

Inviting reluctant adolescent readers into the literacy club: Some comprehension strategies to tutor individuals or small groups of reluctant readers

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Using effective strategies and materials that appeal to learners' interests can improve the reading abilities of reluctant readers and help them comprehend the subject matter found in content area textbooks.

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Jamie (pseudonym) entered the room hesitantly. He took a few steps, stopped, looked around, and frowned. He was the last of the tutees to arrive at the tutorial center. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and offered a quiet “Thank you!” I had been worried that he would skip his reading tutorial session again today. He had already missed more than three sessions, and each time there was a new excuse. He had been ill, he had gone to visit his father in a different town, or he had gone with his mother to court for the custody hearing. Sometimes, Jamie’s excuses for being absent, such as in-school detention in the principal’s office, were valid. At other times, the excuses could not be verified. But today Jamie was here, and I was glad. His tutor saw him and sprang to her feet. She went over to greet Jamie at the door with a big smile. Her cheerful “Hi Jamie! It is so good to see you” was met with a grunt. Then the frown on Jamie’s

face deepened as he followed his tutor reluctantly to the corner of the room where a carrel had been set up for his reading tutorials.

Jamie is a sixth grader in a Mississippi public school. The scene just described took place in the school cafeteria. As part of their course work, preservice teachers from the nearby university go to various schools in the surrounding districts to tutor students

who have been identified by the classroom teachers as having reading difficulties. The main objective of this course is for college students to assess and remediate reading difficulties in elementary and middle school students. I was one of the course instructors, and each semester I went with the preservice teachers to the public schools once every week for 14 weeks to supervise their one-to-one tutorial sessions. I had witnessed scenes like the one described in the vignette several times during our tutorial sessions. Jamie is just one of many students who are labeled in the literature as “unsuccessful,” “passive,” “disengaged,” “disenchanted,” “helpless,” “resistant,” “alienated,” or “low achieving.” Whatever the label, one common factor among these students is that they struggle with reading. Reading expository texts is often a slow and arduous task for them. Such students often become frustrated and develop low

self-images as readers. Ultimately, they tend to avoid reading and other related literacy activities. According to reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there are millions of disenchanting students like Jamie in classrooms in the United States today.

Because the ability to read is both a critical educational issue and a necessary tool for becoming a successful member of society, educators, researchers, and policymakers continue to find ways to help students become successful readers. Finding solutions to reading difficulties can be challenging, mainly because the causes of the difficulties and the learners are varied. Students who struggle with reading generally include those with special learning needs, English-language learners, standard American English learners, and older students who are disenchanting with learning. Often, the classroom teacher does not fully comprehend the sources of the problems or know how to go about solving them, especially because some causes of reading difficulties originate from outside the educational context.

Teachers often need to administer performance assessment measures that can provide evidence of students' abilities as readers and writers. Prior to tutoring, preservice teachers in the program usually administer an informal reading inventory and other relevant assessments that identify students' weaknesses and strengths. Results of the Analytical Reading Inventory (Woods & Moe, 2003), which was administered to students like Jamie, indicated that most of the students selected for intervention were reading below grade level. An Interest and Attitude Inventory (adapted from Collins & Cheek, 1989) illustrated that many of the students in the program were not motivated to read. For example, although Jamie was in sixth grade, his performance on the narrative and expository texts indicated that his instructional level was fourth grade. He read the fourth-grade science passage "A Comet" with 90% total accuracy. At this level, his reading was fluent; he answered 86% of the comprehension questions correctly and retold the sto-

ry with many details. Jamie's word recognition was at the fifth-grade level, as evidenced by his reading 90% of the words on the word list automatically; however, the fifth-grade passage "Worms: Parasites and Scavengers" was more difficult for him. He could not decode some of the words, and his accuracy dropped to 75%. He could not recall many of the facts during retelling, and his comprehension was 60%, which is considered transitional-instructional. When Jamie was administered the sixth-grade reading passage "Disease: Microbes and Antibodies," he could not decode most of the words and struggled so much that little meaning was achieved. His reading accuracy was 40%, which was clearly frustration level. The Interest and Attitude Inventory was administered to identify students' interests in order to provide tutors with directions for selecting reading materials. As revealed from this assessment, one of Jamie's interests was playing basketball.

