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What is This?

Applying Research in Reading Comprehension to Social Studies Instruction for Middle and High School Students

Elizabeth Swanson, PhD[1] and Jeanne Wanzek, PhD[2]

Abstract

Secondary-level content area teachers face unique challenges in helping their students successfully read, understand, and learn content from complex texts in their discipline. In this article, a set of research-based practices designed to provide effective and feasible instruction to improve students' reading and comprehension of text and content is provided. Specific examples of each practice within a social studies unit are used to illustrate how to promote text reading and understanding that is integrated with the content.

Students in middle and high school encounter intricate, demanding, and multifaceted texts across subject areas. It is not surprising, then, that academic success is highly correlated with the ability to read and understand a variety of complex text (ACT, 2006). Most secondary-level students require purposeful instruction in the sophisticated language and comprehension knowledge needed to successfully read texts in the upper grades (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). To address student needs in acquiring advanced reading practices, there has been a renewed emphasis on the importance of academic literacy instruction provided throughout the content areas (Kamil et al., 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan,

2008; Torgesen et al., 2007). Ultimately, providing literacy instruction within content areas such as social studies can increase students' general reading comprehension achievement as well as their knowledge acquisition in the content area (Vaughn et al., 2013).

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The importance of academic literacy in the middle and high school grades is underscored by the national Common Core Standards, adopted thus far by 45 states. For example, specific standards have been identified for literacy in history/social studies instruction in Grades 6 to 12 (National Governors Association & Council of Chief School Officers, 2010), meaning that middle and high school social studies teachers must incorporate content reading and specific literacy practices for facilitating student use and understanding of social studies text. Students must learn to determine what the text says explicitly, what inferences can be made, how the text is structured to present key information, and how to evaluate textual evidence to support conclusions in the discipline. In addition, students must learn domain-specific words and phrases as well as the general conventions of social studies text to develop an understanding of the types of evidence used in the content. These literacy standards are intended to complement the social studies content instruction that is already in place. Consequently, teachers need effective literacy practices that can be embedded easily in the existing content and enhance rather than take away from important content instruction.

Students who struggle with comprehension of text in the upper grades often have deficits in vocabulary or background knowledge, inference ability, word reading, or comprehension strategy use (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007). However, independent reading and understanding of text can be improved when students are provided explicit literacy instruction and practice (Berkeley, Marshak, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011; Chan, 1991; Deshler et al., 2001; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001). A systematic review of reading instruction in Grades 4 to 12 noted moderate to strong evidence in the literature for the effectiveness of (a) providing explicit vocabulary instruction, (b) teaching comprehension strategies, (c) structuring opportunities for extended discussions of text, and (d) increasing student motivation and engagement in literacy activities (Kamil et al., 2008).

Recently, a set of six U.S. history units of study incorporating a set of practices based on the research for improving student reading and comprehension in the upper grades were developed and evaluated. This article presents literacy practices that are designed to (a) incorporate primary source text reading within social studies content area instruction, (b) provide effective comprehension instruction for student understanding of the content and text, and (c) support existing social studies content instruction with feasible instructional techniques to enhance student learning, along with specific examples of each practice from a Roaring Twenties history unit. The components in each of these units are (a) comprehension canopy, (b) essential words routines, (c) critical reading of history text, (d) team-based learning comprehension checks, and (e) team-based learning knowledge application. A description of each is provided below.

Comprehension Canopy

Motivation to learn is increased when students perceive the content as valuable, and this increased motivation can produce positive reading comprehension outcomes (Jacobs et al., 2002). Likewise, students' general world knowledge affects comprehension of new texts (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). The first component, the Comprehension Canopy, is designed to motivate students as well as activate and build background knowledge. The component should take approximately 5 minutes and is introduced at the beginning of a new unit. The following elements compose the Comprehension Canopy:

1. Access and build background knowledge: Ask students a series of questions to prompt access of background knowledge. Allow only correct, accurate information to be shared. When a student answer indicates misconceptions or lack of knowledge, clarify immediately to provide accurate information, taking the opportunity to build student knowledge. In the Roaring Twenties unit teachers ask the following questions to access background knowledge related to previous content instruction and student experiences: (a) "What was life in America like during World War I—for example, the economy, social norms and cultural norms?" and (b) "Values and lifestyles can change significantly over a short period of time. What values of your generation are different from those of your grandparents' generation? For example, would your grandparent have worn shorts to school? Would they have spent hours playing video games? You do a lot of things differently from your grandparents. Just like you, a lot of people in the twenties adopted new lifestyles and values."

