Supporting ELLs

Before, During, and After Reading

Working with English language learners in mainstream ELA classrooms can provide rich rewards in terms of developing multiple perspectives, sharing diverse experiences, and developing understanding of different cultural practices. However, these students can also challenge mainstream teachers. Supporting ELLs throughout the reading process can enhance outcomes for those students in terms of comprehension and in terms of a greater sense of self-efficacy as readers. In addition, successful support can increase teacher effectiveness and actually make the classroom teacher’s job less challenging, at least in this one area.

Strategic Reading + Self-Efficacy = Success

Strategic reading refers to contexts where readers actively construct meaning while reading and interacting with the text. Proficient readers use their background knowledge and textual clues to create meaning. Research on reading provides evidence for the fact that reading strategies are critical to successful reading (Baker and Brown) and that “effective readers are strategic readers who are able to apply various strategies while reading in order to enhance their comprehension” (Davis-Lenski, Wham, and John 135). They have a purpose for reading and they utilize skills as they construct meaning.

A person’s beliefs about his or her ability to be successful with a text will affect how he or she approaches the task of reading and learning to read. (Paris, Wasik, and Turner). When students are aware of strategies and use them automatically, they have become independent readers. Strategies are not naturally acquired. Students become aware of and engage in specific strategies through explicit instruction. Readers require support throughout the reading process, and teachers who understand this and provide these literacy scaffolds can move their students more steadily along the continuum of reading and literacy development.

Self-efficacy refers to a person’s beliefs in his or her capabilities. “Efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves, and act” (Bandura 71). A person’s beliefs about his or her ability to be successful with a text will affect how he or she approaches the task of reading and learning to read. Many older struggling readers blame themselves for their inability to read or read effectively, and this creates a cycle of avoidance, refusal to engage in the reading process, and viewing future attempts at reading as hopeless (Wallace). Students who hold the belief that they are ineffective as readers and avoid reading are challenging to educators who are trying to build skills in high school level English language learners whose reading comprehension skills in English may be lower than their comprehension in their native language and lower than that of their grade-level peers.

What’s Explicit about Explicit Instruction?

Explicit strategy instruction can be thought of as activities that teachers employ to make students aware of the processes that they are engaging in to make meaning from text and to communicate effectively, either in written or oral form. When teachers engage in explicit strategies instruction they purposefully aim to increase not only comprehension but also the metacognitive understanding of what strategies can be used and how and when to select different strategies, based on the task at hand. At the secondary level we
Building Strategies in Practice

As a secondary ELA/ESL teacher, I was always working to find ways to make the curriculum accessible to English language learners and to work with mainstream teachers so that the ESL classroom activities supported and enhanced the learning that was taking place in the content classroom. The students I taught were enrolled in an alternative high school program and many were considered to be students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). They faced a number of challenges with reading, comprehension, and completing the activities that were part of the unit plans. I scaffolded lessons in many ways, including using bilingual materials when available and providing audiobooks of the classroom texts when available. However, this was not enough. After working with these students and determining their needs, I developed a lesson sequence that combined a series of reading strategies with the objectives of building comprehension abilities, vocabulary, language skills, and self-efficacy as readers.

When teachers select strategies to teach explicitly, they must consider a number of factors. Who are the students and what are their learning styles? What are their past experiences with learning and the task at hand? What is manageable in the existing classroom context? There are hundreds of possible strategies to choose from, and teachers must make informed instructional decisions based on their own comfort level, their experience and expertise, and their context. Using a strategy that is challenging to implement because of contextual factors will not result in a great deal of success and may frustrate both teacher and students. For example, a guided imagery strategy, which requires a quiet setting for concentration, can fail if the classroom location has multiple distractions (noise or other interruptions) and therefore might not be the best strategy to implement in that particular setting.

My strategies had to meet a number of goals. First, they had to be easy to implement (no special materials needed) and transferable across the contexts of different genres, different topics, and the different levels of proficiency and preparation of my students. Second, they had to become a regular part of the classroom routine. While these were not the only strategies ever used, they formed a core so that students would understand what was expected of them and be able to get right to work after becoming familiar with these strategies. In other words, after introduction, guided, and applied practice, students needed to employ these strategies independently so that they were responsible for their own learning. Finally, these strategies had to engage and motivate students. After experimenting with a number of different strategies, I decided on the following:

- **Anticipation Guides** as a pre-reading scaffold
- **Vocabulary Self-Selection** (VSS) to facilitate meaningful vocabulary development (Haggard), followed by a **Vocabulary Squares** activity to help the students solidify the vocabulary through strong personal connections
- **Directed Reading-Thinking Activity** (DR-TA), a during-reading scaffold, and guided discussion and strategy (Stauffer)
- **A GIST** activity, an after-reading scaffold and writing prompt (Cunningham)

I selected these activities based on their research-based success with other populations, the ability to adapt them to a variety of activities, and the learner-centered nature of the tasks. Prior to working with these strategies, I would introduce the strategy outside any context. My belief was that these students were developing young adults and would be better served if they had an understanding of why we were doing what we were doing. We engaged in classroom discussion about what was “hard” about reading and how these students viewed themselves as readers. In the beginning of the school year, when participating in their initial student-teacher conference and asked about what makes a good reader, students responded...
that good readers were born that way, or good readers were rich and had good jobs.

