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A Framework to Enhance Text Comprehension

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Abstract

Adult learners of English as a second language attend classes with various goals in mind with the most common being gainful employment. To obtain their goals, these learners must successfully acquire language and literacy in English. This can be a daunting task for English language learners as well as their teachers. Goal-oriented adult learners may be interested in learning to read in English and highly motivated to read; yet, they still require skillful and informed instruction. This literacy-based article addresses text comprehension, which is the culmination of all reading engagements. The article describes a threefold reading framework, which is accompanied by instructional principles and research-based strategies known to enhance text comprehension for English language learners.

Introduction

For adult learners of English as a second language, learning to read in English is a type of *passepourtout* or master key to open doors leading to the attainment of their various goals. The most common of these aspirations is gainful employment. Other goals include (a) involvement in their children's education, (b) acquisition of U. S. citizenship, (c) participation in community activities in English, and (d) pursuit of further education (Marshall, 2002). According to Comings, Parella, and Soricone (2000), adult English language learners with specified literacy goals are highly interested in reading and motivated to read. Teachers of English language learners have a unique opportunity to help these learners meet their literacy goals by providing skillful and research-based instruction in reading, particularly in the area of text

comprehension. With this in view, this article presents an instructional framework designed to enhance text comprehension. Additionally, each section of the framework includes specific guidelines for teachers and a research-based instructional strategy designed to promote text comprehension for adult English language learners.

Overview of the Reading Framework

The reading framework is a teaching structure consisting of three main components. The first is a preparation phase for teachers and students. The second involves student reading, and the third includes all that follows student reading. Typically, the three sections are referred to as pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading. These components function interdependently and flow one to another to complete a total reading

experience. To illustrate, if in the pre-reading phase a purpose for reading, such as answering three teacher-generated questions, is established, then during student reading, the learner seeks to answer the targeted questions, and in the post-reading phase, the purpose for reading is examined by the teacher and learners through discussing the answers to the targeted questions. Thus, the purpose established before reading is intentionally pursued during reading and examined and extended after reading.

Included in the three components of the framework are guidelines describing specific teacher behaviors and strategies with special considerations for English language learners. Kamil (2004) describes eight evidence-based, comprehension-improving strategies pinpointed in the National Reading Panel Report. These strategies include comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic organizers, story structure, question answering, question generating, summarization, and multiple strategies (NICHD, 2000). Most of these evidenced-based strategies are represented in the ones presented in the three segments of the instructional framework.

Also represented across the reading framework are three basic instructional principles relevant to teaching English language learners. These include (a) making reading material comprehensible; (b) teaching language and content simultaneously; and (c) providing learners with meaningful interactions with content, language, and other individuals (Jameson, 2003).

The first principle, making content comprehensible, relates to providing the necessary support for English language learners to comprehend content. For example, when information is process-oriented, teachers use a flow chart with pictures placed under the titles representing the key components on the chart. In addition to selecting and pre-teaching critical vocabulary and building unfamiliar background knowledge, instructional supports for English language learners include gestures, labels, pictures, realia, graphic organizers, hands-on activities, demonstrations, drama, and multimedia.

Regarding the second principle, teaching content and language simultaneously, Krashen and Biber (1998)

report that when the two are taught together, English language learners can acquire notable amounts of language and content. Teachers who follow this principle include both content and language objectives into their lesson plans.

The third principle, facilitating interactions with content, language, and other individuals, occurs when learners engage in meaningful activities in small groups or dyads. These interactions offer adult English language learners opportunities to hear academic language spoken by native speakers as well as to practice using English themselves. Overall, the reading framework with its components of pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading integrated with research-based strategies and instructional principles provides structure and instructional guidance for teachers and a complete reading experience that enhances text comprehension for adult English language learners.

Components of the Reading Framework

Pre-Reading

Pre-reading is a preparatory phase for teachers and students during which teachers prepare to teach and subsequently prepare students to learn. Overall, in this stage, teachers seek to (a) identify the unfamiliar, (b) make the unfamiliar comprehensible, (c) make connections with learners' existing background knowledge and their interests, and (d) set a purpose for reading.

The importance of this initial phase for adult English language learners cannot be overemphasized. Many of these students approach reading assignments with limited word knowledge and unfamiliarity with English language structures and subject matter content (August, 2003). An additional factor affecting text comprehension is learners' culturally-based schema or background knowledge (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003).

Teacher guidelines. In light of the aforementioned linguistic and cultural hindrances to text comprehension, the following guidelines for teachers are offered.

1. Select content based on (a) the learner's

instructional reading level, (b) student interest, (c) relevance to student lives, and (d) cultural sensitivity.

