

Improving Adolescent Literacy

This infographic is based on the recommendations of the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide [*Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices*](#). It presents strategies that classroom teachers and specialists can use to increase the reading ability of adolescent students. The four recommendations from the practice guide included in this infographic aim to help students gain more from their reading tasks and improve their motivation for and engagement in the learning process. Activities are also included to demonstrate how the recommendations may be integrated into classroom instruction.

Click on an image below for details.



1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.



2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.



3. Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.



4. Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.

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1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.

It is important for English language arts teachers and other content area teachers to provide explicit vocabulary instruction in their classes. Content area texts oftentimes include specialized vocabulary, jargon, and discipline-related concepts that students may not encounter anywhere else. Learning content area vocabulary is important so students can fully grasp the concepts and ideas of a particular subject area. When students receive explicit vocabulary instruction, they learn the meaning of new words and strengthen their ability to construct meaning from text independently.

Direct vocabulary instruction includes helping students look up definitions using online resources, read the words and their definitions, match words and their definitions, participate in oral recitation, memorize definitions, and use graphic displays of the relationships among words and concepts such as semantic maps. Strategies to promote independent vocabulary acquisition skills include analyzing semantic, syntactic, or context clues to derive the meaning of words by using prior knowledge and the context in which the word is presented. Research shows that both approaches can effectively promote students' vocabulary (Kamil et al., 2008).

How to carry out the recommendation



1. Dedicate a portion of regular classroom lessons to explicit vocabulary instruction.



2. Use repeated exposure to new words in multiple oral and written contexts and allow sufficient practice sessions.



3. Give sufficient opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of contexts through activities such as discussion, writing, and extended reading.



4. Provide students with strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners.



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Vocabulary Activity – Linear Array

A linear array is a graphic organizer that helps students visualize gradations of meaning between two related words. Linear arrays can be used to provide students with exposure to words in a variety of contexts.

In the activity below, teachers would instruct students to work in small groups to arrange the words in boxes on a line between the words “abundant” and “scarce.” The boxed words are currently in random order. In this case, students have read the science text *[Stranglers of the Tropics - and Beyond](#)*, which talks about the spread of invasive lianas (woody vines), resulting in some native species of plants being overtaken. The lianas are becoming more abundant, while other native species are becoming scarce. Therefore, the linear array below could be used in conjunction with this text.

abundant

scarce

plentiful

occasional

ample

irregular

rare

infrequent

sufficient

Adaptation: Students could choose the anchor words; students could generate the words to place between the anchor words.

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2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.

Teachers should provide adolescents with direct and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies are routines and procedures that readers use to help them make sense of texts. These strategies include, but are not limited to, summarizing, asking and answering questions, paraphrasing, and finding the main idea. Comprehension strategy instruction can also include specific teacher activities that have been demonstrated to improve students' comprehension of texts. Asking students questions and using graphic organizers are examples of such strategies. Direct and explicit teaching involves a teacher modeling and providing explanations of the specific strategies students are learning, giving guided practice and feedback on the use of the strategies, and promoting independent practice to apply the strategies.

An important part of comprehension strategy instruction is the active participation of students in the comprehension process. In addition, explicit instruction involves providing a sufficient amount of support, or scaffolding, to students as they learn the strategies to ensure success.

Upper elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers can take several action steps to implement explicit strategy instruction, which involves helping students actively engage in the texts they read. A number of different strategies can be taught directly and explicitly to students and applied to content-area texts they read. Assisting students in learning how to apply these strategies to their texts will empower them and give them more control over their reading and understanding (Kamil et al., 2008).

How to carry out the recommendation



1. Select carefully the text to use when first beginning to teach a given strategy.



2. Show students how to apply the strategies they are learning to different texts, not just to one text.



3. Ensure that the text is appropriate for the reading level of students.



4. Use direct and explicit instruction for teaching students how to use comprehension strategies.

Comprehension Activity – Directed Note Taking

A graphic organizer designed to help sort and categorize information from texts

The teacher first identifies categories outlined in the text so that students can read the text on their own and develop notes independently that are aligned with the categories selected by the teacher.

