

Reading Is Thinking

Cindy Swallow

Abstract

Reading and thinking need to go hand in hand for students to become successful learners. The processes involved in thinking while reading must be modelled, practised, and infused into everyday instruction in all levels of education. There needs to be a balance between learning to read and reading to learn. Teachers are responsible for finding the strategies that work for all learners, differentiating the instruction and activities, and building a love of reading into our classrooms for students to master the complex action of thinking while reading.

Learning to read and reading to learn both involve complex actions of the brain. Reading requires the brain to make connections and inferences, to visualize and respond, to ask questions and determine importance, to analyze and synthesize, and to monitor comprehension, all while carefully decoding the text (Gear, 2006). Readers engage in active thinking. There is no one best way to teach reading, because all learners learn differently. Therefore, balanced literacy programs include differentiated instruction to build interest, increase comprehension and fluency, and incorporate thinking strategies while reading (Reis, 2009). Reading can be categorized into two main areas: decoding and fluency (learning to read), and comprehension and thinking (reading to learn). Both areas are equally important in the reading process, and necessitate a variety of strategies and practices in order to master the complex action of thinking while reading.

Learning To Read: Decoding and Fluency

Decoding and fluency refer to the physical act of saying the words. Readers enact word attack strategies such as sounding out, chunking, recognizing high frequency sight words, and using context clues and word structure to physically produce the sound. This side of reading is where the phonemic awareness, spelling, vocabulary and decoding strategies all come together to produce words that make sense (Gear, 2006). In order to develop these strategies, students need to participate with patterned text and repeated reading whereby they practise the same text until reading is fluent (Katz, 2012). This may be as simple as reading over a sight word list or learning to blend sounds together, or as complex as participating in a Reader's Theatre. The key is repetition, because repeated readings and wide reading training improves the comprehension scores the most with people learning to read (Ari, 2015). "Re-reading is the most powerful strategy" (Brownlie, 2012) to improve students' overall reading ability.

Teachers tend to focus on decoding, phonemic awareness, spelling, and phonics are skills in the early years of reading instruction. However, it is important to note that the time spent on learning to read should be less than the time spent on actually reading to gain meaning (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Isolated skill-based activities have their place in learning to decode, but they should not be the only focus of a quality reading program. Early years students need to hear quality text being read to them, with them, and for them while meaningful discussions are happening about the features of the text, the meaning of the text, and making inferences about the text. The reading instruction time, based on the decoding skills, needs to be monitored to maintain quality reading instruction.

Somewhere in the middle of learning to read and reading to learn is fluency. Reading fluency includes accuracy in word decoding, automatic processing of the text, and prosodic reading (Rasinski, 2004). When students struggle in any of these areas, it is unlikely that they will fully understand the text. Students who struggle with accuracy need support in decoding. Two successful strategies for increasing this type of accuracy are assisted readings and

repeated readings (Rasinski, 2004). In my own practice as a literacy specialist, using repeated reading such as Reader's Theatre has not only improved the students' reading and comprehension, but also improved the readers' enthusiasm toward and enjoyment of reading. Re-reading texts, which students and parents may think is a waste of time, serves a very important purpose in building fluency. Fluency boot camp activities give the students a chance to read short passages over and over until they are confident with their ability to decode the words and fluently read them. The activities are timed, change quickly, and offer variety and a challenge. These activities have been highly successful in my literacy program and have been requested by students many times. Reader's Theatre, plays, poetry, speeches, or any other form of reading that involves repeated practice of meaningful texts improves fluency.

Fluency has six dimensions: rate, pausing, phrasing, stress, intonation, and integration (Fountas & Pinnel, 2006). Fluency is not to be confused with speed. Fluency does not mean reading faster, while ignoring punctuation, phrasing, and stress. Quality reading instruction must not emphasize speed at the expense of meaningful reading, or the students will become fast readers with limited comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). Fluency is not the only goal of reading; "our concern is integral connection with comprehension" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 64). Quality reading instruction that includes fluency coaching, practising and modelling leads to the greatest gains in comprehension, as well as fluency (Ari, 2015). This practice include reading aloud to students, whereby the teacher models what reading fluently sounds like while sharing quality literature with students. In my own practice, having the students use a rubric to self-assess their fluency, according to the six dimensions, makes the students aware of how they are doing, gives them ownership, and provides the next steps for goal setting. Recording the students reading a passage is a powerful way to have the students self-assess by showing them what they need to do to improve. Any strategy that has students practising the six dimensions on a daily basis will improve their reading fluency.

