

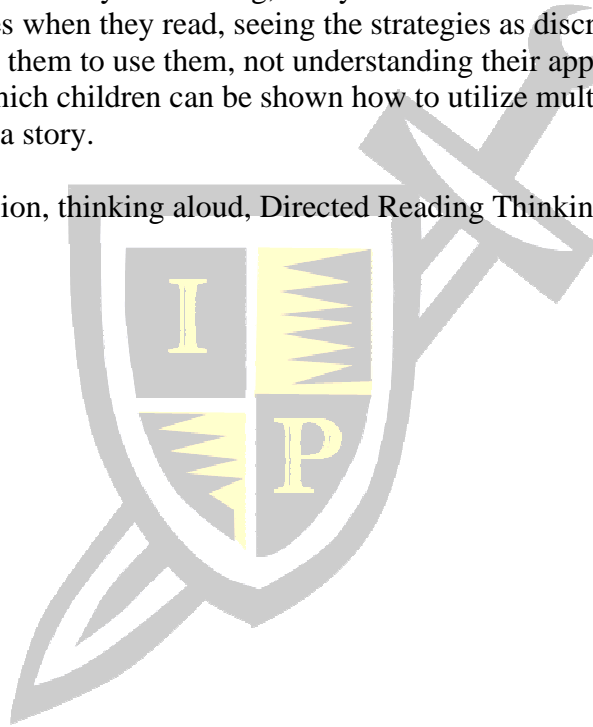
## Teaching children to apply comprehension strategies through interactive, progressive conversations

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of teaching children to read is not for them to learn a set of discrete decoding skills, it is to have the reader obtain meaning from the words on the printed page, to understand the message which the writer tried to convey when he wrote down the words. The goal is comprehension of the printed word. While children are taught multiple singular strategies to help them comprehend what they are reading, many children often falter in applying comprehension strategies when they read, seeing the strategies as discrete skills that are applied when the teacher directs them to use them, not understanding their applicability. This article will describe a method by which children can be shown how to utilize multiple comprehension strategies when reading a story.

Key words: comprehension, thinking aloud, Directed Reading Thinking Approach, DRTA



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Comprehension is the goal of learning to read. If comprehension doesn't occur, then children are merely decoders of words and not true readers (Keene & Zimmermann, 2013). While learning to decode may be a complex skill to learn, it is merely the vehicle through which we aim to unlock the meaning, the message the author attempted to convey when he wrote the words (Hoffman, 2011; Hollenbeck & Saturnus, 2013). Reading without understanding is not uncommon (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). When asked, students stated that they often read passages without processing the words, without understanding or remembering what they read because their minds were focused elsewhere. In fact, most readers will admit to occasionally reading to the end of a passage and realizing they don't remember what they have read (Barry, 2002; Harvey & Goudvis, 2013; Harvey & Goudvis, 2017).

## **RATIONALE FOR USE OF DIRECT READING THINKING APPROACH**

All teachers teach comprehension strategies. Comprehension is a required component of the Common Core Standards and comprehension strategies are included in all teacher's manuals. However, these strategies are usually taught as discrete skills and practiced on "isolated" materials (Fisher & Frey, 20087; Hollenbeck & Saturnus, 2013; Keene & Zimmermann, 2013). Since these strategies are taught in isolation as singular skills, students, especially poor readers, may learn how to work through the strategies, but may not understand when to apply them. The strategies become exercises which are taught and for which the teacher assigns practice, but their usability outside of the teacher-led exercise is not clearly understood (Keene & Zimmermann, 2013; Wasik & Hindman, 2014). The Direct Reading Thinking Approach (DRTA) is a viable strategy for teaching learners the applicability of numerous comprehension strategies and is beneficial for all learners, but particularly helpful for readers who have been introduced to these strategies but are still struggling with comprehension.

Children need help in making the connection between their lack of comprehension and their need to apply comprehension strategies. Teachers need to model the fact that the reader must think while reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013; Hoffman, 2011; Wade, 1990; Wasik & Hindman, 2014), articulating the questions students should ask themselves and showing them how to apply the different comprehension strategies as they read. DRTA is a process by which, once the individual comprehension strategies have been taught, the teacher models for the students how to apply them in a logical, efficient manner. The pivotal concept of the DRTA is not the initial teaching of the separate comprehension strategies, but the application of these strategies throughout the reading of a passage.

