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# Developing Metacognitive Reading Strategies with College Students

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*I'm a college student. I don't understand why I should be taking this reading class. I can already read, or I wouldn't be here.*

As an instructor of a college-level reading course entitled "Seminar in Interactive Reading," I am often faced with these comments each semester. Despite resistance, this class is mandatory for some of the freshmen students enrolling in college through an alternative admissions program. The students are admitted into the university through an alternative admissions program because they do not meet the traditional admission requirements at the university. More specifically, the students have been placed into a developmental writing course based on a writing sample submitted as a part of the admissions process. The writing evaluations determine placement into one of three courses at the university: Developmental Reading and Writing, Basic Writing, or Introductory College Writing. Students whose test results indicate they should begin their college writing course sequence at the Developmental Reading and Writing level are also mandated to take a reading class. The Developmental Reading and Writing course is a three-credit, one-semester course (15-week semester). Time limitations do not permit exhaustive instruction in both developmental reading and writing. Therefore, a two-credit co-requisite course was established: Seminar in Interactive Reading.

## A Close Look: Metacognition and Reading

Seminar in Interactive Reading has the goal of helping students to become strategic, interactive readers. The design of the course is based on metacognitive reading theory, one that suggests the importance of personal awareness and continuous

regulation of cognitive behavior during the reading process.

The literature on metacognitive reading theory, in part, posits that proficient readers are purposeful and strategic, in that readers who appropriately use metacognitive skills *seek* to make meaningful connections in their reading. They engage in deliberate comprehension monitoring during the reading task (Gourgey 127). A metacognitive approach to reading consistently requires readers to clearly identify reading purposes, identify relevant prior knowledge, identify important components of a message, selectively direct attention to the more important contents of a text rather than the less important information, monitor content for consistency, use self-questioning to monitor comprehension, and take compensatory action when comprehension failure has occurred (Baker and Brown 354; Brown, Palincsar and Armbruster 263).

By extension, engagement in metacognitive activities also creates an awareness that learning has not resulted (Britton, Stimson, Stennett, and Gulgoz 476-77). This is an integral strategy to keep readers on task. Too often, poor readers complete the reading assignment by decoding the words on the assigned text, but they have not understood. Moreover, they have not been aware that they did not understand because of the passive nature of their reading process. Students who are able to successfully incorporate metacognitive behavior while reading become better prepared to comprehend and remember information as well as apply newly acquired knowledge to other areas (Gourgey 127).

How does metacognitive behavior translate for the purposes of readers in college? Actually, strategic behavior has been shown to have links to higher achievement at the college level. Taraban, Rynearson, and Kerr (283) examined the connections between reading goals, strategy use and academic achievement of 324 college undergraduates. In this study of reading behavior, the students with higher grade point averages remembered establishing more reading goals to guide the reading assignment and used reading strategies more often than their peers with lower grade point averages. The more

proficient students recognized that reading behaviors should change to address the goals of the reading task. Once the goal had been established, students with higher grade point averages were able to appropriately direct, monitor, and evaluate their individual reading performance.

Also, Palmer (66) found that traditional college readers apply strategic behaviors to monitor comprehension of both expository and narrative text. They often make connections, visualize, reread, adjust reading speed and summarize (57). However, Palmer found that college readers often are stagnated by assuming that similar reading tasks require the same strategies. They overlook optional or additional strategies that may facilitate comprehension. Also, they consistently fail to make predictions during reading. Overall, Palmer's research does suggest that as students mature as college readers, ultimately their ability to apply cognitive skills increases.

Additionally, further research on college readers posits that efficient strategic behavior requires more than the awareness of the proper strategies, as it results when the reader understands how a strategy works, as well as when and where to apply it for the most effective results (Wade, Trathen and Schraw 149; Wood, Motz, and Willoughby, 698). After adequate classroom instruction and practice, the use of strategic processes should eventually become a natural part of reading behavior. Students who understand an array of strategic processes and make use of these abilities usually achieve more in academic settings than those who understand and use fewer strategic processes (Wood et al., 698).

With a sound theoretical foundation in mind, Seminar in Interactive Reading introduces students to the practice of metacognitive, strategic reading behaviors.

### **Think-Aloud as a Useful Tool**

One of the strategic reading tools that is utilized in Seminar in Interactive Reading is the verbal protocol, often referred to as "think-aloud." It has been shown to be an effective means to engage students in metacognitive reading behavior, and it

allows for "entrance" into the cognitive processes used by readers during the reading process (Tierney and Readence, 319 and 360). The reader verbalizes her/his thoughts during the reading task (Davey 44; Pressley and Afflerbach 1), reporting underlying thinking while engaging in a task, according to cognitive psychological processing and reader response theory (Pressley and Afflerbach 4). Reader-response theory also meshes with the theory "that reading is *constructively responsive* – that is, good readers are always changing their processing in response to the text they are reading" (Pressley and Afflerbach 2). The think-aloud can also be used to help poor and weak readers monitor their comprehension and apply self-correction strategies to build comprehension (Tierney and Readence 360).

