

Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons

25 Surefire Ways to Engage Students
and Improve Comprehension


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NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • AUCKLAND • SYDNEY
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Dedication

For my three children, Bryan, Rachael, and Rebecca



To contact Lori Oczkus for workshops or staff development
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Please see page 11 for a note about the DVD.

Acknowledgments

One of the biggest challenges we face in our classrooms today is keeping our students engaged and motivated to learn. This new book is about just that—engaging students in comprehension lessons. I teach every week in classrooms and am deeply grateful to the students and teachers who allow me to learn and engage alongside them. I am especially thankful to the teachers and students at Napa Valley Language Academy for welcoming me into their classrooms and community over the past few years. ¡Muchas gracias! Thanks for allowing us to videotape at your wonderful school.

Also many thanks go to the teachers who encouraged me to write this book, my third on comprehension. A few years ago, whenever I worked with teachers, they began asking, “Where was that lesson in your books?” I realized that I needed to write a text that would target engagement and interactive lessons. It didn’t take much to get me going. I am a comprehension junkie. Like many of you, my bookshelves are filled with resources on comprehension, and I can’t seem to get enough. Titles by Routman, Keene, and Zimmerman, Harvey and Goudvis, Daniels, Pinnell, Block, and Hoyt gather around me and support my work with children. With so many resources out there, what else could one possibly say about comprehension? Yet I felt the need to add some unique ideas that will complement the good work we already do.

I am grateful to my trusted review team for reading every word of this book and providing brutally honest feedback. These teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators from all around the United States are “literacy sisters” who remain crazy for comprehension and can chat enthusiastically about reading for hours on end. Thanks go to Cathy Bailey, Mary Jo Fox, Tamara Jo Rhomberg, and Kathy Langham. How lucky I’ve been, too, to have Audrey Fong as a reviewer on every book I’ve written. Thanks, Audrey, for your brilliant insights! Ellen Osmundson, your friendship and continued support of my work, not to mention long walks every week, make me think and soothe my soul!

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Introduction

Joyful Teaching

After one of my staff development workshops, I found myself alone in a large boardroom with my messy pile of overhead transparencies, dozens of student samples, DVDs, and my favorite children's books scattered everywhere. Just minutes before, the teachers rushed off to their classrooms to attack mile-long to-do lists in preparation for their new students who would arrive in just two more days. We had enjoyed a great day with three staffs joined together for a workshop on comprehension strategies and lots of delicious food. (Teachers love to graze and eat on staff development days!) As I gathered up leftover chocolate kisses and empty wrappers from the tables, I felt satisfied with our time together and looked forward to teaching at their schools in the coming months. At the same time, I knew the teachers felt stressed with all the pressure to meet standards, bring up scores, and help a population that often struggles below grade level.

An administrator slipped back into the room for just a moment to share her wisdom. "You know what is missing from classrooms today?" she quizzed. "Everywhere I go I see a desperate lack of joy. With all the pressure from high-stakes

testing, we've squeezed the fun out of teaching and learning for both kids and teachers. People need to not be so serious. These are children." She added that she thought my lessons provided teachers with a refreshing opportunity to be joyful again, promoting deeper thinking and improving comprehension. Interactive lessons provide teachers and students avenues for joy by allowing them to respond to quality literature with a full range of emotions.

Then off she dashed to an important meeting, leaving me alone again in the echoing hall. I thought about her insightful comment in that moment of solitude. She was right. I'd noticed over the past five years a dramatic decrease in joyful learning and teaching. My mission is not only to show teachers how to improve and deepen comprehension for all students, but also to help teachers rediscover the joy and fun of teaching.

This is a book designed for you, the busy teacher who wants to hook students on reading and learning with research-based lessons but without tons of prep. This is a book that will arm you with practice and flexible tools to help your students improve their comprehension. Along the way I do hope you and your students will find yourselves enjoying the process.

Why We Need Engaging Lessons and Scaffolded Instruction in Comprehension

Let's face it. Sometimes it feels as though we are entertaining as much as teaching this generation of students. Too many of them are glued to television, computer, and game screens for more hours than we wish to know about. It is no wonder it feels so difficult to maintain their attention for longer periods of time. We need to engage students in exciting comprehension lessons that will capture their attention, make them think, improve their comprehension, and keep them motivated to read more.

In this book you will find a wealth of exciting classroom-tested lessons that will aid you in teaching the comprehension strategies you already teach: connect, predict/infer, question, summarize, monitor/clarify, and evaluate through a variety of modalities. Interactive think-alouds engage students during the modeling phase of the lesson with gestures to cue the strategies and clever characters and metaphors that students can relate to the strategies. In addition, mentor texts become familiar friends that anchor students' thinking about the strategies. When students practice the strategies in teams, they use strategy starters such as "I think I will learn" for predicting with nonfiction as they select words from the text and record predictions on a group chart. On their own, students use what they've learned in the lesson to apply the strategies as they read to understand the text better.

