

Build Reading Power: Strategies for Comprehension

by Dr. David W. Moore

Proficient readers are active thinkers (National Reading Panel, 2000). Before reading, they preview the selection and identify possible purposes for reading it. As they read, they think about their own experiences and knowledge of the world and apply this information to help them better understand characters, places, or events. They call on their vocabulary knowledge to figure out new words, and they apply different mental strategies to get the most from what they read. For instance, when proficient readers read Pam Muñoz Ryan's young adult novel *Esperanza Rising*, they experience the main character's passage from being a self-centered girl in a Mexican ranch to becoming a compassionate young woman in a California labor camp. They recognize how objects in the story such as a crocheted blanket signify major ideas, and they discern the ways Esperanza Ortega's individual experience suggests an overall immigrant experience. They note how settings such as the labor camp and the Great Depression affect people's actions. In addition, they actively engage one another in conversations about the novel and learn from different perspectives.

The challenge, then, is to help *all* students develop the knowledge, strategies, and skills that are necessary for active thinking and proficient reading. The good news is that this can be done.

Effective Comprehension Instruction

Numerous studies of adolescent literacy development show clearly that when striving middle school readers receive effective instruction, they can and do achieve reading proficiency (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Torgesen et al., 2007).

Instruction is most effective in building students' comprehension when it

- provides students with access to content-rich texts and diverse genres
- emphasizes purposeful reading
- directly and explicitly teaches students specific strategies for comprehending.

1. Access to Content-Rich Texts and Diverse Genres

Teachers of older striving readers are well-aware that their students often have stores of world knowledge that exceed their reading expertise. Too often, these students are stuck with "easy to read" materials about topics that do not interest them (Ivey & Fisher, 2006). Giving students access to an array of content-rich texts, however, can make reading meaningful and relevant to them (Ivey & Broadus, 2001).

Content-rich texts explore subjects in depth, examining ideas and offering distinctive viewpoints that help students develop both general and subject-specific knowledge. Such texts also may highlight different cultural and linguistic groups and topics and so present students with reading experiences that confirm and reflect their own experiences and thoughts or give them insights into the experiences and thoughts of others.

Making available a variety of text genres can also increase student interest in reading. Some older students may reject novels and stories, but become absorbed in reading magazines, biographies, or poetry.

Each unit of *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* includes a wealth of content-rich selections from many genres, including fiction, nonfiction, reference documents—even screenplays. Reflecting the unit focus, these selections explore science and social studies topics, and examine personal identity, loyalty, and other life issues. Short, related selections are paired with main selections. Students also have access to digital texts online. These diverse selections, which range from easy to difficult, enable students to work with material that is challenging but not defeating. In addition, selections by authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Christopher Myers, Gary Soto, and Lensey Namioka permit students both to identify with characters and settings and to learn about other people and cultures.

Providing access to texts involves more than making them available, however. It involves helping students find their way into the selections and supporting their efforts as they read (Hinchman, Alvermann, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003–2004). Among other things, Levels C–E supply entryways into reading through the National Geographic Digital Library

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of videos and images to prompt background building activities. At all levels, tasks that help students prepare to read include quickwrites, graphic organizers, read-alouds, and students' personal connections that build background and interest. The program scaffolds students' efforts by providing main selection summaries in several languages, glossing unfamiliar words, prompting students to think through what they read before reading on, and highlighting salient words and phrases online as students respond to questions.

2. Purposeful Reading

Students develop reading interest and ability best when the reading has a clear, meaningful purpose, one that has meaning for them (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). When the purpose for reading is unclear to students, or when they cannot see the relevance of the reading, their comprehension suffers. This can also be the case when reading purposes do not take into consideration—or are insensitive to—students' social and cultural backgrounds (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Purposeful reading encourages students to read deeply and thoughtfully for conceptual knowledge and to seek out relationships and applications that enhance their own lives. It helps readers to view facts and ideas as facts-in-action and ideas-in-action.

