



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

Teaching for Comprehending: Improving Students' Expository Reading

"Children need more experience in early exposure to expository (nonnarrative texts) so that they can learn properties and strategies of coping with this kind of text."

~ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS, 2000

Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Reports of the Subgroups, p. 4-109

Expository reading plays an increasingly important role in students' literacy development across the school years. And yet it is well documented that many students experience difficulty when reading expository texts beyond primary grades (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Several explanations have been proposed for this phenomenon. Among them are (a) students have little exposure to expository texts in early grades (Duke, 2000), (b) expository texts use language and structure that are unfamiliar to students (Fang, 2006), and (c) students are rarely trained in the art of expository reading (Kamil & Bernhardt, 2004). In this paper, we further delineate these issues in an effort to help teachers develop students' expository reading skills. Specifically, we (1) describe three pillars of reading comprehension, (2) discuss the unique challenges of expository reading, and (3) suggest instructional practices for building students' capacities to comprehend these texts.

WHAT ARE THE PILLARS OF READING COMPREHENSION?

In order to comprehend a text, narrative or expository, students must be able to recognize at least 90-95% of the words and know what they mean. They must also be able to read the text with some degree of fluency using appropriate speed, phrasing, prosody and intonation, so that they can channel enough cognitive resources for

building a "situation model," or mental representation, that the sentences in the text as a whole projects (Kintsch, 2004). Building such a situational model requires not just knowledge of individual words and sentences. Students need, in addition, a "cultural model" of the subject matter of the text as well as relevant personal experiences. According to sociolinguist James Gee (2001), a cultural model is a person's often tacit and taken-for-granted schemata -- storylines, images, theories, metaphors -- about a particular cultural phenomenon (e.g., Halloween, the Great Depression). Having linguistic knowledge and relevant content knowledge does not, however, guarantee comprehension; readers also need to execute strategic actions for monitoring comprehension and for learning and recall. In short, comprehending a text involves:

- (1) understanding of the language (e.g., words, sentences, discourse) through which the text is constructed;
- (2) possession of relevant experiences and background knowledge -- both specialized and mundane -- that are stated, assumed, implied, or taken for granted in the text;
- (3) command of a repertoire of strategic actions for self regulating and learning, such as monitoring, inferencing, questioning, summarizing, and note taking.

WHAT ARE THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF EXPOSITORY READING?

Although all reading involves the above three pillars, how these pillars are orchestrated depends on the topic of the text and the reader's purpose and motivation. While self-regulating and strategic actions are generalizable across text types, the nature of linguistic and background knowledge required of expository reading differs considerably from that required of story reading. For example, when reading Marc Brown's (2004) *Arthur* series, the background knowledge that is needed is what we would call mundane, or commonsense, knowledge, and it is developed largely through social interaction in everyday ordinary life. On the other hand, the background knowledge required for the expository texts in content areas such as science, social studies and math is farther removed from students' everyday ordinary life. It is much more specialized and typically developed through schooling and wide reading of related materials.

In terms of linguistic knowledge, readers will find that the *Arthur* books, for example, sound familiar and comfortable because its language closely approximates the type of language that children would normally use in their everyday social interaction. We can understand it with relative ease when the text is read or spoken. Contrary to that, the language used in expository texts, particularly those of secondary content areas, tends to be more technical, abstract and dense, sounding less unfamiliar, less comfortable and more alienating than children's everyday social language. The following two examples illustrate this point:

- Phylum Rhizopoda is composed of the protozoans called amoebas that use pseudopodia, extensions of their plasma membrane, to move and engulf prey.
- Four guilty verdicts ended a seven-week CIA leak trial that focused new attention on the Bush administration's much-criticized handling of intelligence reports about weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the Iraq war.

In order to improve students' ability in expository reading, it is important to build their capacities around the three pillars of comprehension mentioned above.