As P. David Pearson once put it, "Scaffolding is the heart and the art of teaching" (1992, p. 145–199). Scaffolding means providing our students with just

the right amount of support in the form of more examples and meaningful opportunities to practice independently and with peers. With the daily challenges we face as teachers, together with the massive amount of print students encounter, and the demand for higher test scores, the need for quality scaffolded instruction in comprehension is great.

Why I Wrote This Book

As a national staff developer and literacy coach, I spend about 25–30 hours every month teaching students in grades K–6 and occasionally in grades 7–8 as well. Most of the schools I serve are program improvement buildings and Title I schools that are filled with English learners. Many of these schools are located in high-poverty areas. The students and teachers alike are under extreme pressure to raise their test scores. Even in the upper-middle-class schools where I coach, teachers feel the heat and expectations for improved performance. Nobody in schools today escapes this unfortunate reality. In all of these different schools where I demonstrate, teach, and coach every week, I learn along with the teachers and students what works best and what doesn't. It is a humbling challenge to say the least. Comprehension is always the number-one concern of the teachers.

Teachers today can't seem to gather enough comprehension ideas to meet the demands of the testing and the standards. The growing interest in comprehension stems in part from the National Reading Panel (2000a) guidelines that require every reading program to include explicit instruction in comprehension along with phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary. The interest in comprehension is greater than ever and growing.

The theme I've chosen for this book is active engagement in comprehension lessons. I began to notice that after demo lessons, when I ask teachers to tell me what they notice about the lessons, the first comment is always, "The students were engaged. They were with you the entire time." So I decided to research and write about the most engaging and creative ways to teach comprehension to our students. The best part about teaching this way is that the students end up doing the work of learning and your job of teaching is much easier! Picture students making colorful chains to represent their connections. Or imagine students role-playing story characters as they infer feelings. Or how about teams of students working together to use the sentence frame, "I can tell that . . ." as they read, record, and discuss their inferences in a social studies text. In these lessons, students talk, students collaborate, and they are supported as they think deeply about their comprehension.

You can use any of the tools in this book with lessons *you already have* in your own repertoire of exciting lessons designed to increase your students' learning engagement. For example, you might have a really great lesson on predicting from

another book or workshop. You read this book and decide to add drama to the lesson. It is up to you to adapt the tools such as drama, music, gestures, and the metaphors of characters to your own teaching style. I wrote this book for teachers like you who want to achieve results by engaging students more effectively.

Who This Book Is For

This book is a flexible resource that offers practical tools for a variety of audiences, including teachers, coaches, staff developers, administrators, and even children.

Teachers

You probably already teach the “good readers” comprehension strategies. Whether you use a basal or teach with novels, trade literature, or leveled text, your district requires you to explicitly teach comprehension strategies. This text provides you with flexible tools to use in any lesson, including those you already teach. These tools include think-aloud lessons with mentor text, characters/metaphors, gestures, drama, and even music. The lesson plan is a pattern that provides students with the support they need to be successful and includes teacher think-alouds; guided practice in cooperative groups, pairs, or teams; independent practice; and a lesson wrap-up. Choose your favorite lessons and use them over and over with different kinds of reading material. Your students will welcome the engaging lessons, and you will find that with very little prep you are set to go.

The DVD offers additional, unique support. You can watch it before, after, or during your reading of the text. Because the lessons are so hands on, it is helpful to see them in action in the classroom with children. Study the DVD on your own time or with a group of colleagues.

Literacy Coaches/Staff Developers

Literacy coaches and staff developers bring varied experiences to their jobs. This book is designed for both the veteran and new staff developer. Whether you need a book to study with a group of teachers, effective demonstration lesson ideas to model, or the outline for a professional development workshop with your faculty, this book provides support for you. Try the lessons with children in a variety of grade levels so you can build your own enthusiasm for the message in this book. You will discover multiple tools that will help you support teachers:

- Part I includes chapters that explain the think-aloud options.
- The DVD allows you to provide a demonstration of lessons and lesson ideas.
- Part II provides you with fully scaffolded lessons and reproducibles.

Principals/Administrators

This book provides support for instructional leaders and administrators working to improve comprehension across grade levels. Whether you have the support of a reading specialist or staff developer or you facilitate teacher learning communities, this book gives you many practical suggestions for group discussions. You might lead your staff as they study the chapters and then try to bring the lessons to staff meetings. Encourage your faculty to embrace the learning that's possible as they watch their own team members teach. The DVD offers just the right support to help teachers internalize what a scaffolded lesson—from teacher modeling to guided practice and independent practice—looks like. You can use the generic template for observations as well as support for effective comprehension lessons. Also, when you step into a classroom, you'll be able to assist students with comprehension with these lessons under your belt.

