Reciprocal Teaching for the Primary Grades: “We Can Do It, Too!”

Paola Pilonieta, Adriana L. Medina

With a few modifications, reciprocal teaching can provide students with comprehension strategy instruction that is research based, explicit, and age appropriate.

In 1978, Durkin (1978–1979) made what continues to be an alarming observation: less than 1% of classroom reading instruction was dedicated to comprehension instruction. When comprehension instruction occurred, the focus was on asking students questions about the text—assessing comprehension, not providing instruction. More recently, Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampston, and Echevarria (1998) examined reading instruction in 10 fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms. They too found little comprehension instruction and an emphasis on assessing comprehension. Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, and Rodriguez (2002) had similar findings when they observed literacy instruction in 88 classrooms. They coded for comprehension strategy instruction only 2%–9% of the time in grades 1–4. Because comprehension instruction is not always synonymous with the primary grades (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008; Myers, 2005; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005; Sweet & Snow, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000), it is not surprising to find that only 16% of K–3 teachers include comprehension strategy instruction as part of their literacy curriculum (Neuman, 2001). Many primary-grade teachers have not always emphasized comprehension strategy instruction in their curriculum (Kragler, Walker, & Martin, 2005; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Reutzel et al., 2005). This sentiment is paralleled in the research community, as there are few research studies focusing on comprehension instruction in K–3 (Reutzel et al., 2005).

The lack of documented comprehension instruction, especially in the primary grades, has contributed to a student population in which 69% of fourth graders read below the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ (NAEP) proficient reading level (NAEP, 2005). Likewise, Catts, Hogan, Barth, and Adlof (2003) found that many second, third, and fourth graders experienced difficulty with reading comprehension. These results have prompted researchers to conclude that comprehension instruction should be an essential part of primary-grade reading programs (Block et al., 2008).

Comprehension Strategy Instruction

Though comprehension instruction is not often evident in classrooms, there is a wealth of research documenting its success in improving comprehension (Kincade & Beach, 1996). This research indicates that proficient readers use comprehension strategies with most reading tasks, whereas poor readers use fewer strategies in a less flexible manner (Kincade & Beach, 1996; Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2002; Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991). Comprehension strategies are conscious, deliberate, and flexible plans readers use and adjust while reading or when comprehension breaks down (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2002). The aim of strategy instruction is for students to become self-regulated learners (Montague, 1993).

Self-regulated learners choose from several strategies to accomplish a reading goal. If the chosen strategy is unsuccessful, they will opt for a different strategy. As a result, students need to be adept with
a variety of comprehension strategies to ensure they have options if a particular strategy proves ineffective.

“Good readers do not use comprehension strategies one at a time as they read. Rather they orchestrate and coordinate a ‘set’ or ‘family’ of strategies to comprehend text” (Reutzel et al., 2005, p. 279). Thus, recent research promotes multiple strategy instruction whereby students are taught how to use and coordinate multiple strategies as they read (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; Neufeld, 2005; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Pressley, 2002; Reutzel et al., 2005). Reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) is a research-based instructional procedure that incorporates multiple strategy instruction.

Reciprocal Teaching
Reciprocal teaching can be used to teach students how to coordinate the use of four comprehension strategies: predicting, clarifying, generating questions, and summarizing. While working in small groups, the students use these strategies to engage in a discussion thereby jointly constructing and enhancing one another’s understanding of the text. Originally designed with seventh graders, reciprocal teaching has been demonstrated as an effective teaching practice in a variety of settings, by countless researchers (Coley, DePinto, Craig, & Gardner, 1993; Kelly, Moore, & Tuck, 2001; Myers, 2005; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Palincsar & Klenk, 1992; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

Given the call for comprehension instruction in the primary grades and the need for research that documents the best practices for delivering comprehension instruction in these grades (Block et al., 2008), we developed a modified version of reciprocal teaching for use in primary classrooms that would help meet those two criteria. To distinguish the modified version from the original reciprocal teaching version, we called our modified version Reciprocal Teaching for the Primary Grades (RTPG).

Theoretical Background: Key Elements of Comprehension Instruction
There are three key elements found in effective comprehension strategy instruction: (1) the explicit instruction of strategies through declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge, (2) the gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student, and (3) the coordinated use of multiple strategies. First, at the elementary level, explicit instruction of comprehension strategies is preferable over instruction where students are to deduce the purpose of the lesson (Harris & Pressley, 1991). Paris et al’s (1983) seminal piece on strategic reading serves as a guide as to the types of cues teachers can provide students during strategy instruction and explains the importance of teaching declarative and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge is defined as knowing what the strategy is while procedural knowledge is knowing the steps necessary to implement the strategy. Conditional knowledge, knowledge of when and why to apply a strategy, is needed to transfer the application of a strategy to other contexts (Paris et al., 1983).

