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Editorial Article

Making Thinking Visible: Explicit, Transferable Literacy Practices Across the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This editorial article introduces the Fall 2025 issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy*, which is themed "Making Thinking Visible: Explicit, Transferable Literacy Practices Across the Curriculum." With AI writing on the rise, new standards, and continued emphasis on science-based reading instruction, teachers are being called on to both teach structured literacy skills and the thinking that drives them. The four articles in this issue show how systematic, explicit, evidence-based instruction, along with modeling metacognition and culturally responsive teaching, can help students make learning visible and transferable across content areas. From reimagining grammar instruction for digital-age learners, to coupling structured literacy with metacognition, to bridging math and storytelling, and using mentor texts to cultivate writing craft, each article highlights how modeling cognitive processes transforms students into strategic, reflective thinkers. The articles here collectively call for literacy instruction that connects creativity, clarity, and structure with equity and thinking with doing.

KEYWORDS

literacy instruction; metacognition; explicit teaching; grammar; structured literacy; interdisciplinary learning; culturally responsive pedagogy; writing instruction

In traditional face-to-face and virtual classrooms, students are surrounded by language, yet they are often disconnected from how language works on a practical level. Between texting shorthand, AI-generative writing, and new ELA standards, the act of thinking about thinking (metacognition) has never been more important. This Fall 2025 issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy* comes at a vital time. Themed “Making Thinking Visible: Explicit, Transferable Literacy Practices Across the Curriculum,” the authors published in this issue demonstrate how explicit instruction, purposeful modeling, and asset-based instruction can help learners read and write but also understand and appreciate the metacognition behind those language acts.

Why “Making Thinking Visible” Matters Now

For decades, literacy education has oscillated between explicit content-focused instruction and constructive, student-centered learning, between correctness and creative freedom. Twenty-five years into the 21st century now, students find themselves needing to master content and build critical thinking skills. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, new state standards (such as Georgia’s new ELA standards), and renewed attention on scientifically validated reading instruction have placed a growing spotlight on metacognition, the ability to understand and monitor one’s own thinking and learning (Grote-Garcia et al., 2025; Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). When teachers model how to think and how to think about thinking, students gain agency across subjects (Ghimire &

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Mokhtari, 2025). They begin to see language, including the syntax or grammar of language, as meaning-making, comprehension as strategic thinking, and mathematics as storytelling. Each of the four articles in this issue highlights the shift toward visibility, toward instruction that makes the invisible processes of literacy explicit, transferable, and equitable.

Grammar as Understanding, Not Correction

In "'Not Just for the Boomers': The Importance of Grammatical Understandings in 21st Century P–20 Classrooms," Dr. Vicki Luther and Dr. Matt Sroka revisit a topic many educators are hesitant to tackle: grammar instruction. They trace how grammar fell out of favor after the 1963 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) report and argue for its return through student-centered, explicit, structured literacy teaching. Their literature review positions grammar within the generative AI and digital communication setting, showing that while it can autocorrect, technology cannot teach intentionality or metacognitive awareness. Luther and Sroka call on educators to balance descriptive and prescriptive grammar instruction to honor both "correctness" or precision and linguistic diversity and to prepare preservice teachers to do the same. Their findings emphasize that meaningful grammar instruction depends on connection, clarity, and cognitive control, not on surface-level error marking.

Thinking Aloud as Equity

Dr. Sarah Sharpe's practitioner article, "Teaching Thinking for Reading: Merging Executive Function, Structured Literacy, and Asset-Based Practices," extends this visibility into comprehension instruction. Based on the science of learning and reading, Sharpe maintains decoding is the starting point, but comprehension is the goal, and it depends on deliberate thinking. Her Culturally Responsive Think-Aloud Instructional Model (CRTAIM) demonstrates how teachers can make invisible cognitive processes, such as inferring, predicting, and monitoring, visible through explicit modeling and culturally responsive teaching. By bringing students' linguistic and cultural assets into structured literacy instruction, Sharpe shows how to transform comprehension instruction from a skill set into an act of empowerment and equity building.

Storytelling as Mathematical Reasoning

Two Teaching Tips pieces constitute the final section of this issue, the first of which is whimsical in title but highly practical in function. Few pairings seem as delightful (or unlikely) as dragons, tacos, and numeracy. Yet in "Beyond Fire and Tacos: Using *Dragons Love Tacos* to Ignite Mathematical Thinking through Interdisciplinary Read-Alouds," Dr. Luminita Hartle shows how teachers can utilize children's literature as a springboard for understanding mathematics. Hartle's work with teacher candidates using tactile manipulatives along with engaging picturebooks and a little humor can make math concrete, visible, and culturally relevant. Her interdisciplinary strategy merges narrative and problem-solving and invites learners to explore math concepts such as addition, graphing, and pattern recognition through shared experiences. Math, Hartle reminds us, lives in conversation, not isolation, with cultural stories and joy.

Writing as Imitation and Insight

Finally, in "Mentor Texts as a Bridge to Independent Writing: Supporting Young Writers Through Sentence Imitation and Craft Study in the Elementary Classroom," Dr. Jolene Reed and Dr. Melinda Miller bring us back to the sentence itself. Using the sentence-composing approach of

Don and Jenny Killgallon, they illustrate how imitation, long dismissed as rote, can instead serve as a scaffold for authentic writing. Through gradual release with explicit modeling, students internalize writing skills, such as narrative leads and parallelism. Reed and Miller posit that when young writers study the sentences of master writers, they can begin to think and write like them. Imitation becomes an act of insight that leads to the development of writing skills and proficiency.

Looking Ahead: From Mechanics to Metacognition

Across these four articles, a theme emerges: visible thinking leads to transferable learning. Whether through grammar, comprehension, math, or writing, each author reinforces the importance of explicit instruction accompanied by deliberate modeling of the cognitive, linguistic, and creative work that learning requires. With information overload and increased automation, the practices and strategies showcased in this issue remind us that *human* teaching still matters. Our role as literacy teachers and advocates is not merely to deliver "correct" content but to model curiosity and the joy of learning. As you read this issue, consider how "making thinking visible" appears in your own work. How could you model the metacognitive habits you want your students to develop by revising in real time or life experience or pausing to wonder during a read-aloud? Principally, literacy is the connective tissue and foundation for all learning and subject areas, not just language arts.

The editors and reviewers of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy* invite you to continue this conversation by submitting research or practitioner pieces or even teaching tips for the next year's Spring 2026 issue. We encourage researchers, teacher educators, literacy advocates, and even PK–12 teachers and school leaders across Georgia and beyond to submit manuscripts that question and expand how we teach students to read critically and write purposely. After all, when we make thinking visible, we make learning and literacy growth possible and lasting for *all* learners.

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Research Article

"Not Just for the Boomers": The Importance of Grammatical Understandings in 21st Century P–20 Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The word "grammar" often conjures negative feelings for both students and teachers; for students, learning rules of language can be simultaneously daunting and boring, and teachers can often view this as a battle that they would prefer not to fight. In an age of texting, social media, and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), the use of proper punctuation, capitalization, and other writing mechanics has become less regulated, yet due to newly implemented ELA standards within the state of Georgia, as well as new legislation efforts designed to improve literacy for all students, there is now a deeper emphasis on grammar as a focal point of instruction. This article provides a literature review of the importance of teaching and learning grammatical concepts in all grade levels in P–12, as well as in educator preparation programs (EPPs), preparing the next generation of teachers, and provides context of how educators can provide information that best supports P–20 students' communicative skills.

KEYWORDS

grammar; writing mechanics; P–12 education, educator preparation programs (EPPs); English Language Arts (ELA)

Teaching the mechanics of language is often a polarizing topic; in fact, Myhill (2021) posits that with the exception of phonics, there is no element of English language arts more divisive. Furthermore, to even define grammar is complex, as there are so many descriptions; as well, there are many ways to define what grammar instruction should entail. For our purposes, we lean into Alzahrani's (2024) explanation of grammar as a skill necessary for enduring, effective communication and in Jean and Simard's (2011) recognition that grammar is necessary for productive life skills. Additionally, we also include the mechanics of writing and speaking in our discussion of grammatical aspects. In this article, we advocate for explicit, student-centered grammar instruction that promotes a growth mindset. This refers to brief, purposeful, in-context teaching that makes language features visible, nameable, and discussable in service of helping students to improve their writing and communication. It includes modeling, dialoging, and targeted practicing that allow students to make applications to their own compositions immediately; it does not include decontextualized worksheets or isolated textbook instruction. Furthermore, what we consider to be effective and purposeful instruction is not based upon a 'gotcha' approach in which students are afraid to make errors and dread the proverbial red pen used to magnify each mistake. Instead, we focus on understanding, intentionality, and utilization.

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A Brief History of Grammar Instruction

While grammar has been taught in schools for centuries, going back to the 1700s (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2011), there have been significant shifts in how it is taught and to the extent it is taught. Until the 1960s, schools within the United States provided students with lessons that were made up of isolated 'skill and drill' practice (Vakili & Mohammed, 2020), and grammar was exclusively taught through rote memorization instead of practical application (Watson, 2013). Educational stakeholders began questioning the validity of learning grammar, and in 1963, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) issued a report (Research in Written Composition) that found the teaching of grammar to be detrimental, even harmful, to students' writing abilities (Braddock et al., 1963).

Due to this, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, grammar instruction was essentially taken out of many classrooms across the country (Vakili & Mohammed, 2020), and teachers whose school systems required the teaching of grammar often resorted to isolated, drill-related worksheet-type practices to do so (Kiuhara et al., 2009). At this time, reading and writing instruction were 'the' premier literacy skills taught, and while the focus centered on the practices associated with reading and writing, in some school systems, instructing students on the fundamentals and usage of the English language became deemphasized (Vakili & Mohammed, 2020). Many teachers were discouraged from explicitly teaching linguistic structures because, under the arch of whole language, such understandings would simply occur naturally, organically, and when the child was ready (Derewianka, 2015). Following the report from Braddock et al. (1963), many felt that grammar instruction was antiquated and unnecessary, and Elbow (1981) went so far as to suggest that "learning to ignore" grammar was the best way to help students with their writing skills (p. 169). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) further eliminated grammar instruction, as teachers began concentrating less on content that would not be assessed on high-stakes testing and delineated grammar as non-essential (McCarthey, 2008).

With the onset of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), grammar once again became a topic of conversation. CCSS (2010) confirmed that other communicative components of ELA are equally important, demonstrating that receptive (reading and listening) and expressive and descriptive (writing and speaking) skills are all critical to students' success and college and career readiness. However, because it had been taken out of so many classrooms for years, many teachers were hesitant to teach it and felt unprepared to do so during this time (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016).

At the turn of the decade, COVID-19 forced schools to shut down for months, and educators and students worked and learned in online environments. During the pandemic, teachers attempted to create effective online instruction but were often met with a myriad of challenges, including students' lack of technology, absenteeism, and attention issues (Francis & Weller, 2022; González et al., 2022). As students were taught outside of their respective classrooms, parents and caregivers were given more of a 'front row seat' to children's learning, and while some parents and caregivers embraced, and continue to embrace, the notion that they are their child's first teacher of language and literacy, not all recognize how important they are in their child's understanding of the components of ELA, including grammar (MacWhinney, 2023). Additionally, many family members felt, and continue to feel, ill-equipped to provide strong foundational support for their children (Goudeau et al., 2021), and school closures created significant gaps in ELA competencies.

Undoubtedly, research shows that the negative implications of COVID-19 on students' academic well-being are far reaching (e.g., Colvin et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Storey & Zhang, 2024). For instance, not only have ELA test results declined over the years since COVID-19, but results of a study conducted by Pejovic et al. (2024) also show that the language and communication development of infants and toddlers during the pandemic was significantly diminished. The vast majority of these children are now enrolled in formalized schooling, and many entered school with potential significant gaps in communicative skills (Pejovic et al., 2024). The global pandemic took a tremendous toll on basic understandings, and students' current "grammar knowledge is at an all-time low" (Erlbacher, 2025, p. 2).

Today, as we are now positioned in the post-COVID era, Common Core standards have been fully removed from all educational settings in Georgia. Although this phase-out has been underway for more than a decade, the adoption of revised ELA standards for the 2025-2026 academic year, brought forth by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), has eliminated the last remaining traces of Common Core (GaDOE, n.d.). Current instructional practices within the state focus on the science of reading (SoR), thus requiring teachers to be more structured, intentional, and explicit (Petscher et al., 2020). As defined by Cabell and Espittia (2025), SoR is "a body of knowledge about how people learn to read and how to best teach reading" (p. 19). The SoR allows educators to recognize the importance of foundational literacy skills, as these foundations provide strong structures for reading in the older grades (Cabell & Espittia, 2025).

While the science of reading is now a fundamental part of our 'literacy landscape,' we cannot forget the science behind writing. Just as explicit and intentional instructional practices are critical in reading, Graham believes that the same intentionality should be occurring in the teaching of writing skills (2019). Sadly, Graham's research suggests that writing is not given the same instructional time, as there is often less time in the day for explicit instruction and application of writing, and without foundational structures, students often continue to struggle in writing as they move throughout the grade levels. By recognizing that there is a science to writing, as well as reading, educators can empower students with heightened communication skills and an enhanced motivation to write (Graham, 2019).

