

Reading for the 21st Century: Adolescent Literacy Teaching and Learning Strategies

Literacy is often broadly defined as the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think critically. Research shows that being literate is closely linked to one's ability to access power and negotiate the world around them. Young people need to develop strong literacy skills to communicate effectively, gain respect from peers and authority, participate in their communities in a meaningful way, and fully contribute to society. Building literacy, therefore, goes far beyond improving a child's ability to read and write. It speaks to the larger societal issues of access and equity. In our society, being literate opens doors, allowing one to access power, and in many cases, helps to level the playing field.

However, approximately 1 in 4 young people are struggling to read and comprehend grade level textbooks and subject matter materials as they enter middle and high school. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which tests the reading ability of America's fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders, shows that eighth and twelfth grade student achievement has not improved in thirty years. In international comparisons of reading achievement, U.S. eleventh graders place near the bottom, which contrasts with rankings in fourth grade, where U.S. students place very close to the top. This confirms what many teachers already know— *students who read well in early elementary often struggle to read and comprehend after fourth grade* (Au, 2000; Balfanz, 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2000; Moore et al. 1999).

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned the RAND Reading Study Group to develop a research agenda identifying the most pressing issues in adolescent literacy (Snow, 2002). Their research was motivated by the following factors:

- All high school graduates need to be able to comprehend complex texts, but comprehension is not improving, as evidenced by national exams.
- Students in the U.S. are performing increasingly poorly in comparisons with students in other countries as they enter the later years of schooling, when discipline-specific content and subject matter learning are central to the curriculum.
- Unacceptable gaps in reading performance persist between children in different demographic groups.
- Little attention has been given to helping teachers develop the skills necessary to promote reading comprehension among secondary school students.

Why literacy in secondary schools?

In an era defined by standards, accountability, and high-stakes testing, it has become even more important for students to develop deep and critical knowledge of subject matter content.

Contemporary national benchmarks in science call for instruction to be inquiry-based. The standards in history call for students to learn the practices of historical analysis, including the use of primary documents. Contemporary language arts standards call for students, at all ages, to read authentic literature across genres (e.g., novels, memoirs, interviews) and to write in various genres.... All of these opportunities provide potentially powerful contexts in which students can learn to interpret text and can learn how to learn from text. (Snow, 2002, p. 45).

Using teaching and learning strategies with content-specific texts, teachers enable students to gain more facility with literacy strategies as well as understand the subject matter better.

What literacy strategies work with adolescent learners?

Research shows that five important factors impact the literacy development of adolescents: motivation, skills related to the alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension.

1. Motivation and engagement are critical factors for providing meaningful learning opportunities to adolescents. Research shows that if students are not motivated to read, they will benefit very little from reading instruction.

Strategies: Paramount to the job of teaching is using strategies that have been shown to increase motivation, such as making reading relevant to students' lives. By building on what students already know and believe and by being mindful of their goals and aspirations for their own futures, teachers can motivate students to want to read. In addition, teachers should supply reading materials that are age appropriate and appropriate to students' reading abilities to help increase their motivation. Teaching strategies that increase motivation include activating prior knowledge through pre-reading exercises, teaching students to look for information while reading, and modeling self-monitoring techniques during reading. (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

2. Skills Related to the Alphabetic Principle, such as phonemic awareness, the ability to manipulate the sounds of oral language and phonics, and the relationship of letters to sounds, are often thought of as skills that need to be learned early to prevent reading difficulties later. However, about 10 percent of students enter middle and high school with reading problems that stem from not having mastered the alphabetic principle.

Strategies: There are teaching strategies that are effective with secondary students who struggle with word identification, including: direct instruction (Curtis and Chmelka, 1994; Curtis and McCart, 1992); instruction that focuses on high-frequency, sound-spelling relationships (Graham, Harris, and Loynachan, 1993; Blevins, 2001); instruction that offers ample opportunity to practice identification of words in context; and an emphasis on making connections among word analysis, word recognition, and semantics (Henry, 1990).

3. Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with appropriate expression, and research shows that *good readers are fluent readers* (Snow, 2002). Not surprisingly, students who are not fluent and read very slowly or focus on each word independently, have difficulty comprehending what they read.

Strategies: Research shows that teaching strategies, such as guided oral reading and repeated reading, help improve fluency and comprehension. Guided reading provides students with time to read independently, but also assures that students have significant support from their teacher, who models the use of various reading strategies. Repeated reading is a teaching technique that has students, particularly the most struggling students, re-read a passage until they can read it fluently.