Second, equally as important as using explicit cues is a student’s transition to independent strategy use through a teacher’s gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). When students initially learn a strategy, the teacher assumes a large part of the responsibility for applying the strategy. As students gain proficiency with a strategy and move toward becoming independent comprehension strategy users, they assume more of the responsibility for applying the strategy while the teacher gradually releases his or her responsibility over the strategy’s application.

Third, research supports teaching students how to coordinate the use of multiple strategies while reading (Gersten et al., 2001; Neufeld, 2005; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Pressley, 2002; Reutzel et al., 2005). Teaching multiple strategies is sensible because proficient readers use multiple strategies while reading. Therefore, these three key elements play a pivotal role in comprehension strategy instruction in general.

Young children need a more explicit and structured approach to comprehension instruction (Eilers & Pinkley, 2006; Williams, 2005). Mathes, Howard, Allen, and Fuchs (1998) argue for a decentered classroom, one in which “children take greater responsibility for their own learning while teachers serve as facilitators by arranging the learning environment and curriculum to enhance learning” (p. 66). Thus, in the creation of RTPG, the instructional needs of primary-grade children were taken into consideration as were the aforementioned three key elements of effective comprehension strategy instruction.
RTPG Is Still Reciprocal Teaching

Although RTPG has been created to facilitate implementation by first graders and modified from the original version, the three core principles of the original strategy were preserved: zone of proximal development, proleptic teaching, and expert scaffolding (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

Zone of Proximal Development

RTPG’s three phases of implementation rely on teacher support of students within the zone of what students can accomplish independently and with assistance. In the first phase, each strategy fundamental to RTPG is individually introduced and applied. In the second, or fishbowl, phase, some students engage in RTPG while the teacher participates through the role of facilitator/leader of the group. In the third phase, all students participate in RTPG groups but report their responses to the teacher. In this manner, the teacher continues monitoring and scaffolding the students as they move to independent practice. Once the groups apply the strategies independently, they report to the whole class so that the teacher can monitor their progress and the class can engage in a text-based discussion.

Proleptic Teaching

Proleptic teaching describes how the teacher gradually releases the responsibility of implementing the strategy to the students. This is evident in the phases built into RTPG. During each phase, the teacher releases some of the responsibility for doing the strategies and managing the RTPG routine, thereby gradually removing himself or herself as the sole provider of support as students learn the components of the strategy and support one another.

Expert Scaffolding

RTPG incorporates expert scaffolding. When the strategies are introduced, the teacher is the expert. The students selected to participate during the fishbowl phase become more familiar with RTPG and scaffold their group members during the group-to-teacher phase. Once students are working in independent groups, the cue cards, scripts, and worksheets continue to function as scaffolding to sustain engagement and support strategy use. Therefore, the zone of proximal development, proleptic teaching, and expert scaffolding, the three principles indicated as the essence that contributes to reciprocal teaching’s success, are maintained in RTPG.

Implementation Procedures—Week by Week

RTPG Overview

There were five phases that the students made a transition through to perform RTPG independently: strategy introduction, fishbowl, group to teacher, independent groups, and writing. Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of these five phases. It also shows how scaffolding is embedded through each phase and how that scaffolding is gradually reduced. Although the process took this first-grade class 24 weeks (engaging in RTPG once or twice a week), the timeline suggested in Figure 1 may vary depending on how often RTPG is implemented and how quickly the students pick up the routines.

The RTPG cue cards were introduced first. A picture illustrated each strategy and phrases or sentences were provided to serve as cues to help students enact each strategy. A “leader card” was included in the set of strategy cue cards. This role functioned to coordinate the RTPG within the small groups. Figure 2 shows the leader card and can serve as an example for the other strategy cue cards. When students were beginning readers, the picture cues were more helpful than the written ones; however, as the students became more fluent readers the written cues played a more prominent role. A set of cards was made for each group; in addition, a set was enlarged to display on the chalkboard.

