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Supporting Beginning Readers in Reading to Learn: A Comprehension Strategy

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Running head: SUPPORTING BEGINNING READERS IN *READING TO LEARN*: A
COMPREHENSION STRATEGY

Supporting beginning readers in *reading to learn*:

A comprehension strategy

Lori McKee & Gay Carr

Abstract: This teaching tip outlines a comprehension strategy designed to support early primary students in *reading to learn* while *learning to read*. The strategy is borne of our classroom practices and is designed to support young children in reading and understanding informational texts by facilitating close interactions between text and reader. Through the steps, Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect, the strategy supports beginning readers in recognizing and responding to the challenges that informational texts hold for reading and comprehending. The strategy is designed to be used flexibly to account for the diversity of readers and of texts within early primary classrooms, and encourages educators to consider students' prior learning, text selection, and multimodal supports when connecting beginning readers with informational texts.

Teaser Text: This teaching tip outlines a comprehension strategy to support early primary students in *reading to learn* while *learning to read*.

"How can we support our early and emergent readers to read and understand informational texts?" we asked one another following a staff meeting. Our school's administrators had just outlined a new school-wide goal to improve our students' reading comprehension of informational texts. As Grade One teachers, we believed that our students were capable of developing comprehension skills as they continued to acquire other early reading skills (Dooley & Matthew, 2009). To help our students read to learn while learning to read (e.g., Robb, 2002), we collaboratively created a comprehension strategy called "*Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect*".

We understand comprehension as an active process of constructing meaning whereby a young reader builds meaning (Dooley & Matthews, 2009) by interacting deeply with the text (McKeown, Beck & Blake, 2009). We recognize that young children construct meaning in ways

that may differ from older children and adults (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). We believe that

"learning to read and reading to learn should be happening simultaneously and continuously

from preschool through middle school—and perhaps beyond" (Robb, 2002, p. 24) and in

conjunction with instruction in other early literacy skills (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). We

connect our strategy to the research, and offer suggestions to guide its implementation in early

primary classrooms.

Pause and Ponder

- Compared with narrative texts, what different demands do informational texts place on
  beginning readers?
- Are informational texts available to my students in my classroom library?
- How frequently do I read aloud from informational texts to my students?

 [H1] What is the *Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect* Strategy?

The strategy is designed to support beginning readers in reading and understanding

informational texts by facilitating close interactions between readers and text (e.g., McKeown et

al., 2009) by mirroring the thinking processes that proficient readers may do automatically (e.g.,

Neufeld, 2005). The strategy is designed to be used flexibly and can be altered to respond to the

different demands particular informational texts present and the diversity of abilities and

practices of beginning readers. As a result, beginning readers may cycle through the strategy

several times in the reading of a text. We describe each of the five steps of the strategy in turn.

(See Table 1 for a summary of strategy steps).

Figure 1. Summary of the strategy
1. *Read:* The reader reads the text as well as text features and images.
2. *Stop:* The reader stops reading frequently to process unfamiliar terms and concepts.
3. *Think:* The reader thinks about structural elements, such as signal words, and how they support understanding. The reader is prompted to begin synthesizing information
4. *Ask:* The reader asks the author questions about the text to support comprehension.
5. *Connect:* The reader considers other information he or she may know about the subject matter andmakes connections to personal experiences, other texts, and/or world events.

[H2] Step One: Read

The first step in the strategy is designed to help beginning readers recognize and respond to the particular challenges informational texts present for reading and understanding. These challenges may differ from narrative texts as informational texts may present material through many sources of information including the text, illustrations, captions, diagrams and/or labels. The beginning reader must recognize that each text feature may represent information that is supplementary to the information discussed in sentence form (Stead, 2002). The first step of the strategy prompts beginning readers to read each source of information presented in the text by scanning images, reading labels, considering diagrams, and reading prose.

In the *Read* step of the strategy, beginning readers might say:

- Where is the information on this page or in this book?

- Have I looked at the pictures, labels, diagrams, etc?

[H2] Step Two: Stop

The second step of the strategy reminds beginning readers to stop frequently when reading informational texts. This is necessary because informational texts are often densely written and use content-specific vocabulary, which may be unfamiliar and difficult for children to understand (Klein, 2008). The frequency of stopping when reading informational texts may

depend on the difficulty of the text, the number/type of text features, and/or the student's

experience with using the strategy. The stop step of the strategy creates space for gradually

"connecting and integrating information" (McKeown et al., 2009, p. 28) through the *Think*, *Ask*

and *Connect* steps.

