

Supporting Upper Elementary And Middle Grade Students As They Read Challenging Texts by Dr. Susan Dougherty, Dr. Evelyn Ford-Connors, and Dr. Dana Robertson

There are distinct advantages to engaging students with grade level texts, even if some students don't currently read on grade level without high levels of support. Engagement with grade level texts allows all students the opportunity to learn the sophisticated vocabulary, academic concepts, and linguistic structures required for understanding grade level concepts (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). It is essential, however, that students not be placed in reading situations that result in high levels of frustration; that is, teachers must take care to establish conditions for successful interactions with these texts. What tools and techniques are available, then, to help students learn from complex, grade-appropriate texts without prompting frustration, embarrassment, and boredom or limiting the amount of text exposure? In this article, we describe how text-to-speech software, repeated reading, scaffolded reading, and partner reading can be used to support students working with challenging texts.

Text-to-Speech Software

Students with weak decoding skills but adequate comprehension benefit from opportunities to use text-to-speech (TTS) software to support their interactions with challenging texts (Dalton & Strangeman, 2006). With TTS software, the “digital text is read aloud by computer-generated speech in voices resembling natural speech with words highlighted as they are spoken” (Meyer & Bouch, 2014, p. 21). In addition, TTS software programs often offer tools for vocabulary support and note-taking, and allow readers to control the pace of the reading. Importantly, as students use TTS software, they maintain their “eyes on the page” encouraging more engagement with the written text than is afforded by simply listening to an audio version of the text or listening to a teacher or peer read the text aloud. (See the Tech Talk column for information on a variety of TTS applications.)

Repeated Reading

Students' experiences with challenging texts can also be mediated through repeated readings, which have been shown to accelerate growth in reading proficiency among below-grade level readers (e.g., Kuhn, Groff, & Morrow, 2011). Repeated reading can be used in flexible ways, depending on the challenge posed by a particular text and the needs of the students. When a text is well above students' independent reading levels, the first pass through the text might be a whole-class teacher read aloud accompanied by discussion to construct meaning. Next, the teacher might meet with a small group of students who are reading well below the level of the text and work with them to echo read or partner read the most important sections of the chapter. The purpose for this rereading of the text is to provide a highly supportive context for reading small portions of text that are well above a student's current level. Repeated use of this technique not only accelerates word recognition skills but also gives students practice with the more complex sentence structures and vocabulary found in grade level text.

On the other hand, if the text is challenging, but not too far out of students' comfort levels, students' first reading of the text might be silent, with subsequent rereading conducted in small groups to meet certain goals. Such “purposeful re-reads” engage students in revisiting and rereading the text for authentic reasons (i.e., sharing a

piece of text that shows character development, reviewing important events, or offering important information about a topic) while at the same time furthering comprehension.

Scaffolded Reading

In previous sections we focused on scaffolding the word reading of challenging texts; in this section we will focus on teaching actions and tools that scaffold the meaning-making process while students read independently or with a partner. McKeown, Beck, and Blake (2009) identify two major approaches to supporting readers as they learn from and with texts: strategy instruction and content approaches. In strategy instruction, students are taught to recognize and engage in particular mental processes as they construct meaning from texts. Content approaches, in contrast, focus attention on the ideas presented within the text without calling attention to the mental processes used to extract meaning. According to McKeown, Beck, and Blake (2009), instructional frameworks such as Questioning the Author and other discussion-based approaches (e.g. Collaborative Reasoning, Junior Great Books), fall under the content category.

In scaffolded reading the eventual goal is for students to independently emulate the types of thinking that they first engage in collaboratively with their teachers. As they participate in scaffolded reading opportunities, students practice the ways of thinking that support their reading of challenging texts. Often, graphic organizers are used to encourage students to use the techniques they previously used alongside their teacher. For example, after teacher-led modeling and explanation of a strategy such as noticing text structure cues, students collaboratively use the strategy alongside the teacher. After these initial instructional steps, students read a new text containing elements of the same text structure and use a graphic organizer that prompts them to notice relevant structural elements and to record important information gained from the text. Like TTS software and repeated readings, scaffolded reading offers support to readers who need a “little more” to enable successful engagement with cognitively challenging texts, but in this case, the focus is on supporting comprehension.

Partner Reading

Another technique used to support student reading of challenging text is partner reading. With this approach, dyads work through a text together, most often taking turns reading the text orally and discussing the meaning as they work their way through. Like Ogle and Correa-Kovtun (2010), we recommend partnering students who have similar reading profiles (i.e. “reading levels”). Doing so allows each partner to experience taking the supportive role – helping the other student pronounce unknown words; answering questions their partner may have about the meaning of the text; and explaining the meanings of words unfamiliar to the partner. We believe that matching students with similar reading profiles is more effective for upper elementary and middle grade students engaged in the reading of classroom texts, particularly because this type of pairing is less likely to reinforce a less proficient reader’s view of himself as a reading failure.

Often, partner reading begins with an opportunity to read the text (or a portion of it) silently. This practice gives the students a chance to gain a sense of the scope and gist of the text, which will support comprehension during the oral reading, and the structure of the prose, which will support fluent oral reading. Following this initial silent reading, students begin reading aloud and engage in supportive behaviors, which might include specific techniques for offering word reading assistance and for enhancing comprehension.

There are a range of tools and techniques that can be used to support readers as they engage with grade level texts. An expansion of the ideas described in this article along with full chapters discussing support for word recognition and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are included in our book *Engaging Readers: Supporting All Students in Knowledge-Driven Reading* published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2017.

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