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Scaffolds to Help ELL Readers

Last year, as part of my district's professional development plan, I participated in a teacher researcher group that gave me the opportunity to investigate a teaching strategy in depth. I have been involved in second language acquisition for the past 20 years, and I firmly believe that second language learners, like native speakers, need to have a strong grasp of the reading process for school success.

I am presently teaching ELL in middle school, and too often, my ELL students close their books telling me they finished the chapter and they understood the text. When we start to discuss the chapter, students are often at a loss to recall key information and to synthesize the most important main ideas of the chapter. I knew I had to find ways to help my students become more strategic and knowledgeable about the reading process. In particular, I wanted to help them learn to recall critical information and then synthesize that information.

Reading for comprehension is hard work. Students must understand that the words on the page should be *thought about* and not just decoded in order to understand the text. I decided that to best help my ELL students, I would teach them two specific scaffolding strategies that could help them summarize, recall, and synthesize. We would focus on using T-charts and sticky notes.

Getting Started

During the first few weeks of school, I read individually with each of my 20 ELL students. I noticed that many of them did not attend to punctuation; they simply read words and, in many cases, became breathless in their quest to finish the paragraph. Somehow students equated reading with word calling and thought that was all they had to do. Thinking did not seem to be a component of the reading process. Also, students didn't recognize when they didn't understand what was happening in the reading selection; they simply continued to read.

Research emphasizes the need for students to have a firm basis in native language literacy skills before they acquire a second language (Boyle, 1990; Rubin & Patterson, 2002). The strategies students learn for reading and writing in their native language are the building blocks for learning another language. I did some research regarding my ELL students' prior educational experiences: 10 of the students had completed fifth grade in their native countries and did not have interrupted schooling prior to their arrival in the United States. That means they should have developed literacy skills in their native language. The other 10 students completed less than five years of education in their native countries and often were deficient 1.5 years or more in native language education. It would seem that the interruption of schooling or failure to complete fifth grade in their native language may contribute to students' reading difficulties. Reading is developmental, and many of these students had not experienced developmental reading strategies in their native language so they could not transfer those important reading strategies to English.

Since all my ELL students were reading below a third-grade level in English based on reading assessments like the Degrees of Reading Power

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(DRP), I decided to introduce them all to the reading strategies mentioned in this article. I expected that students who had longer, formal reading instruction in their native languages would pick up on the strategies more quickly than the students from weaker reading backgrounds.

Intervention #1: Using T-Charts

My first intervention strategy was to help students stop to think about what they had just read. Would that be after each paragraph, each page? Teachers need to model their own reading habits so students can visually see how good readers read and comprehend. I decided to divide an informational book into segments and, after each segment, stop and describe the main idea of what we just read as a way to model what I wanted students to do. Then, I created a T-chart (see Figure 1) that would segment the next chapter and provide a place for students to keep track of main ideas and any new vocabulary words they came across. We used the following procedure:

- students read the designated pages silently, then wrote one main idea sentence on the chart;
- we talked about various sentences that students wrote;
- I shared the main idea sentence that I wrote;
- we reread the pages for reinforced comprehension;
- students listed 2–3 words from each section that were unknown or unfamiliar.

This chart, called a T-chart because its shape helps organize information, helped students to focus on what was important to remember on the selected pages and reinforced the concept of the main idea of the selected pages. When I shared my responses with the students, we were able to compare our thinking and see if we had selected similar main ideas. This scaffold helped students think about how they learn and remember new information. My students seemed very interested in learning more about how adults remembered what they were reading.

Intervention #2: Using Sticky Notes

By mid-October, I could see that students were comfortable using the T-chart to guide them with their comprehension process. However, readers don't always make a chart and write down main ideas as they read. While reading *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), I came across the phrase *leaving tracks*. I really liked this description because that is exactly what proficient readers do—they leave tracks as they write in the margins, use sticky notes, or highlight parts that they can reread when they return to the book. Highlighters and writing in the margins weren't feasible interventions with school-purchased books, so I decided upon sticky notes. Why not let my students in on these tools?

As we prepared to read the novel *The Long Way to a New Land* (Sandin, 1986), I told students we would continue to use a T-chart, but now instead of writing a sentence after each segment, they would write "key words" on sticky notes that would constitute their "tracks." We read the first chapter of the story together, and I had students stop and record 3–5 words that would tell me what was most important about that section. Different students shared their responses, and we talked about why certain key words were selected. Students found it helpful to see that some words were shared

MAIN IDEA	NEW VOCABULARY
P.4-7 A plane was flying over mt. St. Helens and the pilot saw the volcano erupting.	hiking - p5 giant - p6 crater - p7
P.8-10 There was fire, smoke, and gas, but the plane was able to escape.	gain - p 9 dive - p 9 streak - p11

SUMMARY

In this chapter, a pilot was flying over mt. St. Helens and he saw a volcano erupting. He went down closer to see what was happening. There was fire, smoke and gas, but luckily, the plane was able to escape.

Figure 1. Information from *Volcanoes: Mountains of Fire*

by many students while others were never even considered. Next, I shared my choices and reasons for choosing them.

