Reciprocal Teaching: Powerful Hands-on Comprehension Strategy

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Teachers everywhere are concerned about their students’ reading comprehension. Many teachers complain that students are not engaged with texts and that they cannot remember what they have read. Reading research suggests an urgent need for educators to teach comprehension strategies at all grade levels from the very youngest children to high school students (Pearson & Duke, 2002). Many of our students could use a reading vitamin boost from reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1986), a research-based comprehension technique with over 25 years of success. Reciprocal teaching is an ideal strategy to use to strengthen comprehension while implementing the Common Core State Standards.

The “Fab Four”

Reciprocal teaching is a scaffolded discussion technique that involves four strategies that good readers employ when they read: predict, question, clarify, and summarize. “The Fab Four” (Oczkus, 2010), the kid friendly name for these strategies, may be used in any order. Each is first modeled by the teacher, then practiced by the students with one another, and finally individually applied. For best results, four foundations must be in place: think alouds, cooperative learning, scaffolding, and metacognition.

For example, during a read aloud a third grade teacher pauses every few pages to model one of the strategies. The discussion is scaffolded as she models first, then asks students to turn to a partner, and finally discusses the strategy as a group. At the end of the lesson the teacher asks which of the Fab Four strategies helped the students the most for that session—predict, question, clarify, or summarize.

During a social studies lesson in sixth grade, the teacher asks teams of students to take on the roles of predictor, questioner, clarifier, and summarizer as they read the assigned chapter. Each team fills in a chart with their responses, and individuals mark their texts with sticky notes to track their individual reactions. The teacher periodically stops to model how to clarify difficult words and concepts and how to ask relevant questions. The class works together on a “twitter” (short summary) that they will post on the class blog along with student illustrations. Reciprocal teaching is a collaborative hands-on strategy that works well in any grade level K-12 and in a wide variety of settings including whole class, guided reading, and literature circles.
Researchers Ann Brown and Ann Palinscar developed the technique in the 1980s in their work with struggling middle school students. Their idea was to pare down the number of reading strategies to just the essential four and then ask students to read a chunk of text and rotate through all four strategies with that bit of text. Readers actually employ multiple strategies in the reading process (Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005), so using all four is natural. Since the two Anns (Palinscar & Brown, 1986) came up with reciprocal teaching, the power package has been implemented successfully through all the grades from primary to high school and even with adults. The possibilities for implementation are creative and endless (Oczkus, 2010). The results are evident in just a few weeks or months.

**Powerful Results**

When I began using reciprocal teaching as an intervention for struggling intermediate readers at an urban school, I was amazed when our students went from reading at the second grade level to the fourth grade level in just three months!

The results were consistent with the research findings on reciprocal teaching, which promise one to two years growth in three to six months. I was a convert and began trying reciprocal teaching successfully everywhere I went, from urban schools to suburban schools, with a variety of grade levels. Second language students benefited from the consistent use of reciprocal teaching as well as struggling readers.

Here are some of the research findings:

- In 15 days students are more confident (Palinscar & Brown, 1986).
- Low-performing students do well with reciprocal teaching (Carter, 1997).
- Struggling readers grow 1-2 years in 3-6 months (Cooper, Boschken, McWilliams, & Pistochni, 2000).
- In 16 studies reciprocal teaching proved consistent and effective (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

**Reciprocal Teaching and the Common Core**

Reciprocal teaching strategies help teachers to effectively teach the type of close reading called for in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010). These strategies may be applied to all texts and are especially effective with informational texts. Since reciprocal teaching is a discussion technique, Common Core State Standards for listening and speaking are met as well, particularly the standards calling for students to prepare for conversations and collaborative discussions and to sometimes take on roles in discussions.

During reciprocal teaching discussions students run through the strategies with partners or group members, sometimes specifically taking on the roles of the strategies themselves as the predictor, clarifier, questioner, and summarizer. Common core standards also call for students to use evidence from the text when determining themes or drawing inferences as they ask and answer questions (National Governors Association, 2010). During reciprocal teaching lessons, students summarize texts in varied ways; thus each of the four strategies helps students to meet common core expectations.

- **Predict.** Students draw inferences and use evidence from the text throughout the reading process.
- **Question.** Students ask and answer questions to understand the text. They draw on multiple sources, including digital items, to answer questions.
- **Clarify.** Students know and apply grade level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words in texts. They also use context to confirm or self-correct, and they reread when necessary.
- **Summarize.** Students can identify main ideas and details in paragraphs and in multparagraph texts. They also compare and contrast the overall structure of a text. Students determine themes and summarize poems, dramas, or literature.
Favorite Tools for Interactive Lessons

When you use a variety of hands-on tools, reciprocal teaching becomes truly student centered, interactive, and memorable. Here are some of the props and other manipulatives that can bring comprehension alive for students (Oczkus, 2010). For each hands-on tool you will find a quick adaptation for various grade levels.

