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Audio-Visual Text Modification

One common way to attempt to support readers in comprehending written text is to provide audio or visual support. This type of support takes on make several forms. Some forms include audio files of books and movie clips. Here are a few points worth considering about the use of such materials as text modification.

Problem #1: Audio-visual materials do not guarantee comprehension

Oftentimes teachers assume that if students can view the movie or listen to a book from a digital file, this is sufficient support to promote comprehension. Since comprehension is the ability to make meaning from text reveals that students do not automatically comprehend just because they saw or heard a text. Visual text is often filled with subtle clues that enhance the meaning of the scene in non-verbal ways. The placement of the objects in a frame reveal much about what is going on in the text. There is also the problem of language being spoken that cannot be slowed down or that is modified from the written version of the work. Such is a common problem with adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Seeing the movies of his plays alone is woefully inadequate for comprehending the play, although it seems like less work to most people than looking at words on paper. Listening to a text with vocabulary that is too difficult brings the same kind of frustration that reading it does.

Problem #2: Audio-visual materials are another kind of text

When teachers understand that audio and/or visual support are complex forms with features that must be taught to students, they can start to build curriculum that attends to that complexity. Just as the features of an essay must be taught to students, so must the features of a documentary or a music video. Just as giving an assignment about a written text does not constitute instruction, having students take notes or fill in reading guides about audio or visual clips does not constitute an optimal literacy development experiences. The students must be instructed about how these texts operate and assisted in making meaning from them.

Audio-visual materials successfully used

Rather than offering to show students a movie as a reward for reading a book of the same title, or showing a movie to "get the gist" of a story before reading it, teachers should take up multimedia texts as another form to use in their general literacy instruction. This type of instruction goes beyond comparing a book to a movie (which is rarely done well when it is attempted without extensive support) and moves toward having young people use information from a variety of sources to make audio-visual products that reflect understandings about the complexity of embedding and extracting meaning. Students must also be taught how to use the technologies that make audio-visual support possible. When teachers allow students to use technological devices to demonstrate learning, all the students should have access to the means to do so. Students who are impoverished in terms of their experiences with technological media will be left further behind and socioeconomic class divisions are more likely to occur since only certain

students will be able to take advantage of the choice to create media. In short, using audio-visual support materials for instructional purposes is not a panacea for helping students comprehend text; instead, it is a way to introduce sophistication and complexity to lessons.

Matching Comprehension Strategy Instruction to Text

Monitoring comprehension is a thinking disposition. We simply cannot make sense of any text if we do not keep track of our thinking as we go. Some texts, however, require readers to use a particular strategy above others to make meaning. Remember to trust your own judgment about the instruction your students need and the strategies that best serve those purposes.

Activate and Connect to Background Knowledge

When you are trying to help students activate and connect, we suggest you choose a topic about which students are likely to have sufficient background knowledge. Familiar topics are often safe. After students have been taught to connect the new to the known, they are more likely to activate their background knowledge to understand text that is less familiar. However, students must also learn that not all background knowledge is equally valuable. Some connections to background knowledge hinder comprehension. The students should also be taught how to discuss strategies for discerning which background knowledge to validate while reading.

Ask Questions

When you are trying to get the students to ask questions, you might choose text that is a little less familiar and nudges students to wonder. Students ask questions to learn content and gain information. We also encourage students to ask questions to clarify confusion and read to discover answers.

Infer and Visualize

When you want students to draw inferences, consider choosing text that has some ambiguity, where all the information is not explicitly stated. The reader's task, then, is to combine background knowledge with text clues to fill in the gaps and draw a conclusion about the information. Articles with prominent text and visual features support readers as they infer to understand information. When you want readers to visualize, choose text where the writer uses good imagery. When writers paint pictures with words, readers are more likely to visualize. Visualization works differently depending on the text. In narrative texts, we want the students to see the cow eating the grass if that is what the story is about. In an article about the dairy industry, seeing the cow is distracting; instead, we want the students to cognitively organize information as they read. That organization is what we want them to visualize.

