Matching Reading Models and Strategies

MARY FRANCES LANDENWICH

Teacher Mary Frances Landenwich discovers that the skill-and-drill activities used in teaching students to read often do little toward teaching those students to comprehend what they read. Through this realization, Landenwich institutes a more meaning-centered teaching style that, in turn, leads her toward some productive pairings of reading models and strategies.

My undergraduate studies in education little prepared me for the real classroom. I remember my first assignment as a teacher of twenty-nine third-graders. I was given manual after manual for teaching spelling, math, social studies, and the basal reader. I followed the teaching manuals, presenting skill after skill to these eager faces. We learned vowels, blends, suffixes, prefixes, multiplication facts, vocabulary, and more from the honored ditto sheet. My students, and—I must admit—I, too, loved to smell the purple ink from the dittos before we pulled up our sleeves and plunged into this wonderful learning activity. We were all quite proficient—and fast—at these activities. My students could whip them out at a rate of one sheet every ten minutes. And I could always find more and more for them to do. As they read aloud to me in their basal readers, I knew I had taught them to read. Or had I?

It didn't take long to realize this skill and drill did little for their comprehension of the text. Oh, yes, they could read the words on the page quite fluently. To anyone listening, my students could clearly read. But many could not derive meaning from what they read. Some could recall a few factual details, but fewer could make inferences about the text or relate the text to their own lives. I was disheartened. All I had taught them was decoding.

It has been years since this burning issue began to nag at me. I have since taught fourth, fifth, and seventh grades. Amazingly, I have found that lack of comprehension is prevalent in students of every grade. Well, no wonder. If there is no meaning coming from the page, reading is a useless activity only tolerated during the six and a half hours of the school day to keep the teacher from hassling you.

I became determined to find a way to really teach kids to read. Through professional reading of books such as Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop, by Shelley Harwayne (1993), and Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents, by Linda Rief and Nancie Atwell (1992), I began to embrace a different view of teaching literacy. My teaching became less skill based and more meaning centered. I stocked my classroom shelves with good literature toward which I knew my students would gravitate. Time was provided every day for book selection and reading. Linda Rief provided the rationale needed to make my workshop approach successful. She described literacy as a process approach that was far distant from my skill-drill-test approach. I began to assess my students for their strengths and weaknesses instead of right or wrong answers, supporting them along their literacy journey with what they needed instructionally at the moment.

I observed a definite change in many of my students. Most showed more eagerness to read, and class book discussions clearly reflected an increase in comprehension of text. But my efforts saw only minimal results with my lower-achieving students. There was a spark initially. My lower-
achieving students loved looking at the back cover to see what the book was about. But as they sat down to read, most could not stay with the book. It was too much effort to really read. I realized these students needed more support, but I knew skill-drill wasn’t the answer. I discovered another piece of the literacy puzzle when I was accepted into the Louisville Writing Project’s summer institute. During this institute, I was nurtured as a writer and a professional. I was immersed into a supportive learning community that allowed risk taking and meaningful dialogue with colleagues. This experience taught me the value of developing a caring and supportive community in my own classroom where students engage in dialogue and construct meaning for themselves. It was apparent I must not only allow for a varied and rich print environment, but I must also provide opportunities for students to engage in constructive talk about books.

In his book Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom (1994), Harvey Daniels introduced a reading model that would engage my students in constructive book talk. I implemented literature circles the following school year with great success for many of my students. They were motivated to read and enjoyed the social interaction of the circles. These quality book discussions challenged my students to expand their thinking. Standardized test scores of my lower-achieving readers, however, showed few gains at the end of the year. This did not discourage me, for I knew tests could not measure enthusiasm, and enthusiasm was the first step to improving reading.

Last summer, I participated in an advanced reading institute hosted by the Louisville Writing Project. The focus was solely on reading strategies that promote better reading comprehension. Through this concentrated study of strategies that good readers use to comprehend text, I realized I must be very intentional in teaching them to my students. But what intrigued me more was a book called Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop (Keene and Zimmermann 1997). This book introduced strategies like prediction, connections, and visualization—strategies that did not appear at first glance to be reading comprehension at all. However, as an accomplished reader, I know I use these strategies to make text meaningful. Keene and Zimmermann describe text-to-self connections as making the reader aware of the relevance the text has to his or her own life. These connections can be made with characters in the text and the reader’s personal experiences. Prediction helps readers use critical thinking skills and problem solving. By actively predicting while reading, readers reflect and evaluate the text, thereby extracting deeper meaning. Visualization is a strategy whereby the reader creates mental images of the text. By making visual images, students can better understand text.