It was also evident that the breaking up of Jamie's mom and dad was disrupting his attendance and taking an emotional toll on him because he was required to be in court for the custody hearing. Sometimes when he went to spend the weekend with his father, he would not attend school for several days after the weekend. It appeared that these events affected Jamie's attitude toward school and his literacy performance. This tutorial program attempted to make connections between home and school in the hope that such collaboration would improve students' performance; however, the letter that was sent to Jamie's parents informing them of the purpose of the tutorials received no response.

Regardless of whether the causes of reading problems are cognitive, emotional, or otherwise, teachers must continue to use creative instructional strategies to help students become more proficient readers. A strategy is a plan selected deliberately by the teacher to accomplish a particular goal or a desired learning outcome (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Teachers can select strategies

and materials that address some factors that may account for students' reluctance in reading. These factors include lack of motivation, prior knowledge, and adequate knowledge of specialized vocabulary words in specific content areas. Using effective strategies and materials that appeal to learners' interests could improve the reading abilities of reluctant readers and help them comprehend the subject matter found in content area textbooks.

Increasing student motivation

Motivation is one of the most powerful tools for students' success in English for Academic Purposes (Crismore, 2000; Maaka & Ward, 2000; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Wiesen, 2001). Motivated learners make choices to stay engaged and to persist because of their interest and the expectation of outcome (Wiesen). Struggling readers sometimes lack the motivation to continue reading because they do not experience success when they engage in literacy activities. Jamie's hesitation to participate in his reading tutorials illustrates that he is not excited about reading and may even consider it a chore.

To motivate reluctant readers, teachers must help students choose interesting reading materials and provide favorable instructional contexts (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Tutors in this program often collaborated with the classroom teachers to determine appropriate topics for the tutees' expository reading. This collaboration ensured an overlap between the tutorials and the classroom instruction. The tutors then selected a variety of text types that related to the subject matter. These additional resources such as trade books, journal articles, and pictures captured students' interests and motivated them to read. The storybook structure of trade books is easier for struggling readers to understand, thus leading to greater enjoyment of the subject matter when it is encountered in an expository text. Introducing struggling readers to content through trade book materials invites them

to more readily explore similar concepts in complex expository text structures.

Preparing lesson plans and gathering instructional materials took time and required a lot of tutor creativity. Tutors went to great lengths to find engaging resources that related to textbook topics; however, the enjoyment that the students showed when they interacted with a variety of resources and text types was always rewarding. Tutors created a warm, welcoming environment for tutorials. They smiled a lot with the tutees, asked questions about topics that they thought their tutees might find interesting, and tried not to show any discouragement, even when some tutees like Jamie showed no excitement at the prospect of reading. Tutors tried to stay positive, and looked for even the smallest reading achievements to give tutees positive feedback and praise.

Before introducing an expository text, the tutors invariably started with narrative material that would capture the students' interest. For example, when it was determined that Jamie's class was studying the tropical rain forest, Jamie's tutor selected the passage "The Tropical Rainforest" from a fifth-grade science unit on biomes (Daniel, Hackett, Moyer, & Vasquez, 2002) because fifth grade was Jamie's transitional-instructional reading level. The tutor also selected a variety of trade books, including *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990) and *Here Is the Tropical Rainforest* (Dunphy, 1994). At the beginning of the lesson Jamie was asked to choose among the trade books. He picked *The Great Kapok Tree*. This strategy was particularly effective because even if students did not appear to know much about the topics discussed in the expository passages, the easy narrative structure as well as the interesting illustrations of the trade books often appealed to them and invited them into the reading tasks.