The Importance of Grammar Instruction

With more than a quarter of the 21st century behind us, grammar instruction has once again shifted, as the new aforementioned ELA standards and curricula have enhanced the need to strengthen grammatical understandings. Within these revised ELA standards, GaDOE (n.d.) has demonstrated its mission of ensuring grammar instruction is a focal point in K–12 classrooms. Today's grammatical standards begin in kindergarten, as students begin to recognize rules of conversations, listening and speaking skills, the formation of complete sentences, and basic grammar. As students move throughout the grade levels, they are able to learn and apply more advanced components of grammar. The K–12 ELA grammar, mechanics, and usage standards showcase what is learned and taught throughout the grade levels. While these components are presented and practiced during various years, the standards provide a comprehensive outline of grammatical skills that are introduced, mastered, and reinforced during elementary, middle, and secondary grade levels. Appendix A gives a glimpse into these standards.

Grammar taught in schools is typically based upon Standard American English (SAE), also known as General American English. Carter (1999) defined such standardization as "a set of forms which are used with only minimal variation in written English" (p.163). SAE can also be called prescriptive grammar, which is often thought of as the formalized means of speaking and writing

(Huddleston et al., 2021). Xavier et al. (2020) define prescriptive grammar as the "correct and accurate use of grammatical structures," focused on grammatical rules (p. 200).

In contrast, descriptive grammar is described as the way that individuals may actually speak and write in daily communication. Xavier et al. (2020) designate descriptive grammar as a means for "linguistic choices," thus allowing individuals to gain more connectivity through "meaning-making" (p. 200). Prescriptive grammar is often thought of as more formally academic in nature, while descriptive grammar is more personalized in nature.

Grammar is an essential component of expressive language, and those with a proficient understanding of grammar are able to communicate with meaning and purpose (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Contrary to former ideologies from previous decades, Camps and Fonitch (2019) state that grammar is "not learned spontaneously or naturally" and must therefore be taught (p. 6). As command of grammar and mechanics can typically be seen as a benefit for speaking and writing, grammar can also benefit students' reading comprehension (T. Shanahan, 2020), especially as state ELA standards have increased text-level complexity. Grammar can also enhance students' morphology knowledge, thus allowing them to better understand the meanings of words (Jackendoff & Audring, 2020).

Students' ability to understand and produce complex sentences is another important aspect of writing and reading comprehension. As older students read more complex texts, they need stronger understandings of how to write more complex sentences (Balthazar & Scott, 2023). Cognitive and psycholinguistic research further shows that comprehension depends heavily on a reader's ability to integrate each word into the unfolding syntactic structure of a sentence, a process that underlies how meaning is constructed during reading (Dempsey et al., 2024; Van Dyke & Dempsey, 2025). Integrating syntax as part of grammar instruction supports not only writing skills but also access to complex texts.

Teachers must also recognize that students bring their own cultural linguistics into the classroom, and such descriptive grammar and dialect are a part of students' identities (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016). For students learning English as a second (or third) language, grammatical constructs in academic language can be perplexing (Uccelli et al., 2015). At the same time, multilingual learners bring a variety of linguistic resources that can serve as assets for their language development. When teachers encourage curiosity and awareness about patterns and connections between languages, students are able to leverage these resources to extend the knowledge and skills they bring with them into the classroom (Crosson et al., 2022).

Without doubt, classrooms are rich environments for sociolinguistics. Teachers do have a responsibility to teach prescriptive grammar, especially in light of enhanced standards, as to not do so could negatively impact college and career readiness and academic success. Yet we do not want to completely ignore descriptive grammar, as that can lead to enhanced writing motivation, feelings of individualism, and pride of culture and community.

Why is Teaching Grammar so Difficult?

The Student Lens

Students in all grade levels, especially in middle and secondary grades, spend an inordinate amount of time using digital language, which, according to Ovsiienko et al. (2025), is more simplistic and concise than the language, writing mechanics, and grammatical structures expected in a classroom environment. Digital language is the etymology of social networks, online platforms, gaming systems, and messaging services (e.g., texting). Students are entrenched in digital language, which reduces syntax and punctuation, increases the use of abbreviations and acronyms, and often, visual

representations (e.g., emojis and gifs) take the place of text entirely (Ovsiienko et al., 2025). Simply put, digital language has greatly influenced the grammar that our students use.

Due to this, there can be a huge disconnect when we as educators ask for subject/verb agreement, proper punctuation, capitalization, and complete sentences, as to many students, these are 'old-fashioned' methods and often seen as 'taboo' on social media platforms. For instance, in a recent study, when shown text messages, participants determined that those ending with a period were more negative than those with messages with no ending punctuation, regardless of whether the message itself was positive in nature (Houghton et al., 2018). This study clearly demonstrates that grammar, including punctuation, is valued differently in digital language.

It is important to remember that today's P–12 students are, as Prensky (2001) termed, digital natives, as they have never known a world without technology and devices. They are developing in a world where digital technology is being disseminated at a rapid rate and where new social media apps regularly gain popularity (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat). The "Gen Z" generation consists of individuals born between the approximate years of 1997–2010/2012. "Gen Alpha," a phrase coined by social researcher Mark McCrindle in 2020, refers to those born from approximately 2010 and beyond. Though these generations differ, those born within these years represent elementary, middle, secondary, and college-aged students. According to Howarth (2023), the number of individuals considered "Gen Alpha" will be approximately 2.2 billion worldwide by the end of 2025; this number, along with those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, showcases the vast number of digital natives in our respective P–20 (P–12 and higher education) classrooms.

Those considered to be "Gen Z" or "Gen Alpha" have grown up with smartphones as a constant presence in their lives, shaping how they view writing and literacy. These students may feel as though writing mechanics is unnecessary in their academic work because of its unimportance online, and because of this, there is a fear that digital communication can and will negatively impact students' language skills (Busch, 2018). Asking students to write with appropriate punctuation, sentence structure, and spelling can feel rather out of date to them, given that such conventions are rarely valued or modeled within digital spaces such as social media platforms.

Additionally, students in P–20 are increasingly using generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in their writing (Gupta et al., 2024). As those within these generations seek immediate gratification and are digital natives, they tend to utilize technology sources that can be used for their immediate benefit (McCrindle, 2020). For instance, students frequently use programs such as Grammarly to correct writing errors automatically. While these practices can improve surface-level correctness, they also encourage an uncritical acceptance of changes to their writing. To counter this, Levine et al. (2025) suggest educators use ChatGPT as a tool to make writing processes visible, allowing students to critically examine their grammatical and stylistic decisions rather than outsource them to GenAI.

The Teacher Lens

Simply put, teaching grammar is not necessarily a favorite of many teachers. Often, teachers find the teaching of grammar to be an uphill battle, and because the "Do-we-teach-grammar-or-don't-we-teach-grammar?" pendulum has shifted so much throughout the years, teachers can often feel unsupported in this area, commonly wondering how to best teach grammar and the rules of conventions. Implicit learning suggests that the rules are not explained and are instead implied; explicit grammar learning, on the other hand, suggests more detailed orientation and awareness of

form as the concepts are explicitly taught (Oxford et al., 2007). Numerous studies (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2022; Alzahrani, 2024) recognize that explicit instruction is often more valuable to students' success, yet many teachers still struggle with the ability to teach grammar in an explicit manner while not causing students to become bored and shut down. This is often due to the fact that there is a lack of standardization in grammar, and as 'grammar' is so ambiguous and broad, it can be difficult to recognize what to teach.

In addition, due to the aforementioned pendulum of grammar instruction, many teachers feel uncomfortable in their own understandings and language usage, as they themselves may not have received appropriate grammar instruction in school. This can lead to a sense of insecurity and frustration (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016), and teachers who are insecure in their own grammatical understandings often resort to rote, implicit methods of practice (Watson, 2014) or default to methods of teaching that they were taught as students (Smagorinsky et al., 2011). Compounding this issue, research by Myhill et al. (2023) found that many teachers do not view themselves as writers, which limits opportunities to engage in and model authentic grammatical awareness in practice.

Grammar in Educator Preparation Programs

Many teachers enter the classroom without sufficient preparation for teaching grammar because few educator preparation programs (EPPs) include explicit coursework on writing and language instruction. According to Van der Heijden et al. (2015), it is critical that EPPs enhance grammar instruction in order to adequately prepare preservice teachers for the field. Yet research shows that few EPP programs have specific courses, or even one specific course, aligned to the teaching of writing and grammar, leaving many teachers without a strong pedagogical foundation (Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Myers et al., 2016). In addition, EPP faculty members are often confused as to what to teach preservice teachers concerning grammar and are often even more perplexed as to how those preservice teachers can take what they learn and translate that into their own future classrooms (Liu & Master, 2003).

Moreover, while some preservice teachers might be exposed to grammar instruction in their education courses, this often varies based on educational majors and certification tracks; for instance, preservice teachers majoring in elementary education might receive a peripheral overview of grammar and mechanics in their overarching ELA classes, but those majoring in middle and secondary education take courses that are more literature-intensive. While preservice English teachers are required to take methods courses and complete year-long English placements aligned with GaDOE's new ELA standards and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) requirements, which include preparation in language and grammar, the nature and depth of that preparation can vary considerably across EPP programs. This is especially true as certification pathways have become more diverse and alternative certification routes are gaining in popularity (Dori et al., 2023; Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2025). As a result, novice English teachers may either avoid teaching grammar or rely heavily on textbooks and test-prep materials (Smagorinsky et al., 2011), as a lack of preparation often contributes to teachers feeling that they do not have the adequate knowledge or understanding of grammar (Chatterjee & Halder, 2023). Lee (2019) suggests that preservice teachers need learning experiences that allow them to create their own knowledge about grammar, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice. Unfortunately, very few EPPs provide preservice teachers with these types of opportunities.

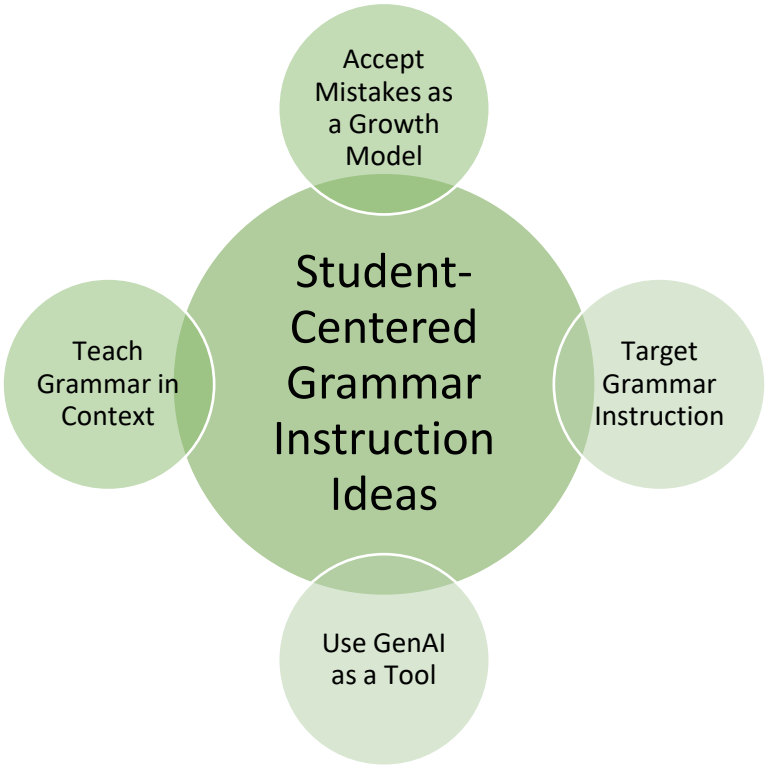
A lack of confidence in grammatical concepts also shapes teachers' identities, as many teachers do not see themselves as writers, making it challenging to effectively teach writing

(Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Myers et al., 2016; Myhill et al., 2023). Cremin and Oliver (2015) note that teachers often lack confidence with writing and carry negative past experiences with these into their classrooms, thus hindering their ability to create effective, positive writing experiences for students. Collectively, these aforementioned studies suggest that EPP programs must do more to prepare teachers to be teachers of writing by building a stronger pedagogical foundation, reshaping attitudes, and strengthening teachers' sense of themselves as writers (Cremin & Oliver, 2015; Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Myers et al., 2016; Smagorinsky et al., 2011).

Student-Centered Grammar Instruction

In order for students to personally connect to the nuances of grammar, they need time to practice; such implementation occurs most effectively when teachers model a curious, reflective, and growth-oriented approach to language. This includes demonstrating appropriate written and spoken prescriptive grammar when conducting academic instruction and also modeling a positive attitude toward grammar and a willingness to learn from mistakes and ask questions. When teachers approach grammar in this way, students are able to benefit not only from hearing and seeing proper grammar usage within the classroom but also from observing a positive and inquisitive view of language. Yet as previously mentioned, teachers often feel underprepared. Recognizing the importance of the utilization of written and spoken grammar, changing habits and attitudes, practicing appropriate prescriptive grammar in and out of classroom environments, and utilizing a growth mindset to continuously improve in grammar skills are some ways that educators can be positive models for their students. In this section, we discuss activities that can allow students to practice while also providing continuous guidance and support. Figure 1 showcases specific key ideas that can be used within K–12 classrooms.