I had two components of a successful literacy program already: a literature-rich environment and a community of learners using social interaction to construct meaning. The third component, I came to understand, is the intentional instruction in strategies that require the reader to make personal connections with text.

**Research Question**

My classroom action research began with the question “What gains are made in lower-achieving students’ comprehension when reading strategies are intentionally taught within three different reading models?” As my research progressed, however, it became clear that I already knew the reading strategies were effective in teaching kids to comprehend better because they were supported by research. What I didn’t know was if reading strategies could be learned more easily within certain teaching models. A more defined question surfaced: “Which literature-based reading models best support the learning of different reading strategies?”

Literature circles, student self-selection of books, and whole-class reads are examples of literature-based reading models I utilized in my fifth grade classroom. Literature circles, as described by Harvey Daniels, allow for the temporary formation of groups of students who have selected the same book. Students monitor their own reading assignments and discussions. Roles such as discussion director and summarizer are assumed by members of each literature group to facilitate book discussion. Upon completion, I require each group to present its book to the class.

Self-selection is a model employed by many teachers. Students choose books from a wide variety of quality literature. I monitor my fifth-graders’ silent reading by using a reader’s response log. Culminating activities often take the form of book talks or book reviews.

The whole-class read is the traditional model of teaching reading without using a basal reader. The entire class reads a book selected by the teacher. I choose books that expose my students to literacy conventions and critical social issues.

For my research, I chose three students from each of my fifth grade language arts classes who scored the lowest, average, and highest by stanine in reading comprehension on the Stanford Diagnostic Test
Matching Models and Strategies

administered to all fifth-graders in my school at the beginning of the year. These students were selected not only by stanine score, but because they did not have any severe emotional, physical, or learning disabilities that would impede learning. After selection, I interviewed the nine students to find out what they knew, if anything, about the reading strategies of prediction, visualization, and text-to-self. Along with each interview, I gave a pretest on each strategy. I used a passage from a fifth grade basal reader that was applicable to the specific reading strategy and asked the students to apply the strategy by sketching for visualization, or by writing a prediction or text-to-self-response. Most students knew what prediction was and could apply the strategy to the passage.

Students gave their best guesses for visualization and text-to-self but were unfamiliar with the terminology. I briefly explained the strategy before they read the passage, but only the highest achievers grasped the idea. I introduced visualization to the entire class as a minilesson before we began a whole-class read using *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, by E. L. Konigsburg. We spent several days practicing seeing the “moving picture” in our heads and doing quick sketches of these mental images in our response logs. I did not allow much time for the students to sketch so they wouldn’t get bogged down trying to be artists. Instead, I emphasized the importance of drawing the picture that was playing in their heads as they read. During our practice, students exchanged sketches and studied the pictures as I reread the passage to the class. As I read, students would put a check mark on details of each other’s sketches about which they had heard me read. This became a rather enjoyable activity for them. Each day, students tried to receive more check marks on their sketches, thus revealing more retained images. When I was sure the strategy was well understood, we began the class read. Instead of answering questions after each chapter, students were required to visualize a scene from the chapter. I monitored the class’s progress with the strategy through these sketches. My final assessment of visualization required the students to read a passage taken from a fifth grade basal reader and to sketch the images they had of the scene.

I felt it would be useful to pair the prediction strategy with the literature circle model. After reading and discussing on the first day of literature circles, students returned to their response logs and predicted what might happen next in their books. Before reading the next day, the group shared their predictions and gave reasons to support them. While visiting each group, I heard, “See, I told you Ralph would be caught!” or “I never thought that would happen.” Class discussions centered on why some predictions were right, some were “partially” right, and some were not right at all. Students would then reflect in their logs about their prediction and again predict the next day’s reading. I monitored the learning of the strategy by reading log entries and class discussions. Final assessment of the prediction strategy was having the students read the first half of a short story in their basal reader and predict the ending.

Before students chose books for their independent, self-selection reading, I gave a series of minilessons to the entire class on the reading strategy text-to-self connections. I used “think-alouds” to help students understand the strategy. I read several books aloud to the class, stopping to think out loud about passages and how they

An example of the reading strategy visualization, with classmates’ check marks on images they recognized from the story.
related to my personal life. These think-alouds were followed by class discussion on ways the passage related to my students. After I was confident students understood the strategy, they chose their books. Students were given twenty to thirty minutes daily to read silently and then respond in their learning logs with text-to-self connections. I gave daily guidance with this strategy by asking students to respond to specific questions like “What character is most like you?” or “Tell me about a time you had a similar experience.” I monitored the learning of this reading strategy by critiquing the daily learning log and providing feedback. The final assessment was based on reviewing the response log.