RTPG was used with the reading basal, content area textbooks, and trade books. The basal began with controlled text and moved toward authentic literature by the end of the series. Each text was read twice. The first time, the students read the text with their assigned buddy and without any teacher assistance. When pairing students, it was important that the differences between their reading levels were not too great so that they could help each other. To avoid such situations, the students were ranked according to their reading level. This list was then split in half with the more proficient readers on one list and the less proficient readers on the other. Then the first of
Overview of RTPG’s five phases of instruction

Phase 1: Strategy Introduction
- Introduce individual strategies and add group components
- Prereading strategies
  - 1 Picture walk
  - 1 Making predictions
  - 2 Set purpose
- Postreading strategies
  - 3 Clarify
  - 4 Generating questions
  - 5 Visualizing
  - 6 Summarizing

Timeframe: 1 week per strategy

Phase 2: Fishbowl
- Cue cards introduced
- A fishbowl group is formed
- Other students observe and attend to routine of RTPG

Timeframe: 2 weeks

Phase 3: Group to teacher
- Group students
- Collaborative engagement in RTPG
- Teacher support for strategy implementation

Timeframe: 5–6 weeks

Phase 4: Independent groups
- Group students
- Collaborative engagement in RTPG
- Reduced teacher support

Timeframe: 7–8 weeks

Phase 5: Writing (optional)
- Group students
- Collaborative engagement RTPG
- Reduced teacher support
- Individual accountability through written responses

Timeframe: Indefinitely
Three strategies were added for RTPG: picture walk, set purpose, and visualization. Picture walk was included to help students make predictions. Set purpose and visualization were incorporated because of the research that show their effectiveness in reading comprehension (Pressley, 2000; Tierney & Cunningham, 1984), and because visualization served as a stepping stone to scaffold students while they were learning to summarize.

The strategies were categorized as prereading and postreading. Figure 1 further illustrates which strategies are part of each category and shows the order in which the strategies were introduced. Picture walk and making predictions were the only two strategies introduced simultaneously because children do a picture walk so that they will have enough information to make a prediction. Although visualization is implemented at the end of the RTPG routine, it was introduced before summarization to provide students support while they summarized.

The last couple of weeks of Phase 1 were devoted to reviewing the strategies. Though a certain level of familiarity with the strategies was attained by the students before moving to the next phase, students were not held back because they were not proficient with the strategies; proficiency came in time as students continually used the strategies while reading. Figure 3 illustrates how strategies were introduced and group work was facilitated during weeks 1 and 2. Figure 3 can be used as a model for the subsequent weeks.

It should be noted that during clarifying, students were instructed to find a word that was difficult to read or understand instead of students clarifying an idea they found confusing in the text. Clarification at the word level was appropriate for primary students because they were more likely to encounter difficulties with decoding and vocabulary. The word level focus during the clarification strategy allowed the teacher to coach students while they applied phonics skills during authentic reading situations. As Taylor et al. (2000) noted “it is what teachers do to promote application of phonics knowledge during the reading of connected text that matters most [in phonics instruction]” (p. 157). Summarizing was introduced last because of the difficulty most children encounter while summarizing.

### Phase 1: Strategy Introduction

During the strategy introduction phase, the teacher provided the declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge for each strategy (see Table 1). For each strategy, it was important to develop definitions that were relevant to the students. Students’ internalization of the strategies’ meaning were facilitated through consistent use of the definitions developed. The first time the strategy was introduced, the teacher explained and modeled it and the class then practiced using the strategy through guided practice. The second time, the aspect of group work was added while the students continued practicing the strategy.

Choral reading, when the class reads the text aloud together, was used to read the text the second time. Not only did this help develop fluency, but also this second reading helped students who encountered difficulties reading the text with their buddy or who were not able to finish the text on their own. In this way everyone had at least one complete, fluent reading of the story prior to participating in RTPG.

### Phase 2: Fishbowl

During the fishbowl phase, the teacher selected students who could serve as potential leaders for the proficient readers was paired with the first of the less proficient readers. For example, if there were 10 students in a class, student one (the most proficient reader) would be matched with student six (the highest of the less proficient readers), student two with student seven, and so forth. Student pairings were changed as determined by periodic assessment of reading levels.

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collaborative groups. The students chosen engaged in RTPG as the teacher scaffolded their progress. The fishbowl phase allowed the teacher to guide the students through RTPG while modeling and monitoring the social interactions and walking students through the routine. This phase gave the rest of the class an opportunity to see how students interacted during RTPG. Figure 4 demonstrates the dialogue during the fishbowl phase. Although this phase was an important one in the process, it may not be possible to conduct a fishbowl too often as it is difficult to sustain the rest of the class’s attention.