Figure 1: Ideas for Student-Centered Grammar Instruction



Accept Mistakes as a Growth Model

In an age of GenAI, students who show a willingness to take chances and make errors in their own expressive work should be praised for their effort. This is true for all students, and perhaps even more so for English learners, for striving readers and writers, and for students with language-based disabilities. A growth-oriented stance towards grammar invites students to take an inquiry stance towards their own writing and explore how grammar and language work, rather than viewing grammar as a restrictive list of dos and don'ts. Eileen Shanahan (2021) frames this as "a shift from finding fault to finding the wonder" (p. 18), while Crosson et al. (2022) encourage us to "model and cultivate curiosity" around language and to encourage students to be lifelong language learners (p. 492). When responding to students' writing, lead with rich, descriptive feedback on ideas, evidence, and organization; address grammar and writing mechanics in targeted follow-ups (Walqui-van Lier & Hernandez, 2001). Beck and Jones (2023) suggest conference-based, dialogic feedback with student writers, which positions the teacher as an interested reader and keeps attention on the writer's goals and writing processes. This supports student agency and avoids an overemphasis on errors in conventions while still creating space for targeted work on grammar and mechanics. Over time, attending first to the what (what was written or stated), and then to the how (how the content was written or stated) improves writing and convention without dampening motivation or voice.

While we must allow students to make errors, we must also ensure that they are learning and growing from misunderstandings or inaccuracies. One way that this can be done is through allowing students to recognize mistakes on their own (Chiou, 2019). Sometimes, students are able to find flaws in someone else's writing faster than they can find errors in their own work. Teachers can 'make mistakes on purpose' as a means of allowing students to find and fix errors. Such types of activities engage students, and, according to Chiou (2019), enhance students' abilities to find their own errors in writing.

Using GenAI as a Tool

There is a current debate on the use and potential misuse of GenAI in P–20 settings. While we strongly believe that students should not rely extensively on GenAI for communication purposes, and while students should be given ample opportunity to write organically and to make errors in the process, we also believe in the value of GenAI as a teaching and learning tool. For instance, emerging research on AI-supported writing aligns with this perspective: Levine et al. (2025) found that when students compare their writing to ChatGPT-generated drafts, they often critique the AI's choices, especially when it removes their personality or voice, and use those differences to refine their own grammatical and stylistic decisions. Such work reinforces the idea that mistakes, revisions, and experiments with language are essential to growth.

In addition, teachers can prompt ChatGPT to generate multiple versions of an opening statement and then guide students in comparing those versions to identify underlying rhetorical or grammatical principles. Similarly, in the revision stage of writing, students can compare ChatGPT's edits to their own drafts and evaluate which revisions strengthen clarity, coherence, or syntax and which remove their "personality" or voice. Through this kind of guided comparison work, students learn to articulate and justify their grammatical and stylistic decisions while also learning to use GenAI in a productive and responsible way.

The utilization of such tools can help teachers and students practice Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as the functionality of ChatGPT and other GenAI programs can serve to scaffold writing skills until students begin to feel more confident. Bridging the gap

between what a student cannot yet do, or is unmotivated to do, and what a student can do with help and support enhances both skill and motivation (Fulton et al., 2021). Such gradual release of responsibility (Vygotsky, 1978) inhabits an "I Do, We Do, You Do" approach to writing throughout multiple grade levels.

Teach Grammar in Context

Teaching grammar in context means providing authentic reading and writing opportunities where grammar instruction can be engaging and relevant for students (Chatterjee & Halder, 2023). This often begins with helping students see the connections between reading and writing so that what is learned in one domain can transfer to the other (Kim & Zagata, 2024). When students become more aware of how authors use language to shape meaning in the texts they read, and then apply similar strategies in their own writing, they begin to understand grammar not as an isolated set of rules, but as a resource for comprehension and expression. Embedding grammar within high-interest and meaningful academic texts and assignments has been shown to be more effective than teaching it as an isolated skill (Andreev, 2025; Balthazar & Scott, 2023; Simmons, 2016). Balthazar and Scott (2023) argue that providing authentic texts also allows students to have richer semantic and syntactic support than decontextualized examples, so they are better able to understand and apply the grammatical concepts they are learning (Balthazar & Scott, 2023). This means students not only notice how grammar functions but also internalize these patterns more deeply when instruction is grounded in authentic texts. Relatedly, Simmons (2016) used The Hunger Game Trilogy as high-interest mentor texts to discuss how authors purposefully use grammar and language and then how students can apply these grammatical understandings to their own writing. Song lyrics can also be used in the classroom, as the lines contain a wide array of grammar structures ready to be dissected and analyzed (Roslim et al., 2011).

At the same time, teaching grammar in context involves encouraging students to authentically reflect on their own writing and grammatical decisions, while also recognizing and drawing upon the linguistic resources and language variations they bring into the classroom (Crosson et al., 2022; Godley et al., 2007). Effective grammar instruction should develop students' metalinguistic awareness and support purposeful decision-making in their writing (Lancaster & Olinger, 2014; Levine et al., 2025; Myhill & Watson, 2014). For teachers, this means inviting students to dialogue about their language use, thus providing space and opportunities to think about how language works so they become more aware of their choices as writers.

Target Grammar Instruction

Given the complexities of grammar, it may be beneficial to limit the scope of the explicit grammatical lessons (Schenck, 2017). In identifying what grammar conventions to teach, it is often best to begin by examining students' work and engaging students in conversation around their own grammar usage (Bohney, 2019; E. Shanahan, 2021). McCormack-Colbert et al. (2018) believe that grammar should be taught in small, explicit mini-lessons, as these shortened, focused lessons respond to specific needs in a structured and explicit manner while not taking time away from practice and implication. Bohney (2019) suggests focusing on just a few grammatical conventions throughout an academic year and providing students ample opportunities to identify, discuss, and apply those conventions.

One example of targeted instruction is syntax. Studies show that brief, explicit lessons in syntactic complexity support improvements in both comprehension and writing (Balthazar & Scott, 2023). For example, when students write fragments beginning with 'because,' teachers can

use this as an opportunity to discuss the relationship between dependent and independent clauses and model how complex sentences convey clearer meaning. In keeping with our previous advice, examples for complex sentences beginning with 'because' can be drawn from the class readings. Students can then be encouraged to practice incorporating these types of complex sentences meaningfully into their writing. This type of targeted syntactic work reinforces the idea that grammar instruction is most effective when it helps students make intentional language choices rather than simply comply with rules.

Conclusion

Understanding grammar is an important life skill and a necessity for academic success for college and career preparedness. The GaDOE K–12 ELA standards also emphasize the importance of helping students to deepen their grammatical knowledge over time. Studies throughout the years (e.g., Kagan, 1992) have focused on teacher beliefs, determining that how educators feel and what they believe about the content they teach has a tremendous bearing on the quality of instruction that is given to students. We posit that teacher beliefs about grammar might actually be even more relevant today, especially in light of how views and expectations around grammar instruction have changed drastically over the past several decades.

Educators must be cognizant and reflective of their own grammar instructional practices and their own feelings of grammar, as teachers who appreciate the significance of grammar are more likely to model it, take an inquiry stance towards language, teach it through targeted daily practices in all content areas, and recognize that aspects of grammar and communication skills are taught, learned, practiced, and discussed in all grade levels. Grammar is a necessary component of English language arts that must be cultivated through organic experiences and is critical for all ages. As students utilize technology consistently in their everyday lives, teachers should recognize that application through the use of digital tools can be helpful in the practice and analysis of grammatical constructs, as this can bring real-world application. However, digital tools should never take the place of educators' explicit instructional practices that embrace a growth mindset.

As well, those preparing the next generation of teachers must take logistical steps to discuss and practice grammar in education courses designated for all certification tracks. For instance, as preservice teachers complete assignments within their respective EPP programs, faculty members should give specific feedback on both the content and the writing so that novice teachers, who may not have strong foundational skills in grammar and writing conventions, are able to recognize ways to improve in their written work. This will allow novice teachers to apply and practice strategies and better prepare them for their future classrooms.

Above all, P–20 educators must remember the cultural and linguistic differences in students. Just as students come into the classrooms with varying background knowledge and skillsets in other components of language arts, P–20 students have differing proficiency in spoken and written grammar. Being intentional in providing authentic student-centered instruction is critical in preparing learners of all ages for academic and career success in the 21st century.

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Appendix A: K–12 ELA Grammar, Mechanics, and Usage State Standards

Standard Code and Strand	Standard Description
K–12.L.GC.1.1 (Usage)	Use nouns and verbs to share complete thoughts when speaking.
K–12.L.GC.1.2 (Usage)	Form and use singular and plural nouns when speaking
K–12.L.GC.1.3 (Usage)	Use interrogatives to ask questions when speaking.
K–12.L.GC.1.4 (Mechanics)	Capitalize the first word of a sentence and the pronoun I.
K–12.L.GC.1.5 (Grammar)	Form regular plural nouns by adding -s or -es.
K–12.L.GC.1.6 (Grammar)	Form and use verbs by adding -ing, -ed, or -s.
K–12.L.GC.1.7 (Grammar)	Use action verbs.
K–12.L.GC.1.8 (Grammar)	Use adjectives and adverbs.
K–12.L.GC.1.9 (Grammar)	Use common and proper nouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.10 (Grammar)	Form and use the simple verb tenses.
K–12.L.GC.1.11 (Usage)	Use determiners (articles, possessive determiners, demonstrative adjectives).
K–12.L.GC.1.12 (Mechanics)	Capitalize proper nouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.13 (Mechanics)	Use periods, exclamation marks, and question marks at the end of sentences.
K–12.L.GC.1.14 (Grammar)	Form plural nouns by changing -y to -ies.
K–12.L.GC.1.15 (Grammar)	Use personal pronouns (subject, object, and possessive).
K–12.L.GC.1.16 (Grammar)	Use frequently occurring prepositions.
K–12.L.GC.1.17 (Mechanics)	Use commas to separate items in a series and to format dates, addresses, salutations, and closings.

K–12.L.GC.1.1 (Mechanics)	Use apostrophes to form contractions and singular possessive nouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.19 (Grammar)	Form and use irregular plural nouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.20 (Grammar)	Form and use the past tense of irregular verbs.
K–12.L.GC.1.2 (Grammar)	Use coordinating conjunctions to join words, phrases, or clauses.
K–12.L.GC.1.22 (Grammar)	Form and use verbs by adding -d or -es.
K–12.L.GC.1.23 (Grammar)	Use collective and abstract nouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.24 (Grammar)	Use reflexive pronouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.25 (Mechanics)	Use commas with coordinating conjunctions to join independent clauses.
K–12.L.GC.1.26 (Mechanics)	Use hyphens to divide words at line breaks.
K–12.L.GC.1.27 (Grammar)	Form and use prepositional phrases.
K–12.L.GC.1.28 (Grammar)	Form and use comparative and superlative adjectives and adverbs.
K–12.L.GC.1.29 (Usage)	Ensure pronoun-antecedent agreement.
K–12.L.GC.1.30 (Mechanics)	Recognize and use conventional capitalization, quotation marks, and commas to indicate exact words and dialogue.
K–12.L.GC.1.31 (Grammar)	Use relative pronouns and relative adverbs.
K–12.L.GC.1.32 (Grammar)	Use interjections.
K–12.L.GC.1.33 (Grammar)	Use helping and linking verbs.
K–12.L.GC.1.34 (Usage)	Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., to/too/two; there/their/they're; advice/advise).
K–12.L.GC.1.35 (Mechanics)	Recognize and use conventional capitalization in abbreviations, proper adjectives, and formal titles.
K–12.L.GC.1.36 (Mechanics)	Use commas to indicate direct address and to set off the words yes and no.
K–12.L.GC.1.37 (Mechanics)	Use apostrophes to form plural possessive nouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.38 (Grammar)	Use indefinite pronouns, ensuring correct agreement.
K–12.L.GC.1.39 (Grammar)	Use subordinating conjunctions to join clauses.
K–12.L.GC.1.40 (Mechanics)	Use commas after introductory phrases or clauses.
K–12.L.GC.1.41 (Mechanics)	Use conventional capitalization and underlining, quotation marks, or italics to indicate titles of works.
K–12.L.GC.1.42 (Grammar)	Use intensive pronouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.43 (Grammar)	Form and use the progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive verb aspects.
K–12.L.GC.1.44 (Grammar)	Form and use participles.
K–12.L.GC.1.45 (Usage)	Recognize and correct vague pronoun references.
K–12.L.GC.1.46 (Grammar)	Use correlative conjunctions to join words, phrases, or clauses.

