.

High-Stakes Testing and the Struggling Reader

Learning is a fleeting skill: If we do not use it, we lose it. Like many young, inexperienced teachers, I used to think that my students had never been taught certain skills—in fact, I was convinced that their previous teachers had never even pulled out the district scope-and-sequence for certain subjects. What were they doing all day in those lower grades? When I would begin to introduce, for instance, the concept of multiplying fractions, a glazed look would come over my students' faces; it was as though they had never heard of the idea in their lives. As I was supposed to be teaching the concept at the mastery rather than introductory level, I was amazed that I would have to stop and take time to go over what I thought they should already know.

Wow, was I naïve! In my seventh year of teaching, I had the privilege of moving up a year, or "looping," with my students. When it was time to take the fractions concept I'd taught in the first year a step further in the second year, lo and behold—that same glazed look appeared on their faces! How could this be? I *knew* who their previous teacher had been, and that she'd taught them appropriately.

So much for criticizing *my* lower-level peers ever again. Our brains are just not designed to allow complex concepts to stick; without constant review, students forget what they have been taught. As teachers, we need to connect what we are teaching to prior concepts so that the ideas *do* stick. We also need to help students tie what they learn to something that they can remember: the more senses we involve in learning the ideas, the more likely the brain will be to make connections to the relevant stored data.

According to Vygotsky (1978), we must teach students at a level "just beyond" the one at which they currently function—this is called the "zone of proximal development." If we are teaching at this level, and if we scaffold our instruction so that students can reach the goals we set for them, our students will perform at a higher level than expected on state-mandated tests. If our students have to stretch to reach the expectations set by exams, they will always have trouble passing them.

Over the years, I have seen many teachers dumb down their curriculum and lower their expectations for students. This does no one any favors; research has proven over and over again that students will meet the expectations you set for them. Know the standards and targeted skills that your students are expected to meet, and study sample assessment materials. It is only when you have a good match between curriculum, student, and assessment expectations that successful performance results.

Another pitfall for teachers is thinking that students cannot go on to more interesting projects and higher-level activities because they still have not mastered all of the basics. A good example of this mind-set is the middle school math teacher who keeps her students performing rote basic drills instead of exposing them to the more challenging curriculum of pre-algebra skills specified

in their curriculum. The brain operates more efficiently on complexity, so find ways to “fill the holes” with strategic mini-lessons on key skills for struggling students while still exposing them to the curriculum appropriate for their grade level. When students are asked to apply their skills in a meaningful way, their interest and motivation skyrocket. Higher-order thinking skills are perfect for helping students master more basic skills.

Enhancing Reading Comprehension Skills

The Question-Answer Relationship Technique

Struggling readers often do not know how to find answers to questions about the material they read. Even those who can read the assigned text often do not know how to process the material. Raphael's (1984) Question-Answer Relationship technique (QAR) can help teach readers how to locate answers in the text.

The technique categorizes questions as either “in the book” or “in my head” questions. Answers to “in the book” (textexplicit) questions are further separated into “right there” answers, which are explicitly stated in the book, and “think and search” (text-implicit) answers, which require the student to connect two or more pieces of data from the text. Answers in the “in my head” category require students to use their background knowledge in addition to text-based information—to make “on my own” answers to develop a response.

You can best teach students about the three types of questions by modeling an introspective process aloud. Ask the students to do the same—to speak their thoughts as they develop responses to questions—so that you can support them as needed.

Pair Rehearsals

Another good way for students to practice reading is to do so in pairs. Begin by choosing a rehearsal text of an appropriate length and difficulty. To introduce the text to each pair of students, read it to them in a fluent and expressive voice. As you read, clarify anything the students might find confusing, and encourage them to make predictions about what's to come. When you're done reading, ask the students to reread the text to each other, alternating pages or sections of text as they go, and assisting and coaching each other as necessary. Once the students feel comfortable reading the text as expressively as you did, allow them to present their material to you for feedback. Be sure to provide them with support and encouragement so that they know both what they did well and what they need to work on during the next rehearsal session.