During the fishbowl phase, the roles and cue cards that corresponded to RTPG were introduced to the students. There were eight cue cards in all, one for each strategy and an additional card for the leader. There were six students in each group. The leader (who had three cards: the leader card, picture walk card, and set purpose card) told each student when to do his or her strategy, told the group to do the picture walk, and set the purpose for reading the text. The remaining five students each received one strategy cue card and used it at the appropriate time in the process. The prediction maker made the prediction, the clarifier clarified difficult words, the questioner asked questions, the summarizer summarized the text, and the visualizer drew a picture of the most important part of the text.

During this phase, the talking stick, a simple popsicle stick, was introduced. Only the student holding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Declarative</th>
<th>Procedural</th>
<th>Conditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picture walk</td>
<td>Look at the title, pictures, heading, graphs, and diagrams in the text.</td>
<td>Turn the pages. Look at the pictures and headings. Think about what the text might be about.</td>
<td>We do this before we read because it helps us make predictions later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>A smart guess about what the text is about.</td>
<td>Think about the pictures. What did you notice? Make a guess.</td>
<td>We do this before reading to get ready to read. It warms up our brains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set purpose</td>
<td>Why we want to read the text. What we are trying to find out.</td>
<td>Think about your picture walk and predictions. What are you wondering about?</td>
<td>We do this before reading. This helps us focus our brains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify</td>
<td>Look for words that are hard to read or that we don’t understand.</td>
<td>When we were reading, which word was hard to read? For which word did we ask for help? Which word didn’t understand?</td>
<td>We do this after reading, so that the next time we see this word we will be able to read and understand it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td>Ask questions about things that happened in the text. Ask questions about parts of the text a kindergartner might find tricky.</td>
<td>Ask questions using the words what, when, where, why, who, and how.</td>
<td>We do this after reading because it helps us understand the text better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualize</td>
<td>Draw a picture of the most important part of the text.</td>
<td>Think of the most important part of the text. Draw a picture that shows this part.</td>
<td>We do this after reading to remember and understand the text better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize</td>
<td>Telling what the text is about in a shorter way.</td>
<td>If the text is fiction, tell what happened at the beginning, middle, and end of the story, or the problem/solution. If it’s nonfiction, tell the topic of the text and the most important information.</td>
<td>We do this after reading because it helps us remember the text better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase 4: Independent Groups

Once students became more proficient with the strategies and their discussions became more focused on the text and flowed more naturally, they were ready to work more independently. In the independent
Phase 5: Independent Groups and Writing

Once students were proficient in their independent groups, the writing component was added. The writing phase took place once students were finished with RTPG, after sharing their strategy with the class, or while still in their groups before sharing with the class. A worksheet was provided for each student with the list of the strategies and space to write down his or her own responses. The writing component allowed for assessment because the teacher had evidence from which to measure students’ progress with each strategy. The writing component was also useful for individual student accountability.
Student Outcomes

There were two types of outcomes observed during and after the implementation of RTPG: outcomes that were easily measured and those that were intangible. Preliminary results indicated that students learned the strategies, they were able to apply them to new content and texts, they learned the sequence of RTPG, and declarative, conditional, and procedural knowledge of RTPG was retained six months later when students were in second grade. However, it is beyond the scope of this “how-to” article to detail all of the academic growth experienced by the first graders.

As to the intangible outcomes, it was clear to the researchers and the classroom teachers that students were engaged, motivated, and looked forward to RTPG. Students were observed actively participating in higher order thinking as they discussed the material read. Over time students were able to independently navigate the RTPG routines with minimal conflict and disagreements.

Benefits of RTPG

All the components research has deemed essential to the success and effectiveness of reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) have been retained in RTPG. Implementing RTPG in first grade allowed for a student-centered reading program that focused on the three key elements of comprehension strategy instruction. Students were engaged in the application of strategies during authentic reading experiences while being scaffolded by their teacher and their peers. Through the use of the phases and cue cards, RTPG became routine and students were able to devote more attention to discussing and comprehending the text read. With the support provided within RTPG, first graders were able to learn, coordinate, and apply comprehension strategies and work in collaborative groups; primary students can do it, too!

References


Pilonieta teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA; e-mail pilonieta@uncc.edu. Medina also teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; e-mail amedina1@uncc.edu.