

Sentence-Level Gist: Literacy Instruction for Students With Learning Disabilities in Co-Taught Classrooms

Marney S. Pollack, MS¹, Alexandra Shelton, PhD², Erin Clancy, MEd²,
and Christopher J. Lemons, PhD³

Abstract

Several strategies that demonstrate promise are available for educators to improve reading comprehension outcomes for students. However, some students, including students with and at risk for learning disabilities, require more intensive supports to develop proficiency in reading comprehension. To support these students, teachers must intensify instruction. This article describes an intensive main idea identification strategy, *sentence-level gist*, for teachers to use with students with persistent reading comprehension difficulties in the co-taught classroom. The sentence-level gist strategy requires students to determine the subject and important words in each sentence and then synthesize this information to write a main idea statement for a section of a text.

Keywords

comprehension, reading, co-teaching, collaboration for students with mild disabilities, inclusion, intervention(s), learning disabilities

Reading comprehension is a critical skill for students to develop. However, for many middle school students, acquiring proficiency in comprehending texts is challenging. Therefore, it is essential that middle school teachers incorporate evidence-based literacy instruction into content-area classes to support the development of student reading comprehension skills (Kamil et al., 2008). It is especially important for content-area teachers and special education teachers to provide this type of instruction in the general education setting that typically consists of many students with learning disabilities (LD) who struggle with reading comprehension (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). As described in the introduction to this special issue (Wexler et al., 2021), we developed the content area literacy instruction (CALI) instructional framework that enhances the content-area instruction co-teachers provide in the general education setting. Co-teachers can use the CALI instructional framework to integrate evidence-based literacy practices that target reading comprehension.

As described in Article 3 in this special issue (Shelton et al., 2021), part of the CALI instructional framework requires co-teachers to explicitly teach students procedures to generate main idea statements and summarize content-area texts. Co-teachers teach students to generate statements that identify the main ideas of sections of text using *get the gist*, an evidence-based reading comprehension strategy that is included in the collaborative strategic reading comprehension intervention package (Vaughn et al., 2011). Co-teachers also teach students to work with a partner to improve their main idea statements using an *associate gist* strategy (Shelton et al., 2021). After writing main idea statements for each section of the text, students use

¹Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

²University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

³Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Marney S. Pollack, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, Box 228 Peabody College, Nashville, TN 37203, USA.
Email: marney.s.pollack@vanderbilt.edu

their generated main idea statements to write a summary of the entire text. Co-teachers can use students' main idea statements and text summaries to gauge students' level of comprehension.

Although get the gist and associate gist are effective strategies for many middle school students (Vaughn et al., 2011; Wexler et al., 2018), some students may continue to struggle to identify main ideas in text, which impedes their overall comprehension. One reason that students may struggle to identify main ideas in text is that content-area text often includes long paragraphs made up of complex sentences (IRIS Center, 2019). This can pose challenges for students when they attempt to synthesize the information across a whole paragraph. For example, content-area text frequently includes sentences with pronouns (i.e., words that replace and refer to common or proper nouns), and to comprehend sentences with pronouns, students must identify each pronoun referent (i.e., the noun that each pronoun represents). Consider the following sentences: "Griffin thought the stars were beautiful. He was so amazed and could not stop staring up at the sky." To understand the second sentence, students must use information from the first sentence to deduce that the pronoun "he" refers to Griffin. However, students with LD often incorrectly identify pronoun referents (Oakhill & Yuill, 1986), which leads to misinterpreting sentences and misidentifying main ideas.

Complex sentences are also long and often contain multiple nouns and words that modify or describe them (Scott & Balthazar, 2013). Take the following sentence as an example: "The singer and her fans, whom she affectionately referred to as her family, pleaded with the judges to let her audition again." Students must be able to isolate the important information (e.g., pleaded with the judges) in individual sentences from the less-important details (e.g., whom she affectionately referred to as her family) to support comprehension of sections of texts (Dole et al., 1991; Taylor, 1986). However, students with LD, who often struggle with comprehension even at the sentence level, may not know how to extract the relevant information from this limited amount of connected text. Because complex sentences may contribute to reading comprehension difficulties, the CALI instructional framework includes a sentence-level gist (SLG) strategy to provide students with LD a method for analyzing individual sentences to generate a main idea statement for a section of text.

