

English Language Arts Strategies

Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices

Grades 4th–12th

RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.

This document provides a summary of recommendations from the WWC Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices Practice Guide (Kamil et al., 2008).

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Strong	        

RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.

Explicit vocabulary instruction should be a part of all content-area classes. This type of instruction teaches students strategies for deciphering the meaning of new words, resulting in stronger independent reading skills due to an improved ability to construct the meaning of a text.

Strategies

1. Dedicate a portion of the regular classroom lesson to explicit vocabulary instruction.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Introduce students to new vocabulary prior to reading the specific text selected.

Ensure students understand vocabulary prior to engaging in reading selections. Exposing students to the vocabulary first may result in students having an easier time while reading. The amount of class time dedicated to vocabulary instruction will vary depending on the amount of new vocabulary included in the reading selection and the student's prior knowledge.

2. Use repeated exposure to new words in multiple oral and written contexts and allow sufficient practice sessions.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Engage students in multiple opportunities to learn new vocabulary from specific reading selections.
- Provide explicit instruction for frequently repeated words; provide scaffolded support and definitions for words that do not appear frequently.

Students learn vocabulary most effectively when exposed to words multiple times, ideally over an extended length of time. Studies have shown that it can take up to 17 interactions for students to retain the meaning of a new word. Provide students with explicit instruction for frequently repeated words so that students have ample opportunities to learn vocabulary. When words do not appear frequently in a reading selection, provide students with definitions, but do not target the words for explicit vocabulary instruction.

3. Give sufficient opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of contexts through activities such as discussion, writing, and extended reading.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Provide opportunities for students to practice new vocabulary in multiple different domains, including speaking, writing, and reading.

Students will best learn the correct meanings and use of vocabulary when practicing new words across multiple domain areas, including speaking, writing, and reading. Through these experiences, students learn how to effectively use the new vocabulary words and better identify new vocabulary words when reading texts.

4. Provide students with strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Focus instructional time on teaching root words, prefixes, and suffixes as they relate to the new vocabulary word.
- Explicitly teach students how to use text tools, such as a glossary, to decipher the meaning of a new vocabulary word.

One approach is to teach students the function of different parts of words (root words, prefixes, and suffixes) that they can utilize to decipher the meaning of new words they encounter. Another method is to support students in using text tools, such as glossaries.

Potential Roadblocks



Students may vary in their responses to different vocabulary instruction strategies.

Suggested Approach. Provide multiple and varied learning opportunities to support students in learning new vocabulary. Some students may learn best when they visualize new vocabulary, while others may learn best when they listen to the meaning of new words. Teaching methods may include direct instruction, class discussions, and computer-guided learning experiences.



Teachers may not know how to select words to teach, especially in content areas.

Suggested Approach. Identify essential vocabulary versus highly specialized vocabulary and jargon words as a focus for explicit instruction opportunities. One method used is to identify Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III words.

Tier I words are high-frequency words already known by students and are not recommended for explicit vocabulary instruction.

Tier II words occur frequently in the text, are less familiar to students, are important for understanding the current context, and are expected to be used by students in the future. Tier II words should be the focus of explicit vocabulary instruction.

Tier III words are identified differently as student grade levels increase. In early grade levels, Tier III words, while helpful in understanding a specific text, provide little value to understanding other texts in the near future. In this case, supply the definition of the Tier III word and forego explicit instruction activities. In later grades, Tier III words, while rarely used outside of the content area, are essential for understanding within the content area. These Tier III words should be a focus for explicit vocabulary instruction.

A different selection method identifies words that are repeated frequently and are unfamiliar to students for explicit instruction. The value of this method decreases as reading levels increase because students are familiar with most high-frequency words.



Teachers may perceive that they do not have time to teach vocabulary.

Suggested Approach. Spending a short, but focused amount of time on explicit vocabulary instruction supports students in becoming effective independent learners of vocabulary. Increasing student skills for deciphering new vocabulary will make it so less time is needed for focusing on teaching new words, meaning more time is available for learning new content. Technology can provide individualized, independent vocabulary learning experiences for students.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Strong	        

RECOMMENDATION 2

Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.

Direct and explicit instruction focused on comprehension strategies improves students' reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies are specific actions or tools readers use to increase their understanding of texts. Classroom comprehension activities might include students using graphic organizers, summarizing, paraphrasing, or identifying main ideas. Direct and explicit instruction involves teachers modeling strategies, explaining why strategies help comprehension, and telling students when to use specific strategies. Teachers then provide students with support and feedback as they begin to apply strategies.

Strategies

1. Show students how to apply the strategies they are learning to different texts, not just to one text.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Expose students to a wide variety of both nonfiction and narrative text.
- Guide students to utilize learned comprehension strategies with both nonfiction and narrative text.

Have students utilize learned strategies with varying text styles. This experience will provide them with the opportunity to think critically about which comprehension strategies work best in different situations.

2. Use direct and explicit instruction for teaching students how to use comprehension strategies.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Explicitly teach comprehension strategies and provide the rationale for when to use a specific strategy.
- Provide regular, ongoing feedback to students as they independently utilize a specific comprehension strategy.

