



TEACHING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES, PART II: CONDUCTING A THINK ALOUD

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Teaching Comprehension Strategies, Part II: Conducting a Think Aloud



ELI has put together two practitioner briefs on teaching comprehension strategies. Part I provides an introduction and overview¹. The present brief is Part II of the series. It discusses how to conduct Think Alouds, in particular, after a quick recap of the importance of teaching comprehension strategies to children.

Think back to your school days: did your teachers show you *how* to make sense of what you read? For most people, the answer would be “no”.

After reading a text, your teachers might have *asked* you what it meant and told you whether your response was right or wrong. They might have tagged students who didn’t understand what they read as “poor readers” and asked them to “read again” or “pay more attention”. Or they might have simply *explained* the meaning of the text without showing you how they arrived at that understanding.

Things have not changed very much since you were in school — similar practices seem to be prevalent in most Indian classrooms even today (Menon et al., 2017, Sah, 2009, as cited in Sinha, 2018). While teachers use these approaches with good intent, these don’t improve students’ comprehension skills much. At best, students might understand the specific text discussed. But without teaching the “how-to” of comprehension, these practices don’t help

¹ Access **Part I** of this series, *Teaching Comprehension Strategies, Part I: Introduction and Overview* at <http://eli.tiss.edu/handouts-publications/>.

Illustration at the top by James Yang in American Educator’s Spring 2012 issue. Retrieved from: <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Rosenshine.pdf>

students make sense of *new* texts. Worse still, students might become passive and entirely dependent on the teacher for comprehension (Sinha, 2018).

What does this “how-to” involve? Research conducted in the United States has demonstrated that people who comprehend texts well (“good readers”) use several *strategies* to actively construct meaning as they read (Pressley, 2001). For example, they set goals for reading a text, preview the text before reading it, make predictions about the upcoming text, associate new information in the text to what they already know, and so on. On the other hand, younger or less-skilled readers don’t use these strategies, or they don’t use them consistently. Hence, they are unable to understand texts well.

Luckily, research has also demonstrated that comprehension strategies can be taught. In such instruction, teachers don’t explain the text at all to the students; they show them ways to make sense of the text for themselves. This is far more effective in the long run than explaining texts. Even children who are not naturally good at meaning making can learn how to read with comprehension, as long as we show them how.

As **Part I** of this series explained, we strongly recommend that you use the *Gradual Release of Responsibility* (GRR) model for teaching comprehension (see Figure 1). Start by clearly explaining *and* modelling how to use a particular comprehension strategy. Then, guide your students in a variety of ways and on multiple occasions on how to use that strategy (“collaborative” and “guided” practice). Only then can you expect them to use the learnt



Figure 1. The Gradual Release of Responsibility model for teaching comprehension (Adapted from: www.literacycompanion.weebly.com)

strategy on their own, independently. This model is a way to support students, where the instructor gradually releases the responsibility of using the strategies to the students.

In this brief, we will elaborate the first step of the GRR model. We will take you through the process of modelling comprehension strategies in a way that makes your meaning making process clear to your students.

An important point before we proceed. Many teachers believe that children should be asked to focus on meaning making *only after* they have learned to read *aksharas* and words!

However, children are natural meaning-makers and are constantly trying to make sense of the stories and books you read out to them, from the very first day. Hence, it is important to focus on comprehension right from the early grades, in a way that is suited to your students' level.

Using Think-alouds for Modelling Strategies

In Figure 1, the comprehension instruction starts with the teacher modelling and explaining the strategy to students. But, comprehension or meaning-making is something that happens inside our heads! How can a teacher explain her thinking to her students? We give you *think-aloud*, a method by which the teacher tries to make her thinking “visible” to students by saying her thoughts out aloud. Say you are teaching your students how good readers make inferences while reading. Stop at relevant points in the book and share your thinking about how you are identifying clues in the text or illustrations and putting them together to understand ideas that the author only implies, but does not mention directly. *Show* the students *how you think* (see Figure 2). That’s the crux of a think-aloud. This kind of modelling helps students by making your invisible thinking process accessible. Not only does this help them understand the current text better, but more importantly, it enables them to use this strategy to comprehend *other* texts. Let’s see how you can go about doing this.

Planning a Think-aloud

First, pick a specific comprehension strategy that you would like to focus on – like making inferences, summarizing, or predicting².