Children

I know what you are thinking: this is not a book for children. You're right. Your students aren't going to read this book. However, the lessons are designed specifically for them and for their need to actively engage in learning. Maybe as you try the lessons you can share with the students what you are doing. You might even show them portions of the DVD. You might list the names of the lessons on the board for each of the comprehension lessons or strategies. Then, when the class is about to read a text, you can let them vote or choose which lesson they want to do for a given strategy. For example, you might ask them to select how they want to practice the prediction lesson for the social studies text. They choose between the gestures or music and drama lessons. So the idea is to let the students in on the menu choices in this book! They'll love being part of the teaching and learning cycle.

How to Use This Book/DVD

I write books for very busy teachers. You want materials you can flip through any time for a refreshing lesson idea or insight, yet you also need a highly practical book that has the research and depth for engaging you in a cover-to-cover read. You can start with the DVD or the book. My hope is that this book will find a permanent home on your desk and that you will draw on the lessons over and over again to enrich your classroom. You can use these lessons with any fiction or nonfiction reading material. Take the lessons and make them your own. Try the lessons with a colleague or two or hold a book study group for a few months. Above all, enjoy teaching your students!

A Note About the DVD

The DVD is divided into four sections; when you slide the DVD into your computer or play it on your TV in your DVD player, a menu with four buttons pops open on the screen. Let me briefly explain what you'll find: *Play Program*, *Chapters*, *Q&A*, and *Forms*.

Play Program

Click on this button and you can watch the entire DVD from start to finish (40 minutes).

Chapters

Or you can click on this button and skip from chapter to chapter:

Chapter 1: *Introduction*

Chapter 2: *Characters and Props*

Chapter 3: *Hand Gestures*

Chapter 4: *Strategy Starters*

Chapter 5: *Drama*

Chapter 6: *Music*

Chapter 7: *Overview of a Complete
Think-Aloud Lesson*

Chapter 8: *Testimonials*

Chapter 9: *Closing Remarks*

Forms

This button enables you to access the following materials that you can download and print from your computer:

- **DVD Viewing Guide:** Also serves as a Professional Study Guide (one that works for an individual or an entire school).
- **Graphic Organizers:** Working in pairs or teams, students can use these forms to record the ways in which they use the strategies.
- **Classroom Posters:** Showcase each comprehension strategy with posters that serve as helpful reminders for students. You might want to display them in your classroom all year long.

Q&A

In this section, I answer key questions such as these that address various aspects of *Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons*:

- How do the interactive think-alouds intersect with comprehension strategies?
- Describe the gradual release of responsibility model of instruction as it relates to your work.
- Explain what you mean by engagement techniques and address how they provide students with new ways to comprehend.
- What engagement techniques would you use to reach all learners, including those who are learning English as well as students who face learning challenges?
- How do the interactive think-aloud and cooperative learning techniques work together to build comprehension?
- How can districts that use mandated basal programs use interactive think-alouds and still meet standards?
- How can teachers select mentor text that will enhance their own interactive think-alouds?

How This Book Is Organized

The main goal of this text and DVD is to introduce you to a wide variety of ways to differentiate comprehension instruction for your students through interactive think-alouds and engagement techniques. I have divided the book into two parts for ease of use.

Part I

This part of the book provides you with background and many creative ideas for using interactive think-alouds to teach comprehension using mentor texts, characters and props, gestures and strategy starters, and drama. Throughout you'll find step-by-step ideas, great books to read, and lots of classroom examples from a variety of grade levels.

Chapter 1 includes a sample interactive lesson plan to use with any comprehension strategy, as well as the latest on research-based comprehension strategies that all students need. In Chapter 2 we explore mentor texts, or strong, memorable books that you can use to introduce and reinforce comprehension strategies all year long. Chapter 3 provides you with options for creating metaphors to anchor the thinking about strategies that range from using props and characters to sketching graphic organizers and icons. Chapter 4 outlines the research that supports using hand motions and gestures to scaffold comprehension strategies as well as strategy starters to promote richer discussions. Lastly, Chapter 5 offers you lots of creative, quick drama and music ideas that support the strategies, deepen comprehension, and make your lessons memorable.

Part II

This part of the book provides you with fully scaffolded interactive lessons for each of the comprehension strategies including: connect, predict, question, monitor and clarify, infer, summarize, synthesize, and evaluate. The lessons are designed for use with fiction or nonfiction at any elementary grade level. You can return to these interactive lessons time and time again to strengthen your students' comprehension as you work together in whole-class lessons, guided-reading groups, or cooperative pairs or teams.