4. Vocabulary size is one factor that can lead to large variations in reading ability. The differences between low and high vocabularies often contribute to the achievement gap that persists between different demographic groups. In fact, Hart and Risely (1995) report substantial differences between the vocabularies of students with low and high socioeconomic statuses (SES), finding that low SES students were exposed to about half the words that students of high SES encountered.

Strategies: Research shows that both direct, explicit instruction and learning from context while reading are important to increasing vocabulary and possibly helping to close the achievement gap. The National Reading Panel (NRP) suggested the following (NICHD, 2000):

- *Repetition* is essential for increasing vocabulary.
- *Revising learning materials* or designing instruction to meet the needs of learners often facilitates vocabulary learning more than simply asking students for the definition of a word.
- Vocabulary learning should entail teaching methods that promote *active engagement in learning*, such as having students make mental pictures of the definitions, act out definitions with charades, use the word in writing tasks, and actively attending to context clues to infer word meanings.

5. Reading Comprehension is one of the most apparent deficits in students' reading abilities at the secondary level. Most students who test "below basic" on NAEP seem to be missing this skill since, according to the NAEP rubric, even a "basic" level indicates that the student "can demonstrate a literal understanding of what they read" (2002). While some students acquire reading strategies relatively easily, many others are not able

to develop effective reading strategies on their own (Bean, Singer, Sorter, & Frazee, 1986) and need reading comprehension instruction.

Two important components to improving students' comprehension are *prior knowledge* and *strategy instruction*. The importance of having sufficient prior knowledge is well documented (Dole, Valencia, Greer, and Wardrop, 1991). Pre-reading activities can be used to connect material in a text to students' own experiences and create a foundation for them to read text effectively. Such connections are often the basis for making inferences and predictions—two skills that NAEP uses to classify a student as “proficient”.

Some reading comprehension instruction is implicit, providing students with an opportunity to use strategies without directly telling them which strategy to use and how to use it. Asking students to write their ideas in a journal as they read is one example of implicit instruction. Other students, especially struggling readers and those with learning disabilities, require explicit instruction, in which teachers explain and model various strategies that successful readers use to promote comprehension.

Strategies: Through comprehension strategy instruction, students learn a set of useful “tools” that allow them to improve their reading comprehension. The NRP found research evidence for the efficacy of eight specific comprehension strategies.

- *Comprehension monitoring* is a metacognitive process by which readers decide whether or not they understand the text they are reading, and if they do not understand it, they learn to apply “fix-up” strategies as they are reading. These strategies include restating, looking back, and even looking ahead for clues that might help with comprehension (Bereiter and Bird, 1985).
- *Cooperative learning* allows students to learn while being engaged in the learning process with other students. In one research study, small groups of students translated content material from “teacher talk” to “kid talk” and showed gains in reading comprehension (Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm, 1998).
- *Graphic organizers* are visual or spatial representations of text that teachers can use to help students understand text structure or arrange textual information in a way that makes recall easier. They can be used before, during, or after reading to improve comprehension. Using of graphic organizers after reading has shown improvement in students' written summaries (Bean and Steenwyk, 1984).
- *Story structure* refers to the common components in a story or narrative text, of which some students already have complete knowledge, but others do not. Research shows that having knowledge of these components helps the reader comprehend stories better than not having such knowledge (Singer and Donlan, 1982).

- *Question answering* is one of the most prevalent forms of comprehension assessment, but it is also an effective comprehension strategy. An example is the Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) technique (Raphael and Pearson, 1985), in which students are taught that questions can be answered by referring to the text, as well as the information in one's own knowledge and experience bank.
- *Question generating* is a technique in which students are taught to create (and then answer) their own questions about information in a text. It teaches students to think about text from a variety of perspectives and take ownership over their own learning.
- *Summarization*, as a strategy, requires students to identify the most important information in a text and eliminate redundant and unnecessary details. It also requires that students read and re-read text, which promotes greater comprehension. It is a widely used strategy, and research shows that it enables students to be independent learners (Brown and Day, 1983).
- Several of the above strategies can be used together as a *Multiple Strategy Approach*. For example, Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1984) is an instructional strategy that utilizes multiple strategies, such as question generating, summarization, and vocabulary. In general, evidence suggests that teaching strategies in multiple combinations is superior to teaching strategies one at a time.

For further information on graphic organizers:

Bean, T.W., Singer, H., Sorter, J., & Frazee, C. (1986). The effect of metacognitive instruction in outlining and graphic organizer construction on students' comprehension in a tenth-grade world history class. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 18, 153-169.

Gallini, J., Spires, H., Terry, S., & Gleaton, J. (1993). The influence of macro and micro-level cognitive strategies training on the prose learning process. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 26, 164-78.