K–12.L.GC.1.47 (Mechanics)	Use conventional capitalization, quotation marks, commas, end punctuation, and attributions to indicate exact words and lines of dialogue.
K–12.L.GC.1.48 (Mechanics)	Use semicolons to separate items in a series or list when at least one of the items already contains commas.
K–12.L.GC.1.49 (Mechanics)	Use commas, parentheses, and dashes to set off nonessential words, phrases, or clauses.
K–12.L.GC.1.50 (Mechanics)	Use ellipses appropriately.
K–12.L.GC.1.51 (Mechanics)	Use hyphens with appropriate affixes and compound words.
K–12.L.GC.1.52 (Mechanics)	Use semicolons, with or without a conjunctive adverb, to form compound and compound-complex sentences.
K–12.L.GC.1.53 (Grammar & Mechanics)	Use parts of speech and their associated phrases or clauses to perform indicated sentence functions (e.g., subject, direct object, predicate
K–12.L.GC.1.54 (Mechanics)	Use conventional capitalization, quotation marks, commas, end punctuation, and parentheses (citations) when incorporating textual evidence.
K–12.L.GC.1.55 (Grammar)	Use demonstrative pronouns.
K–12.L.GC.1.56 (Mechanics)	Use colons to introduce lists, examples, and explanations.
K–12.L.GC.1.57 (Usage)	Form and use verbals and verbal phrases (participles/participials, gerunds, and infinitives) based on function.
K–12.L.GC.1.5 (Usage)	Use tenses and aspects to indicate the mood of a verb.
K–12.L.GC.1.59 (Mechanics)	Use colons to introduce quotations.
K–12.L.GC.1.60 (Mechanics)	Use dashes appropriately.
K–12.L.GC.1.61 (Grammar, Usage, & Mechanics)	Use an appropriate style guide to address complex issues of grammar, usage, or mechanics.

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Practitioner Article

Teaching Thinking for Reading: Merging Executive Function, Structured Literacy, and Asset-Based Practices

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension requires more than decoding; it requires strategic thinking. Yet many students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, are often labeled as struggling readers without attention to their cognitive assets or instructional gaps. This practitioner-based article explores how educators can intentionally teach thinking for successful reading by modeling executive function skills and comprehension strategies, fostering metacognition, and affirming students' cultural knowledge and assets. Grounded in the science of reading and learning, this work draws on research on executive function, purposeful think-alouds, and asset-based frameworks. This article offers practical, classroom-ready strategies for implementing structured literacy in ways that support comprehension, center student voice, and affirm diverse ways of knowing. Through teacher think-alouds, culturally responsive approaches, and student strategy reflection routines, this piece will show how educators can bridge the gap between decoding and comprehending while honoring the assets and brilliance students bring to the classroom.

KEYWORDS

reading comprehension; executive function; structured literacy; science of reading; asset-based teaching; teacher think-alouds; metacognitive reading strategies

A common issue educators observe is that some students demonstrate strong decoding skills but struggle to comprehend what they read (Oakhill et al., 2019). Research suggests that despite having adequate decoding skills, approximately 10% of students still struggle with reading comprehension (Landi & Ryherd, 2017; Taboada Barber et al., 2022). These students may read fluently (at a steady, conversational pace), yet be unable to explain the main idea or key details of the text. This pattern of performance is a characteristic of students with a specific reading comprehension deficit (S-RCD; Landi & Ryherd, 2017). S-RCD can result from several underlying factors, including limited background knowledge, poor vocabulary development, or underdeveloped executive function skills such as inferencing and monitoring for understanding. Regardless of the cause, it is critical for educators to focus on effectively modeling how to think while reading through explicit instruction and rich discussions.

Reading skills and strategies can be taught efficiently and successfully in early childhood and elementary settings when instruction is delivered in a clear, structured, and intentional manner (Rupley et al., 2009). However, while phonological awareness and phonics are often taught through explicit instruction, reading comprehension is not always approached with the same level of intentionality. Reading comprehension requires the integration of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes (Landi & Ryherd, 2017), necessitating explicit instruction for students. This article integrates the science of reading with the science of learning, emphasizing explicit, structured instruction paired with cognitive and metacognitive strategic teaching. Teachers can

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model executive functions through think-alouds and affirm students' backgrounds as they teach students how to think while reading.

Thinking for reading refers to the cognitive and metacognitive processes that readers engage in to make meaning from text. It goes beyond decoding individual words and involves strategic actions such as making inferences, generating predictions, asking questions, clarifying misunderstandings, and summarizing key ideas. These are processes that skilled readers use flexibly and intentionally (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Pressley, 2006). These strategies are closely tied to executive function, which encompasses a set of self-regulatory skills including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control. These skills are essential for monitoring comprehension, adjusting strategies, and sustaining focus while reading (Baker, 2005; Cartwright, 2015).

Complementing executive function, *structured literacy* refers to a systematic and explicit approach to reading instruction, rooted in the science of reading (Moats, 2020). It emphasizes foundational skills such as phonological awareness, decoding, and word recognition, along with explicit instruction in syntax, morphology, and background knowledge to support language comprehension. To fully support all readers, particularly those who can decode fluently but struggle with meaning, structured literacy must be intentionally paired with instruction that cultivates executive function and thinking for reading. This integration is what enables students to become strategic, metacognitive, and self-regulated readers.

Why This Matters for Equity

Teaching students how to think while reading through an asset-based approach is a matter of educational fairness. Too often, students from historically marginalized backgrounds are overrepresented among those struggling with reading (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Although direct studies on marginalized students with S-RCD (poor comprehension despite good decoding) remain limited, these broader reading disparities suggest a likely overrepresentation of marginalized students within the S-RCD category.

Students' reading disparities, as revealed in reports such as NCES (2022), are not necessarily due to innate deficits, but rather because instruction fails to honor their cultural knowledge or provide access to deeper meaning-making strategies. When teachers use think-alouds to model executive functioning and engage students in rich, meaningful discussions related to their reading that build on their lived experiences, they empower all learners to become strategic, reflective readers. This work ensures that comprehension instruction is not a privilege reserved for high-achieving or affluent students, but a right for every learner. Equitable reading instruction affirms students' identities and equips them with the cognitive tools to not only read text but to analyze, critique, and transform the world around them.

Addressing the comprehension crisis requires a shift in how we view reading success. Teaching phonics and decoding is necessary, but not sufficient. Students must also be taught how to think actively and strategically while reading. When comprehension is left to chance, or reserved for students with strong oral language or academic support at home, we risk widening opportunity gaps. Opportunity gaps reflect the systemic inequities in access to high-quality instruction, resources, and expectations that shape student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings (2006) further argues that these disparities stem from a long-standing education debt—the accumulated historical, economic, and sociopolitical disadvantages that continue to undermine equitable outcomes for marginalized students. Addressing comprehension explicitly is one step

toward repaying that debt. All students deserve explicit instruction in the cognitive processes that underpin understanding: making inferences, asking questions, monitoring comprehension, and drawing connections. By combining structured literacy with rich, asset-based comprehension instruction, every child can become not just a reader, but a thinker.

The Science of Reading Meets the Science of Learning

In recent years, the science of reading has gained significant attention, with several states (including Georgia) mandating that K–5 educators utilize universal assessments and implement instructional strategies that align with structured literacy and the five fundamental pillars of reading. In fact, 40 states and the District of Columbia have enacted legislation or policies requiring evidence-based reading instruction that emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, including regular universal screening and the adoption of structured literacy curricula since 2013 (Schwartz, 2025). The science of reading refers to the body of research on best practices for teaching reading, specifically related to brain activities while reading (Moats, 2020). Technological advancements in brain imaging and statistical analysis have deepened our understanding of how students learn to read and respond to instruction.

Similarly, the science of learning is the body of research that studies learning from a multidisciplinary perspective, mainly drawing from neuroscience, psychology, and education. It investigates how people learn and how to design more effective learning environments, uncovering evidence-based principles that support long-term retention, conceptual understanding, knowledge transfer, and learner motivation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). The science of reading and the science of learning highlight the importance of explicit, evidence-based instruction. While the science of reading focuses on how the brain learns to read, the science of learning explains how knowledge is retained, transferred, and applied. Together, they emphasize intentional instruction that supports deep comprehension and long-term learning.

Researchers such as Cartwright and Palian (2024) have demonstrated through meta-analytic reviews that students with stronger reading-specific executive functions (including working memory, planning, organization, and cognitive flexibility) involved in shifting between ideas and integrating prior knowledge demonstrate significantly better outcomes in reading comprehension and fluency. Similarly, Berninger et al. (2017) found that abilities like inhibition (suppressing irrelevant information, impulses, or distractions when reading) and sustained switching attention (shifting attention between different aspects of reading and language in a literacy task) within language contexts uniquely support reading comprehension, indicating that students with stronger executive control are better able to manage competing cognitive demands during reading and writing.

Equally crucial as executive functions is self-regulation, which is the ability to set goals, monitor progress, and persist through challenging tasks. Baker (1979) defines self-regulation as readers' use of metacognitive strategies to monitor comprehension, detect confusion, and correct misunderstanding proactively, showing that such regulation supports effective reading behaviors. Guthrie and Wigfield (2004) demonstrate through their Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction framework that teaching students to set goals, self-initiate strategies, and sustain engagement significantly enhances strategy use, reading motivation, and comprehension outcomes.

Finally, metacognition, or thinking about one's own thinking, plays a foundational role in reading proficiency. Metacognition includes metacognitive knowledge (awareness of strategies) and metacognitive regulation (planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's cognitive activity) during learning tasks (Flavell, 1979). When teachers explicitly model these processes through

think-aloud demonstrations and scaffolded support, they enable students to internalize the cognitive habits of skilled readers (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Meta-analyses and classroom studies demonstrate that explicit instruction in planning, monitoring, and adjusting reading strategies leads to measurable gains in comprehension and vocabulary (Boulware-Gooden et al., 2007).

One essential instructional strategy for developing students' executive functions, self-regulation, and metacognition is explicit, teacher-led think-alouds. Think-alouds are an evidence-based approach in which teachers verbalize their cognitive processes during reading to model the strategic thinking skilled readers use (Ness, 2016). This modeling provides students with clear, concrete demonstrations of how and when to apply comprehension strategies such as predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. According to Ness (2016), think-alouds are especially powerful because they reduce students' cognitive load by externalizing the mental routines that proficient readers perform silently and automatically.

By making the invisible work of reading visible, teacher think-alouds reduce ambiguity and help learners internalize purposeful reading behaviors (Woods, 2020). For example, while reading a nonfiction passage, a teacher might pause and say, "Hmm, the heading says 'Causes of Hurricanes,' so I predict this section will explain how hurricanes form. I'll keep reading to confirm whether that's true." This simple statement models the strategy of predicting, drawing on text features and prior knowledge, while also inviting students to adopt that same habit in their independent reading. Over time, with consistent exposure and guided practice, students begin to mirror these metacognitive behaviors, gaining greater control over their comprehension processes.

In reading instruction, it is critical to distinguish between skills and strategies. Skills such as decoding and recognizing high-frequency words are foundational and typically become automatic with repeated practice. These automatic processes are essential for fluent reading, but they do not guarantee comprehension. In contrast, strategies are deliberate, goal-oriented actions that readers actively choose and apply when they encounter a challenge or want to deepen understanding. These include actions like questioning the text, visualizing content, rereading, making inferences, and summarizing meaning. Skilled and proficient readers don't rely on a single strategy—they draw from a flexible repertoire of strategies based on the demands of the text and their reading goals.

Understanding this distinction is vital because it clarifies the teacher's role in comprehension instruction. While students often acquire skills through modeling and practice, strategies must be explicitly taught, modeled, and practiced in varied contexts. Teachers play a central role in developing students' strategic reading behaviors by making their own thinking visible through think-alouds, providing guided practice, and gradually releasing responsibility to students. When teachers create environments that encourage students to monitor their thinking, select appropriate strategies, and reflect on their use, they empower students to become independent, metacognitive readers who can navigate complex texts with confidence and purpose.

As Keene and Zimmermann (1997) highlight, strategic reading involves intentional meaning-making rather than rote processing. Duke and Pearson (2002) also emphasized the teaching of "good reader" strategies through scaffolded, interactive instruction. Palincsar and Brown's (1984) work on Reciprocal Teaching further supports this approach by advocating for structured strategy instruction through a gradual release model: the teacher first models the strategy, then supports students as they take increasing responsibility. Baker's (1979, 2005) research also connects these strategies to self-regulation, showing that strategic readers are better able to monitor, adjust, and sustain engagement while reading.

Table 1 highlights key comprehension strategies every student should know. The table includes definitions, why the strategy matters, and classroom-based examples for each.

