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Mills, Kathy A.

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Floating on a Sea of Talk: Reading Comprehension Through Speaking and Listening

Kathy A. Mills

Reading “floats on a sea of talk” (Britton, 1970, p. 164). Learning depends on the use of language knowledge for the purpose of acquiring more language, concepts, and information (Merritt & Culatta, 1998). Recent research shows that students' oral language proficiency plays a crucial role in the acquisition of reading fluency and comprehension (Nation & Snowling, 2004; Pullen & Justice, 2003). Research with students between the ages of 6 and 14 shows that scaffolded classroom talk assists students to deepen their understanding of texts (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2004). In addition, spoken language is an area of competence in its own right, to be fostered alongside other aspects of the language curriculum (Stierer & Maybin, 1994).

As a former classroom teacher, and trainer of preservice and inservice teachers of literacy, I share my top six speaking and listening strategies. They have been consistently favored by both teachers and students, and they are supported by current research.

Research with students in the lower and middle elementary grades showed that learners benefited from instruction in metacognitive strategies, assisting them to become effective learners early in their schooling (Anstey & Bull, 2004). Metacognition—awareness and control of one's thinking processes—is not solely developmental, and it can be enhanced through training (Alvermann, Swafford, & Montero, 2004; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). Proficient readers consistently use the following repertoire of thinking strategies. Speaking and listening activities that apply these strategies are matched to the phases of instruction—before, during, and after reading.

Teaching tips are provided here for applying these strategies in the context of speaking and listening. Rather than simply reducing these to “time fillers,” students need to be taught *how*, *when*, and *why* to apply the strategies using a wide range of conventional and digital everyday texts (Anstey & Bull, 2004). Note that although metacognitive strategies have conventionally been taught in the context of reading print, there is an increasing need to incorporate multimodal texts in reading programs, such as websites, podcasts, and billboard advertisements. These texts combine two or more modes—print, visual, spatial, audio, and gestural (Mills, 2009; New London Group, 2000).

1. Activate Prior Knowledge

Students' reading comprehension ability often has more to do with their relevant prior experiences and knowledge of the topic, genre, or vocabulary than their cognitive ability. For example, students with varied social and cultural backgrounds will have differing schemata or conceptual structures upon which to relate new knowledge from texts. One of the most effective ways to improve comprehension is to activate and support students' mental files or prior knowledge before reading (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). A stimulating repertoire of “before reading” speaking and listening activities can help students draw upon relevant cultural and language resources to make meaning and improve all levels of comprehension, from recall to inferential and critical thinking (Anstey & Freebody, 1987).

Telling Tales is a prereading speaking activity in which students make predictions about the events in a recount or narrative by drawing inferences from the visual elements. The teacher should model the strategy first. Using a large, illustrated text, make predictions about the content from the images while covering the words. For example, the teacher might say, “The front cover has a large photo of dinosaur fossils, so I think that this is probably a nonfiction book.” In pairs, students view images in a text, such as an Internet news homepage. The first student might say, “I think this article is about a devastating fire that destroyed a large number of properties.” The second student listens and then makes a prediction based on the next newsbyte image. Students continue in this way, building on each other’s predictions in a consistent and logical way. Students confirm or correct their predictions when they read the article (Mills, 2008).

2. Make Inferences

Recent research has shown that teachers' questioning rarely engages children in inferential thinking (Urquhart, 2002). Inferential thinking involves going beyond the literal meaning of the text, gaining deeper insights by connecting what is read, seen, or heard in a text with one’s background knowledge and experiences (Trehearne, 2006). Questions requiring powers of inference are the most difficult for children to answer. Teachers are now going beyond seeking “right answers” to promote creative and imaginative approaches to the comprehension of texts.

Character Hot Seat is an innovative speaking and listening activity for during and after reading to encourage students to make inferences in response to a written narrative. Conducting the activity in small groups or as a class, a student adopts the role of a major character in a narrative (Education Department of Western Australia, 2004). The other students interview the student in role to generate inferences about the relationships between characters and events. The teacher models a possible dialogue between the book characters. For example, after reading an e-book of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” the class could become the villagers who question the boy about his deceptive cries for help. Villagers could ask, “Why did you attempt to trick us?” The boy could reply, “I wasn’t confident that I could defend myself and the sheep from a vicious wolf.” In this way, students identify the character’s emotions, personalities, and motivations; offer details for events; or provide their own explanations of events. Such dramatic arts activities provide a springboard for generating alternate perspectives while encouraging deeper understanding of the network of relations between characters.

3. Use Knowledge of Text Structures

Students can be taught to identify the organizational structures of a wide variety of texts, which aids reading comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). However, it is important for teachers not to present text structures as static and unchanging, because new forms that extend the limits of conventional texts are constantly emerging in electronic communications. For example, students today are exposed to blogs, wikis, online synchronous chat, SMS messaging, and online financial transactions. Teachers should use authentic texts that are used in the world outside of school, highlighting their typical and atypical organizational features (Mills, 2009).

