Timed Partner Reading and Text Discussion

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This engaging partner-reading activity provides students with an opportunity to improve their reading comprehension and text-based discussion skills. The activity, which can be used with intermediate and advanced learners, is ideal for English language learners in content classes and is particularly useful for building foundational knowledge of a new topic. Most applicable when the class is using introductory texts that include overarching content themes, this technique allows students to connect prior learning to new information, priming them for more in-depth study in subsequent lessons within a previously learned foundational context. Necessary materials include a text placed into a two-column graphic organizer, sticky notes, poster paper (one for each question that you plan to ask), and a timer.

PREPARATION

Prepare the graphic organizer for your students by dividing your text into five to seven sections that can be read in approximately 90 seconds each. Place each section of text in the left column of a two-column graphic organizer that will ultimately be one or two pages, depending on the length of your text, and leave open space in the right column for students to write in, as shown in Table 1.

Next, write one question for each section of the text on its own piece of poster paper, writing large enough so that students can view the questions from their seats. Leave space below the question for students to place sticky notes, then hang the poster papers at eye level in the front of the room, covering the questions so that students cannot read them ahead of

time. An option is to tape up the questions one at a time when the timer goes off.

Write open-ended questions requiring responses that can be reasoned from the text but can't be copied directly. Because students must think within the target language to be successful, these types of questions will generate the highest returns in language development over time. For example, two versions of the question below are related to the language target of using time, but they result in differing responses and thinking levels:

Version 1:

> **Text:** The student arrived for class at 8:30 a.m.
> **Question:** What time did class start?
> **Answer:** 8:30 a.m.

You can anticipate that students will take thinking shortcuts when given limited time to work on this task. In this first version, students might see the numbers in the text and immediately shortcut to 8:30 a.m. as the only possible response. To alleviate this, you can make small changes so that thinking shortcuts aren't readily available. Consider the difference between the above question and a second version of almost the same question:

Version 2:

> **Text:** The student arrived for class at 8:30 a.m. The teacher remarked, "You are a little early for class!"
> **Question:** What are two possible times for the start of class, and what language clues allow you to know?
> **Answer:** Two possible times are 8:35 a.m. and 8:45 a.m. (that is, *any time after 8:30 a.m. but not too much later*). The teacher said that the student is "a little"

early for class. This means that class must begin after the arrival time of the student, but that the student is only a few minutes early. So it is not reasonable for class to begin as late as noon or 3 p.m.

These two versions target the same language goal. However, the second version includes the quote from the teacher, asks for two possible class times, and requires an explanation based on language clues; as a result, the language comprehension and usage are noticeably more intense. Additionally, responses generated in the second version help demonstrate how well students comprehend both the words and the context, enabling you to identify when students produce successful responses that are based on authentic language understanding rather than successful guesses.

PROCEDURE

Pair each student with a partner of a similar reading level, and provide each student with a copy of the text in the graphic organizer. (A secondary option is to pair students of different levels if you prefer that approach.) Or you could provide pairs who read faster with a leveled text that is more complex and includes advanced vocabulary; in fact, you might consider preparing two texts, offering a baseline text accessible to all students as well as an optional "challenge" text. Providing students the choice to opt into the challenge text could increase engagement during the activity.

Give each pair one sticky note per text section and instruct students to write each of their initials in small letters at the top of their sticky notes, leaving the rest of the

Text	What questions could be asked about this section of the text?
90 seconds of text (teacher's discretion)	(Allow ample space for writing)
90 seconds of text	
90 seconds of text	

Table 1. Graphic organizer

sticky note blank to write responses. Show or tell students the purpose and instructions, as suggested below.

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to improve your reading comprehension and text-based discussion skills. It is meant to be challenging, and the harder you work, the more successful you will be.

Instructions:

1. Partner A reads the first section of the text *out loud*. Partner B actively listens.

2. After finishing the section, Partner A asks Partner B, "What questions could be asked about this section?"

3. Partner B then shares possible questions that could be asked about the text section.

4. Both partners write the possible questions in the right-hand column of the organizer.

5. For each section, you will have three minutes to read the text and write questions. After three minutes, the timer will ring.

6. On a chart in front of the room, I will reveal a question I have written for the section of the text. Then I will reset the timer for one minute.