These categories should be aligned with the standards being taught or the reason for the content being taught. As questions for written responses are being considered, it may be most helpful to consider three or four appropriate answers that can be found in the text. These appropriate responses will then become the categories used for directed note taking as aligned with the guiding question.

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In this example, students have read the science text *Stranglers of the Tropics - and Beyond*, which talks about the spread of invasive lianas (woody vines), resulting in some native species of plants being overtaken. The teacher has developed a guiding question to lead this lesson since the standards she is teaching focus on natural selection: What factor of liana growth has most significantly impacted natural selection?

The teacher has determined that there are three relevant categories from the article that students can find notes to support as evidence in developing a response to the guiding question: temperature, sunlight, and nutrients/water. The teacher asks the students to find at least two notes from the text to support each of these three categories.

Directed Note Taking

Directions: Record notes containing the most important information relevant to the guiding question.

“Stranglers of the Tropics and Beyond” National Science Foundation				
Guiding Question: What factor of liana growth has most significantly impacted natural selection?				
Paragraph #	NOTES	Check relevant categories below		
		Temperature	Sunlight	Nutrients/ Water

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3. Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.

One way teachers can help students improve their reading comprehension is to provide opportunities for high-quality discussions that focus on the meaning and interpretation of texts. These discussions can occur in various content area classrooms and can be conducted in a whole-group or small-group setting.

Discussions that focus on building a deep understanding of the author’s meaning, or critically analyzing or challenging the author’s conclusions, can promote students’ comprehension of complex texts.

In effective discussions students have the opportunity to engage in sustained interactions with the teacher or with one another, present and defend their interpretations and points of view using the text, background knowledge, and reasoning to support their ideas. They should also listen to the arguments of their peers and be able to respond with reasoned thoughts and counterpoints (Kamil et al., 2008).

How to carry out the recommendation



1. Carefully prepare for the discussion by selecting engaging materials and development stimulating questions.



2. Ask follow-up questions that help provide continuity and extend the discussion.



3. Provide a task or discussion format that students can follow when they discuss text in small groups.



4. Develop and practice the use of specific “discussion protocol.”

Whole Group Extended Text Discussion Activity

Facilitating an Extended Text Discussion

Step	Description	Example
Teacher Planning	<p>Teachers choose texts or topics that might be difficult, misunderstood, ambiguous, or have multiple interpretations.</p> <p>Teachers develop questions that stimulate students to think reflectively about the text and to make high-level connections or inferences.</p> <p>Teachers create a scenario that allows students to take a position and defend it using information from the text.</p>	<p>A sixth-grade science teacher wants her students to understand that invasive species can affect natural selection. She finds an article <i>Stranglers of the Tropics - and Beyond</i> that talks about the spread of lianas. The article also discusses how temperature, sunlight, and nutrients/water are affecting liana growth. The text is complex and worthy of a class discussion.</p> <p>The teacher develops the following question for consideration: “What factor of liana growth has most significantly impacted natural selection?”</p> <p>The teacher divides students into small groups and asks them to review the text for evidence of whether temperature, sunlight, or nutrients/water are most influential.</p>

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Facilitating an Extended Text Discussion