Emphases on purposeful reading permeate *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content's* comprehension instruction. All selections in a unit are unified by a common theme. At Levels C–E, units begin with a Guiding Question such as, “Why are both storytellers and scientists drawn to the stars?” or “How far will people go for the sake of freedom?” These questions are elaborated in each selection of the unit. Guiding Questions have no single, simple, or predetermined answers; they allow verbal, artistic, and dramatic responses (Langer, 2002). This flexibility helps students to set authentic purposes for reading and provokes active reading to achieve those purposes.

As they move through a selection, students preview each section of the text, establishing a specific purpose for reading each part. Students frequently check their purpose or their predictions as they read. Sections of the text also include Check Your Understanding questions to support students in maintaining focus on the text. *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* also consistently sets up discussions that encourage purposeful reading. During these discussions, students exchange ideas and present interpretations and conclusions. Such discussions contribute greatly to students' understanding of the texts that they read (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Nystrand, 2006).

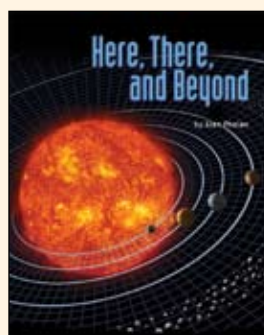
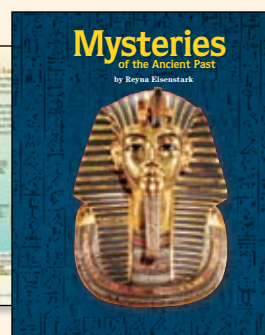
3. Direct, Explicit Teaching of Strategies for Comprehending

Whether they are reading to acquire new knowledge, to perform a task, or for pleasure, proficient readers are strategic (Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Pressley & Afflerbach,

1995). They take charge of what they read, adopting strategies that fit their selections and their particular reasons for reading. If something in the text is puzzling or confusing, proficient readers realize this immediately, shift mental gears, and apply other strategies to repair their understanding.

Effective comprehension instruction teaches students both what these strategies are and how and when to use them (National Reading Panel, 2000). The steps of effective instruction typically include:

- *Direct, explicit teacher explanation* of a strategy and why it is useful.
- *Teacher modeling* (“thinking aloud”) of how, when, and where to use the strategy.
- *Scaffolded/guided practice* in applying the strategy.
- *Independent application* of the strategy by students.



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Inside Language, Literacy, and Content directly teaches the following eight strategies to promote students' reading comprehension:

1. **Plan Your Reading:** controlling one's mental activities
2. **Monitor Your Reading:** checking in with yourself on how well you are comprehending and are playing "fix-up" strategies, if necessary
3. **Determine Importance:** identifying essential ideas and information
4. **Ask Questions:** interrogating texts for a variety of purposes
5. **Visualize:** forming sensory images of textual contents, especially visual images
6. **Make Connections:** using what you know to enrich authors' meanings
7. **Make Inferences:** linking parts of texts that authors did not link explicitly
8. **Synthesize:** putting together ideas from multiple sources

The program focuses on this set of strategies because comprehension strategy research strongly supports their effectiveness (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992). Each unit in the program targets a single strategy. This concentrated attention to one strategy provides students with multiple opportunities to develop expertise and promotes strategy-use transfer across genres (Nokes & Dole, 2004).

