How to Support Reading Comprehension for Adolescents with Language Comprehension Difficulties

by Cassidi Richmond, Colby Hall, and Emily Solari

Gaining meaning from text, or reading comprehension, is the ultimate goal of reading instruction. But too few students in the United States are able to read grade-level texts with understanding. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Report Card, only 34% of eighth-grade students and 31% of twelfth-grade students were able to comprehend text at or above the Proficient level on the 2019 NAEP reading assessment. Secondary students who score at the Proficient level are able to identify main ideas, arguments, or themes; identify information in text that supports the main idea, argument, or theme; and generate other text-based inferences.

There are many reasons why reading comprehension can break down. Adolescent reading comprehension is impacted by self-regulation, motivation, and engagement (Guthrie et al., 2013). In addition, difficulties can be the result of word reading problems and/or problems connected to language comprehension (e.g., problems with text integration, vocabulary knowledge, and/or general knowledge about the world; Snow, 2002). This article will focus on ways to support students for whom language comprehension difficulties are a cause of poor reading comprehension. We highlight some studies that have provided us with an understanding of the following characteristics of effective language comprehension instruction to support reading comprehension for struggling adolescent readers:

1. Comprehension instruction should prioritize building student knowledge.
2. Comprehension instruction can be effective both when it targets metacognitive reading comprehension strategies and when it is text-based.
3. Comprehension instruction can be effective in the context of both language arts and content-area classrooms.
4. Effective comprehension instruction uses a consistent instructional routine and principles of explicit instruction within a gradual release of responsibility framework.

Building Student Knowledge to Improve Reading Comprehension

Research has shown that vocabulary and background knowledge directly influence reading comprehension (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007). Knowledge helps readers connect ideas across sentences and make inferences about information not stated in the text (Ozuru et al., 2009). Thankfully, a number of interventions that focus on building knowledge to support reading comprehension have been shown to improve adolescent students' content and/or vocabulary knowledge (e.g; Vaughn et al., 2013). Despite the fact that the effects of knowledge-building interventions might not be expected to transfer to a measure of general reading comprehension until after students have received multiple years of content-rich instruction, in many cases this improved knowledge has even led to immediate gains in general reading compre-

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hension. Thus, research suggests that effective interventions should focus on building vocabulary and background knowledge to promote the growth and success of struggling adolescent readers.

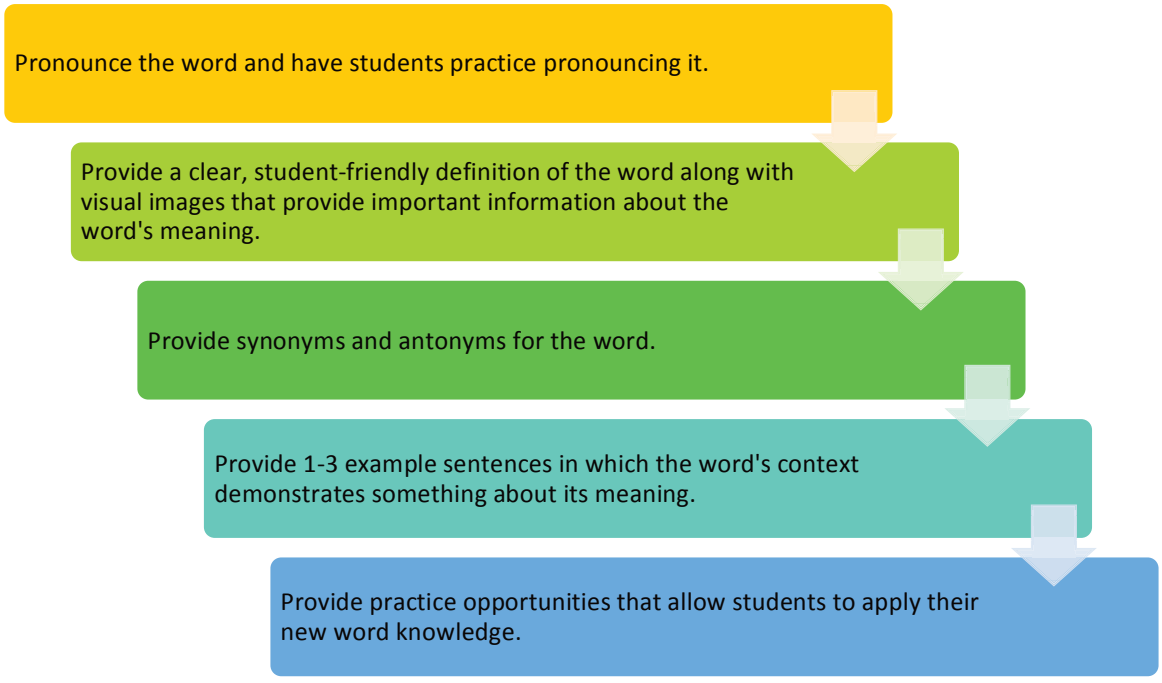
Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text (PACT; Vaughn et al., 2013) is a set of instructional practices implemented daily, designed to improve middle and high school students' content knowledge and reading comprehension by building background/vocabulary knowledge and engaging students in reading and discussion of content-area texts. Teachers initially build background knowledge through the *comprehension canopy* component that takes place at the beginning of the 10-day lesson cycle. This is accomplished through a short, high-interest video clip followed by a discussion and the introduction of an overarching question that guides students' reading and thinking during the unit. This overarching question is reviewed each day with opportunities for students to discuss any newly-learned information that is useful in formulating an answer. Vocabulary instruction occurs during the *essential words* instructional component, which consists of instruction in 4-5 high-frequency academic words or concepts students will encounter during the unit. The words are introduced on the first day of the unit, with teachers presenting a student-friendly definition, visual representation, related words, sentences using the word in context, and questions that prompt a brief discussion that includes the word. An overview of a similar vocabulary instruction routine can be found in Figure 1. Essential words appear in the texts students read and in activities they complete during the 10-day unit of instruction, which helps students make connections and understand the nuances in vocabulary word meanings across contexts.