Fab Four characters (Oczkus, 2009, 2010). Metaphors are a meaningful way to teach students of any age (Wormelli, 2009). Using characters for each of the strategies makes learning about them memorable and brain compatible (Oczkus, 2010). On the “scale of kookiness” you can dress up as the characters and use special voices and mannerisms, use hand gestures, hold up props, or just show pictures of the characters.

Paula the Predictor is a fortune teller who uses pictures and words as she rubs her crystal ball to make powerful predictions. Quincy the questioner is a talk show host who rattles off questions rapid fire for students to answer as he whips out his microphone. Clara Clarifier is a fancy, boa-sporting little lady who says “darlings” often as she pauses to clarify words and concepts she does not understand. Sammy Summarizer is a cowboy or cowgirl ready to rope up the main ideas in the reading.

I have had great fun with these characters over the past ten years of using them. From a puppet kit for primary (Oczkus, 2008; www.primaryconcepts.com) to skits put on by teachers or students, classes embrace the characters and make learning come alive. At one school some of the teachers even dressed up as the Fab Four for Halloween. No wonder smiles break out when the characters come to reading lessons, and students easily remember the strategies.

Hand motions to show strategy use (Oczkus, 2009, 2010). Using hand gestures along with the metaphors actively engages students in a nonlinguistic representation for their thinking (Marzano, 2004). Students become more independent in their strategy use when they employ the hand gestures. For predicting, students pretend to rub a crystal ball. When they question, they make a fist for a microphone, and for clarify they make circles with their fingers for “glasses” to clarify. When students summarize, they pretend to wield a lasso around above their heads as they round up the main idea.

Graphic organizers. Graphic organizers are an effective means of helping students keep track of their reading and comprehension. Reciprocal teaching offers a logical graphic representation organized around the four strategies. Simply divide a paper or chart paper into four boxes and either serve as a scribe to write student comments or invite students to place sticky notes on the chart in each box during the lesson. During guided reading lessons, use smaller paper such as construction paper or a colorful file folder and pass it around the table, allowing students to add to it by writing on it or using sticky notes.

Dice (Oczkus, 2010). Run a discussion using dice. Students working in small groups or teams roll dice, and when they land on each number they read the text and respond accordingly: 1 predict, 2 question, 3 clarify, 4 summarize, 5 free choice, 6 free choice.

Spinner (Oczkus, 2010). Using a simple paper plate, make a spinner. Label the plate with all four strategies. Students may work in small groups, sometimes teacher led, to take turns spinning the dial and carrying out the strategy they land on.

Music (Oczkus, 2010). Try assigning popular songs to each strategy, such as “The Pink Panther” for predicting and “Rawhide” for summarizing. Play these for students or make up your own songs for each strategy using familiar tunes.

Stick and sketch notes. During independent reading, ask students to mark a spot where they used one of the Fab Four strategies and then share in a partner or class discussion. They sketch a symbol for the strategy—crystal ball, microphone, lasso, or pair of glasses.
Common Questions Teachers Ask

How do I start? Read alouds work best, so you can do a think aloud for each strategy. Be sure to include partner turn and talk time frequently during the lesson. Use the props and characters during the read aloud.

How many times per week should I utilize reciprocal teaching? Just like dieting or anything else, once a week is not effective for reciprocal teaching to take hold! Reciprocal teaching yields the best results if students participate in the strategies at least twice per week.

I thought about calling this article “This Isn’t Your Grandmother’s Reciprocal Teaching” because even if you’ve been using reciprocal reaching for decades, when you mix these hands-on interactive ideas with the basic formula for reciprocal teaching, you end up with even more engaging lessons that improve comprehension for all students!

Professional Development Resources

- [www.lorioczkus.com](http://www.lorioczkus.com) for books, sample video clips,

Go to this page with IRA and click on FREE video clips and FREE study guide to go with the 2nd edition of Reciprocal Teaching at Work by Lori Oczkus 2010.

Lori Oczkus, literacy coach, author, and popular speaker across the United States (and sometimes Canada), has motivated tens of thousands of teachers who have attended her fast-paced workshops and read her best-selling books. Lori enjoys teaching every week. She is the author of Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension (IRA 2010).

References