7. Read the question with your partner and write your response on your sticky note.

8. Stick your sticky note under the question on the chart paper before the one-minute timer rings.

9. Quickly return to your table. Switch roles, with Partner B reading the next section aloud and Partner A predicting questions.

10. Repeat until we are finished with the text. If you finish one section of the text early, focus on making more detailed questions.

Begin the activity by starting a three-minute timer. When the timer goes off, reveal or tape up your question that corresponds with the first section of the text; then reset the timer to one minute and immediately start it. Students read the question, write their response on a sticky note, and put their sticky note on the poster before the one-minute timer goes off. After the minute is up, reset the timer to three minutes, prompt your students to switch roles, and immediately move on to the next text section. Repeat this process for the entire text.

Part of the challenge of this activity is the quick pace, which enables students to focus on self-monitoring skills while also pushing their literacy development. The short amount of time forces students to quickly move through the text and actively think about the important aspects of each text section and to produce two or three options for what could be asked about it. It is important to point out that the question posted by the teacher is only one option of many for each text section and that students should work to produce multiple possible questions rather than attempting to match the teacher's. One idea for extending the activity is for students to discuss with each other how they came up with their questions, giving a further opportunity for students to elaborate on their reasoning and their understanding of the important elements of an unfamiliar text.

The activity is designed to give students pronunciation and listening practice through reading out loud, which also gives the teacher a way to keep track of reading pace and allows for an on-the-spot timing adjustment in case students are reading too quickly or too slowly compared to the timer. Meanwhile, alternating between reading and sharing possible questions leads to equal thinking by both students. (With a large class, or if noise is a concern, you may choose to have each student read silently before discussing possible questions with his or her partner, closely monitoring to make sure students alternate who leads with sharing ideas to promote equal opportunity for critical thinking.) Additionally,

this activity helps students develop strategies to identify important aspects of a new text or an unfamiliar concept because it requires them to actively evaluate information as they read. While this is challenging at first, your students should improve with repeated practice at the task.

Finally, the sticky notes serve as real-time formative assessments within the activity. You can quickly look at students' responses to gauge progress, discuss responses with pairs when necessary, and remain hands-off with pairs that can manage the task independently.

FOLLOW-UP

This activity is designed to develop reading comprehension, pace, and text-based discussion skills. For this learning scenario, the text content is important, but it is secondary to literacy skill development—so it is unreasonable to expect students to become immediate experts on the content while reading it once at the quick pace of this activity.

After finishing the reading, you can review the responses to each question and provide a follow-up opportunity for an unstructured conversation about the text content. The class benefits from multiple exposures to the information while working intensely on both literacy and language development. You can also use the follow-up to target a specific language modality based on the needs of your class. After the first reading, you can use one or all of the following activities:

- **Speaking:** Count off students according to the number of sections in the text. Instruct each student to write three talking points in his or her own words for the section that corresponds with their number. Then group students, with one of each number in a group, to present their talking points in the small groups.

- **Writing:** Have students write a summary to reinforce new concepts and vocabulary. Provide a list of five to ten key vocabulary words for students to use and underline

as they write the summary in their own words. This technique, which is useful for an individual formative assessment, can be used after students discuss their talking points or directly after the partner reading.

- **Visualizing:** Change the pairs and have students draw a visual of the information from the text. The visual may be a flowchart, bubble map, graph, or student-designed graphic organizer, depending on the text. Have students display their visuals around the room for a gallery walk. After viewing the other groups' displays, students vote by placing a sticker on the visual that conveys the information most precisely and creatively. This can be completed directly after the partner-reading activity, after the individually written summary, or after the talking-points review.

LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT

This activity helps students build foundational knowledge before engaging in more in-depth study of content. It can also be used to target literacy skill development while covering miscellaneous topics that don't require more than one or two class periods or don't fit seamlessly within your curriculum.

Overall, this process aids the development of literacy skills and provides time for unstructured and purposeful conversation in a second language. The primary objective of the activity is literacy skill development, and the follow-up in a less time-pressured environment lets students practice meaningful use of language while learning important content. With repeated practice, your students should demonstrate improvement in reading comprehension, pace, and text-based discussion skills.

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