As an example of specific application, in my classroom around the fourth week of the semester, I introduce students to the think – aloud process, building on the reading strengths they already possess. Initially, they are reluctant to engage in the process. In part, they believe they are being asked to read aloud. They also feel weird "talking to themselves" as they read. However, they become more interested in and comfortable with the process after I model the behavior, explain the benefits and have them practice in a supportive environment. I model the think-aloud on a text that I am reading for the first time. Sometimes I will simply copy a page from a text that I am planning to read or have just begun to read onto the overhead so that I can verbalize comments as they read along. Also sometimes I ask to borrow a student's textbook for the exercise. The students then know that the text is new to me and that I have not practiced my responses ahead of time. Then I give the student readers explicit directions about what to do during the process, instructing them on how to discuss their mental and strategic processes before, during and after reading. Additional comfort and proficiency comes as they practice the strategy in authentic reading situations, such as in a personal study area while reading their content-area textbooks.

The following comments provide an example of how I might model the think-aloud for

my students while reading an excerpt from Pressley and Afflerbach's Verbal Protocols of Reading: The Nature of Constructively Responsive Reading (1). This is a book that I have used as a research reference (original text in bold type; my think-aloud in regular type):

**An Introduction to Protocol Analysis of Reading**  
Okay, I expect this chapter to tell me about the basics of a think aloud and how it can give insight into reading processes. **The understanding of human thoughts and actions continues as a goal of psychology and affiliated areas of inquiry.**

Okay, I know that research in reading and psychology are closely linked. Obviously, this text will probably have a lot of references to psychological research. I hope I can keep up with some of the technical references. **We begin this book by considering briefly the development of protocol analysis as a methodology for examining thought and action, the uses of protocol analysis in investigations of reading past and present, and the historic and ongoing concerns with verbal reports as data.** They are still referring to the think aloud as protocol analysis. It does seem that it will be a valid way to collect data about my students' thoughts during the reading process, however, they note that there are concerns. I hope those won't affect my ability to collect strong data. **This is a healthy situation, for the ongoing use of think-aloud protocols has provided information that can be used to refine the methodology.** Okay, they now refer to them as think-alouds. I have to make note in my text that there are different ways to discuss the same actions.

After modeling the think-aloud process for the students, I introduce a text that we read as a class. Each student has a personal copy of the text. I begin by asking for volunteers. Usually someone agrees to begin. If not, I select a student. In order to stay on track during the group procedure, I ask the student to read the text. I, however, reiterate that the think-aloud is not an oral reading process. If the student reads without pausing to make comments or ask questions, I interrupt. I specifically ask if there

were any questions or comments by the reader. Then I open the discussion to other students who may have responses to the text. Someone usually has a response. If not, I provide an example of a response to the text and we continue reading. Gradually, students come to understand the non-threatening nature of "thinking-aloud." After the exercise, I give them a simple text to practice in pairs. The students take turns reading while the partner makes comments. I circulate through the room to answer questions and offer insights to help them master the process.

In all, students are encouraged to engage in six types of verbal response to the reading of text: articulating the purpose for reading and making predictions about what is to come in the text; monitoring comprehension by pausing to acknowledge when they have not understood what was read; pausing to paraphrase a statement made in the text; evaluating major and minor points expressed in the text; commenting on how an expressed idea compares or contrasts with other materials being read or discussed in the course; and demonstrating analysis of the text by asking questions about how concepts in the reading fit together or questioning how the material fits into background knowledge.

I insure reinforcement by having my students make at least two think-aloud recordings at home during the term. The recordings are brief — five minutes — but they allow me to listen to students' application of the process. My preference is that they record the reading of a text from another class, specifically while completing an assigned reading task. This reinforcement, I have found, is integral to the transfer of the process to the reading involved in the core academic courses they are simultaneously taking, as the students need assistance with textbook reading. In fact, the Seminar partially relies on the use of textbooks and other reading materials from content-area courses. These authentic materials are perceived as integral to the transfer of the use of strategies, as it is not beneficial for the students to simply know the strategies if they do not demonstrate transfer to their

college reading assignments. The students are provided various opportunities to practice the process of “transferring.”

### Conclusion

Although I work with college freshmen, the think-aloud works well with learners of all ages. It can also be applied to narrative as well as expository text. By the end of the semester it is often one of the most well received strategies in Seminar in Interactive Reading. It is very influential in helping them to engage in comprehension monitoring, including recognizing when comprehension failure has occurred. It also helps students to make connections to other readings and lectures. Students eventually begin to actively judge the validity of academic arguments as a result of using the think – aloud process.

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