
Introduction

The Thinking Behind Think-Alouds

This book is the first in a series entitled *Action Strategies for Readers*. The premise behind it is simple: the most important thing we can teach our students is how to learn. Or put another way, the most powerful thing we can teach is strategic knowledge, a knowledge of the procedures people use to learn, to think, to read, and to write. The most effective way to introduce students to how to use these tools is to model them in the contexts of meaningful tasks and then to assist students in their own use of these strategies.

For our purposes, this means that to help our students to become expert readers, we must model the strategies of expert readers using authentic texts—novels, short stories, non-fiction books, newspaper articles, arguments, and Internet sites—and then support students in taking on these expert stances for themselves as they read independently.

Though this idea may seem obvious, it stands in direct contrast to the theories and practices that dominate most of American curriculum, instruction, and testing. Reviews of American education show that we spend most of our time teaching students information, filling them with declarative knowledge (the *what*), instead of assisting them to enact new and more proficient ways of reading, problem solving, and making meaning (the *how*).

This is unfortunate, as the research clearly shows that when students are asked to learn information without actively using procedures to construct understanding, they usually end up forgetting the *what*—the content. Never having learned the *how*, they are put squarely behind the eight ball and do not know how to learn on their own.

The Action Strategies series will attempt to help turn this deep-seated trend around. With each book, I'll show you how to help students learn *ways of reading*. Some of these ways, called general-process strategies, can be applied to any type of text or content they encounter. Other strategies, known as task or text specific processes, are necessary to comprehending particular text conventions or genres. As our students read and solve problems and inquire using these strategies, they will of course also deeply learn content.

Each book in this series will introduce a family of teaching strategies for assisting stu-

dents to learn reading strategies. The teaching technique highlighted in this book is a think-aloud, in which a reader makes his reading process manifest to others by articulating all that he is noticing, thinking, feeling, and doing as he reads a text.

Vygotsky's Two-Sided Model of Teaching and Learning

The teaching/learning theories of noted Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his followers inform many of the ideas you will encounter in this book and the subsequent ones in this series. Vygotsky's theories have been hugely influential on successful early-literacy programs like Reading Recovery® and Guided Reading, and his ideas are just beginning to gain a foothold in instruction for older students.

Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians build their ideas on the premise that *what is learned must be taught*. Sounds simple enough, but as you will see when you read about the three basic models of teaching and learning influential today, most schools and much classroom activity runs counter to this notion and fails to fully understand what it means to teach.

The most prevalent teaching/learning model today is the teacher/information-centered model, in which teaching is the purveying of information (this model transforms the old saw “those who can't do, teach,” to “those who can tell, teach”). This is considered a one-sided model because learning is centered on the information possessed by the teacher, which flows one way, from the teacher to the student.

A reaction against this model is the progressive student-centered model, in which the student learns about an interest of his choice. The teacher provides a nurturing environment for student exploration and discovery. This is also considered a one-sided model because learning is driven by the student (i.e., “those who can get kids to articulate and pursue their own interests, teach”).

The third is a two-sided learning-centered model in which expertise is given over to students in an exchange (“those who can do something, understand how to do that something, and can assist others to do it, teach”). This model stands in direct contrast to the prevailing one-sided teacher, information-centered model. In this model, the teacher teaches through the relationship cultivated with a student in the context of working together closely. It goes well beyond the one-sided student-centered model in which students construct their own understandings in a nurturing environment but without the direct inter-

ventions of the teacher. In the learning-centered model, expertise is explicitly and continuously shared with the student as teacher and student engage together in meaningful and productive shared activities.

I've always questioned the teacher-centered model because it focuses on *what* but not *how*. Research in cognitive science has made it compellingly clear that just telling students information is a weak form of teaching. Though the student-centered model is a major improvement over the teacher-centered model, I critique it too, because this model assumes that much learning occurs naturally. Given the conventionality of texts (i.e., given that texts are constructed in certain ways not because of nature but because people have agreed to construct and read them in certain ways), I do not believe that we learn to read naturally. A child locked in a room with books would not learn to read them on her own; she needs someone to teach her how print works and what she is expected to do as a reader. I would also argue that the teacher who believes in natural learning often deprives the student of her full expertise as a reader.