If you have only a few students in the class who need this level of support, tape record a passage of interest and allow the students to practice independently with a headset until they are ready to present the material to you. (You will find more information on tape-recorded practice in Chapters 2 and 4.)

Comprehension is a process, and not an end product. The focus of your instruction with struggling readers should be to help make what is invisible to them visible.

The Highly Disabled Middle or High School Reader

According to Shaywitz (2003), a student who has not received the necessary reading assistance before 3rd grade may need 150 to 300 hours of intensive instruction over a one- to three-year period to close the gap between himself and his peers. This is not a job for peers, classroom instructional aides, volunteers, or teachers who do not possess highly specialized training in reading. High school readers who function at an early elementary reading level require the assistance of highly trained reading specialists; they must have intense, individualized training if they are to bridge the gap and learn effective reading techniques.

Older readers who still have not learned solid decoding skills should not start with phonics instruction, but by learning phonemes, word families, prefixes, and suffixes (Cunningham, 2000). There are 37 phoneme groups that form the basis of nearly 500 words in the English language (Wylie & Durrell, 1970). The "must learn" rimes include the following:

> ack, ain, ake, ale, all, ame, an, ank, ap, ash, at, ate, aw, ay, eat, ell, est, ice, ick, ide, ight, ill, in, ine, ing, ink, ip, ir, ock, oke, op, or, ore, uck, ug, ump, unk

Some other rimes that can also be taught are ab, ace, ade, ail, eam, ent, ew, it, ob, oc, old, ot, and ub. Together, these 50 make up the most common patterns in the English language. When introducing each rime, ask students to make a list of all of the words they can think of that contain the rime in question. List the words provided under the relevant rime on the classroom's Word Wall, so that students can easily see them. Add new words that fit the pattern as they are identified. The more words students look at that contain the rime, the more they will be able to visualize the word formation and the letter patterns. As students learn each rime, hold them accountable for all words that contain this letter sequence in their writing.

Once students understand how to use the concepts of onset and rime to unlock the pronunciation of a word, they can then be taught to use context clues and to remove prefixes and suffixes to decipher words that are new to them. Some helpful strategies to teach patterning and decoding to older readers are provided in the next section. These activities can be used either by reading specialists or by regular Language Arts teachers who have a high number of struggling readers.

Mapping Patterns

Introduce one of the word patterns to the students—the "ain" rime, for instance. Place the rime in the center of a graphic organizer map. Ask students to brainstorm words that can be made from the rime and add them to the organizer map (examples: *train, pain, drain, brain*). As they do this, have them discuss the meaning of the words, and draw a small sketch in each bubble

illustrating the meaning. After students have finished their pattern maps, have them create a wall map version with all of the words for continuous display in the classroom. When they're finished, have the students add their individual maps to their vocabulary notebooks.

Fill In the Blanks

Provide students with a list of sentences missing a word, and a list of "demon" words that students often confuse (e.g., *access*and *excess, conscience* and *conscious, fare* and *fair*). Have the students choose the correct word to fill in each blank. Students should work in pairs or groups of three, so that they can interact and discuss the process. The demon words should also be part of the classroom Word Wall, so that students can see them on a frequent basis.

Dissect

DISSECT is a word identification strategy by Lenz and Hughes (1990) that helps students decode unknown words. Each letter stands for a different step:

- **D**iscover the context (examine both syntactic and semantic cues)
- **I**solate the prefix (remove it from the root word)
- **S**eparate the suffix (remove it from the root word)
- **S**ay the stem (read the remainder of the word)
- **E**xamine the stem (divide the letters into groups—look for rime patterns or phoneme groups)
- **C**heck with someone for help
- **T**ry the dictionary for assistance

Hidden Rimes

Older successful readers look for rime patterns when reading. Examining the small common rimes in words can help struggling readers become more aware of how rimes fit into longer words. Have students find words that have a particular rime embedded within them—for instance, if the rime is "ight," students might choose words such as *delight, flight*, or *lighthouse*. This activity can also serve to expand student vocabulary.