Strategy-Based and Text-Based Reading Comprehension Instruction

There is some debate about the degree to which strategy-based reading comprehension instruction is theoretically grounded (e.g., Compton et al., 2014), and there is a need for more rigorous research studying the relative effects of strategy-based and text-based approaches. However, the current research base suggests that reading comprehension instruction can be effective both when it targets metacognitive comprehension strategies and when it is text-based.

Metacognitive strategies are used by proficient readers to monitor understanding of what they read and to repair comprehension when it breaks down. Skilled readers develop these strategies over time while simultaneous-

Figure 1
Example Vocabulary Instruction Routine



Note: Vocabulary instruction routine similar to the one used to teach *essential words* in the PACT approach to instruction (Vaughn et al., 2013).

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ly learning which strategies best support their comprehension (Pressley et al., 1998). However, many readers who struggle with reading comprehension do not acquire strategies naturally. These students can benefit from explicit instruction that introduces metacognitive strategies and provides information about when and how to use them. The National Reading Panel (NRP; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) determined the effectiveness of reading comprehension strategy instruction in a large meta-analysis of intervention research. A What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide (Kamil et al., 2008) also determined the effectiveness of reading comprehension strategy instruction in its review of rigorous reading intervention research, finding strong evidence for the effectiveness of main idea identification and summarization strategies (many of which teach students to identify text structure and use text structure to organize understanding), as well as self-questioning, visualizing, activating background knowledge, and monitoring comprehension. Other individual studies (e.g., Faggella-Luby et al., 2007; Slavin et al., 2009) published after these research reviews have found that reading comprehension strategy instruction boosts adolescents' reading achievement.

The reciprocal teaching (RT) intervention developed and tested by Palinscar and Brown (1984) is an example of a reading comprehension instructional approach that incorporates metacognitive strategy instruction. It focuses on four before-, during-, and after-reading strategies meant to foster students' comprehension: predicting, summarizing (self-review), questioning, and clarifying. Results of the authors' 1984 study indicated that seventh-grade students with standardized reading comprehension scores at least two years below grade level who received instruction and practice using these strategies earned higher scores than their comparison-group peers on measures of reading comprehension.

