

Floating on a Sea of Talk: Reading Comprehension Through Speaking and Listening

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Reading “floats on a sea of talk” (Britton, 1970, p. 164). Learning depends on the use of language knowledge for the purpose of acquiring more language, concepts, and information (Merritt & Culatta, 1998). Recent research shows that students’ oral language proficiency plays a crucial role in the acquisition of reading fluency and comprehension (Nation & Snowling, 2004; Pullen & Justice, 2003). Research with students between the ages of 6 and 14 shows that scaffolded classroom talk assists students to deepen their understanding of texts (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2004). In addition, spoken language is an area of competence in its own right, to be fostered alongside other aspects of the language curriculum (Stierer & Maybin, 1994).

As a former classroom teacher, and trainer of preservice and inservice teachers of literacy, I share my top six speaking and listening strategies in this article. They have been consistently favored by both teachers and students, and they are supported by current research. Research with students in the lower and middle elementary grades showed that learners benefited from instruction in metacognitive strategies, assisting them to become effective learners early in their schooling (Anstey & Bull, 2004). Metacognition—awareness and control of one’s thinking processes—is not solely developmental, and it can be enhanced through training (Alvermann, Swafford, & Montero, 2004; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). Proficient readers consistently use the following repertoire of strategies: (1) activate prior knowledge, (2) make inferences, (3) use knowledge of text structures, (4) visualize, (5) generate and answer questions, and (6) retell and summarize. Speaking and listening activities that apply these strategies are matched to the phases of instruction—before, during, and after reading.

Teaching tips are provided for applying these strategies in the context of speaking and listening. Rather than simply reducing these to “time fillers,” students need to be taught *how*, *when*, and *why* to apply the strategies using a wide range of conventional and digital everyday texts (Anstey & Bull, 2004). Note that although metacognitive strategies have conventionally been taught in the context of reading print, there is an increasing need to incorporate multimodal texts in reading programs, such as websites, podcasts, and billboard advertisements. These texts combine two or more modes—print, visual, spatial, audio, and gestural (Mills, 2009; New London Group, 2000).

Activate Prior Knowledge

Students’ reading comprehension ability often has more to do with their relevant prior experiences and knowledge of the topic, genre, or vocabulary than their cognitive ability. For example, students with varied social and cultural backgrounds will have differing schemata or conceptual structures upon which to relate new knowledge from texts. One of the most effective ways to improve comprehension is to activate and support students’ mental files or prior knowledge before reading (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). A stimulating repertoire of “before reading” speaking and listening activities can help students draw upon relevant cultural and language resources to make meaning and improve all levels of comprehension, from recall to inferential and critical thinking (Anstey & Freebody, 1987).

Telling Tales is a prereading speaking activity in which students make predictions about the events in a recount or narrative by drawing inferences from the visual elements. The teacher should model the strategy first. Using a large, illustrated text, make predictions about the content from the images while

& Paivio, 2001). The strategy of visualizing uses the mind's capacity to imagine what is being communicated by the words, images, gestures, spatial layout, and sounds within a text. Mental imagery anchors new ideas in a reader's mind by linking abstract propositions to a concrete experience—image, feeling, sound, smell, or taste. Students need to be taught to recall ideas in a visual way in appropriate reading contexts (Pressley, 2001).

Three-Step Freeze Frames is a visualizing activity that can be conducted during and after reading. Groups of students create a series of three frozen action shots to depict events in a text using dramatic movement (no words). The teacher assists a group of students to model example freeze frames for the class. For example, after reading Aesop's fable, "The Hare and Tortoise," one student uses expressive postures and facial expressions to reenact the Hare running, falling asleep, and waking. At the same time, a second student could play the Tortoise who plods consistently three times. Other students in the group might be animals cheering as the Tortoise crosses the finish line. The students should use a range of heights—low, medium, and high—to create interest and should remember to face the audience when performing. Divide the class members into groups to plan, rehearse, and present their freeze frames. When presenting each performance, the teacher and class signal for the group to change postures by clapping. Class members offer an interpretation of each freeze frame, and the performing group clarifies the depicted events.

Generate and Answer Questions

Rather than answer the teacher's questions, this metacognitive strategy refers to the students' ability to generate and answer their own questions about a text (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Research with students in grades 3 to 5 demonstrates that elaborative questioning improves comprehension of texts during instructional and independent reading contexts (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). For example, highly effective readers ask questions such as "What is the most important information here for my purpose?" "What have I missed?" and "What is my opinion of this issue?"

A speaking activity that encourages students to generate and answer questions is Interview a

Character. During or after reading a story or autobiography, students work in pairs to prepare and record a radio interview between an interviewer and the main character using an interview script outline. For example, older students might pretend to interview Barack Obama, asking questions that relate to the content of his autobiography. The teacher can explain that questions have different depths, contrasting questions that require information recall with those that require drawing inferences. The students can perform the interviews in role to a live audience or digitally record the interview using a computer, microphone, and a simple sound recording program (e.g., Microsoft Sound Recorder, Audacity).

Retell and Summarize

Students need to be taught the important comprehension skills of retelling and summarizing information. Retelling is not simply recalling a list of events. Rather, it involves selecting the most important information, making personal connections, and representing the information in a logical sequence (Trehearne, 2006). Summarizing requires selectivity to differentiate between salient and unimportant ideas (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991).

PARIS is a speaking activity that I use to combine five essential self-monitoring comprehension strategies: Predict, Ask questions, Retell, Infer, and Summarize. Before reading or viewing a text, students use the first two strategies—predict and ask questions—using the cover, author's name, illustrations, headings, and other textual features. During or after reading and viewing, students apply the last three strategies—retell the events, draw inferences from the information, and summarize the text in 66 words or fewer. The teacher models each strategy using a text that is read aloud or viewed by the class (see Table 1 for example questions and responses).

Provide small groups with a sheet listing these key strategies to record their shared verbal responses. Encourage the students to apply this strategy independently to self-monitor their comprehension.

Setting Sail: Benefits for Reading Comprehension

Teachers need to rediscover the transforming potential of talk for developing students' reading

Table 1
PARIS Examples

Strategy	Example question and answer
Predict	Q: What do you think this text is about when you look at the cover? A: "I think that the article is about a ferocious marsupial."
Ask questions	Q: What questions do you have when you look at the pictures? A: "Why does the Tasmanian Devil have sharp teeth?"
Retell	Q: What were the most important events (fiction) or information presented (nonfiction) in the text? A: "It describes the appearance, habitat, breeding, and diet of the Tasmanian Devil."
Infer	Q: What can you infer from the information that is not directly stated in the text? A: "Tasmanian Devils are nocturnal because the text states that they are awake during the night."
Summarize	Q: What was the main point of the text? A: "The article gives information about an endangered native marsupial, the Tasmanian Devil."

comprehension. All of the speaking and listening activities provided in this article have revitalized and enlivened reading classrooms. The strategies are motivating and engaging, multimodal, open ended, and supported by evidence-based research. In addition, they draw on students' existing language resources, create space for diversity, and require few resources. Teachers find them easy to adapt for use with students of varied levels of language competence. Most importantly, they contribute to a classroom culture in which collaboration and meaningful social interaction form the sea upon which readers can set sail.

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