In the *Stop* step of the strategy, beginning readers may stop after reading a section of text

(e.g., a sentence, a short paragraph, or a set of pictures). Beginning readers may say:

- Do I think I understand the information?

- Do I need to re-read a section?

[H2] Step Three: Think

The third step of the strategy encourages beginning readers to think about what they have

read by recognizing how the text structure can support the meaning presented in the text. In

addition, this step provides opportunities for the beginning reader to summarize information

from a variety of sources. As beginning readers think about what they have read, they may

identify structural elements such as key words or formatting that signal the organization of the

piece so that they can use this information to support comprehension (e.g., the words "first" and

"next" within procedural texts may help readers identify the text is communicating information

about a sequence, and text written in a list may help the reader identify a descriptive structure)

(Dymock & Nicholson, 2010). To further support comprehension, the think step prompts readers

to summarize and synthesize information presented in print and text features, as well as identify

questions they have about the information presented (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010).

In the *Think* step of the strategy, beginning readers might ask:

- Did the author give me any clues in the ways s/he organized the text?

- What do the words in the text mean?

- How does this match the information from the pictures and other text features?

[H2] Step Four: Ask

The fourth step of the strategy invites beginning readers into a dialogue with the author. In this step, students vocalize questions about the content of the text (e.g., Wilhelm, 2007). When we invited the beginning readers to ask questions about the text in our classes, our young students started to talk with the author as though s/he were present and referred to the author by name when asking questions. The process of asking questions about the text invites beginning readers to engage deeply with the text to construct meaning (e.g., Dymock & Nicholson, 2010).

In the *Ask* step of the strategy, beginning readers might ask:

- What is the author trying to tell me?

- Why would the author want me to know that?

- Why did the author show me the information this way?

[H2] Step Five: Connect

The fifth stage of the strategy encourages beginning readers to connect what they have read to their prior knowledge (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010) by making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. These connections help readers use what is known to help comprehend new information (Neufeld, 2005).

In the *Connect* step of the strategy, beginning readers may ask:

- What does this information remind me of?

- Have I seen something like this before?

- Do I know any other information about this topic?

[H1] Introducing the Strategy to Beginning Readers

We found that a highly scaffolded Read Aloud/Think Aloud process (e.g., Ness &

Kenny, 2016) was very helpful when we introduced the strategy to our Grade One classes. We

modeled the use of the strategy repeatedly using very simple informational texts, and then guided

students through other simple informational texts. After several weeks of modeling and guided

practice, our young students started to use the strategy on their own when reading independently.

In Table 2, we show what a Read Aloud/Think Aloud process might sound like through each

step of the strategy when a teacher introduces the strategy to beginning readers.

Table 2. A Sample of Scaffolding the Strategy Through Read-Aloud/ Think-Aloud
Read: "I see there are a few pictures on this page. I am going to cover part of this page so I can really concentrate on the information in the pictures. What information do I see in each of the pictures? Oh, some pictures have the same information, but I see some more details in some of the pictures."
Stop: "There was a lot of information in those pictures. I am going to stop to make sure I remember and understand all of that information."
Think: "I wonder if I can remember all that information in the pictures. Hmm. I saw a really big picture and some smaller pictures. Am I forgetting anything? Oh, yes, I saw some labels, too."
Ask: "I noticed that not all of the pictures seemed to be about exactly the same thing. I wonder, why is this picture bigger than the others? Is it trying to tell me something?…Why would the author want me to know that?"
Connect: "These illustrations make me think of [subject content]. It reminds me of a book we have in our classroom reading bins." Stop to show the book. "But I think this book has some different information."

