

# What Does It Take to Create Skilled Readers? Facilitating the Transfer and Application of Literacy Strategies

Significant attention has been paid to reading strategies of late, especially the strategies used by good readers (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

Through modeling and guiding, middle school teachers are facilitating their students' increasing proficiency as readers. In this article, we will examine a classroom structure that facilitates students' independent use of strategies.

We will also share the work of a group of middle school teachers who are working to ensure that students have multiple opportunities to make connections with texts and to become skilled readers who use strategies automatically. But first, we will note some cautions about this increased attention to strategies.

## Warning: Curricularizing Strategies

Strategies permeate the reading world. We have instructional strategies for helping students read—at least 50 of them (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007). We also have comprehension strategies for readers—"the super six" for example: building background and making connections, predicting and inferring, questioning, monitoring, summarizing, and evaluating (Oczkus, 2004). The strategies come from research on the behaviors of good readers—in other words, what readers do naturally when they encounter texts. Our concern is that these strategies are becoming "curricularized." By this, we mean that the strategies—rather than the text—are becoming the center of instruction.

One publisher even markets this curricularization by noting that the program teaches "one strategy at a time." We can't find any evidence for the effectiveness of teaching one strategy at a time, especially with pieces of text that require readers to use a variety of strategies to successfully negotiate meaning.

This was highlighted in a recent classroom visit. We entered a sixth-grade classroom. On every wall, there were posters about making predictions: how to predict, what to predict, when to predict, what to record about your predictions, why predict, and so on. Some of these posters were classroom-created, while others were publisher-produced. We sat next to Tim, a sixth-grader who was reading *Stone Fox* (Gardiner, 1980). We asked Tim what he was doing, and predictably he answered, "predicting." Having read *Stone Fox*, we asked him what he was predicting, expecting a discussion about the dog dying and the family losing the farm. To our surprise, Tim rolled his eyes and said, "Look around, what *aren't* we predicting?" It seems very unlikely that Tim will incorporate predicting as a habit based on the five weeks his class spent on it. We would argue that Tim has developed a significant dislike of predicting and will do just about anything not to predict. Obviously, this runs counter to the goal of the instruction, which is to increase Tim's use of making predictions when they are needed.

One goal of strategy instruction should be *consolidation*, so that the reader can activate the right strategy at the right time. Consider your own experiences with reading a plot-driven book like *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2003). We'll venture a guess that you didn't make predictions to the exclusion of everything else. It's likely that you evaluated

(“Hmm, not a lot of character development here”), made connections (“I’ve seen these paintings before”), and so on. In addition, you didn’t make predictions at the beginning of the text and then never return to them. Each time a new clue appeared, you revised your predictions. How did you know how and when to do that? Because you were able to consolidate those strategies and activate them when you needed them. A very real danger of curricularized strategy instruction is that they fossilize to the point that readers hold narrow and rigid understandings of how and when they are used.

A second concern related to the increased concentration on strategy instruction is defining the goal that teachers have for this type of instruction. We believe that the goal should be for students to use these strategies with automaticity, applying them authentically as they read. Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (in press) argue that, over time and with purposeful instruction, strategies can become skills and that developing skilled readers should be the goal of instruction. As they note, “Readers are motivated to be skillful because skill affords high levels of performance with little effort whereas strategic readers are motivated to demonstrate control over reading processes with both ability and effort” (p. xx). A look inside another middle school classroom, this time an eighth-grade classroom, will highlight this concern.

Alexandria was sitting at her desk staring at a piece of paper when we entered the room. She had read a passage from the book *Hattie Big Sky* (Larson, 2006), a book she chose to read. Alexandria was required to document the strategy she used to understand the text on a worksheet. The form was blank, so we asked her, “Any surprises so far?” Alexandria excitedly answered, “YES! I’ve been stuck on a word in the book—*honyocker*. The word doesn’t matter that much, I guess, ’cause I can read the whole thing without knowing what the word really means. But I wanted to know, so I looked on the Internet at home. Here’s what I learned: In German, it’s from a word meaning hen

hunter. In Czech, it kinda means a shaggy fellow. In Hungarian, it comes from a word meaning negligent, careless, sloppy, or forgetful. A long time ago, ranchers in Montana didn’t like the homesteaders, and they called them Honyockers, a mean cowboy slang word. In North Dakota, it means a backward, old-fashioned type of rural person. I feel better now,” she said with a grin.