And so I champion the two-sided learning-centered model based on Vygotsky: learning is the crucial element, and we recognize that teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin, two parts in the same dance.

Vygotsky's View of Reading

According to Vygotsky and his followers, we must learn ways of reading and thinking in order to participate fully in our culture and to make meaning within it; these ways have to be passed from experts to novices in the context of meaningful, collaborative activity. For them, a book is more than just words on a page or a narrative that will move us or inform us, it is a highly conventionalized form of language. Authors and readers use agreed-upon sets of conventions in order to convey meaning and make meaning, from knowing that quotation marks signal that a character is speaking to subtler codes signaling a character's intention or reliability. Teaching these conventions requires a more expert reader to notice what a novice reader undersrands and then assist him to a higher level of understanding. This is teaching because it actively assists and promotes growth. Think-alouds are a powerful way to teach because they give students the expert's keys to unlock a text's fullest construction of meaning.

Vygotsky's Zones

Vygotsky maintained that every child has a cognitive *zone of actual development* (ZAD). This zone is defined by what the child can do on her own without any kind of assistance. Vygotsky believed that if you give a child a task, like reading a book, and he does it, then you have taught him nothing. The child could already do the task, as that task was in his current zone of actual development.

Further, Vygotsky said that if you give a child a task to do and he cannot do it, then you have the chance to teach. If the child cannot do the task alone but can do it with a more expert person's help, then the task lies in what Vygotsky calls the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). In this zone, students can do with help what they cannot do alone. Vygotsky argued that we can teach students something new only when the task is within their zone of proximal development.

You'll see an example of "teaching in the zone" in Chapter 1 (page 21) as I use a think-aloud to teach a student named Josh. Josh could identify and discuss the literal details of Walter Dean Myers' novel *Monster*, but he could not make the inferences needed to fully comprehend the text. Understanding the directly stated details was within his zone of actual development; making even simple inferences was within his zone of proximal development (ZPD).

The think-aloud made the strategy of inferring tangible to Josh, putting it in a concrete form that he could study, consider, and respond to. This supports Vygotsky's assertion that all learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, and from the visible and external to the internal. In the chart that follows, I provide an overview of Vygotsky's model of learning.



What's the end goal? A classroom full of independent, engaged readers.

Vygotskian Perspective: Teacher/Student Interactions

Student Responsibility → Teacher Responsibility → Joint Responsibility → Self Responsibility

Zone of Actual Development

Zone of Proximal Development

New Zone of Actual Development

What the student can do on her own unassisted

Assistance provided by more capable others: teacher or peer or environment: classroom structures and activities

Transition from other assistance to self-assistance

Assistance provided by the self

Internalization, automatization

SOCIAL SPEECH

- Adult uses language to model process
- Adult and student share language and activity

PRIVATE SPEECH
student uses for herself language that adults use to regulate behavior (self-control)

INNER SPEECH

The student's silent, abbreviated dialogue that she carries on with self that is the essence of conscious mental activity

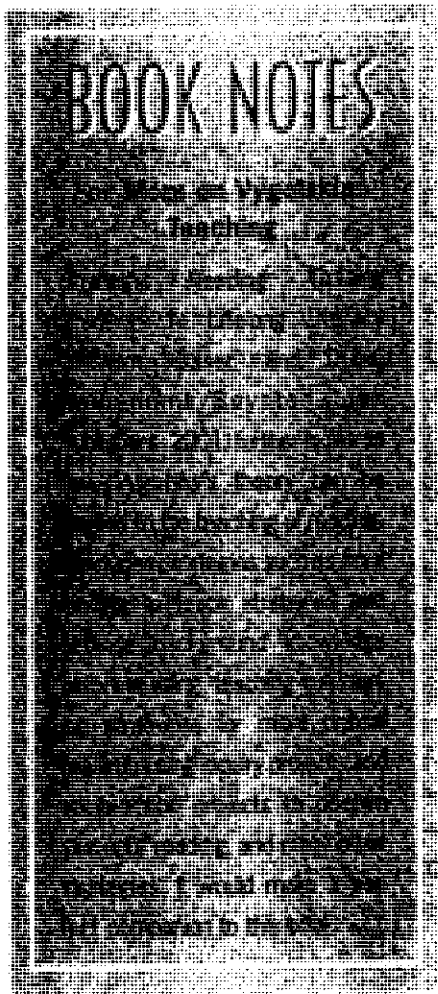
private speech internalized and transformed to inner verbal thought (self-regulation)