The Sentence-Level Gist Strategy

Sentence-level gist is an intensive reading comprehension strategy developed as a part of the CALI instructional framework, which demonstrated positive outcomes for co-teachers and students with LD (Wexler et al., 2020). Within the CALI instructional framework, co-teachers introduce SLG during the *student support* phase (see Lyon et al., this

Sentence-Level Gist Steps
Step 1. Identify <i>who</i> or <i>what</i> each sentence is mostly about.
Step 2. Select two important words from each sentence.
Step 3. Combine the <i>who</i> or <i>what</i> and the important words from each sentence to write a main idea statement for the section.

Figure 1. Sentence-level gist steps.

issue). The student support phase requires co-teachers to use data to place students in homogeneous groups (i.e., review, practice, extend) and provide students with individualized instruction and support using station activities. Special education teachers teach students in the review group, that is, students whose main idea statements and text summaries from whole-class CALI instructional framework lessons indicate a need for more intensive intervention, to apply the SLG strategy to one section of text at a time to increase their accuracy when identifying the main idea of each section. Students later work in pairs to use the SLG strategy with another section of text.

The SLG strategy is similar to the get the gist strategy (see Shelton et al., 2021). However, during SLG, students apply the strategy to individual sentences instead of larger portions of text. After students generate the main idea of each sentence in a section, they synthesize the information across sentences to generate one main idea statement for the entire section. To use SLG, students complete the following steps (see Figure 1 for a quick reference guide):

- Identify who or what each sentence is mostly about.
- Select two important words from each sentence.
- Combine the who or what and the important words from each sentence to write a main idea statement for the section.

The next section describes methods that special education teachers use to prepare for an SLG lesson.

Preparing for a Sentence-Level Gist Lesson

Sentence-Level Gist Log

The SLG log is a graphic organizer that provides students with a structured space for recording sentence-level information from each section of a given text (see Figure 2). Teachers can also use the SLG log to plan for SLG during the student support phase. Students complete one table of

Section 1		
Sentence	Who/What	Two Important Words
1	Rosa Parks	change history
2	Rosa	boarded bus
3	She (Rosa)	settled middle
4	Bus	stops full
5	White man	nowhere sit
6	Driver	ordered stand
7	Rosa	refused give
8		
Main Idea Statement		
Rosa Parks changed history when she refused to give up her bus seat.		

Figure 2. Sentence-level gist log for section one of the *Civil Rights on a City Bus* sample text.

the SLG log for each section of text. Each row in the table represents a different sentence within the section. In the appropriate column for each row, students write the identified who or what and two important words for each sentence within the section of text. At the bottom of the table (labeled Main Idea Statement), students combine the information from the sentence-level section of the table to form a main idea statement.

Lesson Planning

To prepare for a SLG lesson, special education teachers should first read the text and complete the SLG log. The purpose for completing this preparatory step is threefold. First, teachers can use this as an answer guide when teaching the SLG. Second, completing the SLG log ahead of time allows teachers to plan specific explanations for how they completed each step of the SLG process. These planned explanations can serve as *think-alouds* when the teacher is modeling the thought process during each step of the SLG. Third, teachers can use their generated main idea statements to develop the purpose question (see Shelton et al., 2021). Special education teachers write the purpose question in the designated space on the SLG log prior to making copies for each student.

Teaching a Sentence-Level Gist Lesson

To teach students how to use the SLG strategy, special education teachers should use explicit instruction (i.e., a systematic approach to teaching that promotes academic learning;

Archer & Hughes, 2011) to gradually release responsibility to their students. This approach to instruction involves (a) modeling with a clear explanation and planned examples, (b) guided practice, and (c) independent practice. Introducing SLG starts with modeling or demonstrating how to complete the SLG steps using think-alouds to explain the decision-making process. After modeling, teachers then implement guided practice by continuing to lead instruction, but incorporating more opportunities for student practice. During guided practice, teachers solicit student input and provide positive and corrective feedback. If students demonstrate competence during guided practice, students might be asked to complete steps independently. During this independent practice, teachers circulate around the group and provide support to individual students. Across instructional routines, teachers present frequent opportunities to respond, provide immediate and specific feedback, and maintain a brisk pace; all of which support student engagement.

Teaching a SLG lesson requires three steps. Examples of each step are provided using content from a sixth-grade social studies text, *Civil Rights on a City Bus* (ReadWorks, 2014; see Figure 3).