I have found that older students, who are not yet reading at grade level, are often at a standstill with their reading development. The grade-appropriate text is too difficult for them to decode, but may be well within their cognitive ability to understand. The materials at their reading levels are often juvenile and babyish, causing an engagement issue of reluctance for the student. This avoidance prevents improvements in reading from happening. This cycle is difficult to break. Often, text can be created from curricular materials that are accessible for the students and are written for their reading ability, yet are not babyish. In my experience, when the students have ownership in the task of assisting in creating the text, it is more meaningful than any commercially produced text. Their brain needs enrichment, with rich text, to enhance their vocabulary, conceptual understandings, and intellectual growth. However, often they are given the simplest text. Students need to be encouraged to use "accessible text with rich concepts" (Ivey & Fisher, 2006), alternative texts, and challenging materials for reading and thinking aloud. When teachers read aloud from content area texts, they model thinking strategies and the student is free to enjoy the fluent reading. Students enjoy the reading without the struggle of decoding the text, all while engaging the brains of the students.

Reading To Learn: Comprehension and Thinking

The other side to reading includes thinking, comprehension, constructing meaning, and metacognition (Gear, 2006), which comprise "reading to learn." Students need to understand what they are reading as clearly as they know how to read it. The goal of quality reading programs is to create "efficient, independent, self-monitoring behaviour and the ability to search for and use a variety of sources of information in the text" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 270). Reading comprehension skills should not be a secret from the students. One student stated, after hearing a lessons in which I stopped and thought out loud, "How do you know how to do that? You really have all those questions and thoughts in your head?" Teaching how to think, and to ask questions while reading, are as important as teaching how to read.

Metacognition is the act of thinking about thinking. This is an integral component of comprehending what is being read. Metacognition is the foundation for good reading. It encompasses making connections, asking questions, visualizing, determining importance, drawing inferences, analyzing, synthesizing, and monitoring comprehension (Gear, 2006). Good readers are metacognitive: they use, think about, and articulate these strategies to discuss the text and enhance meaning. When students are aware of their thinking while reading, they go beyond the basic information in the text, to thinking deeper and more meaningfully.

Explicit instruction of comprehension strategies, which includes teacher modelling, guided practice, independent practice and application of the skill, should be taught during reading lessons (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Teacher modelling includes “repeated modeling of your thinking while you read aloud to teach each new strategy” (Gear, 2006, p. 31). Guided practice provides the student opportunity to practise the skill with support. This support remains in place until it is no longer needed. During independent practice, the students discuss their thinking with peers, which strengthens their understanding. The final goal is for students to apply the skill on their own in a variety of settings. “Intentionally integrating the language of reading and thinking into classrooms is essential” (Gear, 2006, p. 31), in order to further the thinking skills and to enhance the meaning of the text. Without this gradual release of responsibility, students miss out on the opportunity to practise new skills and make these skills their own.

Re-reading is an important strategy, not only for students to practise, but also for teachers to model. It provides students the opportunity to dive deeper into the text and to find evidence to support their thinking. By keeping the focus on the content of the book, rather than on personal experiences and thoughts, students build content knowledge and vocabulary, before moving to personal connections and feeling (Gerwetz, 2015). The first time through the book, the focus is on enjoyment. The second time reading the book, the focus is on the text and gaining meaning. This re-reading gives all students access to the story on an equal playing field, regardless of prior experiences. Close reading is a strategy that encourages students to re-read with a focus, and to uncover layers of text that they would not have understood or noticed with a single read through (Boyles, 2013). Subsequent readings of the books can focus on connections and deeper meaning. Reading any materials more than once improves comprehension.

Teachers are responsible for helping students to access their prior knowledge and to apply these reading strategies to various texts (Bryce, 2011). Accessing students’ prior knowledge goes hand in hand with helping them to make connections. Teachers must exercise caution not to let the connections overtake the text, while ensuring that they assist students “to enhance understanding and construct meaning” (Miller, 2002) of the text. Knowledge about the world, relationships, and language are critical to boost comprehension of texts (Pearson & Liben, 2013). Teachers are expected to not only teach how to read, but to include vocabulary building activities that will develop language knowledge in order to improve meaning for readers. Activating relevant prior knowledge, or schema, is essential before, during, and after reading, regardless of the text used.

Thinking aloud while reading text to the students is an important way to model thinking strategies. This modelling of thinking stimulates students to “activate, build, change, and revise their schema as they engage in conversations with their peers and their teachers” (Miller, 2002, p. 56). Thinking aloud affords students a look inside the teacher’s brain, to hear about the mental process that he/she is using to construct meaning, and it provides teachers an opportunity to demonstrate when and why each strategy is most effective. In my practice, thinking aloud is a skill that entails the gradual release of responsibility for the students to understand how to use it and how to do it successfully.

Three levels of questions require direct teaching during reading instruction (Fountas and Pinnell, 2012). Thinking within the text includes monitoring and correcting, searching for information, and summarizing. About-the-text questions involve students in analyzing the text. Beyond-the-text questions include inferring, synthesizing, making connections, and predicting

(Fountas & Pinnel, 2012). All three types of questions need to be taught explicitly, practised the gradual release model, and used when assessing students' comprehension of the text.