² Refer to **Part I** of this series, mentioned earlier, for descriptions and examples of key comprehension strategies.

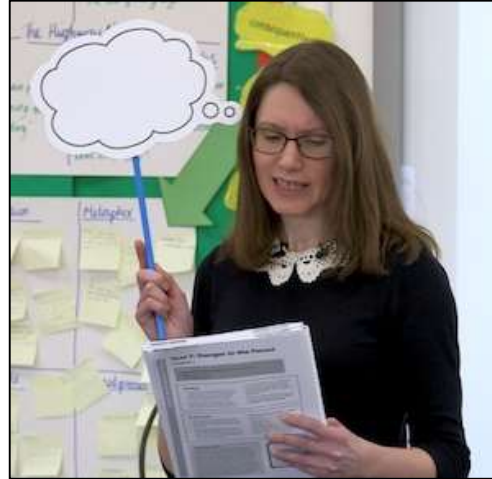


Figure 2. A think-aloud session in progress. (Source: <https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk>)

Second, carefully select a text that gives many chances for you to think-aloud the chosen strategy. Plan the places where you will model it. Obviously, good readers don't use only one strategy at a time while reading; they may predict, summarize, infer, and connect with their own lives while reading. But, it is difficult to show young children how to do everything all at once. Therefore, in the beginning stages of learning, it may be better to focus on modelling one strategy at a time in your think-alouds. This slows down the process for young readers, and helps them to engage with, understand, and practice one strategy at a time. As they become more comfortable and familiar with strategies, do encourage and support them in using multiple strategies simultaneously!

Third, follow these steps to teach comprehension strategies to your students (Wilhelm, 2001).

1. Explain **what** a strategy involves.
2. Explain **why** the strategy is important.
3. Tell students **when** to use the strategy in actual reading, that is, what features of the text may tip off the reader that a particular strategy could be used.
4. **Model how to perform the strategy** using a real text while students observe.

Fourth, while you will have the text you are going to read out to the students, try to make its copies available to your students for them to follow along. When this is not possible (say, you don't have many copies of a book, or students cannot yet read fluently), students may get confused about when you are *reading from the text* and when you are *thinking aloud*. In this

situation, use a prop or a gesture to indicate the difference clearly (Beers, 2003). For example, put on “thinking hat” each time you think aloud, so students know that they are listening to you think. Or, it may be easier for you to simply look up at the ceiling, and think aloud, so they know that you are not reading from the text at that time.

Example of a Think-aloud

In this section, we show you a think-aloud using the book *Catch that Cat!*³ (see Figure 3). Here, the objective is to teach Grade 3 students *how to draw and use inferences* to make sense of what they read.

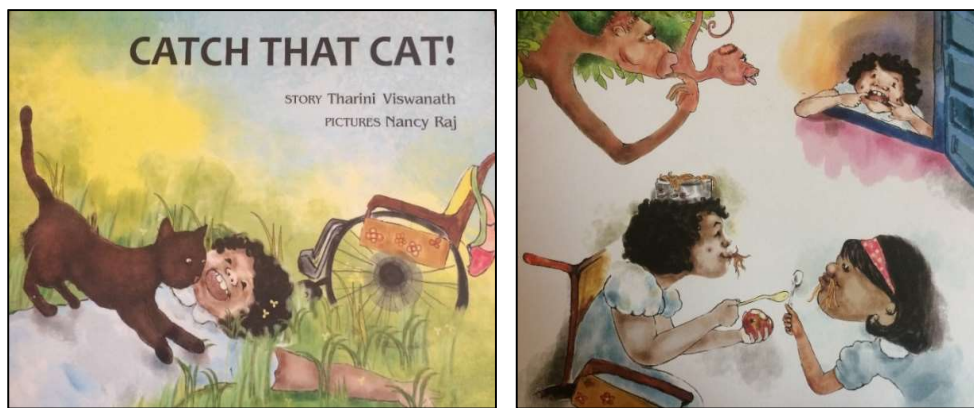


Figure 3. Cover page and an illustration from the book *Catch that Cat!*

What is inferencing? In simple terms, it is the ability to go beyond what the text says in order to make meaning of what is happening. For this, good readers connect what they already know about the world with what is happening in the text, to come to some conclusions. For example, a text may say, “The cats invited the rats to a party”. Good readers will know that cats and rats are not friends in the real world – they would immediately be suspicious of this invitation. We feel that inferencing can be introduced in its simplest form to even young students.