Then I had students use the sticky notes to help them write a short summary of what we had read thus far. The sticky notes helped students retell the main events in sequence and focus only on the main events (see Figure 2).

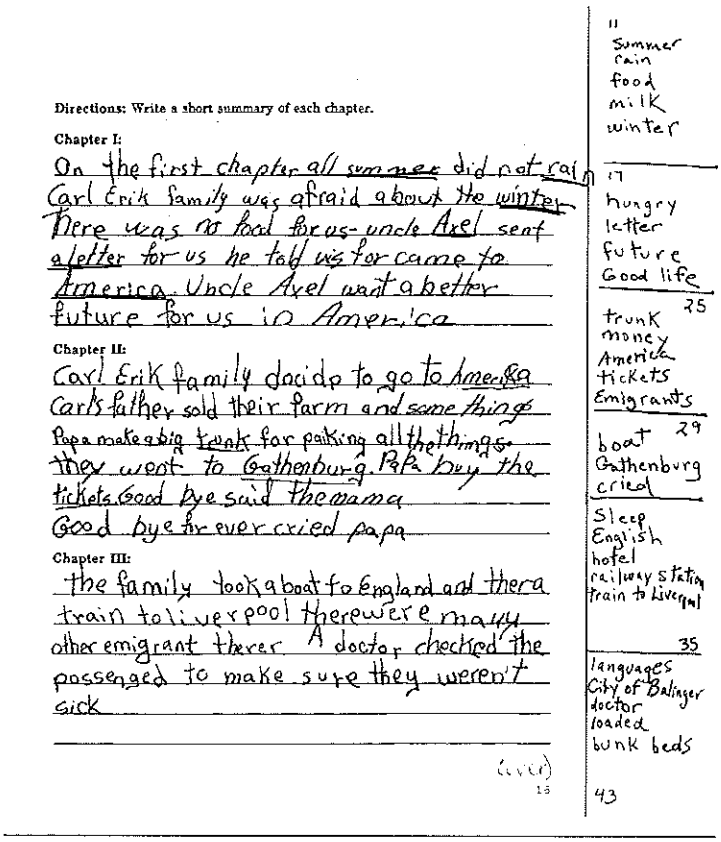
Intervention #3: Key Words

Literature on helping struggling readers emphasizes the need to provide students with scaffolding or support for new or difficult assignments (Allington, 1994; Robb, 1996). It is important to structure productive interventions so that students are able to understand what is expected of them. If this is not done, students will either fail to complete an assignment or will proceed on their own without thinking it through. Students need support that will give them specific guidance on how to proceed and allow them to complete a task successfully. Metacognitive processing or reflecting on a procedure should be a key element in the scaffolding process.

When I had the students use their sticky notes for a story summary the first time, I assumed that students could take their sticky notes, put them in order, and then write simple sentences that retell the story. *Wrong!!* Students needed to see my chapter summary and how I incorporated the key words within my sentences. This structure provided both a cognitive challenge and a greater chance for success. This strategy, like most, needs to be repeated multiple times before students are able to do it independently—which is, of course, the ultimate goal.

During the next few months, I continued using the sticky notes as a reading comprehension strategy for the other books we read. For the novel *Leaving Vietnam* (Kilborne, 1996), I observed and collected work samples to see that students were thinking about big pictures in each chapter and how their key words were incorporated in writing their chapter summaries. I also had students add a personal response after writing the chapter summary (see Figure 3).

Before we read each chapter, I told the students to place a sticky note on selected pages in the novel, usually two sticky notes per chapter. This was a way for students to read to a certain point, stop, write down 3–5 key words that would help them retell the story so far, then go on to the next part and repeat the same process. At the end of each chapter, I had students compare their key words from the chapter with each other. Often, I would write the key words given to the class by three students and then have the class compare the key words for similarities. This was an excellent way for students to see that synonyms were perfectly acceptable. When a classmate didn't agree with a word, then the student who used that word had to explain why it was important to the retelling of the story. This debriefing helped students focus on which words qualified as key words.


Directions: Write a short summary of each chapter.

Chapter I:
On the first chapter all summer did not rain Carl Erik family was afraid about the winter There was no food for us- uncle Axel sent a letter for us he tell us for came to America. Uncle Axel want a better future for us in America

Chapter II:
Carl Erik family decide to go to America Carl's father sold their farm and some things Papa make a big trunk for putting all the things they went to Gathenburg. Papa buy the tickets. Good bye said the mama Good bye forever cried papa

Chapter III:
the family took a boat to England and there a train to liverpool there were many other emigrant there. A doctor checked the passenged to make sure they weren't sick

(over)

11 summer rain food milk winter
17 hungry letter future Good life
25 trunk money America tickets Emigrants
29 boat Gathenburg cried
Sleep English hotel railway station train to Liverpool
35 languages City of Balinger doctor loaded bunk beds
43

