

## Supporting Struggling Readers' Comprehension Across the Curriculum

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As we know, literacy is considered an essential tool leading students toward academic success, and without a solid foundation with strong teacher support, they struggle with understanding content in all subjects. According to McFarland et al. (2019), in 2017:

- 32% of the nation's fourth grade students scored *below* basic levels of reading proficiency, and 31% scored *at* basic levels of reading proficiency
- 24% of the nation's eighth grade students scored *below* basic levels of reading proficiency, and 40% scored *at* basic levels of reading proficiency
- 28% of the nation's twelfth grade students scored *below* basic levels of reading proficiency, and 35% scored *at* basic levels of reading proficiency

We also know that teachers must understand their students' backgrounds, personalities, reading levels, interests, and learning styles in order to recognize struggling readers, plan for appropriate interventions, and provide best practices. Struggling readers display various characteristics. For example, they typically experience difficulties in phonemic awareness and phonics skills and rely on a very limited vocabulary, which prevents full comprehension, thus they experience low motivation to learn. Others are often English learners (ELs) who need other types of interventions and support mechanisms.

While meaning-focused lessons improve struggling readers' comprehension, teachers frequently implement skill-based lessons and passive learning methods such as worksheets and lecture, especially given the reality of high-stakes testing (Bolinger and Warren, 2007; Knapp, 1995). Many also lack confidence to teach struggling readers and seek more resources to gain knowledge and skills to support these learners (Vanden Boogart, 2016). Therefore, I offer four specific strategies and resources that classroom teachers can immediately apply to support struggling readers' learning across the

curriculum: (a) Hot Seat, (b) Ten Important Words, (c) 3D Responses, and (d) Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA). I used these strategies in my literacy methods class so my teacher candidates could learn the procedures and how to apply them across different subject areas. A range of my teacher candidates' licensure tracks included early childhood, elementary education, and middle level education.

**Hot Seat.** A strategy asking students to role-play characters and be interviewed by the rest of the class.

1. Direct all students to read the same story and learn about the characters.
2. Select a student to play a main character and prepare opening remarks including key information and events from the story.
3. Direct the student to sit in a "hot seat" and introduce the character to the class. (e.g., "Hello! My name is Rosa Parks. I am the first person who did not give up my bus seat in Montgomery.")
4. Invite classmates to interact with the character and ask questions. The student responds by impersonating the character.
5. Select a different student to summarize the main ideas from the interactions.

Tips and Application. This strategy is very interactive. Teachers can select multiple students and direct them to role-play different characters. This modification will enrich interactions and deepen students' understandings of the story. Teachers can use biographies in order to examine history (e.g., characters from the Union and Confederacy during a Civil War unit) and can create costumes to make this strategy more interactive and authentic. Some students may not be able to come up with questions on their own during this activity, so providing suggested prompts may be helpful.

Benefits for Struggling Readers. A hot seat is a very useful strategy for struggling readers because it puts them into a situation requiring them to think about what characters from the story feel and sound like. Instead of answering reading comprehension questions on paper, this strategy empowers them to understand the story in a meaningful way.

**Ten Important Words.** Students select ten key words from a story or reading passage, discuss their thoughts and comments in groups or with the class, and create a summarizing statement.

1. While reading a passage, direct students to independently select and record the ten most important words.
2. Ask them to share their lists with their group or the class.
3. Assign them to write a one-sentence summary of the passage/reading selection and encourage them to use as many of their selected important words as possible.

Tips and Application. Teachers can use this strategy to empower students to summarize main events in a story, such as Kathleen Krull's *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*. In social studies and science, teachers can use this strategy to investigate specific information such as historical events or science concepts, such as Nicola Davies' *Tiny Creatures: The World of Microbes*. Informational books typically contain complex words (Hiebert & Cervetti, 2012), and struggling readers find it difficult to read informational books. Focusing on key words helps students comprehend reading passages (Liebfreund, 2015). Some students may also struggle to write a one-sentence summary of the reading selection. To solve this problem, incorporate small group work instead of individual work; in small groups, struggling readers and writers experience reduced anxiety, feel supported by their peers, and work collaboratively to craft a sentence. Another suggestion is to use this strategy for a section from a passage rather than from a whole text.