## **DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DRTA AND TA**

DRTA is different from the thinking aloud strategy (TA) in numerous ways. In a typical TA, students are asked to write down their questions and comments as they read a passage (Block & Israel, 2004; Dorl, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Harvey & Goudvis, 2013; Oster, 2001). DRTA capitalizes on the effective methods of thinking aloud while presenting guiding questions to demonstrate to children how to apply comprehension strategies (Falk-Ross, Grossi, Nordmeyer, Stanfield, Wallace, & Griffin, 2005; Hoffman, 2011; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2013). The teacher notes each child's answer and jots their initials next to their answers for

future reference. Students are asked to justify their answers either by making connections to previous readings, previous learnings or experiences, or with reference to specific portions of the text itself. If students do not readily respond or volunteer answers, the teacher volunteers an answer, articulating her reasoning and verifying the answer. As the reading of the passage progresses, the teacher revisits student responses, adjusting, eliminating, refining or adding to responses as students volunteer their thoughts. This process is most effective if the teacher divides the reading material into separate units beforehand, having all the students respond to the same paragraphs.

DRTA guides children in the application of the comprehension strategies of visualization, prediction, inference and utilizing prior knowledge during an interactive think aloud.

Visualization is a comprehension strategy in which readers are asked to create a picture in their mind related to what they are reading. These pictures are like movies based on their imagination and their background knowledge related to the subject. When predicting, readers use what they already know from their reading and experiences to determine what will happen next in the story. When making inferences, readers evaluate and/or draw conclusions from what they read utilizing what is actually stated, what is omitted, and what is implied. Readers are asked to activate and use their background knowledge to help them understand what they are reading (Acosta & Ferri, 2010; Ferris, 2014; Smith, 2006; Stahl, 2014; Texas Educational Agency, 2002).

## **USING THE DRTA**

A simple chart with six sections can be used as a visual aid to organize student answers, as shown in Chart 1 (Appendix). The sections of the chart include the following headings: Title, Title + Picture, Characters, Setting, Problem, and Solution. The chart covers the multiple components of a story. The teacher fills in the chart as different portions of the story are presented. A dialogue is generated in which questions are asked based on the different sections of the chart. The recommended sequence for the presentation of this chart follows.

Initially, without showing the cover of the book or any pictures involved in the story, share the title of the story. Ask the children, based solely on the title, if they might be able to guess, or to predict, who the characters in the story might be. All answers should be accepted and the child's name or initials should be written next to the predictions. If no one makes a prediction, the teacher should make a prediction, articulating aloud the reasons for the prediction. For example, if the class was reading Rylant's "Papa's Parrot," the teacher might say, "Since the title is 'Papa's Parrot,' I think one of the characters might be Papa since his name is in the title. And if there's a Papa, then there's probably a son or daughter." This suggestion should be written down and annotated and children should be encouraged to add to the prediction.

Next, the children should be asked to visualize the setting based solely on the title of the story. Again, all suggestions should be accepted and annotated. If necessary, the teacher might once again volunteer a suggestion articulating the reasons for the suggestion, such as, "Since there is a family with a pet, they probably live in a house." It might be too early in the discussion for the children to predict what the problem might be, but they should be asked anyway since in an exercise such as this, children are asked to be creative thinkers who substantiate their predictions based on their prior experiences. For example, if the class was reading Rylant's "Slower Than the Rest," a creative child might envision a race and someone is hurt or physically handicapped, or, in a story entitled "Major League Woes," a child might hypothesize a setting at a ballpark where a team is performing miserably this season.

Any pictures associated with the story (or the cover of a book) should then be displayed. Children should be encouraged to edit their suggestions for any and all of the categories based on this additional information. Children should also be asked why they are editing or adding to their suggestions, and, of course, the teacher may take the lead while the children are becoming more proficient. For example, the cover may show a pet store with a parrot and so the teacher might state, "Since the picture shows a pet store with a parrot, I'm going to add a pet store to the setting, not just a house." This would be added and annotated.

If a child has made a prediction which no longer "fits" the storyline, that child should be asked to join the discussion before his contribution is changed. For example, if the picture from "Slower Than the Rest" shows turtles and rabbits, the child who stated that this is a race with children should be asked if he wishes to add or edit his contribution in any way before it is changed.

Once the title and initial picture have been introduced, the reading of the story should commence, however, the story should be divided into manageable portions where only one or two significant elements are introduced in each section. In Papa's Parrot, the first few paragraphs introduce several elements of importance to the storyline, including the fact of a father-son relationship and the ownership of a candy and nut store. The teacher should read this portion with the students and ask if anyone wishes to add possibilities for the characters of the story, the setting, the problem in the story, making annotations as suggestions are made and editing any previous suggestions, requiring that the children provide evidence in the story for their suggestions. Pivotal questions would be: How can you justify that? What words in the text lead you to say/think/assume that? This is repeated with the reading of each section of the story, adding, editing, refining the categories in the chart until a full picture is obtained. The teacher would use the terms "predict," "visualize," "read between the lines" or "infer" to encourage the children to make suggestions for the chart. The teacher might ask, "Has anyone ever been in a situation like this and would predict for us what might happen based on their own prior knowledge of a similar situation?" The active use of these comprehension terms serves as a reminder of the comprehension skills previously taught and encourages the children to remember and apply.