Building prior knowledge

Research has demonstrated that background knowledge of the content of a reading text can facilitate comprehension (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien,

2000; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Therefore, building and expanding students' prior knowledge before reading expository texts can be an effective instructional approach for teachers wishing to improve students' comprehension of subject matter in various content areas (Reutzel & Morgan, 1990). According to Kornienko (2000), "every act of communication includes one's knowledge of the world" (p. 3). Because struggling readers often have little prior knowledge due to unsuccessful engagements in reading tasks, teachers are often required to spend considerable time building new background knowledge before reading content material. Activating related schemata, no matter how small these schemata may be, would engage struggling readers and ensure effective integration of new learning to old knowledge. Effective ways of activating prior knowledge include demonstrations, brainstorming, asking questions, or preteaching some vocabulary words (Reutzel & Morgan). One of the passages selected for Jamie's reading was a seventh-grade social studies passage, "Egyptian Monuments" (Sager, Helgren, & Brooks, 2005). Before reading the passage, the tutor told Jamie that they were going to read about Egypt, but first they would brainstorm. She wrote "Egypt" in the middle of a blank sheet of paper and drew arrows branching out. Then she asked Jamie to tell her anything that he knew about Egypt. Jamie quickly called out the following words: *pharaoh*, *mummies*, *hot*, *Nile*, *desert*, and *pyramids*. The tutor wrote down the words as Jamie called them out. After two minutes, she asked him to stop. The tutor asked Jamie to explain the meanings of the words that he had called out. Both the tutor and Jamie discussed the words, with Jamie providing meanings and the tutor introducing new words like *monuments* and *tomb*. After this activity, Jamie was asked to read the passage silently. His comprehension was accurate as illustrated by his answering most of the questions that followed. Activating Jamie's prior knowledge on Egypt evidently enhanced his chances for comprehending the textbook selection.

Developing knowledge of specialized vocabulary

Words carry meaning. Understanding the meanings of words and how they connect ideas and other concepts is a necessary subskill for comprehension. Because fluent readers can recognize whole words effortlessly, comprehension occurs more easily to them (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). Struggling readers, however, do not often recognize words automatically. For example, although Jamie was in sixth grade, his word recognition was at a fifth-grade level. The lack of automatic recognition of words that are likely to be encountered in grade-level reading materials often leads to poor comprehension of texts for students like Jamie. These behaviors begin a negative cycle of slow and laborious reading, poor interaction with text, less text covered, limited background knowledge acquired from information found in texts, lack of motivation to engage in reading, and slow progress in reading achievement (McCormick, 1999). Teachers can break this negative reading cycle by using intervention strategies that increase students' sight-word recognition of frequently used vocabulary words. One effective strategy that tutors used in the sessions for teaching vocabulary was context clues.

Using context clues. Some context clues that can be used to teach word meanings are synonyms, antonyms, comparison, contrast, description, and example (Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Tutors can use the following suggested steps to teach vocabulary using context clues. Before tutoring, the tutor prereads the text and selects three to five words that are (a) crucial for comprehension and (b) likely to be encountered by students in future situations. Then the tutor makes sentences with the selected words on sentence strips. The tutor's sentences should be more explicit than that of the original text. For example, when Jamie and his tutor were reading a sixth-grade science text on the atmospheric conditions that are found in different planets, one of the new concepts that they needed to explore was "greenhouse effect." To

preteach this vocabulary word the tutor made a sentence that read, “my grandparents grow vegetables in a greenhouse in the winter.” This sentence generated a discussion on how the glass walls of a greenhouse allow solar energy to enter and heat up the house. The heat that is trapped in the atmosphere, just as in a greenhouse, creates a “greenhouse effect.”

At the beginning of the session,

- The tutor needs to explain to the student that the words that he or she is about to learn will be encountered in the reading selection.
- The tutor helps the student read the sentences with the new word aloud.
- The tutor guides the student to figure out the meaning of the word by inferring from those coming before and after it.
- The tutor confirms the meaning inferred by the student or continues to guide the student to use the other words in context to determine the correct meaning through teacher–student discussion.
- The tutor covers up all the focus words with index cards and reads out the sentences in a different order from that in which they were taught. When the teacher reaches an index card covering a vocabulary word, the teacher says “blank,” and the student is asked to provide the missing word.
- The tutor helps the student make his or her own sentences using the new words for further practice.