Timed Rime

Give students a rime pattern that appears in a lot of words, such as "ent." Place the students in teams of three or four and give each group an overhead transparency. Within a given timeframe, ask students to brainstorm all the words they can think of that share the rime—no dictionary or word sources allowed, except for a Word Wall if one is present. Ask them to write the words on the transparency. When you call time, have students read their lists to the class from the overhead projector. Ask another student to record the words, either on the blackboard or on

chart paper, as they are listed.

Student teams will receive 1 point for each real word that contains the target rime. No nonsense or foreign words are allowed, and the teacher with a dictionary is the final authority in case of a dispute.

Another way to find rime patterns is to have students look through the newspaper or some other text. See which group can locate the most words with the target rime. Once students have located the words, ask them to create a collage by gluing the words to a piece of paperboard. The collage makes for both a good room decoration and a reminder of the rime pattern being studied.

Word Anagrams

In this exercise, students are asked to create smaller words from the letters in one long word. For example, if the long word is *inventions*, students might come up with words such as *note, sent*, or *invite*.

Getting from Here to There

Get small, blank wall tiles from a tile or hardware store—approximately 100 per student. Using a permanent marker, make three to four copies of consonants and five to six copies of vowels on the tiles by writing one letter per tile. Put the tiles in a large plastic bag for each student, for fast and easy distribution. Ask students to change one word into another word by laying out the starting word with their tiles and then manipulating them according to your step-by-step directions. Example: Start with the word *mat*. Change the *m* to *b*. What word does it make? Change the *a* to *i*. What word does it make? Change only one letter per step to form a new word based on the original word. After students understand the concept, challenge them to "grow" a word by adding one additional letter to the beginning or the end of the word. Example: Start with the word *in*. Add *f* to the word to make *fin*; on the next move, add an *e* to make *fine*, and so on. Challenge groups of students to see who can make the longest chain.

Tell Me a Story

Have pairs of students write a funny paragraph using words that contain a given rime pattern. Example: when learning the "ail" rime, students might write, "Gail took a pail to gather a snail. It started to hail and she stepped on a nail." For a higher level of thinking, students could be given two similar patterns (e.g., "ail" and "ale") and asked to use both correctly in a paragraph. Have students read their stories to the class, and remind them that the more humorous the story, the better.

Sight Words for Older Readers

Although we often teach primary children sight words, learning words in isolation is not

particularly helpful, and may even reinforce the idea of word-by-word reading for some students. Reading experts suggest that the phrase is the best unit of study for struggling readers (Schreiber, 1980, 1991; Rasinski, 1990; Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994). A good idea is to take some words from a high-frequency word list, such as Fry's "new instant word list" (1980), and organize them into meaningful phrases. Struggling readers should practice these phrases until they can read them smoothly and with good expression.

Because oral reading has been shown to be one of the best indicators of general reading competence (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001), helping students learn good verbal expression is essential. You can do this by modeling good expression and then coaching students as they read aloud. Struggling readers gain substantially from repeated readings of the same passage with direct feedback and coaching. Some good books for this purpose include Avi's *Something Upstairs* (1990), *Bearstone* by Wil Hobbs (1997), and Mildred Taylor's *The Road to Memphis*(1999). The reading specialist might also ask teachers for words that the students will be expected to recognize in the content areas; by practicing these words as well, students will be better able to keep up with their classroom assignments.

Mystery Word Slates

Tell students that you are thinking of a word from one of their sight word lists, the Word Wall, or a word collection bulletin board. Provide hints such as "My word has five letters" or "My word starts with a consonant." After each hint, ask students to write their guesses on a slate and hold them up for you to see. If the word is guessed after the first clue, the student gets five points; after the second clue, four points; after the third clue, three points; and so on. After the fifth clue, reveal the word and move on to the next one.

Flip Around

Put sight words or phrases up on an overhead transparency, the blackboard, or large sentence strips. Using a pointer, direct students to read each word or phrase chorally in a fast-paced manner. As the class reads together, more skilled students will lead the way as struggling students receive immediate feedback without being put on the spot or embarrassed.