Step	Description	Example
Student Preparation	<p>In small groups, students talk about the question(s) the teacher provided.</p> <p>Students review the text with the question in mind and determine, as a group, a position or stance to take in response to the question.</p> <p>Students take notes from the text to support their position.</p> <p>Students discuss how to present their position to the whole group and choose a spokesperson.</p>	<p>After reading the text <i>Stranglers of the Tropics - and Beyond</i>, students discuss the question, “What factor of liana growth has most significantly impacted natural selection?” They come to consensus, as a group, whether temperature, sunlight, or nutrients/water was most impactful.</p> <p>Students return to the text and take notes to use in the discussion that validate their position of temperature, sunlight, or nutrients/water.</p> <p>Students choose a spokesperson for their group and help him/her prepare to present their stance.</p>
Teacher Facilitates Student Discussion	<p>Teachers ask the student groups to share the position they chose.</p> <p>Teachers asks each spokesperson to explain why their group took their stance, using evidence from the text to support their position</p> <p>Groups are provided opportunities to defend their positions throughout the discussion.</p> <p>Teachers ask students to elaborate to extend their conversation, but do not validate any one position.</p> <p>At the end of the discussion, students revisit their position and may change their stance based on information presented by other groups.</p>	<p>The teacher asks the spokesperson for each group to raise their hand to reflect if they chose temperature, sunlight, or nutrients/water as the factor of liana growth that has most significantly impacted natural selection. The teacher records the number of groups that voted for each category. She also records the votes of individuals for each category because they may have had to concede within their group to come to consensus.</p> <p>The teacher chooses a group to present their position. She asks other groups with the same stance to elaborate. She then asks groups with the other two positions to present their stance and evidence. Finally, she provides the opportunity for rebuttal.</p> <p>At the end of the discussion, the teacher takes a final vote of individuals to see if any minds were changed.</p>

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4. Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.

To foster improvement in adolescent literacy, teachers should use strategies to enhance students' motivation to read and engagement in the learning process. Teachers should help students build confidence in their ability to comprehend and learn from content area texts. They should provide a supportive environment that views mistakes as growth opportunities, encourages self-determination, and provides informational feedback about the usefulness of reading strategies and how the strategies can be modified to fit various tasks. Teachers should also make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events.

Although the words motivation and engagement are often used interchangeably, they are not always synonymous. Whereas motivation refers to the desire, reason, or predisposition to become involved in a task or activity, engagement refers to the degree to which a student processes text deeply through the use of active strategies and thought processes and prior knowledge. It is possible to be motivated to complete a task without being engaged because the task is either too easy or too difficult. Research shows that the messages teachers communicate to students—intentionally or unintentionally—can affect students' learning goals and outcomes (Kamil et al., 2008).

How to carry out the recommendation



1. Establish meaningful and engaging content learning goals around the essential ideas of a discipline as well as the specific learning processes students use to access those ideas.



2. Provide a positive learning environment that promotes students' autonomy in learning.



3. Make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events.



4. Build in certain instructional conditions, such as student goal setting, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning, to increase reading engagement and conceptual learning for students.



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Motivation and Engagement Activity – Developing a “Hook” Question

Student engagement in complex thinking can be promoted by strategically introducing students to the topic of a text that students will read. It takes a well-crafted question to simultaneously grab student interest, focus student attention on the topic, and launch a quality opening discussion. This “hook” question needs to help students see the relevance of the topic and find a purpose for reading the text. In order to create these discussion dynamics, the “hook” question requires strategic planning of the following two elements:

- format of the question
- teacher expectation of student response to the question

The format of an effective “hook” question is important to consider:

- **Question Stem/Topic:** The first part of the “hook” is the stem. It is written in question form and focuses on a world-relevant topic that can capture student interest. The question stem takes a broad perspective of the topic of the specific text that students are preparing to read. As an example, the following stem focuses on the broad topic of “invasive species” (cause/effect relationship) prior to reading the text, “*Stranglers of the Tropics—and Beyond*”: What kinds of invasive species do you know about, and which one do you think has had the most significant impact in our state?
- **Student Options:** The “hook” question can be open-ended or the stem may segue into two or three options from which students may choose to take a position. For example, the question above could read: What kinds of invasive species do you know about and do you think they have had little or much impact in our state?

Since a “hook” question sets the tone for subsequent text reading, its alignment with state standards may be helpful in keeping students focused on significant big ideas in text throughout their pre-reading discussion.

Teacher Expectations

The “hook” question is designed to set up a brief whole-group conversation, but it may be helpful for students to talk about their thoughts with a partner before the class engages in the main discussion. The teacher should establish the expectation that each speaker provides an explanation for his or her response or position. Throughout this discussion, the teacher uses contrasts in student responses as the basis for deciding who to call upon for comment. Such expectations stir students’ emotional investment in the topic and maximize student engagement in their own learning.

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