

Reading to Learn in Social Studies: The R2-3E Strategy

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For decades, middle and high school content-specific teachers have been encouraged to integrate reading strategies into their pedagogical practices, yet many are reluctant to do so. This situation suggests that content area teachers believe it is someone else's responsibility or that they lack the ability and/or training to teach literacy (Hall, 2005). According to research, teachers also consider lack of instructional time and increasing pressure to cover content as obstacles to literacy instruction (Deshler et. al, 2001; Obrien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). These are, however, unproductive arguments because many adolescents do not possess the necessary skills to navigate the specialized vocabulary and expository text associated with middle and high school content-specific classes. Furthermore, this reluctance offers a fruitless path for teachers.

In an era where high-stakes testing has the potential to significantly impact teacher accountability, teachers need to accept the challenge of supporting literacy skill development within content instruction. The R2-3E strategy described in this article is a simple means of supporting literacy in the content areas, and is an especially powerful tool for helping students to recognize important or key information in nonfiction text and to develop summarizing skills.

Why Does It Matter?

The middle grades in elementary school are generally considered the time when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). At the same time, they are making this transition, however, reading strategy instruction generally decreases (Giles, Wang, Smith, & Johnson, 2013). Scholars doubt the voracity of the "vaccination" concept of teaching, where students receive enhanced literacy instruction in the early grades with the idea that this will result in continued literacy advancement (Shanahan & Barr, 1995). Even when a child demonstrates strong reading skills in the early grades, these strengths may not automatically translate into the more complex skills needed to navigate the specialized and sophisticated content-specific reading in later grades (Perle, Grigg,

& Donahue, 2005). According to Ness (2009), the nearly eight million students in grades 4-12 who read below grade level are likely to struggle as they encounter the difficult content presented in texts they will be required to read, and, of those struggling secondary readers, nearly 70% struggle with reading comprehension (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Content area reading requires different reading strategies than what is taught in the developmental years (Baer & Nourie, 1993). Social studies texts, for example, present complex vocabulary within unfamiliar text structures, and can present unique challenges to middle school readers (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The complexity of the texts with its jargon, technical terms, multisyllabic words, and a variety of text structures, requires reading skills that middle grade students may not possess or know how to apply (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003). Further evidence suggests that reading instruction in specific content areas such as social studies can improve student understanding and learning (Mosborg, 2002). It, therefore, seems reasonable that we should expect that teachers who are tasked with delivering this content to also be equipped to provide the literacy scaffolds that may be necessary for their students to master the content.

R2-3E Strategy

R2-3E, read twice, extract, explain, and extend, is an instructional strategy developed as a result of utilizing note pages rather than a social studies textbook in a middle school social studies classroom. The strategy provides a platform to model expert reading and meaningful literacy strategies through a sustained collaboration between the teacher and students. Few materials are needed – print copies of text, highlighters, pens/pencils, interactive whiteboard – making it an accessible strategy for most teachers.

The R2-3E strategy can be used with any nonfiction text, including note pages or pages from a textbook. It is important, however, that students have a copy of the text that they can write on. It is also essential for the teacher to provide explicit instruction, modeling expert reading and demonstrating the process on an interactive whiteboard. Students need plenty of opportunities for guided practice until they become comfortable with the process. This is particularly true when they are learning to determine which words or short phrases qualify as key words or important information.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this instructional strategy is that it provides an opportunity for students to learn to summarize informational text. Generally, when a student is asked to summarize, he or she tends to write too much and copy complete sentences from the text, or they write too little and omit

important details. The desired outcome of R2-3E is for students to be able to pull out main ideas of the text by focusing on key details, words, and phrases.

Before using this strategy, teachers should prepare students with a discussion of what makes a word in a sentence or a paragraph a key or important word. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to distinguish between what is important information and what may be interesting, but not necessary for understanding. Questions teachers can ask students to facilitate this understanding include:

- Which words or short phrases relate to the title?
- Which words or short phrases best describe the topic?
- Which words or short phrases help you to understand the topic?
- Which words or short phrases best describe bolded words?
- Which words or information will you likely have to know for a test?
- Which words or information unlocks the door that can lead to useful information?

Determining main ideas and key details does not come easily for many students and providing ample guided practice of this process is essential.