For example, one student, Jose, an 18-year-old from Central America, answered the question *What makes a good reader in English?* "I think they born that way, Miss." Another student reported his frustration with classroom practice: "Everything is hard, Miss. When I look at words in a book I get mad. My teacher try to make me read but I no do it. I pretend." And finally, and perhaps most telling, was an 18-year-old student from Ecuador who responded to the good reader question by telling me, "It make you a good reader if you rich and have good job." In other words, there was a strong feeling among my students that they were not good readers, and that there were some qualitative characteristics that good readers possessed, but they were beyond the reach of my students for a number of reasons.

By talking about how successful readers were no different from them except that successful readers knew about and used strategies, my students began to buy into the idea that they too could develop these skills.

We first worked with these skills using short readings, such as newspaper articles, and I modeled all strategies by speaking my thoughts out loud as I read the article (a *think-aloud* protocol; see the Center for Applied Linguistics: http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0314lavandez.html). Hearing my thoughts explicitly stated, the students understood my task as a reader, what my thought process in completing the reading task was, and how my thought process assisted my reading comprehension. Once the students understood the directions and were able to use the particular strategy, we were then ready to pull it all together and apply it to other texts.

A typical reading task was approached in the following way. The class would work on completing an anticipation guide that required students to make predictions or display their prior knowledge about a particular topic that the section of the text we were working on dealt with (see an example at http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/guided-comprehension-anticipation-guide-296.html). The anticipation guide can be developed so that it targets before-, during-, and after-reading segments of the lesson. Before reading it serves as a way to call up prior knowledge and connect it to the text and the themes that we identified.

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During reading, the DR-TA was used (see an example at http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/drta), which is a comprehension strategy that promotes critical awareness and thinking. This activity requires students to engage in prediction, verification, interpretation, and judgment (Vacca and Vacca 136). After the reading and DR-TA, participants engaged in a VSS, which facilitates the acquisition of academic vocabulary (see an example at http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/choosing-chatting-collecting-vocabulary-296.html). Students nominate a word that they would like to learn more about, from the reading, and then they work in groups to discuss, define, and tell why the word is important enough to have been nominated. The groups share with the whole class and "teach" the selected words to their peers. After the VSS, students also developed vocabulary squares, a verbal-visual word association strategy. Verbal-visual word association strategies help students move beyond memorization of words and toward development of rich and personal associations (Feeds and Cockrum; Readence, Bean, and Baldwin). In the vocabulary square activity, the teacher develops templates for students. Essentially, a page is divided into four quadrants, and each square provides space for an aspect of the...
Success with ELLs

set of strategies becomes manageable and transferable to other texts and other contexts.

Perhaps the most important effect is building students’ self-efficacy as readers. When my students worked in this framework they surprised themselves at how engaged they actually became in the reading and how much they were able to comprehend and accomplish on their own. At the beginning of the school year they understood that there were good readers in the world, but they did not believe they were among them. After explicit discussion of strategies, explicit strategies instruction, and guided and applied practice, these students ended the school year with a sense of self-efficacy as readers and experienced success with text that would help them be successful in the future as they moved on from my classroom.

The value of such instruction can be summed up with the words of Jose, the 18-year-old student from El Salvador, who, when responding to the question What kind of a reader are you in English? at the end of the school year, stated, “A good reader, Miss. Now I’m a good reader.”

Effects on Student Learning

Using the aforementioned strategies together can form a powerful lesson sequence for helping ELLs comprehend the often complicated text they are required to read in mainstream, secondary English classes. By combining these strategies, ELLs—and all students—are supported before, during, and after reading and the word (see fig. 1). See Figure 2 for a completed vocabulary square.

Modifications to this activity are almost endless. A picture can be drawn in one of the squares, as well as the word in the students’ native language, so they are building a bilingual dictionary. Another option is to have students write the definition in their own words (as opposed to the dictionary definition) or to write a sentence from the text where the word appears in context.

Once the DR-TA and vocabulary strategies were completed for a given segment of the reading, we engaged in guided, reflective discussion to further develop the concepts from the reading, to clear up any misconceptions, and to help students understand the reading, and at this point the anticipation guide was revisited.

The final activity was a GIST activity where students answer who, what, where, when, why, and how, then write a 15–20 word summary of what they have read. (An example of a GIST activity and lesson can be found at http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/gist-summarizing-strategy-content-290.html.) Not only did this strategy help my students get the “gist” of the reading segment, it served as a low-stakes writing activity and helped them become more confident and fluent writers as the year progressed.

**FIGURE 1. Blank Vocabulary Square**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Use it in a sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antonyms</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 2. Completed Vocabulary Square**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Use it in a sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perturbed</td>
<td>I become perturbed when I think about the war in Afghanistan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonyms</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm, soothed, reassured</td>
<td>to disturb greatly in mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Works Cited


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Lyn Fairchild Hawks

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The list found on our Authors page is merely a beginning. We are seeking input from our readers regarding current or out-of-print rural authors.

Endangered Literature Campaign

Commit to reviving student understanding of the richness of rural literature in your classroom. Share current or past experiences of ways you use rural literature with your K-12 or college-level students or commit to adding readings from rural authors to your core curriculum. We will compile details provided by our readers and share frameworks for other educators who hope to increase student exposure to diverse forms of rural literature.

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