Making sentences with new words gives the student additional practice and extends learning. This also provides an opportunity for the tutor to assess the student’s understanding of new vocabulary. The tutor can put up the sentence strips on a display board for the student to see throughout the lesson. These steps can be modified to suit different reading levels and individual learners’ needs. The features that make this approach suc-

cessful are (a) the small number of words that are taught intensively, (b) the systematic instruction, (c) the student’s exposure to the same meanings of the words in different sentences or contexts, (d) the game-like activity that makes learning fun, and (e) the stimulation of students’ critical thinking as they make sentences of their own.

Another way to develop students’ vocabulary is to integrate various types of texts and genres in the content areas. Integrating trade books, multimedia, graphics, and other resources not only motivates students to interact with texts, but it also increases their vocabulary and encourages them to think critically about subject matter as they encounter it in different contexts. In addition to reading *The Great Kapok Tree* when teaching the unit “The Tropical Rainforest,” Jamie’s tutor brought in pictures of the rainforest that she had printed from www.pbs.org. Jamie was encouraged to further explore the website when he went home and to bring ideas to discuss with his tutor. He did. Teachers can involve students in their own learning by using a variety of instructional resources and modeling strategies (Morgan & Estes, 1990).

Improving comprehension

Effective comprehension strategies facilitate construction of meaning and help reluctant readers develop positive attitudes toward literacy events. Generally, effective comprehension strategies are those that encourage student or teacher questioning, connect the text to the reader’s background knowledge, set a purpose for reading, and activate higher-level thinking skills (Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2005). Comprehension strategies ensure that students integrate both the process of reading and the content being read. The Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA; Stauffer, 1975) is one of the strategies that many of the tutors used with success. The DRTA uses prediction, questioning, and purpose setting for reading. It is effective with both narrative and expository texts.

Before reading. When preparing to use the DRTA, the teacher must determine what portion

of the text will require the use of the strategy and analyze the text to see logical stopping points. Too many stopping points could hinder comprehension. The teacher then makes a copy of the title of the text separately, copies of various subtitles from the text, and copies of some pictures in the text to be presented in sequential order.

During reading. The teacher starts by explaining the usefulness of the strategy to the student (to enhance comprehension). Then the teacher explains the meaning of the acronym DRTA to the student and the steps for using the strategy. The meanings of words like *prediction* (guessing what you think would take place before you know it) and *reading* (comprehension and not just calling words) and the activation of thinking at each point of the reading (by asking questions and explaining why they provide certain predictions and answers) are also necessary. After the teacher has set a purpose for using the strategy, he or she should use the following steps:

- The teacher shows the students the title and subheadings from the text. Jamie's tutor used the DRTA strategy for a sixth-grade passage from the social studies unit on Asia and the Pacific titled "People and Cultures" (Sager et al., 2003). The tutor activated Jamie's prior knowledge about the different cultures by asking questions such as "What do you think the story is going to be about?" "Why do you think so?" and "What do you know about the topic?" Students are encouraged to construct their personal meanings as they relate to the topic. Jamie was prompted to provide responses about dress, food, houses, and other common features of a people's culture. When asked "What do you think the passage is going to be about?" one of Jamie's responses was "Chinese food!" Teachers should be careful to correct any erroneous knowledge that students may bring to the reading task due to their limited knowledge on the topic or due to a different cultural or linguistic background. As

the student predicts, the teacher writes down the student's responses.