Pick-a-Plot is a dramatic speaking and listening activity for during and after reading. It focuses attention on narrative text structure to assist reading comprehension. Students work in groups of three to create and tell an original story. The first student generates the orientation of the story, introducing the characters and setting. The second student imagines a series of complications in the plot, while a third student draws closure to

the story with a climax and a resolution. After practicing the story, the group can tell their story to another group. Students will benefit from cards that provide suggestions for possible settings (e.g., city, jungle, outer space), characters (e.g., elderly man, dog, alien), problems (e.g., lost, natural disaster, attack), and resolutions (e.g., escape, rescue, character change).

4. Visualize

Research demonstrates that competent readers create mental images before, during, and after reading to aid their comprehension (Guerrero, 2003; Sadoski & Paivio, 2001). The strategy of visualizing uses the mind's capacity to imagine what is being communicated by the words, images, gestures, spatial layout, and sounds within a text. Mental imagery anchors new ideas in the reader's mind by linking abstract propositions to a concrete experience—image, feeling, sound, smell, or taste. Students need to be taught to recall ideas in a visual way in appropriate reading contexts (Pressley, 2001).

Three-Step Freeze Frames is a visualizing activity which can be conducted during and after reading. Groups of students create a series of three frozen action shots to depict events in a text using dramatic movement (no words). The teacher assists a group of students to model example freeze frames for the class. For example, after reading Aesop's fable, "The Hare and Tortoise," one student uses expressive postures and facial expressions to reenact the Hare running, falling asleep, and waking. At the same time, a second student could play the Tortoise who plods consistently three times. Other students in the group might be animals cheering as the Tortoise crosses the finish line. The students should use a range of heights—low, medium, and high—to create interest and should remember to face the audience when performing. Divide the class members into groups to plan, rehearse, and present their freeze frames. When presenting each performance, the teacher and class signal for the group to change postures by clapping. Class members offer an interpretation of each freeze frame, and the performing group clarifies the depicted events.

5. Generate and Answer Questions

Rather than answer the teacher's questions, this metacognitive strategy refers to the students' ability to generate and answer their own questions about a text (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Research with students in grades 3 to 5 demonstrates that elaborative questioning improves comprehension of texts during instructional and independent reading contexts (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). For example, highly effective readers ask questions such as "What is the most important information here for my purpose?" "What have I missed?" and "What is my opinion of this issue?"

A speaking activity that encourages students to generate and answer questions is Interview a Character. During or after reading a story or autobiography, students work in pairs to prepare and record a radio interview between an interviewer and the main character using an interview script outline. For example, older students might pretend to interview Barack Obama, asking questions that relate to the content of his autobiography. The teacher can explain that questions have different depths, contrasting questions that require information recall with those that require drawing inferences. The students can perform the interviews in role to a live audience or digitally record the interview using a computer, microphone, and a simple sound recording program (e.g., Microsoft Sound Recorder, Audacity).

6. Retell and Summarize

Students need to be taught the important comprehension skills of retelling and summarizing information. Retelling is not simply recalling a list of events. Rather, it involves selecting the most important information, making personal connections, and representing the information in a logical sequence (Trehearne, 2006). Summarizing requires selectivity to differentiate between salient and unimportant ideas (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991).

PARIS is a speaking activity that I use to combine five essential self-monitoring comprehension strategies: **Predict**, **Ask questions**, **Retell**, **Infer**, and **Summarize**. Before reading or viewing a text, students use the first two strategies—predict and ask questions—using the cover, author’s name, illustrations, headings, and other textual features. During or after reading and viewing, students apply the last three strategies—retell the events, draw inferences from the information, and summarize the text in 66 words or fewer. The teacher models each strategy using a text that is read aloud or viewed by the class (see Table 1.0 for example questions and responses):

Table 1.0 PARIS Examples

Strategy	Example question and answer
Predict	Q: What do you think this text is about when you look at the cover? A: “I think that the article is about a ferocious marsupial.”
Ask questions	Q: What questions do you have when you look at the pictures? A: “Why does the Tasmanian Devil have sharp teeth?”
Retell	Q: What were the most important events (fiction) or information presented (nonfiction) in the text? A: “It describes the appearance, habitat, breeding, and diet of the Tasmanian Devil.”
Infer	Q: What can you infer from the information that is not directly stated in the text? A: “Tasmanian Devils are nocturnal because the text states that they are awake during the night.”
Summarize	Q: What was the main point of the text? A: “The article gives information about an endangered native marsupial, the Tasmanian Devil.”

Provide small groups with a sheet listing these key strategies to record their shared verbal responses. Encourage the students to apply this strategy independently to self-monitor their comprehension.

Setting sail: Benefits for reading comprehension

Teachers need to rediscover the transforming potential of talk for developing students’ reading comprehension. All of the speaking and listening activities provided in this article have revitalized and enlivened reading classrooms. The strategies are motivating and engaging, multimodal, open-ended, and supported by evidence-based research. In addition, they draw on students’ existing language resources, create

space for diversity, and require few resources. Teachers find them easy to adapt for use with students of varied levels of language competence. Most important, they contribute to a classroom culture in which collaboration and meaningful social interaction form the sea upon which readers can set sail.

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