Benefits for Struggling Readers. Ten Important Words supports struggling readers as it gives them a focus or task while reading. There are no right or wrong answers regarding which ten words they select, but they must share why these ten words are important to them. Hearing peers' explanations and learning about different perspectives help struggling readers develop their reading comprehension.

**3-D Responses.** Students create three-dimensional objects to describe their understandings of a story or a text.

1. Direct students to read a story or biography.
2. Invite them to choose an idea, feeling, event, or character from the story.
3. Ask each to create a three-dimensional object from pipe cleaners, Play-Doh, aluminum foil, or any other material and share it with groups or the entire class.

Tips and Application. 3-D responses incorporate multi-sensory activities, and struggling readers and ELs learn better when they participate in visual, hands-on activities. Students select what to express after reading a passage, which increases self-autonomy. Even when several students read the same story or the same biography, each one will create and share a different sculpture. By sharing their works, they learn different perspectives and interpretations, which increases their reading comprehension. Teachers can use this strategy in different subjects including English Language Arts, science, and social studies.

Benefits for Struggling Readers. Struggling readers benefit from 3-D responses because this is a multimodal, hands-on activity. When I used this strategy in my literacy methods class, my teacher candidates introduced diverse perspectives based on the same story in a very meaningful interaction. Struggling readers, especially those who may not be able to express their thoughts and understandings in writing, can express them visually using this strategy.

**Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA).** This graphic organizer focuses on vocabulary and helps students understand how selected vocabulary on a topic relates to key features or characteristics of the text (Pittleman, Heimlich, Berglund, & French, 1991).

1. Select a general topic or concept from a reading (e.g., mammals, fruits, types of dinosaurs, polygons).
2. Make a list of typical elements related to the topic (e.g., square, rectangle, triangle, trapezoid for “polygon”).

3. List features or characteristics that some of the elements might have (e.g., three-sided, four-sided, convex, equilateral).
4. Encourage students to place a “+” in a grid in which a given element has that feature, a “-” where it doesn't, or a question mark if they cannot determine a relationship.

**Tips & Application.** A semantic feature analysis is easy to implement. Teachers must carefully select a topic with sufficient and appropriate features or characteristics. Student and teachers can use it across different subjects including English Language Arts (e.g., characters from literature), science (e.g., types of clouds), and social studies (e.g., comparing and contrasting political leaders or the 13 colonies). To use this strategy effectively, teachers must carefully select a reading passage because some concepts and vocabulary words may contain ambiguous answers.

**Benefits for Struggling Readers.** A semantic feature analysis helps struggling readers visually “see” connections among related vocabulary words. Often, struggling readers experience difficulty identifying key words, so seeing key vocabulary words and their relationships provides them with context and background knowledge of the topic and story/text.

## **Resources**

How can teachers use innovative literacy strategies to support struggling readers? They are strongly encouraged to use technology and high quality children’s books effectively across the curriculum. The following include helpful, suggested resources.

**Apps and Software.** Utilizing technology resources improves struggling readers’ comprehension and increases motivation (Conn, Sujo-Montes, & Sealander, 2019). These resources provide different modalities, enhance ways to connect and interact with text, supply options to work at their own pace, and activate their prior knowledge by exploring images and information related to the topic and text they read.

1. [Nearpod](#) is a useful online platform that provides teachers with lessons on different subjects such as English Language Arts (ELA), science, math, and social studies. Teachers can modify pre-made presentations to accommodate their own students' needs. Students can work on tasks on their individual screens and create their own presentations.
2. [Wonderopolis](#) offers teachers a number of reading resources on ELA, science, math, social studies, technology, and arts and culture. A reading passage is read aloud, and students follow along as it highlights the words. Included are key vocabulary words and their definitions as well as vocabulary and comprehension quizzes.
3. [Popplet](#) is an online mind-mapping tool similar to semantic maps on physical paper. It gives students a way to visualize their understandings by creating webbed outlines of content and by brainstorming or mapping their ideas and knowledge components for papers and presentations.
4. [Sock Puppet](#) is an interactive online tool. Students work with their peers to create a puppet show to demonstrate their understandings of a lesson or to create a quick summary from a selection of a reading passage.
5. [Vocaroo](#) is a tool for students to record their voices on a selection of reading passages, to record their own summaries of reading passages, or to create other voice recordings for their own digital products.
6. [StoryKit](#) is a tool to create electronic storybooks. This tool includes functions to draw on a screen, attach photos, and add sound effects.