Table 1: Key Comprehension Strategies and Classroom Examples

Comprehension Strategy	Definition	Why it Matters	Classroom Examples
Predicting	Making informed guesses about what will happen next based on text clues, prior knowledge, or text structure.	Predicting sets a purpose for reading and keeps students actively engaged.	• Before reading a historical fiction text, a student says, "I think the main character will join the Civil Rights protest because she's angry about injustice." • While reading a science article, a student predicts the outcome of an experiment based on prior knowledge. • A teacher models predicting by saying, "The author just described storm clouds rolling in. I predict something dramatic is about to happen."
Questioning	Asking questions before, during, and after reading to clarify understanding and promote deeper thinking.	Questioning fuels curiosity and promotes metacognition.	• A student wonders, "Why did the character leave the house in the middle of the night?" • While reading an informational text, a student asks, "How does this relate to what we learned in science?" • During a think-aloud, the teacher models asking, "What is the author's purpose in using this example?"
Clarifying	Pausing to resolve confusion by rereading, using context clues, or consulting outside resources.	Clarifying empowers students to independently tackle challenging parts of a text.	• A student rereads a paragraph slowly to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. • A teacher models clarifying by saying, "I'm not sure what 'photosynthesis' means, but the next sentence gives an explanation." • A student uses a glossary or dictionary to clarify the meaning of a technical term.
Summarizing	Identifying and restating the most important ideas or events in a concise way.	Summarizing builds comprehension, memory, and the ability to distinguish main ideas from details.	• After reading a chapter, a student summarizes: "The main point was that pollution harms marine life." • A teacher models summarizing a paragraph using a "Somebody-Wanted-But-So-Then" framework. • Students work in pairs to summarize a nonfiction article using sentence starters.
Making Inferences	Using text evidence and prior knowledge to draw conclusions not directly stated in the text.	Inference-making is essential for understanding characters, themes, and author intent.	• A student infers that a character is jealous even though it's never directly stated. • While reading, the teacher thinks aloud: "The author didn't say she was scared, but the way she clutched her bag tells me she was nervous." • A student infers a cause-and-effect relationship between two events in a science article.
Visualizing	Creating mental images of the scenes, characters, or information described in the text.	Visualizing enhances engagement and memory, particularly for narrative and descriptive texts.	• A student says, "I can picture the forest in my mind—it's dark and full of strange sounds." • While reading poetry, students draw what they visualize based on sensory language. • A teacher models visualizing by saying, "I see a crowded market filled with bright colors and music."

Monitoring Comprehension	Being aware of one's understanding during reading and adjusting strategies when confusion occurs.	Skilled readers monitor their own comprehension and take action when meaning breaks down.	• A student realizes they don't understand a section and decides to reread it more slowly. • A teacher models, "Wait—I lost track of who's speaking. Let me go back and clarify." • A student switches strategies, like summarizing or visualizing, when comprehension falters.

Metacognitively developed readers are intentional and deliberate with the use of these strategies (Woods, 2020). By modeling these strategies through explicit think-alouds and gradually releasing responsibility, teachers support the development of students' executive function, self-regulation, and metacognitive awareness, all of which are critical for becoming independent, proficient readers. Think-alouds make the invisible cognitive processes of skilled readers visible, offering students concrete examples of how to plan, monitor, and adjust their thinking while reading. As Woods (2020) and Palincsar and Brown (1984) emphasize, these metacognitive strategies are more than tools for comprehension; they are essential for cultivating students' ability to regulate their own learning, make purposeful decisions about strategy use, and sustain deep engagement with text. Ultimately, instruction that emphasizes strategic thinking through modeled practice helps students build the cognitive flexibility, focus, and confidence necessary for lifelong reading success.

Asset-Based Teaching: Centering Students' Cultural Knowledge

Although teacher-led think-alouds are widely recognized as an effective instructional strategy for modeling metacognitive processes and supporting reading comprehension, there is a limited body of research on this instructional approach that centers on diverse student populations, particularly Black students, emergent bilinguals, and other historically marginalized learners. Woods (2020) notes in her examination of teacher think-aloud instruction that few studies have explored how these practices are implemented in classrooms serving culturally and linguistically diverse students. Similarly, Lindo (2006) found that Black students are significantly underrepresented in reading intervention research, highlighting a critical gap in the literature and underscoring the need for more inclusive, equity-centered inquiry. To maximize their effectiveness, think-alouds should not be delivered as decontextualized scripts, but instead should reflect and incorporate students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences. Embedding students' assets into teacher-led think-alouds not only makes instruction more meaningful but also affirms their identities and promotes equity in literacy learning.

Asset-based teaching (ABT) focuses on harnessing students' innate strengths and community resources, rather than centering on deficits or remediation (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). In educational settings, ABT has been linked with improvements in student confidence, agency, and motivation (Flint & Jaggers, 2021). Furthermore, core characteristics of effective ABT include inclusive, culturally informed, linguistically responsive, and reflective instructional practices (Mein, 2018). Across broader community development and educational paradigms, ABT aligns with principles of appreciative inquiry, social capital, and participatory development by emphasizing community assets as bases for growth (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). When classrooms emphasize strengths and cultural wealth over deficits, they foster more engaged, empowered, and equitable learning environments for diverse learners (Flint & Jaggers, 2021; Mein, 2018). Within education, ABT is not a singular approach, but instead reflected in multiple pedagogical frameworks, such as culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, and

culturally sustaining pedagogy, which each interpret and enact asset-based principles in distinct yet overlapping ways.

ABT aligns with frameworks such as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018), and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012). While each one has unique components and emphases, they all share the goal of affirming students' identities and leveraging their cultural knowledge as academic resources in students' learning. Readers seeking deeper theoretical distinctions between each framework can refer to the original works.

Particularly, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) highlights using students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles to make instruction more meaningful and effective. Gay (2018) identifies five essential elements of CRT: (1) developing a strong knowledge base about cultural diversity, (2) integrating diverse cultural perspectives and content into the curriculum, (3) demonstrating genuine care and cultivating inclusive learning communities, (4) communicating effectively with students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and (5) adapting instructional practices to be responsive to students' cultural experiences. The instructional framework (Sharpe, 2022) introduced in this article draws on CRT principles to ensure that comprehension strategy instruction is both culturally affirming and cognitively rigorous.

While teacher-led think-alouds are widely recognized as a powerful approach to support reading comprehension and model metacognitive thinking (Ness, 2017; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995), they are often implemented in ways that overlook the diverse cultural and linguistic experiences students bring to the classroom. Findings from a mixed-methods study examining teacher think-aloud practices (Woods, 2020), along with the development of a practitioner-informed framework for culturally responsive think-aloud instruction (Sharpe, 2022), indicate that while many educators value think-alouds, they often use them as scripted walkthroughs of strategies rather than as authentic opportunities to connect with students' identities and lived experiences. The framework proposes that teachers must be intentional, not only in how they model strategies such as predicting, inferring, and clarifying, but also in how they embed students' cultural knowledge, home language, and prior experiences into their verbal reasoning. When delivered in this way, think-alouds shift from procedural tools to relational and cognitively engaging practices that foster affirmation and deeper comprehension.

Research consistently demonstrates that students benefit from hearing how skilled readers think aloud in real time to make sense of texts (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), as well as from adequate opportunities to practice reading and applying taught strategies (Duke & Pearson, 2002). However, as Gay (2018) argues, cognition and learning are inherently shaped by cultural context. Thus, reading strategies must be taught in ways that reflect students' discourse patterns, values, and meaning-making processes. Hammond (2015) extends this notion by advocating for "culturally responsive information processing," which invites teachers to support students' higher-order thinking by leveraging cultural schema and linguistic assets. When think-alouds are grounded in this asset-based stance, students are more likely to engage deeply and internalize strategic behaviors (Sharpe, 2022; Woods, 2020). In contrast, generic or decontextualized think-alouds, while technically accurate, often fail to resonate with learners, limiting their impact.

Sharpe's (2022) Culturally Responsive Think-Aloud Instructional Model (see Figure 1) addresses this gap by blending explicit strategy modeling with components of metacognition, cognition, self-regulation, and culturally responsive teaching. The model emphasizes metacognition by making students' thinking visible and reflective, guiding them to monitor their comprehension, adjust strategies, and plan ahead. Cognition is addressed through the intentional

modeling of strategy use, such as predicting, questioning, and summarizing, embedded within meaningful, grade-appropriate texts. Self-regulation is cultivated through opportunities for students to set goals, evaluate their understanding, and persist through complex texts. Just as important, the culturally responsive component ensures that texts, language, and modeled thinking reflect and affirm students' identities, experiences, and cultural knowledge. This integrated approach supports not only what students learn, but also how and why they engage with reading in purposeful, personally meaningful ways.

Figure 1: Culturally Responsive Think-Aloud Instructional Model (CRTAIM)

Note. From "Think-Aloud Reading Instruction Through a Culturally Responsive Teaching Lens" (Sharpe, 2022).

While the present author could not locate empirical studies involving direct observation or data collection on the impact of integrating asset-based approaches with structured literacy, there is emerging literature that supports this conceptual blending. For example, Sanchez et al. (2024) examine culturally sustaining pedagogy within the context of early literacy instruction and the Science of Reading. They provide theoretically grounded, practice-based strategies for integrating multilingual learners' linguistic and cultural assets into foundational literacy instruction. Their work illustrates how structured literacy principles can be aligned with culturally sustaining approaches to better serve diverse learners.

Similarly, Gunner (2023) outlines a classroom model that incorporates culturally responsive practices, such as student-authored sentences and texts tied to students' interests, within explicit phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. While not a formal study, Gunner shares anecdotal evidence pointing to increased student engagement, enjoyment, and ownership of learning.

Additionally, Pittman et al. (2024) present an empowered language approach, a culturally responsive framework designed to support African American students' oral and written expression through bidialectal awareness. The article offers pedagogical guidance grounded in sociolinguistic research and classroom application. By affirming students' linguistic identities and explicitly teaching Standard American English as a secondary dialect, the authors advocate for instruction

that is both academically rigorous and culturally affirming, principles that align with asset-based, strategic reading instruction.

Clausen-Grace and Kelley (2008) describe the Metacognitive Teaching Framework (MTF) as a four-stage, apprenticeship model for building strategic, reflective readers. Beginning with explicit teacher think-alouds and structured strategy instruction, the framework transitions through guided practice toward students' independent application of comprehension strategies, specifically, predicting, making connections, questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. Critically, the MTF embeds self-assessment, goal-setting, and metacognitive reflection, enabling students to monitor and control their own reading development.

The MTF components align with the Culturally Responsive Think-Aloud Instructional Model (CRTAIM) shown in Figure 1 (Sharpe, 2022), which focuses on metacognitive modeling through think-alouds. However, it is missing culturally responsive teaching that affirms students' identities and promotes agency. While the MTF is not explicitly framed within asset-based pedagogy, its intentional support for student reflection, discussion, and strategic independence reinforces the premise that structured literacy instruction can be enriched when paired with practices that center the learner's voice, culture, and thinking processes.

The successes and discoveries in the aforementioned literature relied on key instructional components: metacognition, where students reflect on their thinking processes; cognition, where students actively process and make sense of information; and self-regulation, where students plan, monitor, and adjust their reading behaviors. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) principles, such as validating cultural schema, providing cognitive scaffolds, and creating opportunities for dialogic learning, enhance these processes by making learning relevant, relational, and rigorous (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). When instruction weaves together structured literacy's systematic supports with CRT's emphasis on cultural affirmation and cognitive engagement, educators create conditions for all students, not just a select few, to become empowered, strategic readers.

By integrating explicit comprehension strategy instruction with culturally responsive pedagogy, CRTAIM positions think-alouds as tools for both academic development and identity affirmation. Rather than solely demonstrating how to monitor understanding, well-designed think-alouds reveal to students that their ways of speaking, thinking, and interpreting are meaningful in academic spaces. This approach reframes reading as a process that draws from and builds upon who students are, not just what they know. When enacted with intentionality and cultural relevance, think-aloud instruction becomes more than a literacy technique; it becomes a pathway toward equity, engagement, and empowered learning.

Strategies for Teaching Thinking While Reading

The following instructional strategies are essential components of a comprehensive framework for promoting metacognition and strategic reading among all learners. Each is grounded in evidence-based practice and contributes to the development of self-aware, engaged readers capable of monitoring and regulating their own comprehension. Ranging from explicit teacher modeling to peer collaboration and culturally affirming text selection, these strategies work together to support both the cognitive and affective dimensions of reading. By intentionally integrating these approaches into daily instruction, educators can scaffold student thinking, foster independence, and build stronger connections between learners and the texts they encounter.

Teacher Think-Alouds

Teacher think-alouds are an evidence-based instructional strategy in which educators verbalize their cognitive processes before, during, and after reading to model how skilled readers make meaning from text (Ness, 2016; Woods, 2020). This practice makes metacognitive strategies, like predicting, clarifying, and monitoring comprehension, visible and accessible, helping students internalize the habits of proficient, strategic readers (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

Context example: While reading aloud, the teacher pauses and says, "When the author describes the character as standing tall and smiling, I'm thinking that she feels proud and confident. That helps me understand how she is changing in this part of the story."

Cognitive Scaffolds

Cognitive scaffolds are tools that support students' strategic thinking by providing visual or verbal cues to guide comprehension (Moats, 2020; Pressley, 2006). Examples include question stems, anchor charts, and graphic organizers, which help students organize their thoughts, monitor their understanding, and engage more independently with complex texts.

