
Close Reading in Elementary Classrooms

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Overview

In recent years, many literacy educators have focused their attention on the practice of close reading. Close reading is the instructional practice of having students critically examine a text, especially through multiple readings. It has been utilized most commonly at the secondary and college levels, usually within the context of rhetorical reading and writing courses. Adler and Van Doren (1940/1972) explain in their seminal text, *How to Read a Book*, that readers should “x-ray the book” in order to find “the skeleton hidden between its covers” (p. 75). The intent in analytic reading is to identify these deep structures in order to plumb the explicit and implicit meanings of the text. Paul and Elder (2003) explain that this practice encourages students to:

- Identify their purpose for reading
- Determine the author’s purpose for writing the piece
- Develop schema
- Understand systems of thought in the disciplines

The overarching goal of close reading is to cause students to engage in critical thinking with a text. Notice how all of the above elements coincide with well-researched elements of effective reading instruction. What is lacking, however, is specific research on the effectiveness of close reading for elementary students. It is fair to say that our collective understanding of this practice will grow as empirical studies are conducted with this population. Until that occurs, it is useful to examine these elements within the context of what we currently know about reading instruction for young students. Each element will be followed by suggestions for instruction in close reading.

Overview

Even emergent readers understand that different pieces of text are used for different purposes. They see a parent consult a cookbook to locate a recipe for preparing a meal. A caregiver provides important read-aloud time as they read a well-loved picture book for the fiftieth time. Their teacher consults a map of the zoo as she leads her class on a field trip to study African animals. In each case, the reading demand is shaped by the reader’s purpose.

The recipe reader is reading for details, while the bedtime story reader is reading for comfort and enjoyment. The map of the zoo requires skimming and scanning of the layout in order to locate the elephant enclosure. In each case, the reader adjusts one's reading based on purpose.

Understanding one's purpose for reading is a metacognitive process that supports a reader's comprehension of text (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991). Students apply their sense of purpose for reading in order to locate information. Reading for pleasure activates a student's expectations about how she will evaluate the text. On the other hand, if her purpose is to seek technical information, she is going to judge that reading in a completely different way.

Understanding one's purpose for reading allows the learner to judge goodness of fit. In other words, was this the right text for the job? Purpose plays a key factor in motivation for reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

In their study of assessing motivation for reading, Baker and Wigfield (1999) stated, "Engaged readers are motivated to read for different purposes, utilize knowledge gained from previous experience to generate new understandings, and participate in meaningful social interactions around reading" (p. 453).

Teachers can build students' understanding of purposes for reading by establishing it clearly for them. A statement of the purposes establishes a learning target for students and increases the likelihood that they will reach the target, in particular because it serves as a priming mechanism (Gagné & Briggs, 1974). These statements include the content and language (reading, writing, speaking, listening) purposes (Fisher & Frey, 2011). "We're going to read this article so we can figure out how honeybees carry the pollen from one flower to another. You'll use this information in your table groups to develop a scientific illustration of how this occurs," a

fourth-grade teacher tells his students. In doing so, he signals students to the content purpose (to figure out how honeybees carry pollen) and the language purpose (to create a scientific illustration). Teachers can use a thinkaloud approach (Davey, 1983) as they model metacognitive reading processes during interactive read-alouds and shared reading.

Determining the Author's Purpose

Think of purpose as two sides of the same coin. On one side is the reader's purpose: Why am I reading this? What do I want to get out of this text? On the opposite side is the author's purpose: What does the writer want me to know? Why has this been written, and for whom? A reader who can ascertain the author's purpose is able to begin analyzing the text. An author's purpose typically addresses one or more of these:

- To entertain
- To persuade
- To inform

The Rand Reading Study Group (2002) identified determining the author's purpose as a key element of reading comprehension. The report notes that understanding the author's message is essential for determining the discourse structure, including "text genre, the distinction between given (old) and new information in the discourse context, the points (main messages) that the author intends to convey, the topic structure, the pragmatic goals or plans of the communicative exchange, and the function of the speech acts (e.g., assertion, question, directive, evaluation)" (p. 98).