Step 1: Students Identify the Who or What

The first step in the SLG strategy requires students to identify the subject of each sentence. Special education teachers might model subject identification for students with a novice level of understanding by describing aloud their thought process using planned examples and a clear explanation. For example, in a sixth-grade social studies co-taught class, the special education teacher models her thinking by saying,

Civil Rights on a City Bus

by ReadWorks



On the first of December 1955, the African American seamstress Rosa Parks helped change the course of history on a city bus. Rosa boarded the bus after a day's work at a Montgomery, Alabama, department store. She settled towards the middle, past the first several rows, which at that time were reserved for white people. After making a few stops, the bus became full. Then a white man boarded, but there was nowhere for him to sit. The driver ordered Rosa and the rest of the black passengers in her row to stand at the back of the bus and let the white man sit. In an act of defiance that would help intensify the American Civil Rights Movement, Rosa refused to give up her spot.

Figure 3. Section one of the *Civil Rights on a City Bus* sample text. Copyright 2014 by ReadWorks®, Inc. Used by permission.

The first sentence of *Civil Rights on a City Bus* (ReadWorks, 2014) reads “On the first of December 1955, the African American seamstress Rosa Parks helped change the course of history on a city bus.” To figure out who or what this sentence is mostly about, I first ask myself: “What is happening?” In this sentence, I found the verb “helped,” so I know someone or something was providing help. Next, I ask myself: “Who or what helped?” According to the sentence, Rosa Parks helped. Therefore, I know this sentence is mostly about Rosa Parks.

After identifying the subject, students are instructed to use annotation strategies and the SLG log. For example, after identifying the subject in the first sentence of *Civil Rights on a City Bus* (ReadWorks, 2014), the teacher says, “Now that we know that Rosa Parks is who the first sentence is mostly about, circle ‘Rosa Parks’. Next, let’s write her name in the who/what column of the SLG log.” Students copy the circled text to the who/what column of the SLG log for that particular sentence (see Figure 2).

Sentence subjects are typically proper nouns (e.g., Rosa Parks), common nouns (e.g., the bus, the driver), or pronouns (e.g., she, it, they). Although students may easily recognize proper nouns and common nouns, students with LD often struggle with understanding pronouns and their referents (Oakhill & Yuill, 1986). In *Civil Rights on a City Bus* (ReadWorks, 2014), students might have difficulty identifying who or what the third sentence is mostly about because it includes a pronoun. Therefore, teachers might implement a guided practice opportunity to help students identify the subject of this sentence. Here is an example dialog:

The third sentence reads, “She settled towards the middle, past the first several rows, which at that time were reserved for White people.” Who or what is this sentence mostly about? (Students respond “She.”) Yes, so let’s circle the word she. Now, is the word she a pronoun? (Students respond “Yes.”) Since she is a pronoun, we need to look at the previous sentence to figure out what she refers to. The sentence before says “Rosa boarded the bus after a day’s work at a Montgomery, Alabama, department store.” What is the subject in this sentence? (Students respond “Rosa.”) Good! So, what does she refer to in the third sentence? (Students respond “Rosa.”) Correct! So now we are going to draw an arrow from she to Rosa in the previous sentence. This will remind us that she is referring to Rosa. Now, we’ll write she, with *Rosa* in parentheses, in the who/what column of the SLG log.

After students identify who or what the sentence is mostly about, they complete SLG Step 2 with the same sentence.

Step 2: Students Select Two Important Words

The second step in the SLG strategy is to select two important words from each sentence. This requires students to isolate important content in each sentence. Special education teachers model this skill by describing aloud their

thought process for selecting two important words from a sentence. For example, the teacher might say,

Let’s return to the third sentence: “She settled towards the middle, past the first several rows, which at that time were reserved for white people.” I know that the words I select must be important, so I can’t choose any of the following: towards, the, which, at, that, were or for. I also know that important words usually tell me something about what the subject did. I’ll choose settled and middle since those two words tell me a little bit about what Rosa Parks did. Remember, your words may not be the same as mine. What is important is that the words help you make a main idea statement for the whole section of text.