Figure 2. Chapter summaries based on key words and class discussion

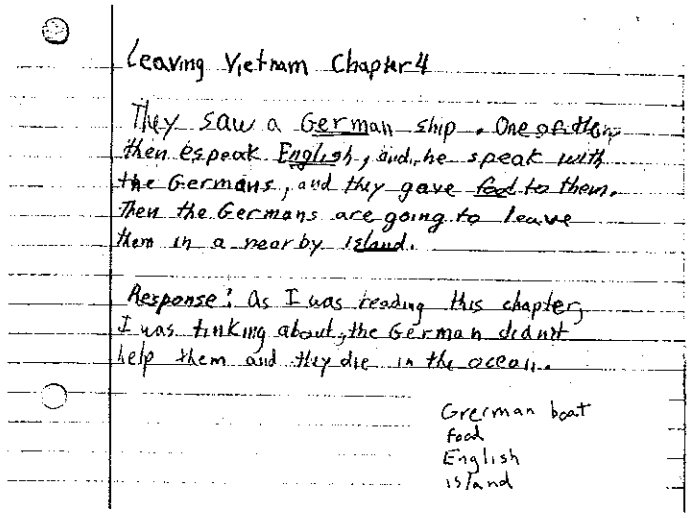
Assessing Effectiveness

Throughout this year, I was continually reviewing students' use of the T-chart and sticky notes to see how well they were following the procedures and how quickly they were becoming independent about using the strategies. Analyzing the work samples was extremely beneficial because it allowed me to determine if students were choosing appropriate key words or just writing down any word that might have been in the chapter. This dictated additional minilessons on how to choose appropriate key words and why some words would not be useful to students when writing a chapter summary.

I was constantly watching and listening to the kinds of responses that my students gave in class. Often I walked around the classroom asking students to explain their key-word choices. This gave students some personal instruction and an opportunity to talk about their responses, while allowing me to check for comprehension. Throughout the year, I also met with students in small reading groups, during which we would read a chapter together. As students worked quietly to select their own key words for their sticky notes, I could observe their selection process. Finally, we reviewed their responses together. Small groups provided another arena for talking to students about their choices and for making sure they understood the strategy.

Eventually, I had students write personal reflections about this strategy: it gave *them* a chance to think about how they learn and what they do to help themselves; it gave *me* valuable information about their understanding of the strategy. I concluded that using sticky notes is a valuable scaffolding strategy. The students' own comments, listed below, show that they are not just mimicking someone else's suggestions, but rather, have thought about and internalized a reading strategy and are using it on their own.

- "In this year I learned how to use the sticky note. They help me to remember the chapter. I like to use them next year when I read a book. If you forgot what the chapter was about, you can look again to remember."
- "This year I learned how to use sticky notes when I read a story. I think that is an important thing because the sticky notes help me remember the part of story, and I don't have to read all the story. Those sticky notes are very important. I can use anywhere when I read a story, in my house, park, etc."
- "The sticky notes is great because this help me to remember what I read. I think that all school need use this because is good for the students that helps to don't forget what you read because you need put only key words about what you read in each chapter."
- "This year I learn how to use sticky notes. I like it because when we're reading a story we leave a sticky note in a page so when we return to that page the sticky notes help us remember some of the words that was on the chapter. I will keep using sticky notes because is a great idea to use them."
- "This quarter was to easy when I read books and do the summary because I put the key words on the sticky notes and I remember


Leaving Vietnam Chapter 4

They saw a German ship. One of them then espeak English, and he speak with the Germans, and they gave food to them. Then the Germans are going to leave them in a near by island.

Response: As I was reading this chapter, I was tinking about, the German dianr help them and they die in the ocean.

Greman boat
food
English
island

Figure 3. Key words and resulting chapter summary for *Leaving Vietnam*

the chapter. Is easy and small for put to any book. I think use this sticky notes in the future."

Conclusions

Many of my ELL students had not ever developed effective strategies for comprehending a text written in their native language. I wanted them to develop such strategies, now, as they were reading English. In particular, I wanted to help them summarize main ideas and synthesize information from a text. Using T-charts helped students organize their thoughts. Using sticky notes helped them begin to do what independent readers do: actively respond or question a text as they read. These students quickly saw the value in being able to mark (via sticky notes) on a text as I saw them transfer this scaffolding strategy to other classes. As I watched them do this, I saw that my ELL students had realized that reading is an active process, and that comprehension is a result of engagement with the text, not merely decoding the words.

As students used sticky notes, they learned to pause, reflect, and visualize. Through continued use, some students began to move away from actually writing words on the sticky notes as they stopped to reflect on the key terms from each section. In other words, the scaffolding strategy—using the sticky notes as a cue to stop and gather important words—was no longer needed as reflection became a part of their reading process.

This year's inquiry study has helped me to "really know and understand" my students' thinking processes beyond the results of activities and tests. Analyzing students' work samples gave me a basis for creating activities/lessons that reflect students' needs, instead of teaching one strategy after another without seeing students demonstrate their understanding of them. I am confident that my students know why they are using this reading strategy, and even if they are not reading at grade level, they have a grasp and understanding of the reading process that they can apply to future classes.

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