



## “Teach Reading? But I’m not a Reading Teacher!”

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A critical issue in education today is that many middle and high school students are not able to read on grade level (Alvermann & Rush, 2004; Biancarosa & Snow, 2010; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Houge, Geier, & Peyton, 2008). In an effort to deal with the problem, many schools encourage all teachers, regardless of their subject area, to emphasize reading in their classes, because as Rasinski, Padak, McKeon, Wilfong, Friedauer, and Heim (2005) state, “if our goal is to improve student performance across content areas, then improvements in general reading abilities must be a goal” (p. 26). This is often met with a great deal of resistance because not only have most teachers not been trained in the reading process, but they also do not feel it is their responsibility to teach reading. Heller and Greenleaf (2007) state, “At the secondary level, the responsibility for teaching reading and writing often seems to belong to no one in particular” (p. 15). However, Shanahan (2012) makes the point that the “idea of disciplinary literacy is that students not only have to learn the essential content of a field, but how reading and writing are used in that field” (para. 3). He contends teachers in any field can help students read text critically in the same way professionals in the fields would read the text, instead of merely helping students learn what they need for a test.

The purpose of this article is to provide a structure that any teacher, regardless of content area and training in reading instruction, can use to help students hone the literacy skills necessary to explore, develop, and expand content area knowledge. The suggested structure is based on a review of the literature that states: students need to (a) *listen to others read aloud* (Miller, 2002; Rasinski, 2003; Routman, 2003); (b) *read often* (Allington, 2006; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Cunningham, 2009), (c) *practice using reading strategies* (Beers, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000), (d) *interact with texts and each other* (Routman, 2003, 2005; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011), and (e) *develop a word consciousness* (Harmon, Wood, & Medina, 2009; Scott & Nagy, 2004).

### **Students Need to Listen to Others Read Aloud**

Hearing others read aloud is an excellent way to stimulate students’ interest in reading (Miller, 2002; Rasinski, 2003; Routman, 2003). Trelease (1989), an expert on reading aloud and author of the famed book *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2006), contends that reading aloud to students is “the most effective advertisement for the pleasures of reading” (p. 201). Vacca et al. (2011) contend, “After hearing a book read aloud, students are much more likely to pick up books on this topic, and related ones, on their own” (p. 383). Additional benefits are that hearing reading aloud helps students develop their reading comprehension and vocabulary (Harris & Sipay, 1990; Routman, 1996). For example, students who struggle to read a content area textbook use a great deal of their cognitive energy on decoding the text with little energy left to devote to comprehension. Hearing the text read aloud relieves these students of the burden of

decoding and allows them to focus on comprehension. Vocabulary acquisition is also enhanced by hearing text read aloud. As the text is being read aloud, the teacher can use think alouds to model the use of context clues to determine the meaning of words, insert synonyms and antonyms, give definitions, or make connections for students to information they have learned previously (Tompkins, 2009).

One way teachers can set up a structure for students to hear others read aloud is to have a signup sheet (some teachers have a calendar posted on the wall) where each student in the class signs up for a day to read aloud to the class (Hurst, Scales, Frecks, & Lewis, 2011). Then each class period begins with one student reading aloud. Students can read any text, within certain perimeters, such as an excerpt from a book or magazine article, song lyrics, jokes, famous quotes, or something from the Internet. According to Hurst et al. (2011), the sign up to read activity gives “students a reason to read; provides opportunities for oral reading, rereading, practice reading, choice in reading selections; and helps students develop prosody” (p. 439).

Before reading, students tell why they chose that particular text. Hurst et al. (2011) believe that by students explaining their “personal connections to the reading, the class has opportunities to become interested in a wide range of reading materials, and it fosters a sense of community as students come to better understand their classmates’ interests, likes, and dislikes” (p. 439).

Not only does the class listening to the reading benefit, but the students who are reading aloud are helped too because before they read, they are encouraged to practice reading the text until they can read it fluently. Rasinski (2006) states, “If I were to give an oral reading performance of a passage, I would most certainly have an incentive to practice, rehearse, or engage in repeated readings” (p. 705). It is this kind of practice that helps students become better readers.