Context examples: The teacher provides a bookmark with a list of question stems such as "I wonder…" and "This reminds me of…". During independent reading, a student uses the prompt "I wonder…" to write, "I wonder why the main character didn't tell anyone about the problem."

Student Self-Talk & Reflection

Promoting student self-talk and reflection helps cultivate metacognition and self-regulation—key components of executive function (Baker, 2005; Woods, 2020). Through practices such as reflective journaling and "What was I thinking?" protocols, students learn to monitor their comprehension, articulate their thinking processes, and adjust strategies when meaning breaks down.

Context example: After reading, students write in their journals: "When the character ran away, I thought about what I would do in that situation. That helped me realize why he was so nervous."

Culturally Responsive Texts

Culturally responsive texts affirm students' cultural identities and experiences, making comprehension more meaningful and accessible (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). When students see themselves and their communities reflected in what they read, they are more likely to engage with the text, activate background knowledge, and connect strategically to content.

Context example: A teacher selects a text that reflects her students' family and community experiences. During discussions, students share how their own traditions or challenges connect to the characters, deepening their understanding of the text and the author's purpose.

Collaborative Reading Tasks

Collaborative reading tasks promote comprehension through peer dialogue and shared strategy use (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Paris, 2012). When students engage in activities like partner reading

or explaining strategies to a peer, they deepen understanding through social interaction, clarify misunderstandings, and practice metacognitive talk in an authentic context.

Context example: Students work in pairs to reread a paragraph and ask each other, "What do you think the author meant here?" One student says, "I think the character felt left out because nobody listened to her," while the other adds, "Yeah, and that's why she decided to speak up."

Classroom Vignettes and Examples

Below are three classroom vignettes that illustrate practical ways teachers can implement the Culturally Responsive Think-Aloud Instructional Model (CRTAIM; Sharpe, 2022), using selected strategies to teach students how to think while reading. As you read each scenario, consider how the teacher makes cognitive processes visible, affirms students' identities, and models strategic reading behaviors. Each vignette offers a glimpse into how intentional, asset-based instruction can foster deeper comprehension and more engaged, reflective readers.

Vignette 1: Ms. Torres and the Power of Prediction

Ms. Torres, a White, monolingual fifth-grade teacher, teaches in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom with many Latinx and multilingual students. She's intentionally selected *The First Rule of Punk* by Celia C. Pérez for today's read-aloud, having spent time learning about her students' interests and identities through classroom surveys and family connection letters.

"Before we start," she says, holding the book and pointing to the cover, "I want to share why I chose this story. I know some of you have shared during morning meetings that your families value both tradition and self-expression, and that sometimes those can feel at odds. This book reminded me of your stories."

She directs students' attention to the anchor chart labeled "What Good Readers Do Before Reading", which includes sentence stems like "I wonder if…" and "I predict…" Then, she models her thinking: "Looking at this cover, I see a girl wearing a punk outfit, skulls in the background, and the words, *Always remember to be yourself.* I predict she's going to find her own voice, even if others don't always understand it."

As Ms. Torres reads aloud, she pauses to verbalize her reasoning: "When Malú says her mom wants her to be a 'proper senorita,' I think about how hard it must feel to balance family expectations with wanting to be yourself. I don't share Malú's cultural background, but this part helps me imagine what it's like."

Students then engage in a collaborative reading strategy, using their own experiences to connect to the text. Later, they respond in journals using the prompt: "What was I thinking when...?" One student writes, "When Malú's mom said she should be more proper, I thought about when my mom tells me to speak Spanish with my cousins. It's hard sometimes, but I get it."

By listening carefully and choosing texts and language that resonate with her students, Ms. Torres models both strategic thinking and cultural humility, allowing her students to see their identities reflected and honored in the literacy space. Her teaching approach illustrates how teaching thinking while reading can go beyond comprehension strategy instruction to include cultural empathy. Additionally, she bridges metacognitive awareness with asset-based teaching, demonstrating that thinking about reading can also involve thinking about whose stories, experiences, and backgrounds are valued and made visible.

Vignette 2: Mr. Johnson and the Anchor Chart for Questioning

Mr. Johnson is a Black fourth-grade teacher, serving a predominantly Black American student population in the community in which he grew up. During a lesson, he stood beside a large anchor chart labeled "Thinking While We Read: DURING Reading Questions." It featured question stems like, "Why might the character feel this way?" and "What is the author really trying to show?"

Today's text was *Crown*: *An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes. Before reading, Mr. Johnson said, "Y'all remember how we talked about barbershop culture and how important that is in many of our communities? Well, this book celebrates that, and I'm going to model how I ask questions that help me really understand what the author is trying to say beneath the surface."

As he read the first page, he paused: "It says, 'You came in as a lump of clay, a blank canvas, a slab of marble.' That's some powerful language. I'm thinking, why does the author use art metaphors to describe the boy?" He pointed to the chart. "That's me asking a question to dig deeper."

After reading, Mr. Johnson asked students to work in pairs for a dialogic conversation, using the sentence stem, "This part made me think…" and to practice asking questions as they read the text. As students shared, he circulated the classroom and encouraged them to connect the text to their lived experiences. While reading, one student asked herself, "Why does the author describe the haircut as 'fresh'?" In a separate student pair, another student reflected on his similar lived experiences, saying aloud, "When the boy felt fresh after his haircut, it made me think of when my uncle says, 'Look good, feel good.'"

To close the lesson, Mr. Johnson asked students to share one to two thoughts or questions that occurred to them as they read the text. A student shared, "While reading, I was thinking that this book made me feel proud. I didn't know books talked about stuff like this."

By modeling how to ask questions during reading tasks, prompting students to pause and reflect on their thinking while reading, and encouraging students to make connections with the text, Mr. Johnson demonstrates to students that reading should be a mentally engaging task. He also reaffirms his students' culture and experiences by using a text that reflects their identities. Through the questioning strategy, not only does this strengthen students' comprehension, but it also further develops their critical thinking skills by learning to make meaning beyond the surface level of texts. The collaborative inquiry enables students to connect their lived experiences with their peers and the book characters, transforming reading into an act of reflection, connection, and cultural pride.

Vignette 3: Mr. Halbrook and Reading with a Plan

Mr. Halbrook, a White, mid-career third-grade teacher, teaches in a school where the majority of students are multilingual and learning English as a second language. He has been working on strengthening his culturally responsive practice by attending professional development sessions, engaging in community events, and reading student-authored reflections about identity. Today, he's reading *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi and plans to model both comprehension strategies and executive functioning.

He begins by pointing to the board, where the day's goal is written:

"Today, I will monitor my thinking while reading to understand the character's decisions and identity."

"I want to show you how I make a plan for reading and what I do when I feel distracted or stuck," he tells the class.

Before opening the book, he reflects aloud: "I've never moved to a new country or had people mispronounce my name, but I've read your family stories and learned how important names and identity are to many of you. I'm going to read this book with the goal of understanding how Unhei feels, and I'll stop to check my understanding along the way."

He gestures toward a class anchor chart titled "Plan → Monitor → Adjust" and begins reading. "Okay, Unhei's classmates are teasing her name. That would make anyone feel upset. I'm going to pause and ask myself, 'What is she thinking right now, and why might she consider changing her name?" He writes his thoughts on a sticky note: She wants to fit in, but what will she lose if she hides her name?

Later, students complete a graphic organizer that tracks the character's feelings and decisions. Mr. Halbrook encourages them to use the "What was I thinking?" protocol in their reflections. One student writes, "I was thinking how I feel when people mess up my name, too. I liked how the teacher understood how names can be hard but still important."

Even though Mr. Halbrook does not share his students' cultural or linguistic backgrounds, he models curiosity, intentionality, and respect towards the diversity in his classroom. By using cognitive scaffolds, goal setting, and identity-centered reading, he demonstrates how any teacher can make strategic, culturally responsive instruction meaningful for every learner. Using students' lived experiences as both cognitive and cultural tools for meaning-making, he transforms his comprehension instruction into both an intellectual and identity-affirming activity.

Conclusion

Teaching students how to think while reading is ultimately an act of empowerment. When we shift our literacy practices from a focus on compliance, answering surface-level questions, or completing reading tasks, to a focus on cognition, we invite students to engage deeply, question critically, and make meaning on their own terms. As Geneva Gay (2018) reminds us, culturally responsive teaching is not just about content, but about cultivating intellectual capacity and agency. Zaretta Hammond (2015) builds on this by asserting that instruction must develop independent learners who can process, analyze, and act on information. By teaching thinking as a core part of reading instruction, we move beyond rote performance and toward liberatory, equity-centered pedagogy, one where all students are equipped not just to read the word, but to read and reshape the world.

Implications for Future Research

The integration of structured literacy, executive function, and asset-based practices into a unified instructional framework offers a promising direction for equitable reading comprehension instruction. However, the effectiveness of this integrated approach, particularly the Culturally Responsive Think-Aloud Instructional Model (CRTAIM; Sharpe, 2022), has not yet been examined through rigorous, empirical research. While current literature supports each component independently, few studies investigate their combined impact on student outcomes, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

To address this gap, the author plans to implement the framework in teacher preparation and K–5 classroom settings to examine how it supports student engagement, strategy use, and comprehension development. Mixed-methods studies will be designed to gather insight into both student outcomes and the instructional experiences of teachers. For example, quantitative data may track changes in students' reading strategy use, comprehension performance, and executive functioning, while qualitative data may help explain how teachers adapt and enact the model.

Action research conducted in collaboration with classroom teachers will also provide valuable, practice-centered feedback for ongoing refinement.

Longitudinal research could further explore the lasting effects of culturally responsive comprehension instruction, particularly in supporting students' self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and higher-order thinking over time. Given the underrepresentation of historically marginalized students in reading comprehension intervention studies, future research must intentionally center the voices and experiences of Black students, emergent bilinguals, and other groups who have often been excluded from such work.

Ultimately, sustained inquiry and practitioner collaboration will be critical to determining how models like this can be scaled, sustained, and adapted across contexts. This work represents not only an instructional shift but a broader call for equity-driven literacy research that affirms student identities and advances reading as a cognitive, cultural, and justice-oriented practice.

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Teaching Tips

Beyond Fire and Tacos: Using *Dragons Love Tacos* to Ignite Mathematical Thinking through Interdisciplinary Read-Alouds

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ABSTRACT

On a bright Tuesday morning, in a university math undergraduate course, the professor held up a beloved children's picture book, *Dragons Love Tacos* by Adam Rubin, and the room filled with smiles. "If you want to make math fun, put it in a taco!" shouted one teacher candidate, prompting laughter all around. While the line was humorous, it also hinted at something deeper: mathematics, when anchored in meaningful contexts, becomes more than just numbers on a page. This narrative follows a group of teacher candidates as they explore mathematics through the lens of children's literature. Using the playful yet insightful story of taco-loving dragons who cannot eat spicy salsa, the lesson evolved into a space where literacy, math, and interdisciplinary teaching came to life.

KEYWORDS

children's literature; math; teacher candidates; interdisciplinary read-aloud

An interdisciplinary approach intentionally integrates concepts and skills across content areas to foster deeper, more authentic learning experiences (Beane, 1997; Drake & Burns, 2004). By selecting texts that are humorous, relatable, and rich in social-emotional subtext, such as *Dragons Love Tacos*, educators can bridge literacy and mathematics in ways that connect students' cultural and personal experiences (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). When paired with accessible, hands-on math tasks, this approach engages learners as capable thinkers, problem-solvers, and storytellers, making both subjects more meaningful and memorable (Vacca & Mraz, 2017). Such integration not only supports academic growth but also promotes collaboration, creativity, and the transfer of knowledge across disciplines (Fogarty, 2009). An interdisciplinary framework also challenges teacher candidates to rethink the traditional boundaries of subject instruction. Rather than treating mathematics and literacy as isolated domains, teacher candidates begin to recognize how each discipline can enrich and clarify the other. The process of weaving story and cultural touchpoints into mathematical tasks encourages them to design lessons that are not only academically rigorous but also personally relevant for students. This blending fosters a mindset where learning is viewed as holistic, dynamic, and responsive to real classroom communities, rather than segmented into discrete and disconnected parts.

Setting the Stage: Literacy as a Gateway to Mathematics

This article explores how the popular children's picture book *Dragons Love Tacos* by Adam Rubin (2012) can serve as a springboard for interdisciplinary instruction in teacher preparation programs. Anchored in culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and grounded in student-centered practices (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), this approach illustrates how teachers can blend literacy and mathematics instruction in meaningful and engaging ways. Through a case study of a

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2nd-grade integrated lesson designed in a teacher preparation program, we examined how mathematical concepts such as estimation, addition, subtraction, and data analysis emerge naturally through storytelling, an approach supported by research on narrative-based learning (Bruner, 1990), and how students respond to this type of experience. Drawing on reflective feedback from teacher candidates, the article offers instructional strategies and demonstrates how children's literature can nurture both conceptual understanding and classroom community (Chambers, 2011; Sipe, 2008).