ASSEMBLING A SCHEMATIC WORKING SYSTEM

One of the reasons why students feel more uncomfortable with expository texts is that they have rarely been exposed to it. One way to increase students' ability to handle expository texts is to expose them to lots of these texts early on in their schooling experiences. For this purpose, teachers should have a classroom and/or school library full of quality expository texts that consist of trade books (see, for example, <http://www.nsta.org/ostbc> and <http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable> for award-winning literature in science and social studies), magazines (e.g., *Kids Discover*, *National Geographic Explorer*, *Science Magazine*), newspapers, and journals, as well as traditional textbooks and other primary source documents. These resources are central to the development of content-rich literacy curricula needed for building students' vocabulary and content knowledge, which is arguably the foremost building block of reading comprehension (Hirsch, 2006). Teachers should allocate time for independent reading in class as well as through a home reading program. They should also regularly select quality expository books for read alouds in the class. The bottom line is that if students have little experience reading expository texts, they will be more likely to experience difficulty handling the more demanding reading materials in later years of schooling.

ASSEMBLING A LINGUISTIC WORKING SYSTEM

Exposing students to wide reading of content-rich materials will not only increase their domain knowledge, but build their knowledge of expository language. Getting immersed in the expository language of academic content area texts is, however, often not sufficient to ensure effective comprehension. Students need to be schooled in the

art of expository reading. For example, it is important to teach students to recognize the typographical features of expository texts such as headings, subheadings, graphics, captions, index, and marginal glossing. It is also important to teach the purposes and linguistic features of common expository genres such as procedures, report, description, explanation and argumentation (Derewianka, 1990). Developing reading and writing competence in these expository genres is critical to attaining success in school and beyond. Recognizing the basic organizational patterns of expository texts -- such as description, listing, sequence, cause and effect, question and answer, and compare and contrast (Meyer, 1975) – is beneficial as well. Fine (2004) has suggested that helping students learn to graph these basic organizational patterns enables them to make better predictions and remember more information.

In addition, as students advance in their schooling, they need to employ strategic actions to unpack the dense, abstract texts of curricular content areas. Some of these strategic actions have been described in detail (see, for example, Fang, Lamme & Pringle, 2008). They include structural analysis of technical vocabulary, back-and-forth translation between the academic language of content areas and students' everyday ordinary language, noun expansion and deconstruction, noticing signposts and connectives, sentence transformation, sentence completion, sentence stripping, and recognizing text structure. These language-focus tasks do not have to be carried out as isolated worksheet practices. Rather, they can take place with connected texts in authentic reading and writing and as part of the reading/writing workshops in the context of disciplinary inquiries, using examples drawn from the texts that students read or compose. The focus of these tasks should be to develop students' linguistic awareness and insights, not to impart linguistic rules for memorization and recitation.

STRATEGIC ACTION IN READING/LEARNING

A number of reading/learning strategic actions have been identified as particularly effective for use with content area texts (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; National Reading Panel, 2000). These include predicting, inferring, think-alouds, summarizing, questioning, making connections, clarifying, using a graphic organizer, and note taking. Teaching students how to use strategic actions like these in content area classrooms may seem to take time away from content instruction, but once students have developed a repertoire of strategic actions, they will be able to read the text with more comprehension and retention. In other words, time invested in contextualizing instruction for strategic action within content areas ultimately pays off.

When introducing a strategic action to students, it is important to not only tell students, but show them how to use it. All instruction for strategic action should involve the teacher explaining and modeling the strategic action, providing an opportunity for guided practice, and then allowing students to apply the strategic action independently. This Explain-Model-Guide-Apply (EMGA) model of instruction for strategic action (Fang, Lamme, & Pringle, 2008) will ensure that more students embrace the strategic actions as their own and use them effectively to facilitate content learning.

CONCLUSION

Expository texts are a key medium through which school knowledge is constructed. They are also the primary means through which students' academic literacy is demonstrated and assessed in school. It is thus imperative that students develop strategic actions and skills for coping with expository texts. Without the ability to read and write expository texts, students will be severely handicapped in literacy development and permanently "left behind" in schooling.

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