Trade Books. Teachers must carefully select trade books appropriate for all students. Richeson (2019) used trade books for her fifth graders' social studies project on Abraham Lincoln, and they examined and engaged in critical text analysis and more complex writing. Frye (2009) used trade books in her social studies lessons and found that struggling readers increased their comprehension. The resources presented in this section have received endorsements by experts.

1. *Literacy.* The [International Literacy Association](#) provides lists of children's books on Children's Choice, Teachers' Choice, and Young Adults' Choice by the

International Literacy Association (ILA) and Children’s Book Council (CBC). Children’s Choice includes recommended book titles that children themselves evaluated and classified into three groups: beginning readers (Grades K-2), young readers (Grades 3-4), and advanced readers (Grades 5-6). Teacher’s Choice includes a list of children’s books for the same three groupings classified by teachers. Young Adults’ Choice provides a list of adolescent children’s books reviewed by adolescents.

2. *Math.* The [California Department of Education](#) provides an option to search for mathematics at targeted grade levels. The search will result in a list of recommended books as well their annotations.
3. *Science.* The [National Science Teacher Association](#) (NSTA) provides a list of high quality science trade books, all of which were evaluated and selected by the NSTA collaborating with the Children’s Book Council (CBC). It also provides a list of [Best STEM Books for K-12](#).
4. *Social Studies.* A search on the [National Council for the Social Studies](#) (NCSS) website will provide a list of trade books published since 2000, carefully selected by a Book Review Committee organized by the NCSS with the collaboration of the CBC.

### **Five Tips for Teachers**

1. Provide a safe learning environment. Struggling readers experience many anxieties and low motivation due to difficulties in learning. Create a warm, welcoming, and safe classroom community. Teachers need to show all children they care about them. Set and explain norms in the beginning of a school year so students know their teacher’s teaching philosophy, guidelines, and routines. Assure students that it is acceptable to make mistakes while engaged in learning. Respect all students, get to know them well, and learn about their interests. All of these actions will equip teachers to select reading appropriate passages and texts that challenge students in developmentally appropriate ways.

2. Offer one-on-one or small group instruction as often as possible. This type of instruction empowers teachers to adjust the instructional pace appropriate for struggling readers and can contribute to reducing the number of struggling readers (Simmons, Kameénuí, Stoolmiller, Coyne, Harn, 2003). Small group instruction also provides students with increased opportunities to interact with their teachers and peers and to work successfully on tasks.
3. Use multisensory activities. Struggling readers including ELs learn when they read and interact using multimode activities. As shared in this article, increase opportunities for students to do craft work (e.g., 3D response strategy) and use visual aids and auditory support to remember both content and key vocabulary. In general, struggling readers do not fare successfully with traditional worksheets and quizzes.
4. Provide enough time and remain patient. Struggling readers need longer processing time than other students. In particular, beginning and intermediate ELs need extra time to process information as they read. They often think in and rely on their native language to transfer information into English or vice versa. Teachers might feel some ELs are not responding to their questions because they are quiet for a while before answering. However, the teachers need to keep in mind that ELs process with at least two languages, especially in the beginning stage of their English learning. Waiting enables them to process and use their native language and knowledge before translating to and responding in English.
5. Offer a variety of strategies. After a thorough meta-analysis of studies on reading comprehension, the National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that students remember what they studied and improve their comprehension when teachers use a variety of strategies. Teachers must use different strategies appropriate for struggling readers' learning styles, reading levels, interests, and reading goals.

## Conclusion

To support struggling readers, teachers must know them well, plan best practices and interventions, and implement these using multisensory modes. Struggling readers typically come to school with low motivation for learning. Therefore, teachers must carefully select reading passages or texts that interest them and are appropriate for their reading levels. Teachers also need to keep in mind that struggling readers, including ELs, encounter challenges in many subjects and that incorporating literacy in these subjects assists their learning. Hands-on literacy strategies improve learning in ELA, math, science, and social studies. Be creative, be innovative, and be supportive in lesson delivery. Literacy is essential for academic success.

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