2. Visual-based motivator and background builder: Present a short video to introduce the topic of the unit in an engaging way. Give the students an opportunity to respond to the video. For example, in the Roaring Twenties unit, a 56-second video, *The 1920s, Roaring 20s, History, Fashion, Costumes* (King, 2010), is introduced by saying, "This video is about the events and attitudes that characterized the 1920s. It will prepare you to learn more about the changes that happened in America during the 1920s. As you watch the video, write one change that might have caused conflict in society during this time." After the video, teachers ask the students to turn to a partner and tell why the change they wrote would cause societal conflict. Teachers monitor students' partner work and ask students with high-quality answers or comments to share with the entire class.

Essential Words Routines

The second component, Essential Words, provides instruction in key concepts to support content mastery. Superordinate concepts that are related to many other terms and concepts learned throughout the social studies were purposefully chosen. This is an effective approach to vocabulary instruction (Vaughn et al., 2009) that encourages long-term recall of key concepts and related words. For example, the essential words for the Roaring Twenties unit are *consumer economy, prosperity, mass media, demographics*, and *social revolution*. Words are introduced on Day 1 of the unit, followed by frequent reviews on subsequent days throughout the unit.

Introducing Essential Words on Day 1

In preparation for essential words instruction, teachers prepare a one-page display that contains all components of the routine (i.e., definition, pictorial representation, related words, examples of words used in context, and two turn-and-talk questions). On the first day of the unit, each term is introduced using the teacher document (see Note 1). Students are encouraged to take notes during the teacher's instruction of each essential word. This component should take approximately 15 minutes. The following elements are included in the Essential Words introduction:

1. Tell students the word and the definition: "Our first word is *social revolution*. Everyone say 'social revolution'. A social revolution is a change in the way a large number of members of a society live."
2. Explain how the visual is an illustration of the word: "Take a look at this photo. Here, women are marching to bring attention to the fact that they were not allowed to vote. They were demanding a social revolution—or a change in the way women were treated."
3. Tell students the related words and provide any necessary clarification: "Some related terms that will help you understand social revolution better are upheaval of social norms, or massive change."
4. Read two sentences that use the word in context. Notice that one sentence uses the word in modern context and the second sentence uses it in historical context: "Listen to how social revolution is used in two sentences, 'Flappers symbolized one of the social revolutions of the 1920s. A growing list of universities and colleges now offer social media courses, responding to the social revolution caused by social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.'"
5. Provide some examples and nonexamples of the word: "Here are some examples of social revolution: the civil rights movement and feminism. Why are these examples [allow student answers]? Here are some nonexamples: the *Hunger Games* book series, skinny jeans. Why are these not examples of a social revolution [allow student answers]?"
6. Read the turn-and-talk prompt to students and have them turn to a partner to discuss. It might sound something like this: "Now, I want you to turn to your partner and discuss the answer to this question, 'How is a social revolution different from a political revolution (for example, the American Revolution)?'" Provide students about 30 seconds to discuss. As students discuss, monitor and note high-quality responses. Regroup students and ask students with high-quality responses to share their answer.

Review Essential Words

On subsequent unit days, students engage in a beginning of class warm-up focused on the review and use of an essential word. The warm-up document should be prepared prior to the lesson and can take one of several forms. The goal is to create a short activity that requires students to apply what they know about the essential word(s) to a novel reading or situation (see Note 1). Each warm-up lasts approximately 5 minutes.

1. Display the warm-up document as students enter class. Students may have a copy of the warm-up document to write on as well.
2. Direct students to complete the warm-up activity. Monitor student work and note high-quality work that can be showcased at the end of the warm-up.
3. Take about 1 minute to ask students who wrote high-quality responses to share with the class. Reteach word meanings if there are students who had difficulty with the warm-up activity.