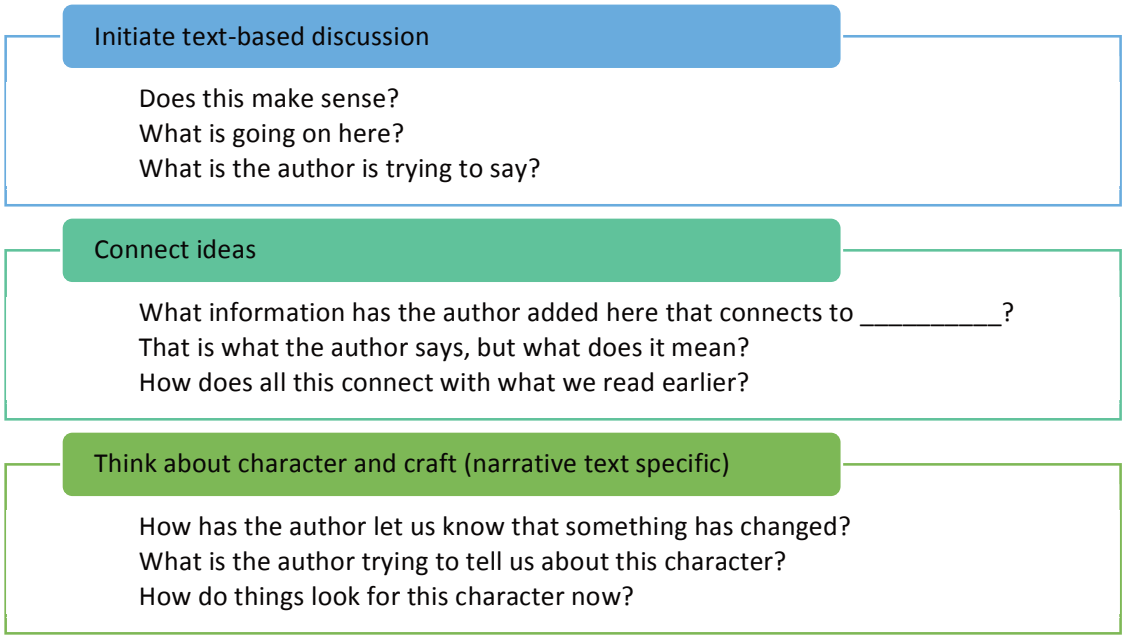
Strategy instruction focuses on teaching students to become metacognitive about processes they can use to prevent errors in comprehension and/or to repair comprehension when it breaks down. Text-based comprehension instruction, on the other hand, focuses directly on content, engaging students in building coherent representations of specific texts by integrating new information and prior knowledge (Beck et al., 1996). Teachers guide students' comprehension by asking general, meaning-focused questions about the text. They initiate discussion at key stopping points (e.g., when a new character is introduced, an important event occurs, or comprehension depends on making an inference). The idea is that these text-based discussions will not only build students' topic-specific knowledge, but also prompt them to engage in text-based verbal reasoning in a way that has the potential to transfer to other texts.

Question the Author (QtA), piloted by Beck et al. (1996), is an example of a text-based approach to reading comprehension instruction. In QtA, the teacher stops students at intentionally selected points and poses open-ended questions designed to focus students on the important idea in a text segment or help them make explicit an idea that was left implicit. Figure 2 provides examples of questions adapted from Beck et al. that are used during QtA. Students with reading difficulties who received QtA (Beck et al., 1996) demonstrated higher levels of comprehension than their peers who did not receive this instruction; they were also more successful at monitoring the extent of their comprehension. While QtA was originally piloted with fourth grade students, it has also been shown to be effective with eighth-grade struggling readers (Sencibaugh & Sencibaugh, 2015). In this study, QtA teachers implemented a *turn and talk* strategy that allowed students to answer questions about the text with classmates. Authors found that students who received QtA outperformed their peers on a standardized assessment of reading comprehension. The PACT study described earlier (Vaughn et al., 2013) also used a text-based approach to facilitate students' discussion of content-area texts.

Reading Comprehension Instruction in Language Arts and Content Classrooms

When students struggle with reading comprehension, the assumption has traditionally been that instruction to remediate these difficulties would be provided in the English/language arts classroom—not in math, science, or social studies classes (Hall, 2005). However, it

Figure 2
Question the Author (QtA) Example Questions



Note: Example questions adapted from Beck et al., 1996.

has been shown to be effective to support students who struggle with reading comprehension by providing opportunities to engage with complex texts across the school day, in both English/language arts and content-area classrooms (Swanson et al., 2016). As noted earlier, research demonstrates that struggling readers can improve not only their content knowledge