[H2] Further Considerations

As stated previously, the strategy is designed to be used flexibly, and can be adapted to

meet the needs of beginning readers with particular abilities in diverse settings. Before

introducing the strategy to a particular group of beginning readers, we encourage educators to

consider:

- Students' prior learning

- Text selection

- Multimodal support

[H3] Prior Learning

We encourage educators to consider the prior learning of their students. The strategy

invites beginning readers to make connections to the texts they read. To use the strategy

effectively, young readers need to understand how to make connections when reading. When we

introduced the strategy in our classes, most students were successful with making text-to-self

connections, some could make text-to-text connections, and a few could make text-to-world

connections. In addition, the strategy asks students to consider how text structures can support

the author's intended meaning. In our classes, we introduced students to procedural texts with

signal words (e.g., first, next) within a guided reading context prior to learning the strategy. We

used our understandings of students' prior knowledge as the starting point of instruction and

continued to support students in extending their abilities in these areas.

[H3] Text Selection

We encourage educators to select carefully the informational text they use when

modeling the use of the strategy. In our classes, we selected a simple text that:

- had simple sentences

- had multiple text features

- was written about a topic that was interesting to our students.

When we introduced the strategy to our students, we only read through one page of a text. We

wanted to emphasize to the children that we were encouraging a deep reading of the text rather

than reading a large quantity of pages. We used an informational text from our school library, but

the strategy can be used with simple, leveled informational texts, trade books and websites.

Some sample informational texts that may be useful for beginning readers include:

- *Books:*
    - Kinsley Troupe, T. (2014). *Glowing with electricity: Science adventures with Glenda the origami firefly*. Minneapolis, MN: Picture Window Books.
    - Meachan Rau, D. (2006). *Hot and bright: A book about the sun*. Minneapolis, MN: Picture Window Books.
- *Websites:*
    - Pebble Go. https://www.pebblego.com/login/index.html
    - National Geographic for Kids http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/

[H3] Multimodal Support

We encourage educators to consider how they might further support their beginning

readers through multimodal resources. In our classrooms, we found it useful to make a very

simple poster (see Figure 1). We further supported our students' use of the strategy by asking

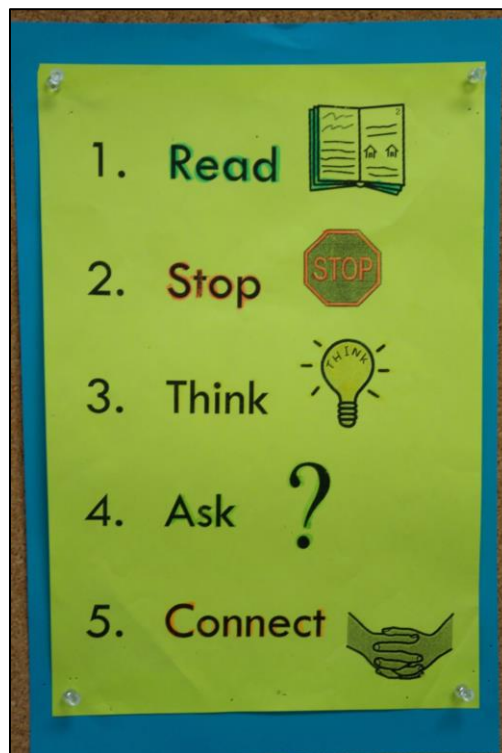students to create gestures to help them remember each step of the strategy. (See Table 3).

Figure 1. Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect Strategy Classroom Poster

Table 3. Gestures to Support the Meaning of the Strategy Steps
Read: Hands open like a book.
Stop: Hold hand up like a stop sign.
Think: Point to the head.
Ask: Make a question mark in the air.
Connect: Link both hands

We also encourage educators to consider how students might use a graphic organizer to support the comprehension process. We found it helpful to provide opportunities for our students to draw and/or write their understandings of the informational text read on a graphic organizer. To support our students, we selected graphic organizers (T-charts, Venn diagrams, etc) according to the demands of the particular informational text read.

[H1] Summary

"*Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect*" is a strategy designed to support beginning readers in reading and understanding informational texts. In our practice, we found the strategy very useful in helping our beginning readers navigate the complexities of informational text and guiding them toward a deep construction of meaning. We invite other educators of beginning readers to use this comprehension strategy as a way that "can help children learn to read at the same time they read to learn" (Moss, 1995, p. 50).

Take Action!

1. Evaluate the children's prior learning and experience with informational text forms.

2. Select a simple informational text with a variety of text features.

3. Model, and re-model the use of the strategy through a Read Aloud/Think Aloud.

4. Support students with multimodal supports (poster, gesture).

5. Gradually guide the students toward independent practice.

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