Students need to learn how to talk about their reading, to articulate their thinking, to ask questions, to make predictions, to analyze, to synthesize, to respond emotionally, and to make inferences about the text (Brownlie, 2005). Some students can respond as second nature. However, many students need to be taught how to respond through modelling. The Say Something strategy is a very effective way to facilitate discussions about the book (Brownlie, 2005). This discussion opens the door for all readers to participate and be heard, because of the expectation that all students will say something. In this model, the students practise comprehension strategies and learn how to talk about their books from the teacher, and from one another, in a safe environment that is respectful of all abilities.

Assessments require a purpose at all times. In my practice, I use reading assessments as benchmark assessments to get the students going and understand what they are able to do. Ongoing assessment is critical to assess previous lessons, to assess understanding of the text, and to determine the needs and strengths of the students. "Good assessment is the foundation for effective teaching" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 275), and it therefore drives instruction. However, educators must keep in mind that "you don't fatten a sheep by weighing it" (Stead, 2003). Taking time to assess groupings, lessons, and strategies can drive forward planning to ensure success (Firmender, Reis, & Sweeny, 2013); but too much assessing, and too little time spent on practising and gaining the skills, are detrimental to the growth of our readers.

Conclusion

Reading is a complex skill that is neatly woven between meaning and decoding, fluency and thinking. Many successful strategies improve student reading. Re-reading, reading aloud while thinking aloud, and explicit teaching of thinking skills are among the most successful, and the most easily adopted in a classroom situation. All readers, regardless of their ability, can participate in thinking while reading if the correct structure is in place. An atmosphere that values reading and thinking, and models both, will enhance the students' ability to learn to read and read to learn.

References

- Ari, O. (2015). Fluency interventions for developmental readers: Repeated reading and wide reading. *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education, 28*(1), 5-15. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42802377>
- Boyles, N. (2013). Closing in on close reading. *Educational Leadership, 70*(4), 36-41. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec12/vol70/num04/Closing-in-on-Close-Reading.aspx>
- Brownlie, F. (2012, October). *Big ideas in literacy: Making a difference for all children*. Presentation to Brandon School Division, Brandon, MB.
- Brownlie, F. (2005). *Grand conversations, thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles*. Winnipeg, MB: Portage and Main Press.
- Bryce, N. (2011). Meeting the reading challenges of science textbooks in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher, 64*(7), 474-485. doi:1598/RT.64.7.1
- Fielding, L. G., & Pearson, P. D. (1994). Reading comprehension: What works. *Educational Leadership, 51*(5), 62-68. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb94/vol51/num05/Synthesis-of-Research---Reading-Comprehension@-What-Works.aspx>
- Firmender, J. M., Reis, S. M., & Sweeny, S. M. (2013). Reading comprehension and fluency levels ranges across diverse classrooms: The need for differentiated reading instruction

- and content. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 57(1), 3-14. doi:10.1177/0016986212460084 Retrieved from <http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/57/1/3.full.pdf+html>
- Fountas, I., & Pinnell, G. S. (2006). *Teaching comprehension and fluency: Thinking, talking and writing about reading, K-8*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Fountas, I., & Pinnell, G. S. (2012). Guided reading: The romance and the reality. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(4), 268-284. doi:10.1002/trtr.01123
- Gear, A. (2006). *Reading power: Teaching students to think while they read*. Markham, ON: Pembroke.
- Gerwetz, C. (2015, May 11). New read-aloud strategies transform story time. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/05/13/new-read-aloud-strategies-transform-story-time.html>
- Ivey, G., & Fisher, D. (2006). When thinking skills trump reading skills. *Educational Leadership* 64(2), 16-21. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct06/vol64/num02/When-Thinking-Skills-Trump-Reading-Skills.aspx>
- Katz, J. (2012). *Teaching to diversity: The three-block model of universal design for learning*. Winnipeg, MB: Portage & Main Press.
- Miller, D. (2002.) *Reading with meaning: Teaching comprehension in the primary grades*. Markham, ON: Pembroke.
- Pearson, P. D., & Liben, D. (2013, September 12). The progression of reading comprehension. *Achieve the core*. Retrieved June 1, 2015, from http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/liben_pearson_progression_of_comprehension_research_ela.pdf
- Rasinski, T. (2004). Creating fluent readers. *Educational Leadership*, 61(6), 46-51. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar04/vol61/num06/Creating-Fluent-Readers.aspx>
- Reis, S. M. (2009). *Joyful reading: Differentiation and enrichment for successful literacy learning K-8*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Stead, T. (2003, August). Teaching children to read and write. Presentation to Brandon School Division, Brandon, MB.

About the Author

Cindy Swallow has taught in Brandon School Division for 22 years, currently as a Literacy Specialist for Valleyview School. She is back at BU for her third time, in the Master of Education program in curriculum and instruction. She and her husband have two wonderful sons who keep them busy with sports and activities.