Research has shown that knowledge of reading comprehension strategies alone does not result in students applying strategies independently. In addition to knowledge of strategies, students must also understand why strategies are important and when to use them. Direct and explicit instruction is very detailed about what strategy to use, why to use it, and how to use it. Feedback is provided to students as they begin to apply strategies independently.

3. Provide the appropriate amount of guided practice depending on the difficulty level of the strategies that the students are learning.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Based on the complexity of the comprehension strategy, provide the appropriate amount of guidance to promote students' application of strategies independently.
- Apply a gradual release of responsibility by modeling the use of the strategy, then teaching the strategy with small groups of students, providing less support to pairs of students, and ultimately, promoting individual practice.

Different comprehension strategies require varying amounts of time to learn. Some strategies can be learned from one demonstration, while others are more complex. For more complex strategies, start student practice in small groups with high levels of teacher support, then release the students into pairs and provide less support. Finally, have students practice independently.

4. When teaching comprehension strategies, make sure students understand that the goal is to understand the content of the text.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Explicitly teach students the importance of applying key comprehension strategies to understand the content of the text.
- Promote the use of reading strategies to improve overall reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension strategies are a tool for supporting a better overall understanding of a text. Sometimes a focus on teaching specific strategies can distract students from overall text comprehension. Frequently remind yourself and students that improved reading comprehension is the goal, not just using strategies.

Potential Roadblocks



Many teachers do not have the knowledge or skills to provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies.

Suggested Approach. Teachers may find it difficult to confidently model how they use strategies to comprehend text because it is something they do automatically. Additionally, many educator preparation programs do not cover teaching reading comprehension strategies.

Professional development that includes opportunities for teachers to practice and receive feedback will help them develop the knowledge and skills required to provide explicit instruction on reading comprehension skills.



Teachers from some content areas do not feel responsible for teaching reading comprehension strategies.

Suggested Approach. The goal of teaching reading comprehension strategies is to increase a student's ability to understand texts in all contents. Therefore, the time taken to teach comprehension strategies will be regained as students become more effective content learners, resulting in better student performance in all content areas.



Teachers and students become too focused on specific comprehension strategies versus improved overall comprehension.

Suggested Approach. Stay clear and focused on the goal of increased comprehension. When teaching strategies, be purposeful in the application. Additionally, the effectiveness of different strategies will depend not only on context but also on student preferences as well. Frequently remind yourself and your students that improved reading comprehension is the goal and there is no one right way to get there.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Moderate	4 th 5 th 6 th 7 th 8 th 9 th 10 th 11 th 12 th

RECOMMENDATION 3

Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.

Providing students with the opportunity to participate in effective discussions regarding the significance or meaning of a text in all content areas is a way to improve reading comprehension. Teachers may guide a whole classroom discussion or monitor students as they discuss in small groups. Effective discussions may include constructing comprehension and investigating outcomes both through cognition, relating what one knows, and listening to what others have to say.

Strategies

1. Carefully prepare for the discussion.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Select reading texts that will engage students in a conversation about the text that includes analysis and differing points of understanding.
- Predict areas of the selected text where students may present difficulty or opposing viewpoints. Prepare for how to address these difficulties with supportive materials.
- Be prepared to respond to countering points of view.
- Create discussion questions that promote student analysis and engagement in deep classroom discussion about the selected text.

Prepare for discussions by strategically selecting readings that will engage students in different understandings and analyses to drive the conversation. Predict areas of textbooks or reading selections that may present students with difficulty and prepare support materials for those areas. Also, be sure to gather information about countering points of view when available. Finally, when creating questions, focus on encouraging students to analyze and engage in deep discussions about the text.

2. Ask follow-up questions that help provide continuity and extend the discussion.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Create discussion questions that require students to consider different points of view and perspectives. Provide follow-up questions that engage students in deeper analysis and continued discussion.
- Ensure teacher-created questions are standards-based.
- Ensure questions promote students to use evidence from the text to support their claim.

Initially, provide students with questions that require them to consider different perspectives. Follow-up with questions that spark further analyses should be based on student comments that emerge during the discussion. Discussion questions should reflect the reading comprehension standards by providing students with opportunities to think about how to support an answer using multiple parts of the text or using evidence from the text to support a claim.

3. Provide a task, or a discussion format, that students can follow when they discuss text together in small groups.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Organize students into small discussion groups with specific roles and responsibilities.
- Provide a reading passage that will engage students to apply reading comprehension strategies.
- Monitor group discussion and provide feedback that includes asking thought-provoking questions.

Give students reading passages that require them to use reading comprehension strategies. Also, consider providing students with different roles that go into group reading, such as discussion leaders, prediction creators, and paraphraser. During the discussion, walk around and monitor discussions, provide feedback to students, and ask thought-provoking questions.

4. Develop and practice the use of a specific “discussion protocol.”

Instructional strategy from the example:

- Utilize frameworks and protocols to guide effective, meaningful student discussions.