Taking Apart the Word

Write several words on an overhead transparency or on the blackboard. Have students analyze the words and decide as a group how to dissect them into prefixes, suffixes, root words, and rime patterns. Students can use colored markers to indicate the different word parts.

Sight Word Bingo

Make regular 5″ × 5″ Bingo cards for students. Laminate the cards if possible so that they can be used over and over again with water-soluble markers. Write 24 sight words on the blackboard and ask students to write one of the words in each space on their card, leaving the center space

empty. Next read each word, asking students to place a bean or plastic marker on the words as they are called. The first person with all the spaces covered in a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal row wins the round. Play can continue till the whole card is covered if desired if more words than spaces are provided.

Sorting Attributes

This is a good activity for English-language learners as well as for struggling readers. On index cards, write various words that you want students to study. Have students work with partners to sort the cards into their own categories (examples: words that have a hard G or C sound, begin with a certain prefix, or contain a particular rime). When students have sorted the cards into the various categories, ask them to explain how the words belong together.

The more students talk through their thinking, the more you can address any misconceptions they may have. You can also use the Sorting Attributes exercise to have students learn various phonic rules, such as the "r-controlled" vowel rule, by identifying instances of the rule when the words are sorted.

It is essential that struggling readers read and talk through the content of assignments with others. This helps them to process and reflect in a productive way on what they know and do not know about the content. Rote learning alone does not work well, so make sure that the students understand the text. It is also very important to help students see that they are making progress: graph fluency rates or comprehension scores so that the students can see that their efforts are paying off in solid increases. Creating benchmarks and celebrating progress will help low-performing readers keep striving to improve their reading skills. Students are much more willing to keep trying when they feel successful and see that they are making progress.

Working with English-Language Learners

Children who speak nonstandard English or who have limited English proficiency when they begin school are also at risk for reading problems. The causes of limited proficiency are many, and intervention at the earliest possible opportunity is the key to preventing reading difficulties that last a lifetime.

State and national accountability standards now hold schools equally accountable for the growth and reading performance of these students despite the language barrier. When students arrive in a country where a different language is spoken, they go through a "silent" period during which they take in the sounds of the language around them (Hakuta & Snow, 1986). This is natural; students need time to absorb the "lilt" of the language. As the need to communicate grows, English-language learners will learn to communicate in a few words and phrases. They may learn words such as *water* or *bathroom* first, as these words are important to survival. In time, their ability to communicate in longer, more complete phrases will develop. Try to de-emphasize oral reading with English-language learners, as it focuses too much on decoding. Work instead on

helping them build their vocabulary and comprehension skills. As students' language skills develop, you can then start working on fluency and word pronunciation as needed.

There is a big disparity between the academic performance of English-language learners who are fluent readers in their native language and those who are not (August & Hakuta, 1997). The former usually have had extensive schooling in their home countries, and thus bring a storehouse of solid background knowledge to the classroom. Students from areas with a high emphasis on literacy, such as Europe or Japan, will be likelier to have strong family support for knowledge and learning.

When students come from a literate background, we can quickly present oral language and cognates to which they can relate, since they already have some insight into the purpose and workings of language and reading. When students can read and process at high levels in their own language, they can transfer many of the skills they have already learned to learning a new language; despite different native customs and norms, English language learners who are already literate can quickly assimilate the norms and practices of their new homeland.

Students who have *not* developed literacy skills in their home countries must gain not just oral language and reading skills, but also extensive background knowledge in content curriculum that other students learned long ago in lower grades.

Because oral language develops before other forms of language, teachers should provide English-language learners with opportunities for a lot of oral interaction, such as through discussions and by participating in small-group work. Talking to other students is motivating, and can encourage students to try harder at communicating with peers.