After choosing two important words, the special education teacher again instructs students to use annotation strategies and the SLG log. An example dialog follows: “Let’s underline two words that are important in this sentence.” In this case, students underline the two words they have identified as important. “Now let’s write the two important words in the two important words column of the SLG log.” After students select two important words from the sentence and copy the words to the appropriate column of the SLG log for that particular sentence (see Figure 2), they complete SLG Steps 1 and 2 with each remaining sentence in the section before proceeding to Step 3.

Step 3: Students Write a Main Idea Statement

The third step of SLG is to use the information gathered in Steps 1 and 2 to write a main idea statement that summarizes the entire section of text. This step is similar to the original get the gist strategy in that students are developing a main idea statement that should be between 8 and 13 words (see Shelton et al., 2021). However, when using SLG, students will have recorded notes on their SLG logs about the subject and important words from each sentence to help guide them in developing the main idea statement. Even with these notes, this step requires a relatively high level of synthesis as students consider content from all sentences included in the section of text. To establish fluency with this complex process, students with LD might require many opportunities for practice and feedback.

Step 3A: Students identify the most common who or what. To help students develop their main idea statements for a section of text, teachers instruct students to use the scaffolded sentence-level information they recorded in their SLG logs. First, students review the who/what column of their SLG logs to identify the most common *who* or *what* across all sentences. Students select this who or what as the subject of their main idea statement. If students record more than one most common who or what, they can likely choose either one as their subject and still produce an accurate main idea statement.