### **Students Need to Read Often**

Allington (2006) and Cunningham (2009) believe students need to read volumes (read a lot) and contend this has an impact on student achievement in reading. Just as with any skills such as in music or sports, if there is little practice, there is little improvement. Therefore, to become better readers, students must read often (Anderson et al., 1985; Atwell, 2007). Trelease (1989) contends “Reading is an accrued skill: the more you do it, the better you get at it; the better you get at it, the more you like it; the more you like it, the more you do it” (p. 202).

Perhaps one reason there are so many middle and high school students who read below grade level is because reading instruction typically stops at sixth grade, and once that instruction stops, the reading seems to as well. Heller and Greenleaf (2007) found that in most secondary schools there is very little reading, very little required reading of primary or real world materials, and very little time devoted to discussing what was read. This may be why students do not increase their reading levels as they increase their grade levels. According to Atwell (2007), “The major predictor of academic success is the amount of time that a student spends reading” (p. 107). Anderson et al. (1985) stated, “Those who read a lot show larger gains on reading achievement tests” (p. 26). They further contend that “becoming a skilled reader is a matter of continuous practice, development, and refinement” (p. 18). Therefore, one of the most important components of developing reading skills is time for students to read daily.

Motivating students to read daily can be enhanced by teacher awareness of adolescent sociocultural perspectives. When activating prior knowledge on a topic, cultural diversity must be taken into account. Depending on student experiences, origin, and home beliefs, students may

not share the same viewpoint as their teacher and fellow students and may choose to read materials outside the required reading list. Linguistic diversity may also be a factor if students choose to read in their home language or read materials where their home dialect is featured. A multiliteracy approach is often needed (Moje & Speyer, 2008). Along with the content of the materials the students read, an additional concern is that students are reading material on their ability and interest level. According to Roe (2001), “Students need to read texts that fit their instructional reading level and their interest” (p. 13). School librarians can help teachers find appropriate supplemental texts in their subject area that are low level, high interest for these students that also address their unique sociocultural needs.

### Students Need to Practice Reading Strategies

Beers (2003) defines *reading strategies* as the processes we use to read. The National Reading Panel (2000) states that students need practice using reading strategies. Routman (2003) contends teachers need to “teach strategies students need to know to process and understand text” (p. 43). Even though all teachers are not trained in reading instruction, they are most likely fairly good readers since they have college degrees, so they can share with their students what they do when they read a difficult text. They can help students learn what to do to improve their reading by using what Davey (1983) called *thinking aloud*. Teachers can think aloud what they do when they come to a word they do not know or a difficult passage as they read with their students.

Some strategies these teachers most likely use regularly themselves that help students become better readers include: **rereading** (Beers, 2003; Samuels, 1979), **use of context clues** (Bean, Readence, & Baldwin, 2011; Vacca et al., 2011), **predicting** (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Wolsey & Fisher, 2009), **visualizing** (Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; Moje & Speyer, 2008), and **making connections** (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007).

**Rereading.** According to Beers (2003), rereading is “probably the number one strategy independent readers use when something stumps them in a text. It’s probably the last strategy dependent readers use” (p. 113). She believes this is because independent readers have learned that rereading can help them figure out text they did not understand the first time, while dependent readers have not yet figured that out. Teacher prompts may be as simple as saying something such as: *That sentence was not clear. Let’s read it again.*

**Context clues.** Vacca et al. (2011) contend the use of context clues is “one of the most useful strategies at the command of proficient readers” (p. 266). Bean et al. (2011) contend there are three types of context clues: definition, description, and contrast. Definition is when the word is defined in the sentence as in this sentence: *Context clues, or using other words in the sentence to figure out an unknown word, are an effective reading strategy.* Description is when the word is described in the sentence as in this sentence: *She knew that because of Starbucks’ ubiquitous presence that she would find one on the next corner.* Contrast is when the sentence provides the opposite meaning as in this sentence: *The teacher knew the student was not being deceitful because he had always told the truth in the past.* Teachers can explain these differences to students as they occur during reading.

**Predicting.** Predicting is when students are encouraged to use their prior knowledge and experiences to guess what might happen in the text. This also provides motivation for them to want to read on to see if they were right in their guesses. It is a way to get students to think about what they are reading. Fisher, Frey, and Ross (2009) contend that predicting “also facilitates use

of text structure as students learn that headings, subheadings, and questions imbedded in the text are useful means of anticipating what might occur next” (p. 339).