Critical Reading of History Text

Monitoring comprehension during reading is an important reading practice students must master (Vaughn et al., 2011; Vaughn, Swanson, et al., 2013). The critical reading routine that follows can help teachers and students remain focused on critical themes and topics in the text while implementing procedures that improve reading comprehension. Prior to the lesson, the text is split into sections or stopping points. At the end of each section, the teacher asks, "What's going on?" and "How does this relate to what you have read already?" At the end of the reading, teachers assist students in answering two additional questions: "What is the overall message of the passage?" and "What questions do you have?" The following routine is implemented for each reading in the unit (see Note 1):

1. Introduce the reading. An introduction to *Redirecting America* (Schortemeier, 1920) might sound something like this: "The memory of World War I was fresh in 1920 during Warren G. Harding's presidential campaign. This excerpt from one of Harding's campaign speeches describes his goal for postwar America. As we read, we'll stop at the boxes to answer questions and take notes about what we've read."
2. During reading, as needed, clarify unknown words. Point out connections to essential words where applicable.
3. At each stopping point, facilitate student note taking in response to the provided questions.
4. Monitor student responses and provide corrective feedback if students misunderstand the material.

Team-Based Learning Comprehension Check

Team-based learning (TBL) is an effective routine for improving content knowledge among adolescent readers (Wanzek et al.,). The routine provides opportunities for individual student accountability, group learning that is associated with positive outcomes for struggling readers (Vaughn et al., 2011), and immediate feedback that is also associated with student gains in learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The comprehension check is implemented several times during the unit so teachers can check on student understanding of the content. During the comprehension check, students take a short quiz (5–8 questions) on the content covered thus far in the unit. First, each student answers the questions independently (and without text resources). Following the independent check, students then move into teams (3–4 students on each team), where they repeat the comprehension questions but provide a text-based rationale for the answer. Over the course of the 10-day Roaring Twenties unit, teachers should implement two TBL comprehension checks using the following procedures:

1. Students complete the comprehension check independently and turn it in to the teacher for a grade. This comprehension check is completed without referring to the text.
2. Students gather their reading materials and move into their assigned teams.
3. Teams complete the comprehension check again as a group using scratch off cards. For each question, students will do the following: (a) suggest an answer, (b) cite evidence from previously read texts in the unit, (c) agree on the correct answer, and (d) scratch off the answer. If incorrect, repeat the process.

Prior to engaging students in TBL for the first time, there are several instructional considerations, such as unique materials needs, creation of teams, and TBL procedures. These considerations are addressed below.

Team-Based Learning Targeted Instruction

One of the benefits of TBL for students who struggle in class is the opportunity to receive instruction targeted to address areas of misunderstanding. TBL targeted instruction consists of two phases—teacher planning and delivery of instruction.

Teacher Planning. In this phase, teachers gather information to determine what to review or reteach. Several sources of information can be used. First, teachers should score the individual comprehension checks to identify frequently missed questions. Second, while the teacher circulates during the TBL comprehension check, he or she should note where students struggle with identifying correct answers or experience difficulty finding text evidence to support answers. Finally, teachers can identify frequently missed questions from the scratch-off forms.

Delivery of Targeted Instruction. After areas of need are identified, the teacher may begin designing instruction to review or reteach the necessary material. Instruction should be delivered in a way that differs from the original instructional method and may include any combination of lecture, video, discussion, and additional reading. Because instruction targets a few key concepts that caused particular confusion, TBL targeted instruction should not take long—anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes.

TBL Materials. Teachers need several materials for the TBL comprehension check: (a) student copies of comprehension check composed of 5 to 10 multiple choice comprehension questions, (b) one additional copy of the comprehension check for each group, (c) one scratch-off sheet (visit www. epsteineducation.com/how.php for ordering) per group, and (d) the text students have read previously.

Forming TBL Teams. One of the strengths of the TBL process is the efficiency with which students engage in group work to complete a product and receive immediate corrective feedback. For the process to run smoothly, care should be taken in forming groups. Teachers are encouraged to form heterogeneous groups so that students who may struggle have the opportunity to engage in discussion with team members who can teach them. Other student characteristics should be taken into consideration as well. For example, second language learners in the class may be proficient enough in English to join a heterogeneous group. On the other hand, they may need a dual-language speaking partner to assist with translation. After the teacher designates teams, it is important for teams to remain consistent for about 6 to

9 weeks so that students begin to feel comfortable sharing their answer choice and their text evidence with the team.