Adapted from Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube, 2001

The Zones

Vygotsky's concept of cognitive learning zones is so critical to appreciating this book—and to effective teaching—that I recap it here:

Zone of Actual Development—Independence: When we give a student a task in the zone of actual development, the student can already independently complete the task and there is nothing new to be learned, though such tasks may build confidence and fluency (some researchers believe that up to half of school time is spent teaching things that most of the kids already know and can do). Reading inventories designate texts that students can comprehend on their own as being at the “independent” reading level. These are



texts that students can understand without assistance and therefore reading such texts is in that child's zone of actual development.

Within the Zone of Proximal Development—Instruction and Learning Occurs:

If we give students a task within their zone of proximal development, the opportunity for learning is there, provided we assist. With assistance (teaching), students can do things they could not do before. Learning will occur! We do it until we see that students can accomplish the task without help, until the skill has moved into their zone of actual development. Reading inventories designate texts that students can comprehend with expert assistance as being at the "instructional" reading level. At this level, students will be successful with instructional help. As students are provided with help to read texts at this level, they learn new strategies of reading and achieve understanding in how certain textual conventions and text structures work to make meaning. The child becomes a more expert and knowledgeable reader by being assisted through this zone.

Beyond the Zone of Proximal Development—Frustration: If we give students a task that is beyond the zone of proximal development, then it will be too hard no matter how much support we give (e.g., if we try to teach Shakespeare to students whose sight vocabulary is low and who have never read drama, with its alternating speakers, stage directions, and other special conventions, then they may not succeed with the text no matter how much help we provide). Reading inventories designate texts that a student cannot comprehend even with assistance as being at her "frustrational" reading level. These are texts that students cannot comprehend and that frustrate them, demonstrating that the text lies beyond the zone of proximal development.

ACTIVE TEACHING IN THE ZPD: OFFERING EXPLANATION, MODELING, GUIDED PRACTICE

To teach in the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky says the teacher must first generously model how to work through a task, highlighting and naming how a particular strategy or strategies can be used to successfully complete it. Then the teacher needs to provide opportunities for students to try the strategy, with various levels of assistance. After modeling, a teacher would then have students work in small groups, so they can assist one another, and so that she can circulate among them, helping when students get stuck. As the teacher notes evidence of students using the strategy effectively, she then provides a task in which students who are ready can use the strategy unassisted. If a student has trouble, the teacher can move her back a step by having her work with a peer or with the teacher herself. She then looks for evidence that students can use the strategy completely on their own, applying it and adapting it to new learning tasks. For example, after teaching Josh the strategy of inferring using the novel *Monster*, (see page 21) I would watch to see that Josh used inferences when reading another novel, during a class discussion of an article on cloning in *Time for Kids*, or in his reading journal. In other words, I look to see that a student has internalized new strategic knowledge and uses it independently and automatically. I look to see that the strategy is within his ZAD. This is the goal of all teaching and learning: independence.

Six Recursive Steps of Explicit Instruction

Remember, modeling doesn't stop after you've introduced a strategy. Throughout this teaching process, lend kids your strategic knowledge through active modeling and by stating what you are attending to. Literacy researchers Taylor, Harris, Pearson, and Garcia (1995) identify six recursive steps that occur in this kind of explicit instruction. When you read about Josh in the next chapter, you can refer to this list to see how I went through each of these steps.

1. Teacher explains *what* a strategy consists of.
2. Teacher explains *why* this strategy is important.
3. Teacher explains *when* to use the strategy in actual reading (e.g., what to notice in a text that tips off the reader that this particular strategy should be used).
4. Teacher *models how* to perform the strategy in an actual context (e.g., by doing a

- think-aloud using a real text) while students observe.
5. Teacher *guides learner practice*. Teachers and students work through several increasingly challenging examples of the strategy together using authentic texts. Teacher gradually releases responsibility to the students, allowing them to do what they are capable of on their own and intervening and supporting only when needed and only as much as is absolutely needed.
 6. Students *independently use* the strategy as they pursue their own reading and projects.

DO AS I SAY—AND AS I DO!