**Visualizing.** Teaching students to visualize what they are reading can help them improve their comprehension of the text (Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; Moje & Speyer, 2008). We think in images, not words. For example, if students were asked to visualize a basketball, they would most likely think of an orange ball with lines circling it. They might also envision a basketball player, court, or hoop. Rarely would someone envision the letters b-a-s-k-e-t-b-a-l-l. Teachers can encourage students to visualize as they read by asking questions such as, *What do you see in your mind as you read?* It is helpful to have students share with others what they visualized. This can help those students who do not have prior knowledge on the subject create their own visualizations.

**Making connections.** Comprehension is enhanced when students activate their prior knowledge by “connecting the known to the new” (Wilson, 1983, p. 382). Keene and Zimmerman (2007) recommend students make connections between text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. Teachers can do this by asking students to make these different types of connections to what they are reading, and when they share these connections with the class, it helps all of the students build on their prior knowledge and comprehension.

### Students Need to Interact with Texts and Each Other

Because we are social creatures, it is important to the learning process for students to learn from and with each other (Bromley, 2008; Dewey, 1963; Kasten, 1997; Smith, 1998; Vacca et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2010). Routman (2005) contends “students learn more when they are able to talk to one another and be actively involved” (p. 207). Routman (2003) further contends that “talking with others about what we read increases our understanding. Collaborative talk is a powerful way to make meaning” (p. 126). Almasi and Gambrell (1997) believe “participation in peer discussions improves students’ ability to monitor their understanding of text, to verbalize their thoughts, to consider alternative perspectives, and to assume responsibility for their own learning” (p. 152). Providing daily opportunities for students to read and interact with texts and each other is an important component of any class.

It is recommended that teachers provide a wide variety of readings. These readings can be any source of material such as newspapers, magazines, the Internet, or books as long as these texts are both readable and comprehensible for students (Godt, 2008). In addition, variety encompasses not only a wide range of genres, but also includes variety in topics and in reading levels. Students will be less likely to take advantage of opportunities to read if the materials they are provided are too difficult for them to read independently or if the topics hold no interest or connection to their lives (Allington, 2006). Dunston and Gambrell (2009) contend that real world texts and interactions motivate students intrinsically to read.

The following strategies are ways teachers can encourage their students to read and interact with texts and each other. Each class period, after a student reads aloud and another student shares a word, the class will be given a text to read from the subject area currently being studied, and then teachers use a strategy such as the ones listed below to allow students to interact with the text and each other.

**Anticipation Guides.** Vacca et al. (2011) define anticipation guides as “a series of statements to which students must respond individually before reading the text” (p. 181). The purpose is to get students to draw their attention to what they already know about a topic and to

encourage them to want to read the text to find out if what they knew was right. Students fill out the anticipation guide before reading and discuss their answers with the class. After reading, students refer back to their responses and discuss it as a class again.

**Directed Reading-Thinking Activity** (Stauffer, 1969). The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity involves the teacher stopping at predetermined places throughout the text and asking students to think about the text in different ways by asking questions such as What do you think? Why do you think so? What do you think will happen next, and why? and by attempting to get the entire class in on the predicting and discussing. Students use their prior knowledge and experience to make these predictions throughout the text.

**Fishbowl**. The fishbowl strategy involves a small group of students sitting in a circle surrounded by a circle of the rest of the class. After all students have read the text, the group in the inside circle discusses the text while the students in the outside circle listen. After a brief discussion, the students in the inside can switch with students from the outside for a continuing of the discussion.

**Found Poems** (Hobgood, 1998). Found poems encourage students to pick out the most important words and ideas from the text to create a poem using exact words from the reading. As students read the text, they underline important words or phrases. Then in groups after they read, they write a poem using the words they underlined.

**Guided Reading Procedure** (Manzo, 1975). As an adaptation of the Guided Reading Procedure, before reading, students brainstorm what they know about the subject of the text they will be reading while the teacher makes a webbing of that information on the board. Then students read the text in groups. After reading, each group adds new information to the web and writes a summary sentence or *moral of the story* on the board. Then each group shares with the class what they added to the board to prompt discussion.

**Jigsaw** (Aronson, 1978). With the jigsaw strategy, the class is divided into groups. Each group is given a different text, but on the same topic or different parts of the same text. The groups read their text together and discuss the main points of the text. Then new groups are formed with one person from each of the original groups. Each person in the new group tells the main points from their reading. This allows the whole class to learn from different texts.