Bridging mathematics and literacy through interdisciplinary instruction enables students to form deeper, more authentic connections across content areas (Beane, 1997; Drake & Burns, 2004), enhancing both engagement and conceptual understanding (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2014). Furthermore, children's literature offers powerful entry points for mathematical discussions that are rooted in storytelling, cultural experiences, and classroom dialogue (Van de Walle et al., 2019; Whitin & Whitin, 2004). As one teacher candidate reflected, "We had a book project in one class and used it to design a math lesson in another—that helped it all make sense." This integration underscores the power of interdisciplinary instruction to ground abstract ideas in concrete, culturally relevant contexts (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). Such cross-course connections highlight why the read-aloud, long valued for literacy, can also serve as an anchor for interdisciplinary and culturally responsive mathematics instruction. here.

Inside the Read-Aloud: Stories that Count

As the story unfolded, in the college classroom, the teacher candidates were asked to think mathematically. "If one dragon eats 7 tacos and another eats 5, how many tacos did they eat in total?" the professor asked, pausing mid-story. Teacher candidates reached for paper taco manipulatives and drew number sentences. Math became visible and tactile. One teacher candidate noted that hands-on, tactile experiences are more memorable and impactful for students than computer-based tasks. Throughout the read-aloud, teachers can also seamlessly incorporate math talk by posing simple questions such as, "What happens if a dragon eats spicy salsa?" or "If three bowls of salsa were made and one spilled, how many remain?" These prompts encourage mental math and problem-solving while grounding mathematical thinking in the context of the story's plot.

Extending the discussion, teacher candidates also experimented with different ways to scaffold questions for diverse learners. For instance, some suggested using sentence frames such as "___ plus ___ equals ___" to support students still developing language skills, while others recommended encouraging students to act out the problem using taco cards or by grouping themselves into "dragon teams." Teacher candidates quickly saw that the same story prompt could be adjusted for varying levels of readiness, simple addition for early learners, multi-step problems for more advanced students, or even open-ended questions like, "How many different ways could three dragons share 12 tacos?" This flexibility illustrates the broader pedagogical significance of story-based instruction: one narrative can sustain a wide range of mathematically rich discussions, differentiated to meet diverse learner needs and coherently linked to a shared text. In doing so, it exemplifies how interdisciplinary and culturally responsive practices can ground abstract concepts in meaningful and contextually relevant experiences.

After Reading: Bringing Data to the Table

Post–read-aloud activities extended mathematical learning by integrating graphing with real-world applications. As part of a class exercise, teacher candidates conducted a brief survey on preferred

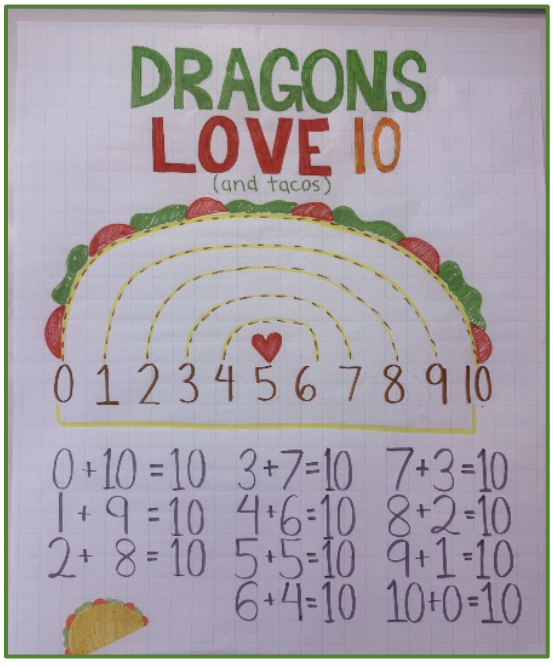
taco toppings such as cheese, lettuce, salsa, and beans, and recorded the results using tally marks. They then transformed this data into bar graphs and engaged in small-group discussions to interpret patterns and compare frequencies. This activity reinforced essential data analysis skills while fostering collaboration, purposeful mathematical discourse, and application of mathematics in authentic contexts, an approach that candidates noted they could readily implement in their future classrooms.

A subsequent task was framed as a real-world scenario: "If you are throwing a taco party for five dragons and each dragon eats six tacos, how many tacos do you need?" Teacher candidates approached the problem using a variety of strategies, including drawing visual models, skip counting, and composing equations, before sharing their reasoning with peers. One candidate reflected, "The problem felt real. It wasn't just a worksheet—it was our story." This type of authenticity, where mathematical reasoning emerges from familiar and engaging contexts, can transform mathematics from an abstract exercise into a meaningful, memorable learning experience for all students.

Tens and Tacos: Building Number Sense Playfully

Building number sense in early elementary classrooms often begins with understanding combinations of 10, an essential foundation for addition, subtraction, and place value. Inspired by the classroom read-aloud of Dragons Love Tacos, teacher candidates extended the learning with a vibrant, taco-themed math anchor chart titled "Dragons Love 10" (see Figure 1). In this anchor chart, the numbers 0 through 10 are arranged in an arc, representing a taco shell. Yellow lines link the pairs that make 10 (e.g., 3 and 7, 4 and 6), visually reinforcing the symmetry and logic of number bonds. Below the taco, each fact is written as a number sentence, bridging concrete and abstract representation.

Figure 1: "Dragons Love 10" Anchor Chart



Note. The taco-themed anchor chart provides a visual representation of all number combinations that equal ten, designed to support students' addition fact fluency.

The activity exemplifies responsive teaching by embedding familiar, culturally relevant imagery, such as tacos, into core mathematics instruction and pairing it with joyful classroom routines. As students build fluency with number combinations, they simultaneously engage in storytelling, collaboration, and visual problem-solving, hallmarks of an engaging and student-centered mathematics classroom. Activities such as "Dragons Love 10" illustrate how mathematics can be joyful, conceptually rich, and rooted in a sense of community within the playful context of a taco. As one teacher candidate observed, "Students will get excited to find their taco match. It can turn a basic math fact into a game—and they will remember the combinations better because of the story."

Integrating Mathematics and Literacy: GSE-Aligned Activities Inspired by *Dragons Love Tacos*

To support the integration of mathematics and literacy through *Dragons Love Tacos*, Table 1 presents a range of classroom activities aligned with key elementary mathematics concepts and the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE). Each activity illustrates how the book can function as a catalyst for engaging, standards-based instruction across domains such as addition, subtraction, graphing, measurement, and early multiplication. Collectively, these examples demonstrate how mathematical thinking can be anchored in storytelling, transforming abstract concepts into meaningful, joyful learning experiences.

Table 1: Example of Math Activities Using the Book "Dragons Love Tacos"

Activity Title	Description	Math Focus	GA Math Standard (GSE)	Sample Math Problem
Taco Tally & Graph	Students survey classmates on taco toppings and create bar graphs	Data collection & graphing	MGSE1.MD.4: Organize, represent, and interpret data	How many students prefer cheese? Which topping is most popular?
Dragons Love 10	Use an anchor chart or taco cards to find number pairs that make 10	Number bonds & addition	MGSE1.OA.6: Add and subtract within 20	If one dragon eats 4 tacos, how many more does it need to eat 10?
Taco Party Planning	Plan a party for dragons with tacos and toppings	Multiplication & repeated addition	MGSE2.OA.4: Use repeated addition to model equal groups	If each dragon eats 5 tacos and there are 4 dragons, how many tacos are needed?
Salsa Spill Subtraction	Story problem about spilled salsa bowls	Subtraction within 20	MGSE1.OA.1: Represent and solve problems involving subtraction	If there were 6 bowls of salsa and 2 spilled, how many are left?
Taco Sorting	Categorize taco toppings or dragon types by attributes	Sorting, classifying, and patterns	MGSE2.G.1: Recognize and draw shapes with given attributes	Sort tacos by number of ingredients. What pattern do you notice?
Build-a-Taco Word Problems	Students create and solve taco-themed word problems	Addition, subtraction, multiplication	MGSE2.OA.1: Solve word problems using drawings and equations	Maria made 3 tacos with beef and 2 with beans. How many tacos did she make?

Dragon Delivery Distance	Dragons deliver tacos; measure and compare distances	Measurement & comparison	MGSE2.MD.1 & MGSE2.MD.4: Measure and compare lengths	Dragon A flew 12 feet, and Dragon B flew 15 feet. Who flew farther and by how much?

Note. MGSE2 refers to the Mathematics Georgia Standards of Excellence, Grade 2.

Planning with Purpose: Creative Lesson Design from Teacher Candidates

Designing a math lesson that integrates literature requires teacher candidates to think beyond conventional models. One candidate shared, "I used to think math had to look a certain way—charts, numbers, timed drills. Now I realize it can be a story, a conversation, even a taco party." Teacher candidates also described how integrating literacy into their math instruction made the standards more approachable. Several teacher candidates embraced the interdisciplinary nature of the task as a strength. "I learned that I don't have to choose between being creative and meeting the standards," one reflected. "I can do both—and my students learn more when I do." This mindset shift, viewing standards as the foundation rather than the limit, enabled teacher candidates to craft lessons that were engaging, rigorous, and joyful. As one summed it up: "Creativity is not about doing whatever you want—it's about making the learning meaningful." As teacher candidates worked through the planning and designing of the lesson, they demonstrated creative flexibility in both format and content. These reflections illustrate a deepening understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy not as a checklist of strategies, but as a sustained mindset. Children's books like *Dragons Love Tacos* serve as both mirrors and windows (Tschida et al., 2014). Mirrors that reflect students' familiar cultural experiences, such as taco night, and windows that invite them to explore new ways of thinking, reasoning, and engaging with mathematics.

Lessons for Practice: A Narrative Framework for Integration

The classroom experience revealed five guiding principles for weaving math meaningfully into story-rich learning: (1) choose literature with natural mathematical hooks, such as *Dragons Love Tacos*, where numbers and comparisons emerge organically; (2) embed math talk into shared reading to prompt reasoning and verbal explanation (Hammond, 2015); (3) use manipulatives like paper tacos or counters to make abstract concepts tangible (Sowell, 1989); (4) connect math tasks to real-world or imaginative contexts to boost motivation and relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1994); and (5) engage in intentional reflection to ensure instruction remains inclusive, student-centered, and responsive to both academic and social-emotional growth (Zeichner & Liston, 2013).

These five principles provide a flexible framework that teacher candidates can carry into their own practice. For example, when selecting literature with mathematical hooks, teacher candidates recognized the value of choosing texts students already enjoy, whether about tacos, animals, or familiar routines, to make math feel approachable from the start. Embedding math talk into read-alouds was also identified as a powerful move, especially when teacher candidates practiced using open-ended prompts such as, "What do you notice? What do you wonder?" to spark multiple solution strategies rather than a single correct answer.

The use of manipulatives such as taco cards or counters showed how easily abstract ideas could be transformed into playful and concrete tasks. One teacher candidate reflected that "passing out tacos" during the lesson can keep students' hands and minds equally engaged, a reminder that movement and play are not distractions but powerful vehicles for learning. Real-world and imaginative contexts, such as hosting a taco party for dragons, helped teacher candidates see how

math could connect to students' lived experiences while still meeting curriculum standards. Finally, intentional reflection emerged as a practice that made the biggest difference for teacher candidates' growth. In this way, the five principles served not only as a framework for planning but also as a mindset for sustaining joyful, responsive, and meaningful mathematics instruction across content areas. here.

Conclusion: Children's Literature as a Catalyst for Mathematical Understanding

The *Dragons Love Tacos*, read aloud, showed how children's literature can transform math from abstract numbers into meaningful, memorable experiences. By embedding mathematical concepts in a playful, culturally familiar narrative, teacher candidates designed lessons that were rigorous, creative, and student-centered. This approach reframed standards as a springboard for innovation, blending literacy and math to build both conceptual understanding and classroom community. In the end, tacos and dragons became more than a whimsical tale; they served as a catalyst for joyful, connected learning, advancing student literacy and mathematical understanding through purposeful and interdisciplinary integration.

Equally important, this lesson design demonstrated the potential for replication across multiple texts, grade levels, and contexts. Teacher candidates recognized that once they learned the process, they could select a story with natural math connections, embed purposeful math talk, extend learning through hands-on tasks, and apply the same framework to other children's literature. For example, *Counting Crocodiles* by Judy Sierra (1997) lends itself to lessons on number sense and repeated addition, *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto (1992) can be used to explore estimation, subtraction, and culturally responsive connections around family traditions, and *The Doorbell Rang* by Pat Hutchins (1986) naturally introduces division and sharing concepts through a familiar context of cookies and friends. Each of these texts, like *Dragons Love Tacos*, provides opportunities for authentic math talk, hands-on exploration, and interdisciplinary teaching that bridges literacy and mathematics in ways students find meaningful, authentic, and memorable.