It is difficult to facilitate meaningful student discussion that results in improved reading comprehension. Utilize frameworks and best practices identified at your school or in the literature to support the establishment of a set of processes or guidelines for effective student discussions.

Potential Roadblocks



There might be low student participation due to students' lack of interest in the topic or desire to avoid receiving negative feedback from teachers and peers.

Suggested Approach. Elicit student participation by selecting a high-interest topic that may only be indirectly related to the intended class topic. For instance, try starting a discussion using a text that students will engage with, such as an article from the web.

You must also provide a socially safe, encouraging environment so that students can confidently provide their thoughts during the classroom discussion. To increase safety and build student confidence in discussions, strategically call on quiet students for discussion questions that you know they can answer. Allowing students to work in small groups can also help quiet students engage.



Time spent on in-depth discussions for one topic might result in a lack of time to cover other curriculum topics.

Suggested Approach. Content-area and literacy standards require students to think deeply, and students need the opportunity to apply these skills in class. If the required curriculum does not allow for in-depth learning opportunities, districts or states may need to review curriculum expectations. If this is not feasible, teachers need to strategically prioritize a few topics that they will include in more in-depth conversations.



Teachers may lack discussion facilitation knowledge and skills.

Suggested Approach. Professional development can help teachers learn to be mediators of deep discussions in the classroom. It may be helpful for teachers to have time to gather topics and participate in discussions on those topics so they can learn helpful discussion techniques firsthand.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Moderate	4 th 5 th 6 th 7 th 8 th 9 th 10 th 11 th 12 th

RECOMMENDATION 4

Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.

Instructional methods should interest students in reading and encourage them to learn. Teachers need to support students in developing reading comprehension skills, thereby increasing student confidence levels and learning abilities. The classroom environment should encourage students to embrace a growth mindset, independent learning, and a transfer of knowledge between assignments and contents. Literacy experiences should be focused on real-world applications and high-interest topics.

Strategies

1. Establish meaningful and engaging content learning goals around the essential ideas of a discipline as well as the specific learning processes students use to access those ideas.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Establish clear learning goals that are specific and meaningful to students and provide clear steps toward achievement.
- Provide the opportunity for students to set their own learning goals, especially to promote increased engagement.
- Monitor progress towards learning goals, providing feedback to ensure growth towards goals.
- Maintain high expectations towards growth.

Learning goals should be specific and meaningful to students and provide a pathway to achievement. Teachers, students, or a combination of both can set learning goals. Allowing students to set at least a few of their own learning goals may result in increased engagement. It is important to closely monitor student progress toward learning goals, maintain high expectations for all students, and provide students with timely and specific feedback to ensure growth toward their goals.

2. Make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Learn about your students and what is happening in their lives. Promote relevant learning experiences that match what is happening in students' lives and the world around them.

Connect what is happening inside the classroom to what is happening outside the classroom. Make learning relevant to students by connecting concepts to what is currently happening in students' lives and the world around them.

3. Build in certain instructional conditions, such as student goal setting, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning, to increase reading engagement and conceptual learning for students.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Increase student engagement by connecting ideas across content areas, connecting reading comprehension strategies, and connecting learning activities.

These instructional conditions are supported by purposefully building connections for students, connecting ideas between content areas, connecting reading comprehension strategies, and connecting exercises intended to increase student engagement as well as their social and emotional advancement.

Potential Roadblocks



Activities developed to engage students may prioritize entertainment over learning.

Suggested Approach. Activities such as having students compete toward a goal and rewarding points might motivate students to complete tasks, but that does not mean they benefit from learning. Instead of externally motivating students to engage in work, think of ways that might internally motivate them. Actions might include linking instruction with learning goals, having high expectations, providing constructive feedback, and boosting student self-reflection about their learning.



Students may not be interested in textbooks or may feel that they cannot understand the text.

Suggested Approach. Some texts fail to explain connections between themes, resulting in students struggling to understand the textbooks. When students cannot understand a text, they may start to believe they will inevitably fail. Teachers should provide additional information on difficult topics so students can learn more about the content, make connections, and increase their level of understanding.



Content-area teachers may not realize the importance of teaching reading and thinking strategies or realize the benefits of using these strategies.

Suggested Approach. Content-area teachers may not have experience highlighting the authentic application of literacy processes in their content. Literacy coaches can encourage these teachers to focus on literacy skills to enable students to be good readers and writers in all content areas.

Providing professional development and utilizing publicly available resources on the web will support teacher growth around this topic. Content-area teachers should develop formative assessments that allow students to demonstrate thinking processes, including problem-solving and critical-thinking strategies. They should use the results from these assessments to inform future instruction and tools.



Struggling readers may not believe that they will perform well in any class.

Suggested Approach. Based on past performance, teachers and students may have low expectations for struggling readers. Additionally, many struggling readers also have low self-confidence in their learning and thinking capabilities. Improved learning and confidence levels are supported by identifying and focusing on student strengths, reviewing data to identify skill growth opportunities, and providing students with multiple opportunities for success in learning. Additionally, studies show that when students build connections with school staff, they have developed a better perception of themselves and the school.

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