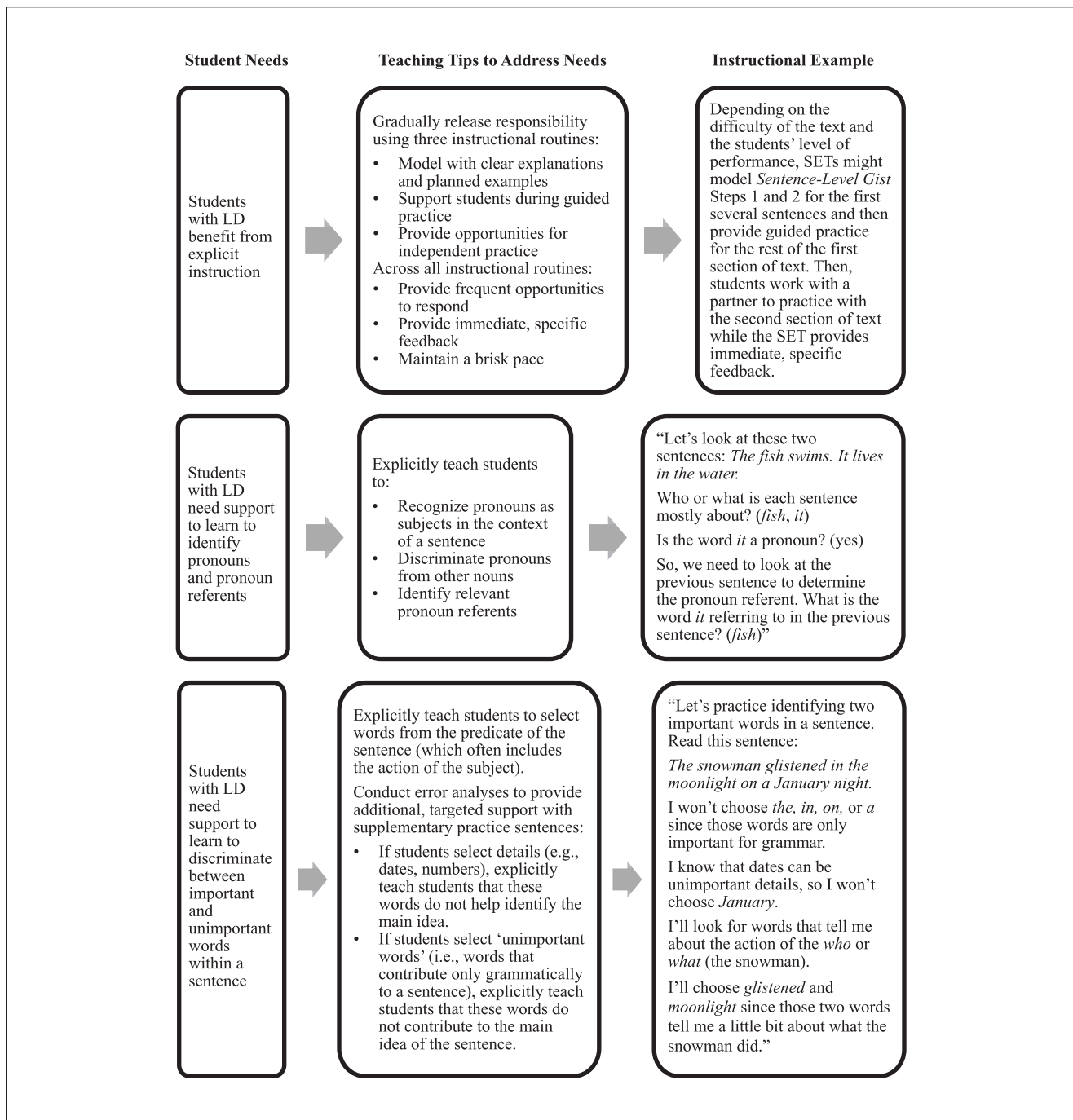


Figure 4. Teaching tips to address unique needs of students with LD.
 Note. LD = learning disabilities.

To model this process, the teacher might say,

Now that we've identified who or what each sentence is about (Step 1) and selected two important words from every sentence in the section (Step 2), we will use the most common who or what and some of the important words you identified to write a main idea statement for the first section of *Civil*

Rights on a City Bus (ReadWorks, 2014). When I look at the who/what column of my SLG log, I see that Rosa Parks was the who or what for most of the sentences.

Step 3B: Students select important words. Next, students select approximately five important words from the two important words column to include in their main idea

statement. To determine which words to select, students consider which words provide information about the most important subject they identified. Special education teachers may need to explain to students that they will need to add noncritical words to the main idea statement to ensure it is grammatically correct. However, the five important words they selected should make up the majority of the statement. To model this, the teacher explains,

I'm going to pick about five words from the two important words column of my SLG log to include in my main idea statement. I'll use the words "change, history, refused, give, bus" because they all relate to Rosa Parks, the subject of my main idea statement.

Step 3C: Students write a main idea statement. Finally, students combine the subject and the five words to write a main idea statement. The teacher models by saying: "I'll start my main idea statement with Rosa Parks because this section of text was mostly about her. Next, I'll write a sentence about Rosa Parks using the five words I chose. I'll write: 'Rosa Parks changed history when she refused to give up her bus seat.'" Because students might have identified different important words in each sentence, main idea statements can vary; however, they should ultimately convey the same general main idea. See Figure 2 for the completed SLG log for section one of the sample text.

After completing Step 3, students repeat all of the SLG steps for each section of the text. Once students generate main idea statements for each section of text, students write a text summary that answers the purpose question. For guidance on text summarization, see Shelton et al. (2021).

Generalization of Sentence-Level Gist

Although SLG was designed for special education teachers to implement during the student support phase of the CALI instructional framework (see Lyon et al., 2021 for more information), students can apply the SLG strategy outside of the CALI instructional framework as well. This strategy might be particularly useful for students who have demonstrated a need for more intensive intervention in reading comprehension; more specifically, those who would benefit from support (a) identifying pronouns and their referents, (b) discriminating between important and unimportant words within a sentence, and (c) synthesizing important information across sentences. Figure 4 presents several unique needs of students with LD, tips for addressing these needs, and examples of instruction.

Special education teachers can encourage students who need more intensive reading comprehension intervention to use the SLG strategy during supplemental instruction (i.e., Tier 2, Tier 3, and special education settings). In these contexts, teachers or other service providers (e.g., Tier 2 instructors, paraeducators) can use an explicit instruction approach

during each lesson such that students have the opportunity to (a) observe a model of the first section, (b) participate in guided practice with educator feedback for the second section, and (c) practice independently for the third section of text.

Conclusion

The CALI instructional framework, including student support, was designed for middle school co-teachers to use to support the reading comprehension of their students. This article provides guidance on SLG, a strategy that can be used to support students who continue to struggle with reading comprehension as demonstrated by an inability to synthesize critical information across a section of text. Sentence-level gist allows greater differentiation within the content-area co-taught class and increases the likelihood that students with intensive needs will be able to engage with complex texts that are aligned with grade-level content.



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ORCID iDs

Marney S. Pollack  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4058-762X>
Alexandra Shelton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3659-347X>

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