Impressed, we asked Alexandria, known to be a collector of words and a bit of a trivia hound, what the problem was with her completing her work. She showed us the worksheet, which required that she identify one of the “big six” comprehension strategies, and she said, “I’m not sure what I did. I read the whole thing, really. I understand it all, but I wanted to learn more about the word *honyocker*. I’m not sure which box to check and what to write. Can you help?”

Again, we were struck with the unintended consequences of the concentration on strategies. Forcing students to independently identify which strategy they use and explain it is not likely to ensure that students develop as skilled readers. Was it monitoring? Sure, she knew herself well as a reader and knew she wanted to mine a specific word. Was it evaluating? Yes, she looked at several websites before settling on one that gave her definitions she found useful. Alexandria had moved into the realm of a skilled reader. Forcing her to deconstruct what was becoming an elegantly automatic process for her was counterproductive.

Our experience suggests that a classroom structured on a gradual release of responsibility model will ensure that students develop reading habits and automaticity. This model moves readers across the divide from strategies to skills as they assume more of the cognitive load for applying the strategies.

**A very real danger of curricularized strategy instruction is that they fossilize to the point that readers hold narrow and rigid understandings of how and when they are used.**

## A Classroom Structure That Works

Consistent with the apprentice/expert depiction as well as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, the gradual release of responsibility model acknowledges the role of the teacher in guiding students to independent practice or application (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Our work on the gradual release of responsibility model centers around four instructional routines. Importantly, the structure is not linear but rather is recursive, meaning that each of the routines is used flexibly in the classroom. Let's briefly consider each of the four routines before taking a closer look at the importance of teacher modeling.

### Focus Lessons

Typically delivered to the whole class, focus lessons are usually 15 minutes or less in length. The focus lesson contains two parts. First, the teacher establishes purpose. Establishing purpose has been shown to be a critical component of instruction, especially for English language learners who often are unsure which parts of the class to pay attention to (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Purpose can be established in a number of domains, such as content, language, and

social. For example, one teacher might suggest a focus on "using literary devices to understand themes from literature" while another might focus on "specific words authors use to make their case or to persuade the reader." The content purpose should align with standards but not simply be the standards read aloud. Typically, the daily purpose is a step toward mastery of the standards. The middle school teachers who consistently ensure that their students reach high levels of proficiency establish a content and language goal daily.

The second component of the focus lesson,

modeling thinking, is critical for students as they are provided with examples of the use of strategies that they can incorporate on their own. This type of modeling will be explained in greater detail below.

### Guided Instruction

The second routine, guided instruction, involves the teacher guiding students through tasks. This is typically accomplished with small, purposefully selected groups of students. These groups are created based on formative assessment information, and thus are changed regularly. In meeting with small groups of students, the teacher can provide additional prompts, cues, or questions to get the students to do the thinking. The key to effective guided instruction is the link between the small-group instruction and the focus lesson. For example, if the purpose was to identify words that persuaded a reader, students might be asked to write a persuasive paragraph. These paragraphs may then be used as fodder for a guided instruction session in which the teacher asks questions of students about the persuasive nature of the selections (theirs or others'). In addition, the teacher must remember that the guided instruction should transfer more responsibility for thinking to the students.

### Collaborative Learning

When students work together in small groups in the absence of the teacher, they consolidate their thinking. These collaborative learning groups occur while the teacher is working with needs-based groups in guided instruction. Again, the tasks of the collaborative learning group must be aligned with the focus lesson and allow students, with their peers, to apply what they are learning. In this way, students talk with one another about the strategies they use as they read and can assist one another in making decisions about what to do when stuck. For the example on persuasive writing, students might read selections in pairs or triads and discuss the ways in which the author used words to attempt to persuade readers.

**The middle school teachers  
who consistently ensure  
that their students reach  
high levels of proficiency  
establish a content and  
language goal daily.**

As middle school teachers, we know that students can explain their metacognitive strategies to peers, even when they cannot do so for the teacher. Social learning theory tells us that humans learn from the interactions they have with others. As Bandura (1977) noted, “Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do” (p. 22). Through peer support, students assume greater responsibility for their own use of comprehension strategies and receive feedback about their strategic use from others. In this way, the strategies begin to become skills and not simply something that the teacher talks about.

### Independent Learning

The final routine is independent learning—the goal of schooling. Unfortunately, too many middle school students are assigned independent learning tasks for which they have not yet received adequate instruction to be successful. The gradual release of responsibility model requires that learners have multiple opportunities to engage with facts, concepts, and literacy strategies before they’re expected to use them on their own. In fact, we would go so far as to say that without this level of instructional support, students will experience a “failure to launch.” Instead of ensuring that students become skilled readers who apply strategies automatically and unconsciously, and who can slow down and purposefully apply strategies to difficult texts, we will create readers who have a definitional knowledge of reading strategies but fail to use them in real time and with real texts.