Determine Importance

It is hard to find a nonfiction text where determining importance is not a handy thing to do. However, if you want your students to practice this strategy explicitly, look for text that packed with details so that readers have to sift out the most important information. Students are easily seduced by minutia. They have to have many experiences sifting through details to get a handle on what is a relevant detail and what is not. Also, find text that is organized around sections with subheads, so students can find the important information more readily.

Summarize and Synthesize

If you are searching for articles to teach your students to summarize and synthesize information, many texts will work. Readers need to summarize

and synthesize everything they read. However, when specifically teaching students to summarize and synthesize, guide them to tackle text with a lot of information. Articles packed with information require readers to get the gist, put the information into their own words, and isolate the salient ideas from a sea of facts.

Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2000). *Strategies that work*. Markham, Ontario: Stenhouse Publishers.

Implementing Standards-Based Vocabulary Instruction

Words power our language and power comprehension. Standards-based vocabulary instruction is integral to supporting students' effective comprehension of texts in all content areas. To be successful lifelong learners, students need a rich and robust vocabulary. As teachers, we have a responsibility to offer, "a robust approach to vocabulary [that] involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with thought-provoking, playful, and interactive follow-up" (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, p. 2).

Students with a rich vocabulary:

- know and use many words while increasing their knowledge of words daily
 - have enriched prior knowledge that offers a foundation for extensive and complex understandings of many different concepts
 - have deep-rooted and flexible understandings of many concepts that words represent
 - have a keen ability to identify important aspects of words and sort out subtle differences in word usage
 - are fascinated and delighted with language and are thereby highly motivated to learn new words
- (Brabham & Villaume, 2002, p. 26).

In *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, Beck, McKeown, and Kucan emphasize that not all words call for instructional attention.

To get a perspective on the kinds of words that need instructional attention, consider a mature literate individual's vocabulary as comprising three tiers. The **first tier** consists of the most basic words—*clock*, *baby*, *happy*, *walk*, and so on. Words in this tier rarely require instructional attention to their meanings in school.

The **third tier** houses low frequency words limited to specific domains. Some examples might be *isotope*, *lathe*, *peninsula*, and *pedagogy*. In general, a rich understanding of these words would not be appropriate for most learners.

The **second tier** contains high frequency words for mature language users that are found across a variety of domains. Examples include *coincidence*, *absurd*, *industrious*, and *fortunate*. Because of the large role they play in a language user's repertoire, rich knowledge of words in the **second tier** can have a powerful impact on verbal functioning. Thus, instruction directed toward **Tier Two** words can be most productive.

Another way to look at Tier Two words is to think of words in a subject that cross disciplines and therefore, are words that students will need to know in a variety of situations across their educational careers in that subject area.

Tier One: Basic words (words most students at a particular grade level will know)

Tier Two: Words that will be used across multiple subjects (horizontal) and over the course of many years (vertical).

Tier Three: Highly specific content words lacking generalization

Some Criteria for Identifying Tier Two Words

Importance and utility: Words that are characteristic of mature language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains.

Instructional potential: Words that can be worked with in a variety of ways so that students can build rich representations of them and of their connections to other words and concepts.

Conceptual understanding: Words for which students understand the general concept but provide precision and specificity in describing the concept.

Selecting Words to Teach

Based on an understanding of their students' needs, teachers should feel free to use their best judgment in selecting words to teach. While reading text or planning a unit, underline or list potential words for vocabulary study. Go back and determine which words might be Tier One, Tier Two, or Tier Three. Select 10 – 15 words that you will study throughout the unit. Most of these words should be tier 2 words.

Beck, I.L, McKeown, M.C., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Brabham, E. G. & Villaume, S.K. (2002). "Vocabulary Instruction: Concerns and visions." *Reading Teacher* 56: 26.