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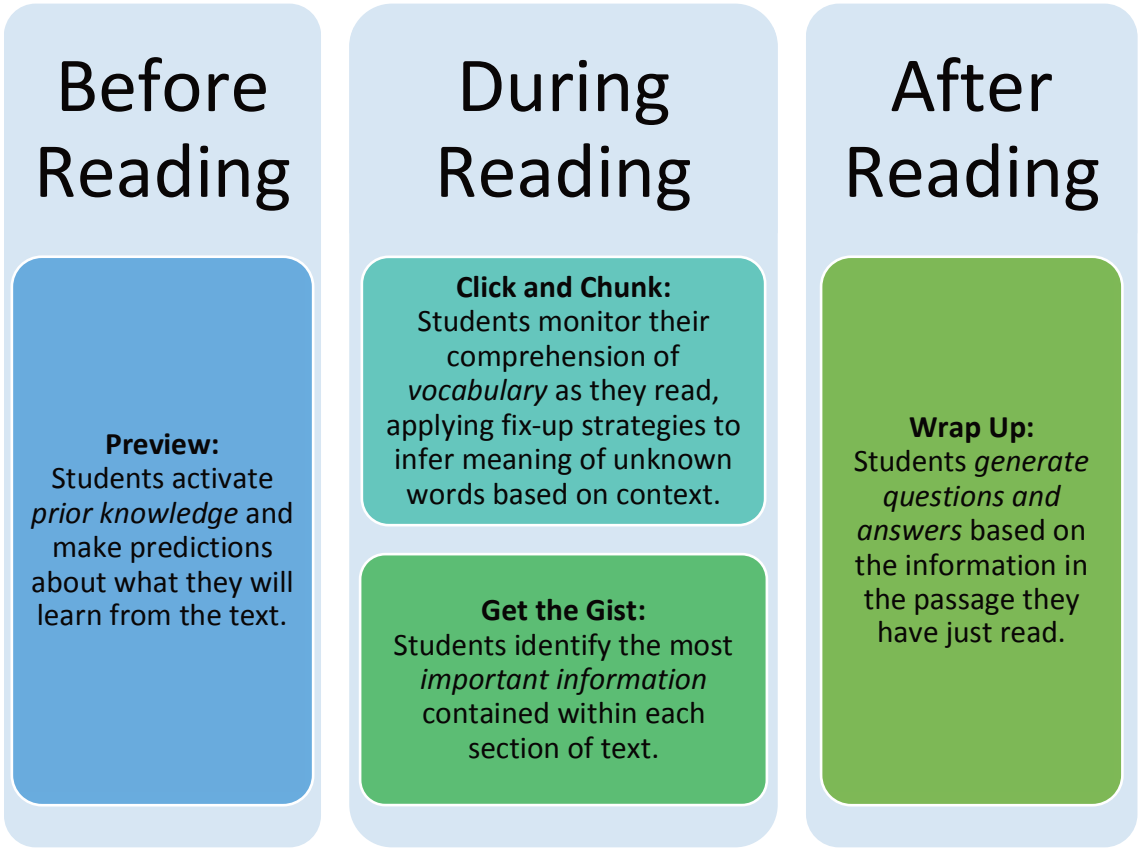
but also their comprehension of content-area texts and even their general reading comprehension when they receive reading instruction in content-area classes (Vaughn et al., 2013). A number of reading comprehension interventions have been shown to be effective in the context of both English/language arts and content-area classroom instruction. For example, when Beck et al. (1996) piloted QtA, they did so with both social studies and language arts teachers implementing instruction; students who participated in QtA improved their reading comprehension relative to their peers who did not. QtA is flexible in that the questions asked of students can be tailored to a variety of texts.

Another instructional approach that has been effective in improving reading outcomes for adolescents in both content area and language arts classrooms is the multicomponent reading intervention known as Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR; Klingner et al., 1998). CSR was designed to be used with expository textbooks in science and social studies content area classes. The origin of CSR can be traced to a study by Klingner & Vaughn (1996) that investigated reciprocal teaching with cooperative groupings of seventh- and eighth-grade students who had learning disabilities and were English learners. These students were able to implement comprehension strategies with minimal adult assistance and demonstrated statistically significant gains in reading comprehension relative to their peers who did not receive CSR. As can be seen in Figure 3, CSR employs four strategies students use before (*preview*), during (*click and chunk* and *get the gist*), and after reading (*wrap-up*). During CSR, students work in cooperative groups encouraging and assisting peers to implement the four strategies while reading. Klingner and col-

Figure 3
Components of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)



Note: Components of CSR as described by Klingner et al. (1998).

leagues found that fourth-grade students who participated in CSR instruction in social studies classrooms made better progress in reading comprehension than their peers who received traditional social studies instruction. Vaughn et al. (2011) found that seventh- and eighth-grade students who participated in CSR in English/language arts classrooms outperformed students who did not on a standardized reading comprehension measure. CSR has thus been shown to increase reading comprehension gains in students with reading difficulties across classroom contexts and grade levels (i.e., in both upper-elementary and middle-school grades).