Understanding the gradual release of responsibility model requires a firm understanding of the focus lesson, as this is the pivotal point from which students witness a skilled reader at work. In the next section, we will explore modeling as a critical component for students’ progress toward making connections between texts and their reading habits. In the final section, we will peer inside another middle school classroom in which students are assuming increased responsibility.

## Modeling: Good First Teaching

As we have noted, modeling is critical to students’ learning. Students deserve to have models that they can approximate as they attempt to become skilled readers (Duffy, 2003). Students do not deserve to be interrogated, especially in front of the whole class, about the strategies that they don’t yet employ or employ well. Unfortunately, it is the latter that is far too common in the classroom.

It’s not hard to imagine a teacher reading aloud from a text displayed via an overhead projector, right? It’s also not hard to imagine that teacher pausing to ask students a series of questions based on the reading: “What’s your prediction?” or “What questions would you ask?” or “How would you summarize this section thus far?”

The more successful teachers do not interrogate students, but rather model their own thinking about the text. Remember that this modeling occurs as part of the focus lesson after the purpose has been clearly established. Of course, the modeling is only part of the instructional routine; following the modeling provided by the teacher, there are opportunities (in a classroom operating on a gradual release of responsibility model) for students to receive additional instruction, be prompted, ask questions of peers, and apply learning to new texts. The highly effective middle school teachers we’ve observed model their own thinking across four categories: comprehension, vocabulary, text structures, and text features. Let’s explore each of these in greater detail.

### Comprehension

The most common modeling teachers do focuses on the comprehension strategies that good readers use to make meaning. Of course, they model comprehension strategies based on the clues from

**The gradual release of responsibility model requires that learners have multiple opportunities to engage with facts, concepts, and literacy strategies before they’re expected to use them on their own.**

the text rather than spending X number of weeks on a specific strategy. The most common comprehension strategies we have observed middle school teachers model include: inferencing, summarizing, predicting, clarifying, questioning, visualizing, monitoring, synthesizing, evaluating, and connecting. Again, these are not a curriculum, but rather a set of strategies that students need to understand texts. Our goal should be to provide students with enough modeling and practice that they use these comprehension strategies automatically and unconsciously.

### Vocabulary

The second most common component that teachers model focuses on vocabulary. It is important

**Our goal should be to provide students with enough modeling and practice that they use these comprehension strategies automatically and unconsciously.**

to note that effective teachers don't ask students the meanings of specific words or simply tell students what difficult words mean. Instead, they model word-solving strategies with the hope that these strategies become skills that students

use automatically. Within vocabulary modeling, the middle school teachers we observe consistently do three things. First, they model the use of context clues to figure out words. Second, they use word parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots, bases, and cognates) to determine word meanings. And third, when the first two fail to help, they use resources such as other people, the Internet, and dictionaries. Again, the goal is to model behaviors that students can incorporate into their habits as readers.

### Text Structures

A third component that teachers model involves text structures. As part of their modeling discussions, teachers focus on the informational text structures that writers use such as cause/effect, problem/solution, description, sequence, and so on. They note the signal words that guide them to an understanding of the specific text structure as well as how they might use the knowledge of

text structure to help them understand the text. For example, if the text were written using a problem/solution structure, the teacher might explain that she expected the author would offer a solution when she recognized the introduction of a problem. Be sure to remind students that text structures are not limited to informational texts; narrative texts have a predictable structure as well, including plot, setting, characters, dialogue, literary devices, and the like.

### Text Features

The final component that teachers use for modeling is text features. We've heard a number of middle school teachers explain text features as follows: these are the things that the author or editors add to help us understand the words. Text features include: headings, captions, illustrations, charts, tables, graphs, boldfaced words, table of contents, glossary, index, and margin notes. The key to modeling the text features is to note how they aid in comprehension. Students especially appreciate modeling when to use the text features—before, during, or after the reading.

### Strategies at Work, Not Just That Work

In 1995, *Discover Magazine* published an interesting account of a railroad worker who survived a significant brain injury. There is also a book focused on this person's life written for young adults called *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science* (Fleishman, 2002). The opening paragraph of the text reads as follows:

Attend the tale of Phineas Gage. Honest, well-liked by friends and fellow workers on the Rutland and Burlington Railroad, Gage was a young man of exemplary character and promise until one day in September 1848. While tamping down the blasting powder for a dynamite charge, Gage inadvertently sparked an explosion. The inch-thick tamping rod rocketed through his cheek, obliterating his left eye on its way through his brain and out the top of his skull. The rod landed several yards away, and Gage fell back in a convulsive heap. Yet a moment later he stood up and spoke; his fellow workers watched, aghast, then drove him by oxcart to a hotel, where a local doctor, one

John Harlow, dressed his wounds. As Harlow stuck his index fingers into the holes in Gage's face and head until their tips met, the young man inquired when he would be able to return to work.