Teaching TBL Procedures. Because this is a team-based approach, teachers should instruct students on the procedures of the routine prior to engaging students in their first TBL comprehension check. Such procedures include how to move into and out of teams, how to gather/turn in materials, and behavior expectations during TBL. Establishing expectations for behavior is particularly important to successful team interactions over the 6 to 9 weeks that they work together. Teachers should be encouraged to announce to students the behavior expectations for the day and then provide corrective feedback to teams. For example, a teacher might say,

> Today during TBL, I want to hear you providing text evidence for your answers. Instead of simply saying, "I think the answer is b," I want to hear something like, "I think the answer is b because on page 126 of the text book, the author talks about. . . ." I will be walking around during TBL to listen for teams who provide text evidence for their answers.

After explaining the behavior expectation of the day, provide specific feedback to groups by saying something like, "I noticed you all got the answer correct, turn to page 329 and find the text evidence to support your answer."

Team-Based Learning Knowledge Application

Students work again in the same teams in the culminating activity for the unit, Knowledge Application. Knowledge Application is designed to allow students to analyze and synthesize text-based information covering the key concepts taught in the unit. The Knowledge Application includes several activities that will take 45 to 70 minutes. First, students read several new passages of text that provide different perspectives or different key ideas related to the Comprehension Canopy. Students follow the critical reading routine and record answers to the questions asked during text reading. Second, using their notes, group members analyze the text to evaluate and apply the content they have learned. For example, in the Roaring Twenties unit, students are asked to "analyze each text regarding the changes in politics, the economy, and culture that occurred in the 1920s." Third, students use the analysis to complete a writing assignment. A key aspect of the analysis is the requirement for students to use textual evidence to support conclusions. In the Roaring Twenties unit, the following directions are given:

> In the 1920s, the United States saw vast political, economic, and social change. Imagine that your team is on the editorial board of a monthly magazine to be published in January 1929. This month's edition will focus on the 1920s and the three excerpts you just read. You have been assigned to write an introduction to the essays that explains how they capture the

spirit of the 1920s. Using your information from step one, plus any other texts or notes for this unit, write a paragraph that highlights the political, economic, and social changes that took place during the 1920s.

Finally, and if time permits, students may engage in an extension activity to demonstrate understanding of the main concepts from the unit. Instructions for Roaring Twenties extension activity are as follows: "Design a cover for the January 1929 edition of the monthly magazine in which the three essays and each team's introductory paragraph will appear. Emphasize political, economic, and cultural change in the cover's design and graphics." Students share the covers and comment on how each one captures the spirit of the decade. The following procedures can be used to accomplish this work within the TBL Knowledge Application.

Before TBL Knowledge Application:

1. Facilitate student movement into teams.
2. Hand out one set of TBL Knowledge Application pages to each team (see Note 1).
3. Review the directions for the activity with students.

During TBL Knowledge Application:

4. Have students read the selected text and take notes by answering the given questions within their TBL discussion teams (Note: Depending on student need, teachers may take more of a leadership role during text reading and note taking). After reading, students may move directly into the text analysis and writing portions.
5. While teams work, check in with teams and provide feedback.
6. Direct students back to the text for evidence to support their contributions.
7. Pause the activity and with the whole class highlight contributions that demonstrate good use of text evidence or critical thinking.

After TBL Knowledge Application

8. After teams finish, ask them to summarize and present their writing and extension activity product.
9. Highlight groups' use of text to support ideas.

Summary

The current focus on all students being college and career ready in literacy by the end of high school involves providing access and effective instruction in reading and understanding complex texts across content areas. The social studies provide a rich content in which text reading and literacy instruction can be integrated to strengthen students' content and reading knowledge. The set of strategies presented in this article can be applied in a variety of units of

study to offer students with multiple opportunities to (a) connect content to critical key ideas and questions, (b) learn domain-specific words and concepts, (c) access and learn from text related to the content, (d) engage in collaborative, extended discussions of content, and (e) evaluate and identify textual evidence to support learning and application of the content. These practices provide teachers with flexible, feasible ways to integrate research-based literacy practices to boost student knowledge acquisition in the content while also improving student reading comprehension and ability to learn from text.

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Note

1. A set of sample materials can be found online at http://www .meadowscenter.org/library/resource/applying-research-in-reading-comprehension-to-social-studies-instruction-fo

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