- The teacher shows the student some illustrations that go with the text in the order in which they appear (if there are any). One of the pictures used for Jamie's social studies lesson on "People and Cultures" was that of Chinese actors enacting scenes from traditional myths and legends. The teacher asks the student to add to predictions using the pictures and then asks the student to read to a predetermined logical stopping point.
- The teacher asks the student to verify, modify, refine predictions, and formulate new ones. The teacher asks, "How do you know?" for clarification or redirects questions.
- The teacher directs the student to continue reading to another suitable level and continues in this way to the end of the material. The teacher can choose different modes of reading such as aloud, silent, echo, or choral reading, depending on the reading level and needs of the student.

When using the DRTA strategy, it is important for the tutor to create a supportive and encouraging atmosphere so that students can participate freely. For example, the tutor assures the tutee that there are no wrong predictions but that after reading he or she will be given a chance to modify his or her predictions depending on new information gathered from the text. When students know that it is all right to make mistakes they are more willing to try. It is also necessary to provide enough think time (i.e., wait long enough for students to process information). This strategy helps students become more independent learners. Sometimes, simple prompts like "In what section of the text do you think we could find this answer?" could be helpful. The DRTA employs the frequent use of three questions: (1) What do you think or what do you think will

happen next? (2) Why do you think so? and (3) Can you prove it?

These questions prompt students' responses through interpretation, clarification, and application. They foster critical awareness and move students through a process that involves prediction, stimulation, and thinking as they use the questions for verification and ultimate extension of thought. Asking their own questions may also motivate students to read supplemental material in order to find more information on given topics.

After reading. After reading the expository text, the teacher can extend learning with a number of creative activities such as asking students to respond to some ideas from the passage in their journals. During the reading of the social studies selection on East Asia, Jamie found the section on Japanese students sometimes dressing like samurai warriors rather fascinating. In his journal, he wrote about beating his friends on video games just like the samurais and drew a picture to go with it. Journal responses create personal involvement in text content and give readers a sense of ownership of what they have just learned. For more difficult expository texts a simple summary of the story in the student's own words may be adequate.

The goal of the teacher in using these strategies is to bring the students to a point where they can independently and automatically use the strategies on their own to construct meaning from texts. This goal can be achieved if the teacher provides frequent practice with the strategies, reminds the student that the strategies can and should be used independently to achieve success in reading, and prompts them to use the strategies in appropriate situations.

Final thoughts

As for Jamie, the last day of tutorials was hard for him and his tutor. Tutors usually put all the students' work in folders for students to take home to their parents. When Jamie received his folder from his tutor, he had tears in his eyes as the tutor

hugged him goodbye. I watched from the corner of my eye as he produced an envelope that he handed to his tutor. It was a letter to be mailed to Michael Jordan, the famous basketball player, written and illustrated by Jamie himself—an extension activity that followed the reading of *Salt in His Shoes: Michael Jordan in Pursuit of a Dream* (Jordan & Jordan, 2000). Jamie was visibly proud of himself as a reader and writer. Fourteen weeks of direct systematic instruction in comprehension strategies and the integration of interesting materials had put this reluctant adolescent reader on his way to becoming a bona fide member of the “literacy club.”

Preservice teachers have used the intervention strategies described in this article successfully for several semesters to develop struggling readers' fluency, enhance motivation, improve vocabulary, build background knowledge, and foster comprehension of both narrative and expository texts. Reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and other related literacy activities are integrated. Students are usually encouraged to choose their own trade books from a variety that the tutors have preselected for the tutorial sessions. The tutors plan reading lessons so that expository texts and trade books are on the same topic. Tutorials usually start with the reading of a trade book. The narrative structure in trade books is easier for students to understand, and the stories are more enjoyable. Equipped with the background knowledge obtained from reading easier texts, students can more easily construct meaning from expository passages and feel less challenged when they encounter the same subject matter in textbooks. Although this intervention program is offered in a cafeteria, which serves as a resource room, it can also be used in the classroom. A classroom teacher, paraprofessional, or any other trained adult volunteer can implement the procedures. This tutorial approach can be used with individual students or modified for small groups of students in elementary and middle grades. When used with small groups of students, the teacher should give each child in the group the opportunity to respond in ways that are personally meaningful.

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