Story-based mathematics instruction can be strengthened through three interconnected strategies: (1) embedding purposeful questioning by pausing at key moments in the narrative to pose mathematically rich prompts that stimulate reasoning and discussion (Hammond, 2015). For example, during *Dragons Love Tacos*, a teacher might pause when dragons are piling up tacos and ask, "If one dragon eats seven tacos and other eats five, how many tacos do they eat together?" (2) facilitating representational modeling by encouraging the use of manipulatives, drawings, or embodied actions to connect abstract concepts with tangible representations (Sowell, 1989). For example, having students distribute paper taco cards among dragon cutouts to model sharing twelve tacos among three dragons; and (3) designing authentic extensions that situate mathematics in culturally relevant and real-world contexts, such as surveys, data displays, or scenario-based problem solving (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2018). For instance, after the read-aloud, students might conduct a taco-topping survey and graph the class's preferences. Together, these strategies illustrate how children's literature can transform mathematics into a dynamic, interdisciplinary, and culturally responsive learning experience.

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Teaching Tips

Mentor Texts as a Bridge to Independent Writing: Supporting Young Writers Through Sentence Imitation and Craft Study in the Elementary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of mentor texts as a powerful strategy for developing independent writing skills in elementary students. Drawing on classroom experience and inspired by the sentence composing approach of Don and Jenny Killgallon, the authors demonstrate how mentor texts can be used to support craft study and sentence imitation across a range of writing skills--from prepositional phrases and parallel structure to adjective and adverbial clauses. The article provides practical, developmentally appropriate examples for teaching students how to analyze and mimic writing moves of professional authors. It also illustrates how mentor texts can be used to teach students to craft engaging leads and build narrative depth. Through a gradual release of responsibility, students gain confidence and independence as they begin to internalize sophisticated writing techniques. The authors conclude by emphasizing the importance of thoughtful scaffolding, patience, and high expectations in helping students of all levels grow as confident, capable writers.

KEYWORDS

mentor text; elementary writing instruction; gradual release of responsibility

A common frustration of the classroom teacher when trying to elicit good writing from students is helping the student understand how to hone their craft. This is consistent from the beginning Kindergartener to the student on the university campus. An effective and practical approach is to use mentor texts that model professional writing, allowing students to analyze and practice diverse styles found in published works. This can be done not only at the sentence level, but also at a larger level to add interest to the writing and engage the reader.

Mentor texts provide examples of well-crafted writing, allowing students to observe how authors use different writing techniques. By analyzing these techniques, students can learn how to incorporate that craft into their own writing. When students see what is possible in writing, they are more likely to experiment with their own ideas and styles. Mentor texts can serve as springboards for creative writing activities, encouraging students to explore their own imaginations.

Our work regarding the use of mentor text was highly influenced by Don and Jenny Killgallon's (2008) *Story Grammar for Elementary School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*. In this book, the authors give multiple examples from texts that are familiar to the students, then

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break down the structure of the professional sentence, and finally ask the students to create an original sentence using a similar structure. In this article, we will illustrate the same process beginning with some simple examples and moving to more complex sentences. We have experienced great success with this approach with students of various ages and abilities, beginning in the third grade and continuing through university courses. We have been able to help students learn to imitate sentences written by professional writers. In addition, we have helped students realize that different placements of prepositional phrases can make their writing more interesting, and that moving prepositional phrases around creates a more pleasing flow to their writing piece. Finally, we were able to introduce the concept of incorporating adjective and adverbial clauses through the context of literature, a more interesting approach than isolated "drill and kill" instruction.

Teaching with Mentor Text Using Gradual Release of Responsibility

This section describes examples of teaching different types of sentences and clauses using excerpts from literature. Working with students on the following examples requires patience, support, and a belief that the students will perform. In reflecting on our use of mentor texts, we realize how nicely this technique fits into the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). We start with the author's text, we model with our own writing, and then we work through examples with the class as a whole or in small groups. Over time, students develop independence. In the beginning, students need us to show our thought process as we delineate the "formula" used by the author. Eventually and gradually, we pull back, and progressively, students take control of more and more of the process of looking closely at how the author developed their craft. They are eventually able to easily (sometimes not so easily) emulate the style of the author. The process takes patience and perseverance on the part of both teacher and students. However, the process should always be underscored by our belief in their ability to succeed.

Sentence Imitation

In our first example, we give a very specific illustration of the process we went through to guide children through the procedure of using a mentor text to write a more precise sentence. The remaining examples can follow the same general steps.

We begin with an example of a third-grade class using a sentence taken from *Stuart Little* (White, 1945): "When the people in Central Park learned that one of the toy sailboats was being steered by a mouse in a sailor suit, they all came running" (p. 43). We selected this sentence because the book was being used as the read aloud to the class and was meaningful to the children. We displayed the model sentence using the document camera. We then demonstrated to the students how to analyze this sentence by thinking of it as the following: When the (who) (where) (learned/saw) that (what) (doing what/where) (what was he wearing?) (what did they do?). We gave an example of a sentence written in the same format. Using a think-aloud process, we wrote our own sentence as a model for the students:

> *When the mother saw that the child was playing in the mud while still wearing his best Sunday clothes, she screamed at the top of her lungs.*

Once the children saw the process modeled, the class, as a whole, created a different sentence following the same pattern. Together, the class came up with the sentence:

When the piano student at the recital learned that one of the other piano students had spilled punch all over her recital music, she burst into tears and ran out of the room.

Notice that even though we did not follow the exact planning format, we were given the opportunity to discuss how they do not always have to follow the pattern precisely. They can make it their own. This realization helps the students not to be intimidated by the process. Next, we had each student (or pairs of students) write their own sentences based on the pattern. Students volunteered to share their example sentences with the whole class. The final step was for the students to find a sentence in their own creative writing pieces and revise it to follow the pattern they had been working on. Mimicking this example, one student wrote the following to be incorporated in their piece:

When the dogs in the schoolyard saw that the children had treats in their outstretched hands, they all ran to get their share.

Notice that this example does not exactly follow the guide that the students were given. The student made it their own. To follow it verbatim and talk about what the dogs were wearing would have detracted from the beauty of what they did write.

Another craft utilized in writing is that of parallelism. Parallelism in writing is a powerful technique that enhances clarity, balance, and rhythm, making sentences more engaging and easier to read. It can be introduced and modeled for students by beginning with examples from professional writing. One such example can be found in *Flight 116 is Down!* (Cooney, 1992). "Pieces of tree, pieces of metal, pieces of seat and airplane wing gleamed in the moonlight" (p. 48). Students can be led to discover that in this example of parallelism, there are three items listed, each of which uses a three-word phrase. The example ends by telling what those items were doing. As instructors, we came up with the following to model parallelism:

Bowls of peaches, bowls of tomatoes, and bowls of half-eaten spaghetti were spread across the table.

Imagine our delight when the students came up with this sentence:

Fans dressed in purple, fans dressed in red, and fans waving banners poured down the streets to the playing field.

Prepositional Phrases

Our students were very familiar with prepositions and prepositional phrases because we had discussed and identified them previously through the context of reading and writing. Prepositional phrases can occur at multiple points within a sentence. You will find them at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Using mentor texts, we were able to demonstrate examples of all three locations of prepositional phrases. In addition, we had practiced adding prepositional phrases to simple sentences. We displayed examples of prepositional phrases with subject/verb splits in texts, and we had students practice making their own on sentence strips.

As our example of a prepositional phrase at the beginning of a sentence, we used the following from *Bad Boys* (Palatini, 2003): "With Betty's prodding, they queued up next to each other in back of two long lines of sheep." When we asked students to begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase using the same process we described earlier by showing examples on the document camera, one animal enthusiast wrote the following sentence:

Like a sloth in its natural state, the boy slowly slid out of bed.

We used *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Speare, 1958), with its beautifully written text, to introduce the use of a prepositional phrase with a subject/verb split. "Captain Eaton, in his good blue coat, was shouting orders from the quarterdeck" (p. 3). One student incorporated this technique when they changed an original sentence from:

The grizzly bear walked to the lake.

Into the more stylistic sentence:

The grizzly bear, with lumbering movements, made his way down to the lake.

The student was extremely pleased with the way this simple change enhanced their writing and seemed to make the grizzly bear come alive.

Our last work with prepositional phrases focused on placing them at the end of the sentence. We chose the following excerpt from *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984) for our example of this sentence type. Sandra Cisneros described the sudden development of a teenage girl's hips by stating, "One day you wake up and they are there. [They are] Ready and waiting, like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition" (p. 49). Notice that this quote ends with three prepositional phrases in a row. The three prepositional phrases are: "like a new Buick," "with the keys," and "in the ignition." Our students, in following this pattern, created the following:

Galloping on horses refreshes your mind as the wind blows against your face, through your hair, and down your spine.

The House on Mango Street is adolescent literature. Notice, however, that the level of the book from which your examples are derived is not that important. You could also use picture books when teaching at the secondary level or secondary texts as examples for primary children.

Clauses for Sophisticated Sentences

Adjective and adverbial clauses are types of dependent clauses that add depth and detail to writing. They help to create more sophisticated and precise sentences. Using these clauses allows writers to connect ideas smoothly, show relationships between thoughts, and add layers of meaning. The clauses make the sentences clearer, richer, and more engaging.

An adjective clause contains a subject and a verb but cannot stand alone as a sentence. It is used to modify a noun, just as individual adjectives do. The following quote comes from *The Polar Express* (Van Allsburg, 1985): "We traveled through cold, dark forests, where lean wolves roamed." "Where lean wolves roamed" is the adjective clause describing the forest. After seeing this example, one student wrote:

We sat by the lake where the fireflies sparkled.

Like the adjective clause, an adverbial clause contains a subject and a verb. However, the adverbial clause must play the part of an adverb. The following example is from *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (Lobel, 1970): "He ran up the path to Toad's house because he wanted to see Toad" (p. 4). "Because he wanted to see Toad" modifies the verb ran. In describing his family's trip to Tanzania, our student wrote:

We rode in the hot air balloon because we wanted to see the Serengeti.

Crafting Interesting Leads

In addition to working at the sentence level, mentor text can also be utilized to help students hone their craft in a bigger picture, such as developing provocative leads. In the following examples of using texts as models of leads, we will start simple and move to the more complex. A fun book to begin with is *Roger the Jolly Pirate* by Brett Helquist (2004). This book begins as follows, "Before anyone had heard of Black Beard, Long John Silver, or Calico Jack, there was a pirate named Roger." To use this text to support students, begin by pointing out the structure of this lead. The text starts by saying "Before anyone had heard of . . ." and then it names three individuals who have something in common. It then says, "There was . . ." and names the main character of the story. This is a fairly simple pattern that is easily followed by students. We invited students to follow this format to introduce a story. We received some amazing results. One aspiring rock star thought of her own future career and began as follows:

> *Before there was Cher, Madonna, or even Beyoncé, there was Eloise*!

Another dog lover wrote about his favorite, using the lead:

> *Before there was Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, or even Benji, there was the best dog of all—Max, the black lab.*

The class could then more fully understand the importance of an attention-grabbing lead that immediately engages the reader and compels them to read on.

Another book we have used for a model of an interesting lead is *Albert the Bear* (Butterworth, 2002). This is an excellent text to teach the craft of flashback. The story begins, "From the front, Albert the Bear looks very sad indeed. He has the saddest eyes you ever saw. Which is strange, because Albert . . . But wait. Let's tell his story from the very beginning." Notice how the story really begins at the end, and now the author is going to nostalgically recall and tell a reminiscence to continue the story. We encourage students to think about how their story would end so that they can do the same. One young sports fan wrote:

> *The crowd roared and cheered as #19 threw the pass to its intended receiver, who turned and ran for the winning touchdown. Which is remarkable, because everyone thought #19 would actually be playing in the World Series . . . But wait. Let's start from the beginning and tell this young man's surprising journey to fame.*

The young author then proceeded to tell the rest of his hero's story.

You will notice that we started with a somewhat simple lead that was easily replicated, then went to an example that was somewhat more challenging by introducing the flashback. The truth is that any book can have its lead imitated. Different leads lend themselves to different stories. Children can learn to use the lead from any story they enjoy to create the beginning of their own story.

Let us look at an example of a lead that might be a little more challenging to deconstruct. *Zachary's Ball* (Tavares, 2000) offers a bit more of a challenge. The book begins as follows:

> *I had never been inside a ballpark until that day. Everything felt so close to me–the outfield fence, the players warming up, even the man who watered the field. I was jealous of him because he got to walk on the same grass as Buck Spoonwell and all the other heroes my father talked about so often.*

Let us take a close look at how Tavares began this story. The author begins by bringing us into the setting. He then uses a listing technique to describe what he sees. The list is followed by

a feeling. One student was excited to share her travels to the Grand Canyon. She began her story with this:

> *This was my first visit to the Grand Canyon. Everything was overpowering, vibrant, and strange–the distance to the wall on the other side, the colors of the rocks, even the knowledge that it creates its own weather! Standing at the precipice and gazing out across the horizon, I immediately knew why it was called the Grand Canyon.*

Conclusion

Mentor texts are powerful tools that help students internalize the techniques of skilled authors. If teachers carefully select professional examples of craft they would like to see emulated, students can be taught to deconstruct what the writer created. Once the deconstruction has occurred, students can learn to produce new writing using the professional writing as a model. If this process is used on a regular basis, students will learn over time to internalize more sophisticated crafting moves. With thoughtful scaffolding, students of all ages and abilities can use these models to enhance their writing. Through patience, encouragement, and practice, we can help all students grow as writers.

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