The Steps of Passing Strategic Expertise to Students

<p>TEACHER DOES/STUDENTS WATCH STEP 1: MODELING OF STRATEGY</p> <p>Teacher uses and talks about strategy through use of technique like think-alouds.</p> <p>Student observes.</p> <p>Teacher stresses what, why, and when of strategy use.</p>	<p>TEACHER DOES/STUDENTS HELP STEP 2: APPRENTICESHIP OF USE</p> <p>Teacher uses strategy.</p> <p>Student talks about and help, identifying when and how strategy should be used.</p>
<p>STUDENTS DO/TEACHER HELPS STEP 3: SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY USE</p> <p>Students use and talk about strategy with help of scaffolding technique like think-alouds, usually in small groups.</p> <p>Teacher observes, provides feedback, and helps as needed.</p>	<p>STUDENTS DO/TEACHER WATCHES STEP 4: INDEPENDENT USE</p> <p>Student independently uses strategy, demonstrating competence through techniques like think-alouds</p> <p>Teacher observes and assesses; plans future instruction</p>

Adapted from Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube, 2001

Vygotsky's take on learning is incredibly liberating. In his view, any child can learn the next more difficult strategy or concept if given supportive instruction. Children can and will learn, no matter the obstacles, if they are given the right help. If students are not progressing, Vygotsky would assert that the instruction has not been appropriate, thereby rejecting the view of Jean Piaget that the child may have plateaued in a particular developmental stage. George Hillocks' influential research (1995) uses classroom data to make the same case. He draws on Benjamin Bloom's (1976, 1985) research on human potential to argue that almost any child can and will learn given the right opportunities and instruction. This is a wonderful position for us to embrace: if we give our developing readers the right kinds of help then they can and will learn to be better readers.

This book and the others in this series are dedicated to this end: to help provide you with flexible techniques for giving the right kind of help to your students, assistance that will move them through the four steps of modeling, apprenticeship, scaffolded use, and independent use, so they can become confident, motivated, and engaged readers.

THE PLACE OF STRATEGY INSTRUCTION IN YOUR READING PROGRAM

In my previous books on teaching reading I've maintained that reading well is a potentially life-transforming pursuit because it allows us to outgrow ourselves and become more than we currently are. This can only happen for our students if we fully embrace the idea that good reading requires good teaching, and that the more reluctant the readers we teach, the better and more powerful our teaching must be. But as we teach our students, there are several things to remember so that strategy instruction isn't overemphasized to the point that it interferes with rather than supports engaged reading.

- Reading strategies are important only insofar as they assist readers to construct meaningful understandings of texts. With this level of comprehension, readers can respond to, converse with, and even resist the meanings the author seems to put forth.
- Teaching strategies are important only insofar as they assist readers to comprehend and respond to text. In other words, think-alouds are a useful teaching strategy when they help a reader through her zone of proximal development, assisting her to develop a par-

ticular strategy or set of strategies that she cannot yet use independently, and when these strategies help her to engage with a text important to her current purposes.

- Think-alouds, like any teaching strategy, are not appropriate when students already know how to use a featured reading strategy, when they do not have a need to use the strategy, or when the strategy is so complex that it lies beyond their zone of proximal development. Once a new strategy is mastered, the scaffolding should be removed so students can use what they have learned independently to engage with the text.

The teaching and grouping structures explored throughout this book can provide various levels of support to whole-class, small groups, or individuals. They will help you teach each student in his zone of proximal development. The key is to use the strategy instruction flexibly. For example, if students have a general need to know a strategy in the context of a unit or reading, then I will teach them as a whole group. Often, because my students read with widely differing abilities, I will flexibly group them for strategy instruction. When I have the time, I find it most effective to work with students one-on-one. This is particularly important when a student has a unique need or when others in the class have already learned the strategy. If you use a workshop approach or have inquiry stations in your classroom, such tutoring can easily take place within these structures.

Sometimes I use more able readers to tutor less able ones. I find that even able readers benefit from using think-alouds (both in the role of student and more expert peer) to name and consolidate their own current strategy use and to find ways of extending and elaborating on that use.

The bottom line: think-alouds are a means to an end—and that end is engaged and reflective reading. Use the technique flexibly to give power over to your student readers.