2. Analyze the text and select content-specific and core or high-frequency vocabulary. See the Nisbet article in this issue for more information on vocabulary selection and instruction.
3. Analyze the text for unfamiliar language structures and unfamiliar content including cultural factors.
4. Write content and language objectives.
5. Decide what specific background knowledge is essential to comprehend the new material and plan how to make connections with learners' existing background knowledge. If necessary, plan to build essential background knowledge in meaningful ways so that learners can better gain meaning from the text.
6. Plan how to explicitly teach selected vocabulary and language objectives.
7. Identify supports to help English language learners comprehend content and meet content objectives.
8. Develop a purpose for student reading based on the content objectives. Determine how the objectives are relevant to the lives of English language learners.

This last guideline (number 8) is particularly significant because adult English language learners need to understand what they are to learn and why the knowledge is important to them (Florez & Burt, 2001).

Instructional strategy. Most educators are familiar with the basic threefold K-W-L strategy (Ogle, 1986). In this strategy, *K* represents what students know or their existing background knowledge; *W* represents what students would like to know or their particular interest in the topic; and *L* represents what students have learned after reading. Student responses in K-W-L segments are usually written on a chart with a column representing each segment.

One of the main reasons for the K-W-L strategy's enduring effectiveness is its close alignment with the reading framework. The actions of the K and W are an essential part of pre-reading activities (connecting with,

activating, and building prior knowledge; connecting with student interests; setting a purpose for reading using student-generated questions). The W segment guides purpose-setting for during reading, and the L segment is a post-reading activity. Thus, the K-W-L strategy functions in concert with all components of the reading framework providing reading experiences that foster text comprehension. Although K-W-L is introduced in the pre-reading segment, it spans the reading framework, finding its completion in post-reading activities.

The various segments of the K-W-L strategy are reported to be helpful for adult English language learners. Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer (2010) recommend discovering what students know and want to know as well as connecting to and building on concepts from the learners' culture and experiences as much as possible. However, these same researchers also recommend use of visuals, graphics, pictures, and text structures to improve text comprehension. Thus, to fully address the needs of second language readers an extension to the classic K-W-L strategy is required. K-W-L-Plus (Carr & Ogle, 1987) is even more effective for enhancing comprehension for English language learners. The Plus segment meets the second set of researcher recommendations in that it encompasses a clarification activity, a graphic organizer with pictures if needed, and oral and written language rehearsal and reinforcement activities. The Plus section of the strategy also includes the comprehension skill, summarization.

Once teachers have routinely employed K-W-L-Plus in a whole group setting and learners become knowledgeable of the steps, K-W-L-Plus can be implemented in small groups, dyads, and even by individual students. Whatever the grouping for K-W-L-Plus, each student can quickly make three equal vertical folds in a sheet of notebook paper, placing *K* at the top of the first column, *W* at the top of the second column and *L* at the top of the third column. Students use the front of the paper to record the Know, Want to Know, and Learned information. The graphic organizer and the summary paragraph are developed on the reverse side of the paper. Student-developed K-W-L-Plus can be used as springboards for conversations or study sheets.

K-W-L-Plus

1. Prepare a three column chart.
2. Introduce the topic of the reading selection.
3. Record what students know about the topic.
4. Record what students would like to know about the topic, adding the content objectives if they are not included in the learner responses.
5. Record what students have learned after reading.
6. Provide a time for clarifying the learned information and fill in any gaps in information.
7. Develop a graphic organizer of the learned information. Select the graphic according to the original organization of the information. For example, if the information is descriptive teachers would use a web graphic.
8. Assign verbal and written small group or dyad interactions. Summarization of the learned material is appropriate at this juncture. Learners take the information from the graphic organizer and verbally form a summary. Next, learners write a summary of the learned information. For adults with limited literacy and/or limited English language proficiency, drawings or pictures can be added to the graphic organizer and a slot outline with a word bank can be provided for writing of the summary.

During Reading

In this second component of the reading framework, learners read assigned content either silently or orally with a partner or in a small group depending on the learner's reading level. Reading is an active process. Even during silent reading learners are self-monitoring and making necessary clarifications and adjustments to their understanding of text. The focus of this stage is to accomplish the purpose(s) established in the pre-reading stage.

Teacher guidelines. Teacher guidelines for the during reading stage of the reading framework are listed below.