Paris, S.G., Wasik, B.A., & Turner, J.C. (1991). The development of strategic readers, In Barr, R., Kamil, M.L., Mosenthal, P. & P.D. Pearson (Eds.). *Handbook of Reading Research, Volume II* (p. 609-640). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

For further information on QAR technique:

Raphael, (1982; 1986). *QAR* (<http://www.somers.k12.ny.us/intranet/reading/qar.html>)

Just Read Now. (<http://www.justreadnow.com/strategies/qar.htm>)

Vacca, Richard T and Joanne L. (2001). Adapted from *Content Area Reading : Literacy & Learning Across the Curriculum*.

(http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/question_answer_relate.pdf)

For further information on vocabulary development:

Baker, S.K., Simmons, D.C., & Kameenui, E.J. (1995). *Vocabulary acquisition: Synthesis of the research* (Technical Report No. 13). Eugene, OR: National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators. Retrieved April 15, 2003, from <http://idea.uoregon.edu/~ncite/documents/techrep/tech13.html> (as seen on 12/11/03)

Hennings, D. (2000). Contextually relevant word study: Adolescent vocabulary development across the curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44 (3), 268-279.

Stahl, S.A. (1999). *Vocabulary Development*. Newton Upper Falls, MA: Brookline Books.

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/atrisk/at6lk38.htm>

For further information on cooperative learning:

Cohen, Elizabeth G. (1994). *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cooperative Learning: Response to Diversity
(<http://www.cde.ca.gov/iasa/cooplrng2.html>)

A variety of resources related to cooperative learning and case teaching, including lessons and activities. (<http://bestpractice.net>)

For further information on guided oral reading:

National Reading Panel. (2000b). *Report of the national reading panel: Teaching Children to Read - Reports of the Subgroups*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. p. 3-11.

International Reading Association (<http://www.reading.org/advocacy/nrp/chapter3.html>)

Building reading proficiency at the secondary level: A guide to resources
(<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/reading16/8.html>)

For further information on reciprocal teaching:

Carroll, Ann-Martin. (1988) *Reciprocal Teaching*. Presentation given at the California Reading Association, San Diego, CA.

Palincsar, A. S. & Brown, A. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1(2), 117-175.

Walker, B. (1988). *Diagnostic Teaching of Reading*. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co.

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- Bean, T.W., Singer, H., Sorter, J., & Frazee, C. (1986). The effect of metacognitive instruction in outlining and graphic organizer construction on students' comprehension in a tenth-grade world history class. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 18, 153-169.
- Bean, T.W. & Steenwyk, F.L. (1984). The effect of three forms of summarization instruction on sixth graders' summary writing and comprehension. *Journal of Reading Behavior* 16 (4), 297-306.
- Bereiter & Bird (1985). Use of thinking aloud in identification and teaching of reading comprehension strategies. *Cognition and Instruction* 2, 131-56.
- Blevins, W. (2001). *Teaching Phonics and Word Study in the Intermediate Grades*. New York: Scholastic.
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- Curtis, M.E., and McCart, L. (1992). Fun ways to promote poor readers' word recognition. *Journal of Reading* 35, 398-99.
- Dole, J.A., Valencia, S.W., Greer, E.A. & Wardrop (1991). Effects of two types of prereading instruction on the comprehension of narrative and expository text. *Reading Research Quarterly* 26 (2), 149-159.
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- Greenleaf, C.L., et al. (2001). Apprenticing Adolescent Readers to Academic Literacy". *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol. 71, No.1, pp. 80.

Guthrie, J.T., and Wigfield, A. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, and R. Barr (eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*. (Vol. III, pp. 403-22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates

Hart, B., Risely, T. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in Everyday Parenting and Intellectual Development in Young American Children*. Baltimore: Brookes.

Henry, M.K. (1990). *WORDS: Integrated Decoding and Spelling Instruction Based on Word Origin and Word Structure*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Klingner, J.K., Vaughn, S., & Schumm, J.S. (1998). Collaborative strategic reading during social studies in heterogeneous fourth-grade classrooms. *Elementary School Journal* 99 (1), 3-22.

Moore, et al. (1999). Adolescent literacy: A position statement. *International Reading Association, Commission on Adolescent Literacy*.

NICHD (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Palincsar, A.S., & Brown, A.L. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction* 1 (2), 117-75.

Raphael, T.E. & Pearson, P.D. (1985). Increasing students' awareness of sources of information for answering questions. *American Educational Research Journal* 22, 217-35.

Singer, H., and Donlan, D. (1982). Active comprehension: Problem-solving schema with question generation for comprehension of complex short stories. *Reading Research Quarterly* 17 (2), 166-86.

Snow, C.E. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward a research and development program in reading comprehension*. Pittsburgh, PA: RAND