**Findings**

My action research took approximately three months to complete. I paired reading strategies with reading models to see which ones best supported the learning of the strategy with three different fifth grade language arts classes. I came to similar conclusions: A few surprises and many new questions surfaced from this experience. Most of all, I realized the value of doing classroom research.

I was certain that teaching the reading strategy prediction would be an easy task. After all, teachers from preschool on use this strategy while reading aloud to students. But I was wrong. My students clearly understood what prediction was. While they could easily tell me what they thought would happen in a book, they had not learned to use prediction as a strategy while they read. Initially, students predicted too far ahead; while reading chapter two, predicting the ending does not help one anticipate what will happen in chapter three. I realized I must provide step-by-step instruction on using this strategy if students were going to internalize its benefits.

After each literature circle read and discussed the day’s reading, I had each student write down three things they knew from the reading. Based on these three things, they were then to write down a prediction of what would happen in tomorrow’s reading. This was needed to get kids to realize that predictions must be based on information learned through prior reading. Each member of the group shared predictions before reading the next day. In addition, each student explained why they thought as they did. This sparked discussion even before the group began reading. In one group that was reading *Stealing Home*, a biography of Jackie Robinson, I heard, “I think Jackie is going to get a scholarship to school because they don’t have any money” and “How could he become great if he doesn’t go to school to play on a team?” Another member of the group responded, “Maybe he has a rich uncle that will pay his way?”

After much struggling, students began internalizing this strategy as they read. It was very common to hear students shout, “I was right!” as the group was reading. Other students would leave their groups to show me exactly in the book where their predictions had come true. We always revisited our predictions in our response logs and wrote why we thought we had been right or wrong. Interestingly, some students were partially right or their prediction came true later.

In analyzing this strategy within this reading model, I realized student conversation about prediction greatly supported their learning. Listening to other students predict stirred thoughts in those who were reluctant. I think this model also aided students who struggled with reading comprehension. The group supports comprehension by reading aloud, discussing the book, and sharing ideas. I feel the literature circle model greatly facilitated the learning of prediction. Analyzing the response logs, students showed improvement in all three classes. Lower-achieving students improved as much as average and high achievers.

I chose visualization to teach within the whole-class read because I expected the strategy to be difficult and need lots of teacher reinforcement. I was wrong. Students easily learned the strategy and received the reinforcement from each other. The term visualization was new to most of my students. But, once it was explained, it turned out to be a strategy that a handful of students already used. As you might expect.
Matching Models and Strategies

these were my quick and skillful readers. One student described it as “reading without seeing the words.” This brought the admiration of the entire class and comments such as “How do you do that?”

Students caught on to this strategy quickly. They were very motivated by drawing and challenged themselves to add more detail to their sketches. As we read a book aloud, I would stop and ask the students to visualize the scene. They would share their images. In The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, great discussions took place over scenes like the janitor mopping the men’s restroom of the art museum. Some students visualized him dressed in light blue with his name on the left pocket; others saw him in all gray with a red rag hanging out of his back pocket.

Students learned from each other by checking each other’s sketches. They tried to get more and more checks. Many times, students would ask questions about sketches that clearly showed advanced thought. For example, in one scene, there was a rope marking off the fountain in the museum. One student put a guard by the rope to ensure no one played in the fountain. However, this was not in the book. It clearly showed the student was basing visualization on a personal experience, as all good readers do.

I responded to their moaning by modeling again with think-alouds. They could do it with me and seemed to understand the strategy, but when they were left to be independent, they were not productive. I concluded the text-to-self strategy needs more social interaction to be successful. The independent self-selection model doesn’t allow for discussion of books with others who read the same books. The only interaction is with the student and the text. Young readers, still learning strategy, need others to support them through discussions and peer modeling.

Potential Significance

My fifth-graders internalized the reading strategy prediction when it was taught within the literature circle model. I believe the success of this pairing suggests that peer discussion and group support facilitated learning of the prediction strategy. I believe this to be an effective match of reading strategy and reading model.

The whole-class reading model and the reading strategy visualization was also a successful pairing. Students at every level were motivated by illustrating the “moving picture” in their heads. Sketches of these visual images improved in depth and detail as the reading progressed. Students became more metacognitive. It was, however, not my great guidance that helped students internalize this strategy. It was more the interaction the students had with one another’s sketches.

Surprisingly, the text-to-self strategy and the independent self-selection read was not a successful pairing. Students clearly could not conceptualize this strategy without the support of discussion and peer modeling.

References


Mary Frances Landenwich is a teacher-consultant with the Louisville Writing Project. She teaches seventh grade language arts at Highland Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky. At the time of this research, she taught fifth grade.

This piece, reprinted with permission, originally appeared in the Louisville Writing Project Network News 19 (2), Winter 2000.