1. Provide learners with a rationale for using the strategy and model the Think-Aloud Strategy (Davey, 1983). Model think-alouds until learners are able to demonstrate their use of the strategy as they read with partners or in small groups and, finally, when reading silently. As teachers model think-alouds they demonstrate how mature readers draw meaning from text by actively interacting with the text as they read. They reveal their own metacognitive processing and well as the reading strategies for extracting meaning from text.
2. Provide English language learners with a printed copy of the purpose for reading. For students of limited reading levels and/or English proficiency, supply a graphic for learners to complete while reading.
3. Monitor student reading and be available to answer questions and make clarifications as needed.

In contrast to native speakers, most English language learners are more metacognitively aware while reading (Garcia, Jimenez, & Pearson, 1998). This means that during the reading process they are monitoring for meaning and adjusting accordingly. Even with this awareness, these readers still require guidance on how to more intentionally and strategically monitor their own reading because metacognitive strategy instruction improves reading comprehension for English language learners (Muniz-Swicegood, 1994).

Instructional strategy. The purpose of think-alouds is to encourage learners to pause periodically during their reading to assess their understanding of the text and make any necessary adjustments. In the process they reveal the reading strategies that they employ to facilitate understanding. For example, if the readers find that their reading does not make sense, they can apply "fix-up" strategies such as rereading and reading ahead to gain meaning from the text. Some samples of questions used in think-alouds are listed below.

Sample Think-Aloud Questions

1. What is this going to be about?
 2. Do I know anything about it?
 3. Does this make sense?
 4. Does what I know relate to this context?
 5. Do I see the author's organizational plan?
 6. Where will the author go next?
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Post-Reading

Post reading is the third and final component of the reading framework. The major activities of this phase include (a) checking for meaning, especially regarding the purpose for reading established in the pre-reading stage along with evaluating the content objectives; (b) clarifying troublesome points; (c) summarizing critical information in verbal and written form; (d) making meaningful connections to student lives; and (e) extending learning to new situations. It should be noted that the last two segments of the K-W-L-Plus strategy are completed at this stage of the reading framework.

Teacher guidelines. Guidelines for the post-reading stage are listed below.

1. Teachers return to the questions posed in the *W column* of the K-W-L-Plus strategy. They fill in the *L column* as students share what they have learned. They make sure all questions from the purpose for reading and related to the content objectives are answered.
2. Teachers make any necessary clarifications and fill in any gaps in knowledge.
3. Teachers and students together take the completed content from the *L column* of the K-W-L-Plus and develop a graphic organizer representing all critical information.
4. Teachers facilitate summary writing. Students use the content from the graphic organizer for the summary. First, students talk through the summary before writing. (Review adjustments for English language learners found in the K-W-L-Plus strategy description).

5. Teachers facilitate small group or dyad interactions with the vocabulary pre-taught in the pre-reading phase of the reading framework.
6. Teachers initiate small group and dyad interactions to help students make relevant connections to their lives.
7. Teachers extend learning by engaging students in the Question and Answer Relationship Strategy (QAR). This ensures that students experience literal as well as inferential questions. The inferential questions foster higher-order thinking for English language learners.

Instructional strategy. Raphael and Au (2005) report that the QAR strategy enhances text comprehension. QAR has been researched and successfully implemented over a number of decades. Raphael and Au further indicate that QAR is especially appropriate for English language learners because the strategy's vocabulary provides students and teachers with a common language. QAR includes two research-based strategies: question generating and question answering. Both are vital for text comprehension. QAR acquaints learners with four types of questions. Two are literal, and two are inferential. Teachers think-aloud as they model identifying the four types of questions and locating the answers. Next, they ask students to think with them. Finally, students use QAR in small groups or dyads.

The four questions of the QAR strategy are described below.

Level One: Right There--In the Text! The question is literal and the answer is directly stated in the text using some of the words in the question.

Level Two: Think and Search--In the Text in Separate Places! The question is literal and the answer is still in the text, but it is not as directly stated. The student may need to find and link information in two separate places to answer the question.

Level Three: You and the Author--In your head and In the Text! This type of question is inferential and not directly answered in the text.

Students use their prior knowledge and the information in the text to arrive at an answer.

Level Four: On Your Own--In Your Head! This type of question is more evaluative. The answer comes from the students' existing knowledge. (Raphael, 1984)

Conclusion

Adult learners of English as a second language enter classes with various goals with the most common being profitable employment. To reach goal attainment, these learners must successfully acquire language and literacy in English. This can be quite challenging for English language learners as well as their teachers. Goal-oriented adult English language learners may be interested in reading and highly motivated to read; yet, they require skillful and informed instruction. This article addressed the area of literacy instruction with a focus on text comprehension, the culmination of all reading instruction. A threefold reading framework accompanied by instructional principles and enduring research-based strategies can be used to enhance comprehension for English language learners.

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