**K-W-L** (Ogle, 1986). The K-W-L strategy is where students list what they already *Know* about a topic before they read. Then they make a list of things they *Want* to know, and finally, after reading, they list what they *Learned*. Students share with the class their responses at the different levels to prompt discussion of the text.

**Memory Game** (Robinson & Hurst, 2007). The Memory Game is a fun way students can read and interact with factual text. Students first listen to the text being read aloud by the teacher while they read along silently. This allows the students to hear and see the text at the same time. Without looking at the text, students individually make a list of every fact they can remember. Next, students are placed in small groups where each group makes a master list of all of the facts they can remember. Once these master lists are completed, the game is played by each group providing one new fact until all facts have been given. A group is out of the game when they repeat a fact already given by another group or when they run out of facts. When a group goes out, the group members become judges in order to keep them actively involved in the game. At this point the judges may look back at the text to help answer any disputes.

**ReQuest** (Manzo, 1969). ReQuest stands for Reciprocal Questioning in which the students ask the teacher questions. To do this activity, the students and the teacher read the text carefully. Then students get into groups to create questions they want to ask the teacher. The

same process can be used for the groups to ask each other questions.

**Oral Learning Logs** (Hurst, 1999, 2005). As students read the text on their own, they look for things that interest them or draw their attention. On a piece of paper with a line drawn vertically down the center, students write on the left side what they read that interested them, and on the right side, they write their reaction/reflection or what it was that drew their attention. Then, as a whole class activity, each student shares one thing from his or her learning log with the class, which creates a class discussion with input from each student. Many students find it easier to share with the whole class when they have previously written their thoughts on paper.

**Vocabulary Self-collection Strategy** (Haggard, 1982). For this strategy, students in groups scan the text before reading to pick out difficult vocabulary words. Each group picks one word and writes it on the board. They read aloud to the class the sentence from the text that contains the word, and then they tell the class what the word means. Then when students read the text, they are more likely to remember the new or difficult vocabulary words.

### **Students Need to Develop a Word Consciousness**

Scott and Nagy (2004) define word consciousness as “an interest in and awareness of words” (p. 202). They contend that developing this word consciousness “can be fun and motivating” (p. 358). Harmon et al. (2009) agree that teachers need to give “attention to raising word consciousness” (p. 357). According to Fisher et al. (2009), “vocabulary is a significant predictor of reading comprehension,” and that “increasing vocabulary improves comprehension” (p. 333).

One simple way teachers can help students develop word consciousness in their classes can be done with a signup sheet like the signup sheet for reading aloud—students sign up for a day to present one new word to the class. On the students’ turn to present a word, they (a) write the word on the board, (b) tell why they chose that word, (c) tell the class the definition(s) of the word, (d) use the word in a sentence, and (e) ask for a volunteer from the class to use the word in a sentence. Some students put a great deal of thought into the word they want to share with the class. Wherever students go to find a word they want to share, whether in a dictionary, online, through friends, or through reading, they are thinking about words—and that is the point—to get students thinking about words and their meanings. Graves (1987, 2000) believes that through playing with words and language, students will develop an interest and appreciation for words that will last a lifetime.

### **Pulling it Together**

Regardless of content area specialty or training in literacy instruction, this daily structure is one that any teacher can use to support student learning. Five components have been suggested: students 1) take turns reading aloud, 2) read often, 3) practice reading strategies, 4) interact with texts and each other, and 5) develop a word consciousness. Table 1 provides a chart of a daily routine.

**Table 1. Suggested Daily Structure**

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|---|--|
| First five minutes of class: one student reads aloud to the class.  | Students sign up for a day to read.  |
| Next two-three minutes: one student introduces a word to the class. | Students sign up for a day to introduce a word to the class.   |
| Students read a text.   | Variety of ways to read: silently, whole class taking turns, in pairs, in small groups, teacher reads aloud while students read along silently.  |
| Students interact with the text and each other.                     | Variety of ways to interact: anticipation guides, directed reading-thinking activity, fishbowl, found poems, guided reading procedure, jigsaw, K-W-L, memory game, ReQuest, oral learning logs, vocabulary self-collection strategy. |

With this structure, students hear someone read aloud every day, and they are reading and interacting with text and each other every day to deepen and develop ownership of content. They are engaging in the often missing component in most classrooms today—reading. In order to become better readers of content texts, students have to read, and read often.

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