Consider for a minute the skills you used to understand this paragraph. There were a number of them, right? You had to decode the words, read them quickly enough to make meaning, mobilize your background knowledge and vocabulary understanding, and apply comprehension strategies. Of course, as a good reader, you did these things automatically.

Now ask yourself a different question: If you were to use this passage with your students, which components would you model? The text allows for modeling of any of the four components we discussed earlier: comprehension, vocabulary, text structure, or text features (there's an illustration of the injury in the original text). Your choice of what to model will be based on the content and language standards you're focused on at the time, the needs of your students as noted in formative assessments, and your knowledge of students' current skills. Again, there isn't one right comprehension strategy to model for this text. Like most texts, it offers a range of possibilities.

In one classroom, we observed a teacher focus on visualizing for this first paragraph. She explained the mental images she had of the world in 1848, the type of transportation offered, and the sophistication of the medical profession. In another classroom, we observed a teacher model word solving by using context clues and word parts to figure out some of the unfamiliar words, such as *tamping*, *obliterating*, *convulsive*, and *agbust*. In still another classroom, we observed a teacher discussing the text structure clues that he was using to make a prediction about what the author would explain next.

In all three cases, students were provided a mental model that they could use later—in guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent work. In all three cases, their teachers understood that explaining reading was critical to the developing of skilled readers who could apply literacy strategies in authentic situations. And in all

three cases, these teachers knew that explaining or modeling had to be connected with other classroom tasks so that students would use what they learned in personal contexts. These teachers understood that skilled readers are able to consolidate strategies and activate them at appropriate times. They also understood that the modeling phase of instruction presented an ideal time to demonstrate how a skilled reader could apply several comprehension strategies simultaneously in order to make meaning. This modeling encourages students to transfer their learning of strategies to an increasingly consolidated practice. Furthermore, the gradual release of responsibility framework promotes application to new texts, resulting over time in skilled readers who activate strategies automatically. Through this approach, Tim and Alexandria don't have to expend their energy trying to figure out what the teacher wants—they can get down to the business of comprehending.

**These teachers knew that explaining or modeling had to be connected with other classroom tasks so that students would use what they learned in personal contexts.**

## References

- Afflerbach, P., Pearson, P. D., & Paris, S. (in press). Clarifying differences between reading skills and reading strategies. *The Reading Teacher*.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Brown, D. (2003). *The Da Vinci code*. New York: Doubleday.
- Duffy, G. G. (2003). *Explaining reading: A resource for teaching concepts, skills, and strategies*. New York: Guilford.
- Fisher, D., Brozo, W. G., Frey, N., & Ivey, G. (2007). *50 content area strategies for adolescent literacy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2007). *Scaffolded writing instruction: Teaching with a gradual-release framework*. New York: Scholastic.
- Fleishman, J. (2002). *Phineas Gage: A gruesome but true story about brain science*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- Gardiner, J. R. (1980). *Stone fox*. New York: HarperTrophy.
- Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2007). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension for understanding and engagement* (2nd ed.). York, ME: Stenhouse.
- Hill, J., & Flynn, K. (2006). *Classroom instruction that works with English language learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Larson, K. (2006). *Hattie big sky*. New York: Delacorte.
- Oczkus, L. (2004). *Super six reading strategies: 35 lessons and more for reading success*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.
- Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, G. (1983). The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, 112–123.

**Douglas Fisher** is professor of Language and Literacy Education at San Diego State University.  
**Nancy Frey** is associate professor of Language and Literacy Education at San Diego State University.

---

## Learning Beyond the Classroom from ReadWriteThink

Are you looking for resources you can recommend to families, caregivers, and tutors to maintain and reinforce over the summer the gains your students have made this year? ReadWriteThink is proud to announce the relaunch of Learning Beyond the Classroom, a special area of the ReadWriteThink site. There you will find a collection of summer literacy activities for children and teens. Included are printable tip sheets for using some of ReadWriteThink's many online tools and much more! Visit <http://www.readwritethink.org/beyondtheclassroom/summer/> and share these resources with the many adults who work with children and teens over the summer!

---