The English language is filled with slang, idioms, and figurative language. We must help English-language learners to understand vocabulary, word usage, customs, cultural values, and norms. You should discuss and model new information frequently to help these learners develop an ear for the language. Some good books to help students learn about idioms and figurative language are *In a Pickle and Other Funny Idioms* by Marvin Terban (1983) and Fred Gwynne's *Chocolate Moose for Dinner* (1976) and *The King Who Rained* (1970). Students can think about and make their own visual representations of interesting idioms and examples of figurative language based on the ideas in these books.

For beginning speakers, pictures and easy, predictable books can help introduce the sounds and patterns of the English language. Vocabulary cards with pictures on them can also help students expand their vocabulary base. Some older students who are not literate in their own language may not even know how to handle a book. A large amount of oral reading and modeling exactly how to approach a book will help students develop the skills they need. Read predictable books, such as *The Doorbell Rang* (1986) by Pat Hutchins or *The Important Book* (1990) by Margaret Wise Brown, to help English-language learners develop their skills.

Learning about our alphabet is also important, especially when the student's native language uses a different alphabet than we do. Introduce letters to them and have them locate the letters in environmental print in the classroom. Have them match words to pictures, or create "personal dictionaries" in which to write words they want to remember, together with their own definitions of the words. Activities such as echo reading and choral reading of poems, songs, and predictable text will also help English-language learners who are not literate in their first language to better learn English. Writing must be seen as a means of expression and idea generation, with mechanics emphasized only after students have learned the basics of getting their ideas down on paper. Graphic organizers are very helpful to English-language learners, as the visual representation helps them see relationships and identify key concepts and connections.

Online Resources

A good Web site for information about working with English-language learners is http://www.eslkidstuff.com. Another site, http://www.escort.org, run by the State University of New York at Oneonta, offers a free, downloadable guide called *Help! They Don't Speak English Starter Kit* in its "Products" section. (The guide is large, so either download with a high-speed connection or expect to wait a long while.) The Internet is also an excellent resource for free pictures to use in building vocabulary. Parent volunteers or even students themselves can cut out the pictures and mount them on index cards for easy and repeated use.

To get small paragraphs translated either from English or into English for some of the more common languages, try http://www.freetranslation.com. This site supports translation software for Spanish, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Norwegian, simplified Chinese, and traditional Chinese.

Many foreign students are shy about speaking and worried about making mistakes in their use of language, so respect their need for time and processing of English words and phrases. The classroom environment must be supportive, fun, and encouraging. Students must feel that it is acceptable to make a mistake and take risks without being laughed at or ridiculed. When they feel supported, they will take greater risks to expand their learning.

Many teachers confuse social language proficiency with academic proficiency. I have often heard teachers say things such as, "He talks to other students just fine, but he has trouble with academics." Just because students can communicate at a conversational level does not mean that they can understand the language used for content-area teaching and sophisticated sentence construction. There is a three- to five-year lag between the time it takes students to easily communicate at a social level versus at an academic level (Cummins, 1994).

When students arrive from another country, their focus has to change from learning content to communicating in a new language. Cummins reminds us that while English-language learners are acquiring language skills, their native-speaker peers are progressing in their knowledge of the content areas. Thus English language learners must "catch up with a moving target" if they

are to match the proficiency levels of native speakers. This is difficult for even the brightest of students, so we must be patient and supportive of their learning.

Be sure to encourage classmates to be supportive of one another and to provide many opportunities for English-language learners to practice their new skills without being the center of attention. Maintain a positive, supportive classroom climate in which all students feel included. Little by little, the Englishlanguage learners' skills and self-confidence will grow, and you will find them taking more and more risks in their speaking. Allow them the freedom to listen, think, process, and respond when they can, and they will grow much faster.

Struggling Readers Can Succeed

Supportive classrooms where students can experience success with teachers skilled in teaching reading are key to helping all students prepare for the literacy demands they will face in society. To prevent reading difficulties, teachers must monitor students regularly and give them targeted support as soon as they begin to fall behind their age-level benchmarks. Once students fall behind, intensive and directed support will be necessary to help them close the gap. Content-area teachers must examine how they make meaningful connections for their students. When all teachers take responsibility for developing good reading skills in all students, student success rates will soar.

Table of Contents

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