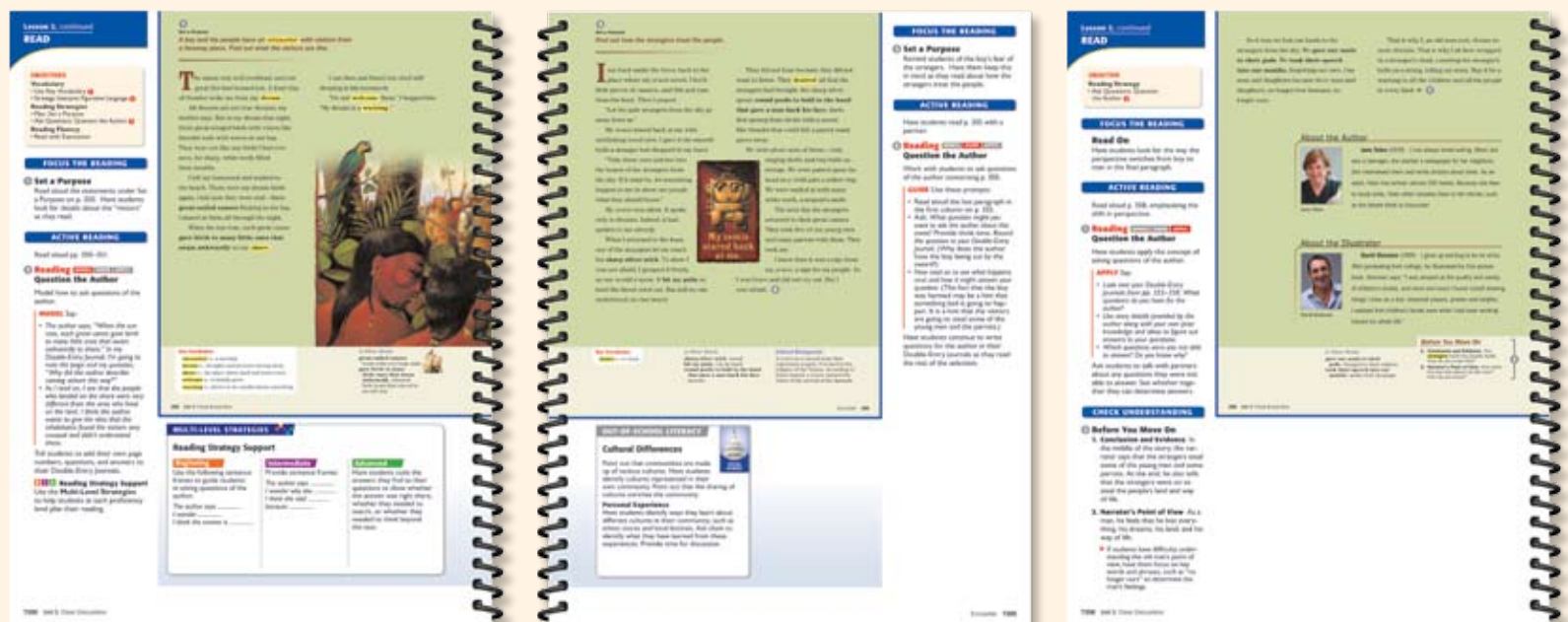
In each selection, students focus on one aspect of the unit's comprehension strategy. For example, if the unit strategy is Make Connections, the three selections may focus on mak-

ing Text-to-Self, Text-to-World, and Text-to-Text connections. At the start of each selection, student books include an explicit lesson in the specific strategy for that selection that uses graphic organizers or notes to clearly demonstrate the thinking process involved. During the reading of the selection, this initial lesson is followed up with further teacher modeling, guided practice, and student application of the strategy. This Model/Guide/Apply structure scaffolds instruction so that students have repeated opportunities to use the strategy with increasing independence. Strategy instruction also makes frequent use of Academic Language Frames and other structured supports to help striving readers understand and internalize the thinking processes that proficient readers use habitually.

Along with these general comprehension strategies that apply across selections, **Inside Language, Literacy, and Content** also presents strategies for analyzing specific text structures and genres. These strategies focus on ways for students to build meaning from texts by analyzing authors' organization of ideas, purposes for writing, and uses of genre-specific features. The strategies are especially important to teach because the ability to activate and apply one's knowledge of text structures and genres to make sense of new passages is a characteristic of proficient readers (Pearson & Camperell, 1994; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Conclusion

The three fundamental features of effective reading comprehension instruction are seen best as interactive elements that support one another. Providing students access to content-rich texts and diverse genres and directly teaching them specific strategies for comprehending lead to and enhance purposeful reading. The reading comprehension instruction of **Inside Language, Literacy, and Content** provides students multiple meaningful opportunities to become active, purposeful, proficient readers.



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