Using and Producing Multiple Texts

There are two ways to talk about multiple texts. The first way is to use multiple conflicting documents to teach students critical reading skills. As an added benefit, multiple texts can also be used to meet the needs of multiple reading levels and interests in your classroom.

The second way to use multiple texts is to gather renditions of the same text or texts about the same topic that have been written at varying levels of difficulty. Using multiple texts in this way will also meet the instructional demands of multiple reading levels in the classroom and support the ability of English learners as well as the other students to move forward in their literacy development and participate in classroom discourse. A teacher may assign texts to certain students or groups of students, or allow the students to choose which text they think will meet their needs.

Start Small

It is not necessary to make every unit one where multiple conflicting documents are used. With one or two well-planned units, students will understand the idea that texts are either obviously or subtly laden with arguments. In working with English language learners, one lesson per unit with multiple documents at multiple levels of reading difficulty is recommended.

Choose Texts that Will Invite Critical Thought

The texts that the teachers choose (and the teacher should choose the first time this is done) should take a critical stance on a topic or add new insight. All of the texts should be ones that are inviting to read and think about. These topics should also be ones about which students have background

knowledge, or will generate high levels of interest.

Consider Source and Context

Teachers should know about the context of the creation around the documents used in class initially. Eventually, teachers can scaffold student performance where they can do the sourcing for the piece and consider the context. Teachers of multicultural students should also consider what arguments are being made that would be pejorative to students. Students and teachers can confront these arguments as part of the class discussion around the topic.

Engage Students

Eventually, the students are prepared to locate and evaluate the materials themselves. Exceptional materials can be saved and used for instruction in future years. Remember, the goal of using multiple texts is to promote literacy development in general terms as well as discipline specific ones and increase critical thinking skills. These goals make it necessary to gradually release this responsibility to students.

Some ideas for this section are from Using Multiple Texts to Teach Content by Cynthia Shanahan, PhD. (2003) Learning Point Associates.

Rewriting the Text

Rewriting ensures that the text is at the appropriate level for the students because you are directly in charge of vocabulary and content. You should ask three questions before rewriting:

- What are the content issues that might impede comprehension?
- What are the language issues in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure?
- What are the cultural issues that will affect understanding?

Now you are ready to start adding and/or deleting information. Here are some suggestions:

- Critical vocabulary words should remain in the text or be added.
- Shorter sentences are often more comprehensible than longer sentences.
- Paragraphs are more cohesive when they are limited to one topic.
- Graphics or visual aids should be well-constructed rather than distracting.
- Negation lowers comprehensibility.
- Pronouns, especially in long strings, impede comprehension.
- Transition words help novice or unskilled readers make connections between ideas.

Edit an existing text

Editing an existing text is a good strategy for those who are just beginning to rewrite. Take an article from the Internet, copy it into a word document and then make changes to meet your instructional needs. Be sure to cite the original text in some way to give credit to the original author(s).

Memory warp

This strategy works well for shorter texts. Read the text to yourself several times. Then, go to your computer and type everything that you remember. The odds are that you will remember most or all of the things that were important for your students. Then, you will just have to go back and do minor editing. Be sure to cite the original text in some way to give credit to the original author(s).

Start from scratch

Write a narrative or informational texts for your students, taking into ac-

count their present levels of learning and your objectives for them. You can even tell them you wrote it, and you wrote it for them. Put class members' names in the story if you are writing a narrative. Alternatively, you can enlist the class in writing a story corroboratively. Then, you can type up the story and distribute it for use in your class.

Harvest student work

Students often do exceptional work in our classes and then those wonderful things they write are lost and/or forgotten for the next school year. When students generate high quality texts that would be useful for our curriculum, we can "buy" their work from them in exchange for food items, books, or gift certificates. Students like to read texts written by their peers. Students rarely object to their work being used as a good example.

Rice, M. (2009). Adapting texts for ESL students.