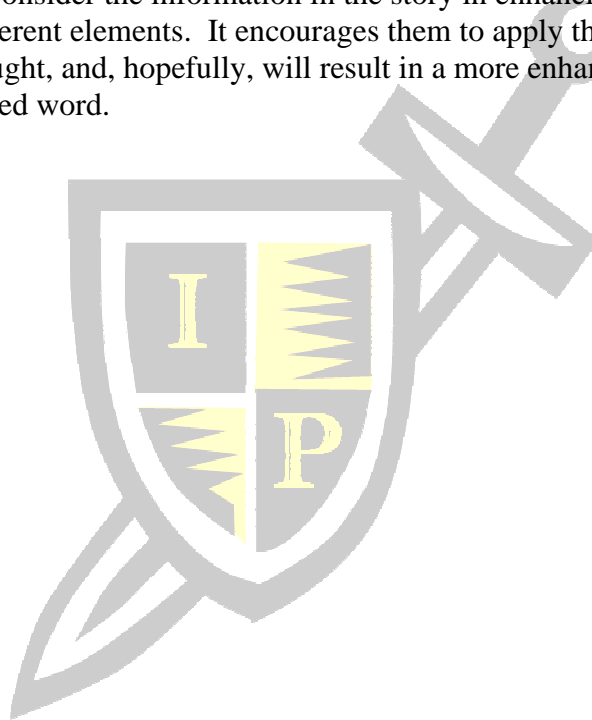
Some questions which might be asked for each section of the chart include the following. For the section "Title," appropriate questions would be: "What do you think the story is about? What makes you say that (WMYST)?" For the section "Title + Picture," questions could be: "Now that you see this picture, what do you think the story is about? WMYST? Does anyone want to edit their previous answers?" Related to the section "Characters," the teacher might ask: "Who do you think the people in the story, the characters, might be? WMYST?" For the section "Setting," one might ask: "Where do you think this story takes place? WMYST?" For the section entitled "Problem" appropriate comments and questions might be: "Every good story has a problem, a conflict. That's what makes it interesting. What do you think the problem in this story might be? WMYST?" Regarding the "Solution," questions one might ask are: "What do you think the solution to this problem might be? WMYST?"

When completed, a filled in DRTA chart might look like Chart 2 (Appendix). Each section contains what the students have suggested as answers to the different questions with their initials identifying their contribution. Some answers are edited or completely crossed out as new information is added to the comprehension of the storyline. In the end, what emerges is a summarization of the story based directly on the elements of the story. Summarization, in and of itself, is a valuable comprehension skill and is a natural outcome of the use of the DRTA.

## **BENEFITS OF THE DRTA**

The use of the DRTA highlights for children that their comprehension of a story emerges as they receive more information and that their understanding of the elements of the story might initially be incorrect, and that this is acceptable, but that they need to reevaluate their understanding as they read in order to obtain a clearer picture of what the author is attempting to convey. The DRTA chart can become a tool which could be used in groups or by individual children to work their way through their understanding, their comprehension of a story.

Comprehension is the goal of teaching children to read. Teachers spend many hours teaching children strategies to help them comprehend what they are reading, however, often these are understood to be discrete, separate skills to be used when directed by the teacher and students often fail to apply them during the actual reading of a story. The DRTA process encourages children to consider the information in the story in enhancing and refining their understanding of its different elements. It encourages them to apply the multiple comprehension skills they have been taught, and, hopefully, will result in a more enhanced understanding and appreciation of the printed word.



**APPENDIX**

Title
Title + Picture
Characters
Setting
Problem
Solution

Chart 1 Directed Reading Thinking Approach (DRTA) Chart

Title Papa's Parrot Papa, son, daughter T
Title + Picture Father, pet store mb
Characters Papa, son T Papa, <del>mama, daughter</del> , son rw Parrot mb
Setting <del>House</del> -T Zoo dj <del>Pet store</del> mb Candy store dj <del>Hospital</del> et
Problem The <del>papa</del> takes the children to the zoo but the kids get lost dj The family goes to a pet store to buy a bird and when they get the parrot home, he only likes <del>papa</del> . mb Harry used to spend time at the candy store with his Dad when he was little, but not when he got older. rw <del>Harry's friends didn't like spending time at the candy store.</del> mn Harry was embarrassed by his father. et Harry resented that his father spent more time talking to the bird than to him. hs Harry was sad that his father was in the hospital and <del>wanted</del> promised to help out. dj Harry didn't realize that his Papa missed him so much until he heard what the parrot kept saying. tm
Solution <del>Harry should get a pet of his own.</del> py <del>Mr. Tillian should get a helper for the candy store.</del> dj Harry should visit the store more often. rw Harry should spend more time with his papa. tm Harry goes to the hospital to spend more time with his dad. mb

Chart 2 Filled in DRTA Chart (Note: T=teacher; other notations are student initials)

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