The R2-3E Process

The R2-3E strategy examines one paragraph of text at a time. Teachers may ask students to draw a line across the page under each paragraph. This provides a visual divider and helps students to focus on one chunk—a paragraph or a section—of text at a time. It may even be beneficial for some students, especially those who become overwhelmed when they encounter lengthy nonfiction text, to use a piece of paper to cover all but the paragraph they are working on. See table 1 for a summary of the strategy process, which can be used in whole or small group instruction.

Table 1. *R2-3E Strategy*

| | |
|---------|---|
| Read | Teacher reads the paragraph; students listen |
| Read | Teacher reads the same paragraph again; students highlight key or important words and circle new or unfamiliar words |
| Extract | Teacher asks students to share circled words Teacher asks students to share highlighted words |
| Explain | Teacher and students – define circled words, analyze paragraph by discussing highlighted words to determine important information |

Extend | **Students** – create a dictionary, word wall, summarize paragraphs; summarize entire passage

The first step of R2-3E beings the process of direct instruction, where the teacher reads the first paragraph while the students listen. The more students are exposed to this strategy, the more eager they are to skip this step and begin highlighting as soon as reading begins, but it is essential to remind students that they cannot determine what is important until they have heard the paragraph in its entirety and have a sense of what it is about.

Moving on to the next step, the teacher reads the same paragraph a second time. This time, students highlight key or important words and short phrases and circle new or unfamiliar words. The tendency when first introducing this strategy is for students to highlight nearly every word in the paragraph. Teachers should plan on repeated modeling of this step. It takes practice for students to master this, and teachers will likely find themselves repeating questions such as, “Do you think that is information that you will be tested on?” or “Are those words important for understanding what the passage is about?”

During the extract and explain phases, the teacher asks the class to share all of the words that were circled. In the beginning, students may be reluctant to share because they do not want their peers to know that they do not know the meaning of a word. Generally, if teachers take the lead and circle a few words, the students will chime in with words of their own, providing a perfect opportunity to explain new or unfamiliar vocabulary and to discuss strategies such as using context clues or looking for the root or base word to help determine meaning. The students should also take turns looking the words up in the dictionary and as a class discuss how well the dictionary definition matches the definition that was determined together using context clues or word origins. All students should then draw a line from the circled word to the margin of the page where they write a brief, agreed upon definition.

Asking a student volunteer to share the words they highlighted is also part of the extract and explain phases. Again, teaching students to extract key words and short phrases requires a great deal of modeling. One technique that has been useful is to tell the students that they have to use all of the words they highlighted in one complete sentence. They quickly realize that generally less (words) is better if they are going to be able to do this. When too many words are highlighted, it can be nearly impossible for the student to write a well-structured sentence. This process is then repeated for each paragraph in the passage.

The final step is to have students extend their learning. Students can create a personal written or visual dictionary from the circled words and these can also be

added to a student created and maintained word wall. Students can create graphic organizers or write “test” questions based on the important words or short phrases.

An important outcome of using R2-3E is for students to acquire summarizing skills. Because this is often difficult for students to learn, one technique to accelerate the acquisition of this skill is to give students one-sentence summary frames (Santa, Havens, & Valdes, 2004). Sentence frames provide a scaffold for constructing sentences from newly acquired vocabulary and content, but need to be modeled before students are asked to complete them on their own. Not only do these frames help students to summarize new content, but they also provide a clear model of appropriate sentence structure. Table 2 provides several general examples:

Table 2. *Summary Sentence Frames*

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Description - | A _____ is _____ that _____. |
| Compare/Contrast | _____ and _____ are similar because both _____, but different because _____. |
| Sequence | _____ begins with _____, continues with _____, and ends with _____. |
| Problem/Solution | _____ wanted _____, but _____, so _____. |
| Cause/Effect | _____ happens because _____ or _____ causes _____ |

Eventually, students should be able to write a summary sentence for each paragraph and then combine those sentences into a paragraph that summarizes the entire passage.

Conclusion

R2-3E, read twice, extract, explain, extend, is a strategy for reading nonfiction that is easy to incorporate at any grade level and with any content area. The focus is on helping students define unfamiliar words, to extract important information, and then to be able to summarize their new learning. Like most strategies, it requires repeated modeling on the part of the teacher, but it is a worthwhile endeavor. The more students are exposed, the more competent they become in extricating and summarizing important information on their own.

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