While this may initially sound too complex for elementary readers, in practice it is not. A durable model of promoting children's understanding of author's purpose and its relationship to discourse structures is through the use of Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997). The researchers who developed this instructional routine advise that students query the text systematically:

- **Query 1:** Initiating discussion (What is the author talking about?)
- **Query 2:** Focusing on the message and linking information (What information has the author added that connects or fits with?)
- **Query 3:** Identify difficulties with the way the author has presented information (Did the author explain that clearly? Why or why not?)
- **Query 4:** Encourage students to refer to the text (Did the author give us the answer to that?)

Developing Schema

Schema theory is at the core of teaching and learning, especially in reading comprehension (Spires, Gallini, & Riggsbee, 1992). The deeper one's schema, or organized pattern or structure of knowledge about a topic, the easier it is to comprehend a text about the subject (Mannes, 1994). When one's schema on a topic has significant gaps, the reader must devote cognitive resources to constructing a mental model on which to attach this new information (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). This causes a delay in the comprehension of a piece of text. It is likely that you find yourself doing this all the time, perhaps even with this paper. When the information in a text is dense, and when the reader has gaps in schema, the information isn't fully understood immediately. You have to pause to figure out how this new information relates to previously understood concepts. In other words, you are actively constructing a mental model. A chief way you accomplish this is by rereading. You slow down your pace, review a previous passage, and look back to the text in order to find information.

Text-dependent questions are used in reading instruction to promote the habit of rereading text in order to build schema (Fisher & Frey, in press; Pearson & Johnson, 1978). These questions do not rely on outside sources, but rather are designed to cause students to return to the text. This is especially important when text is being used for the purpose of building knowledge. Out-of-school reading is often devoted to topics the reader already knows quite a bit about. But in classrooms, much of the text students encounter will be about topics that are less familiar.

Text-dependent questions signal to readers that the information is complex and readers are expected to linger over the details in order to build those mental models. These questions move through a progression from part to whole, from word and sentence level,

to paragraph and then across the entire text. As well, these questions move from explicitly stated information to those that require inferential and critical reading. These include (Fisher & Frey, in press):

- General understanding questions that draw on the overall view of the piece, especially the main ideas.
- Key detail questions, which are the who/what/ when/ where/why/how questions essential to understanding the meaning of the passage.
- Vocabulary and text structure questions that bridge explicit with implicit meanings, especially in focusing on words and phrases, as well as the way the author has organized the information. Text structure questions may include text features, and discourse structures (problem/solution, cause/ effect, compare/contrast, etc.).
- Author's purpose questions, which draw the reader's attention to genre, point of view, multiple perspectives, and critical literacies, such as speculating on alternative accounts of the same event.
- Inferential questions that challenge students to examine the implicitly stated ideas, arguments, or key details in the text.
- Opinion and intertextual questions that allow students to use their foundational knowledge of one text to assert their opinions or to make connections to other texts, using the target text to support their claims.

Understanding Systems of Thought in the Disciplines

A final element of analytical reading is in understanding that each discipline has unique characteristics, especially in its systems of thought, that inform the texts of the discipline. For example, narrative structures, primarily fictional, dominate English language arts content. On the other hand, science texts use an explanatory text structure that contains a high number of technical vocabulary words. Moreover, these texts assume a tremendous level of background knowledge in order to understand new information. Paul and Elder (2003) call this text structure a "map of knowledge" and define these as the primary and secondary ideas that help us understand a system of thought. "When we understand core historical ideas, we can begin to think historically. When we understand core scientific ideas, we can begin to think scientifically. Core or primary ideas are the key to every system of knowledge. They are the key to truly learning any subject. They are the key to retaining what we learn for lifelong use" (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 3).

- Science texts contain "technical vocabulary and dense sentences that require the reader to draw on multiple concepts simultaneously."
- Social studies texts contain "nominalizations (nouns derived from adjectives and verbs) that reference abstract ideas, and the presence of evaluative judgments."
- Mathematics texts "switch between both natural language and mathematical language and symbols, requiring readers to make similar shifts in the grammar of both."