The previously discussed approaches, QtA and CSR, view reading instruction from a content area literacy perspective. Content area literacy instruction involves teaching students comprehension strategies and/or prompting them to engage in text-based discussions that function similarly across text topic or disciplinary context (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Content area literacy instructional approaches center on the premise that the process of learning from text does not depend on the subject/content of the text; reading comprehension strategies such as summarizing, self-questioning, monitoring, and visualizing can be used across texts. This approach differs from a disciplinary literacy instructional approach, which engages students in discipline-specific reading behaviors. The aim of disciplinary literacy instruction is to provide students with an insider's perspective of a discipline. For example, students might learn that while reading history texts, they should read like historians, thinking about who wrote a document and why (i.e., about how trustworthy the author might be), corroborating important details across multiple sources, and/or contextualizing the document and the events it describes in time and place (Wineberg, 2010). There is value in exposing students to both approaches to instruction across subject areas (including mathematics, science, and social studies).

Effective Methods of Delivery for Reading Comprehension Instruction

Research suggests that vocabulary and comprehension instruction are most effective when they are delivered using explicit instruction

(Scammacca et al., 2007) via a Gradual Release of Responsibility model as shown in Figure 4 (GRR; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The GRR model was developed to describe the process by which teachers can systematically reduce supports provided during explicit instruction and shift the responsibility for learning to students (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The first stage in the GRR model is explanation and modeling. In this stage, the teacher clearly describes and demonstrates (in step-by-step fashion, if appropriate) how to use a strategy. In the context of knowledge-building instruction, the teacher could pronounce the targeted vocabulary words and provide definitions, illustrations, and examples of their use in context. Students may be prompted to respond during this stage (e.g., the teacher may prompt students to chorally repeat the pronunciation of a vocabulary word), but the teacher maintains primary responsibility for demonstrating the knowledge or performing the strategy being taught. During Stage 2, guided practice, the responsibility for learning is gradually shifted to the student. This occurs when the teacher provides students with opportunities to respond in the presence of teacher support. During the guided practice stage, the teacher may respond along with students or use prompting, additional modeling, or another type of scaffolding to support students' initial efforts to demonstrate knowledge or use a new strategy. The third stage is independent practice; during independent practice, students are provided with opportunities to retrieve new knowledge, perform a new skill, or apply a new strategy without assistance from the teacher or peers. These three stages can be summed up using the catchphrase, "I do, we do, you do" (Archer & Hughes, 2010).

> Vocabulary and comprehension instruction are most effective when they are delivered using explicit instruction via a Gradual Release of Responsibility model.

These stages of explicit instruction within a GRR model are present in CSR when teachers model each of the four strategies extensively through think-alouds, while allowing students time for guided practice to develop proficiency in strategy use (Vaughn et al., 2011). In QtA, teachers carry out a Modeling Protocol that involves modeling the processes of a skilled reader while thinking aloud (Beck et al., 1996). The RT approach involves teacher modeling of summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting strategies. After modeling and guided practice, the RT students assume the role of the teacher and guide their peers in using the strategies (Palinscar & Brown, 1984). The PACT intervention employs explicit instruction during the essential words and *critical reading* components (Vaughn et al., 2013). During the critical reading portion of instruction, teachers model note-taking and comprehension processes when responding to questions/prompts by means of think-alouds.

Explicit instruction in these reading comprehension interventions includes frequent opportunities for students to respond. Students

Figure 4
Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRR)

Note: GRR model as established by Pearson & Gallagher (1983); "I do, we do, you do" phrasing from Archer & Hughes (2010).

should have the opportunity to respond in various ways, including oral, written, and action responses that enable the teacher to check for understanding (Archer & Hughes, 2010). One way to increase student opportunities to respond is to prompt students to turn and talk, as in the QtA study conducted by Sencibaugh and Sencibaugh (2015). Small group work is another way to increase student response. In the RT (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) and CSR (Vaughn et al., 2011) interventions, students learn to assume designated roles in their small groups (e.g., as a dialogue leader who generates quality questions and summary statements in RT, or as leader, chunk expert, gist expert, and question expert in CSR). Similarly, students engage in small-group, *team-based learning* while reading and discussing social studies texts during PACT instruction (Vaughn et al., 2013). They are prompted to respond in writing and with actions during team-based learning comprehension checks and knowledge application activities that occur during each 10-day lesson cycle. During these application activities, students cooperatively engage in text-based discussions, using evidence from the text to support their ideas.

Takeaways

At the secondary level, students may struggle with comprehension for a number of reasons. For students who struggle with reading comprehension as a result of language comprehension difficulties, instruction should prioritize building student knowledge. Instruction can be effective when it teaches students to be metacognitive about using reading comprehension strategies, as well as when it engages students in text-based discussion. Students can benefit from reading comprehension instruction that is provided across classroom contexts, in both English/language arts and content-area classrooms. Finally, effective reading comprehension instruction uses a consistent instructional routine and employs a GRR model, using principles of explicit instruction. ■

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