³ Tulika, 2013. Written by Tharini Viswanath and illustrated by Nancy Raj.

In the next few pages, see how we introduce the strategy first and then apply it to understand the book, *Catch that Cat!* As we're using a picture book, we alert students to the "clues" in both the text as well as the illustrations to understand the characters, actions and events in the story better.

Introducing the Session

*Today, I'm going to read aloud a story for you. It is called **Catch that Cat!** As I read, I'll stop in some places and tell you what I'm thinking. This way, you can see how I'm trying to make sense of the story. Listen to how I connect what the words and pictures say with what I already know to understand the story better. This is called "making an inference" OK?*

*Sometimes, authors do not give us **all** the details in a story. But we can guess some of these by paying attention to the "clues" they leave for us in the words and pictures. This is inferencing, where try to make sense of the unsaid things in the story to understand it better.*

*Making inferences is helpful when you don't completely understand what is going on in the story, that is, when you feel confused. Maybe you wonder, what is this character feeling or thinking? Why is she acting the way she is? What kind of a person is she? How are the characters related to each other? and the like. Whenever you are wondering what's **really** happening in the story, stop, reread and try to 'infer' what may be going on. You will see how I do that today. Okay, shall we start?*

Teacher explains what will be done in the session

Teacher introduces the strategy in a child-friendly way

Teacher explains why and when to use the strategy

Selected Text from the Book	Think-Aloud by Teacher	Comments for the Reader
<p>Dip Dip was the naughtiest child in school... She whizzed through the corridors. She played with the monkeys through the window. She started most of the food fights at break time.</p>	<p><i>Hmm...the words tell me that Dip Dip is a naughty and fun-loving girl. But wait! In these pictures (see Figure 3), she is on a wheelchair. There was a wheelchair on the cover page too. So, even though she cannot walk, she goes to school and has a lot of fun. In many stories and movies I know, children like Dip Dip seem so sad and they don't go to school, but Dip Dip seems like any one of us. Look at her playing with the noodles! I like her already!</i></p>	<p>The author doesn't say that Dip Dip has a physical disability. It is something readers infer from the illustrations. Catching this detail is important to appreciate her character and personality (and the story!).</p>
<p>“Don't worry, Meemo.” Dip Dip said. “You go to the school. I will look for Kaapi [the cat].”</p>	<p><i>The author did say that Dip Dip is very helpful but missing school to look for a friend's cat? Wow, I'd do that only for my best friend. I think the author is giving us a hint here that Meemo and Dip Dip are very close friends.</i></p> <p><i>Dip Dip seems like a confident girl because she says she will look for the cat all by herself! I wonder how she is going to do that.</i></p>	<p>This is an inference about the relationship between characters. Here, teacher makes a text-to-self connection to make this inference.</p> <p>Teacher also draws attention to the several clues in the story about Dip Dip's personality and character.</p>
<p>...He [Dip Dip's brother] left her there to wait for her school bus, and went off to his own school. As soon as he left, Dip Dip raced off...</p>	<p><i>She waited till her brother left. This tells me that she doesn't want her brother to know that she is missing school. Perhaps she thinks that he wouldn't let her miss school or allow her to look for the cat on her own. This is also a clue that neither her brother nor other family members know where she is! So brave of her to just venture out like this on her own.</i></p>	<p>This is an inference about the plot/situation – adds to the adventure in the story.</p>

<p>Down the hill she rolled, behind the cat. Thank goodness, she had wheels, she thought. It was so much faster than running. She could always beat her friends in a race quite easily!</p>	<p><i>I like the way Dip Dip is so positive about her situation! She is happy that she gets to move around faster than others because of her wheelchair.</i></p>	<p>Here, the teacher has made a character inference.</p>
<p>...She opened her lunch box and saw... “Fish curry! This will bring Kaapi down...”</p>	<p><i>Why should Kaapi come down for fish curry? Oh, I get it! Because cats like fish in general, Dip Dip thinks that Kaapi might too. Such a smart way to get the cat to come down from the tree.</i></p>	<p>The story does not mention that Kaapi likes fish. This requires the reader to bring their knowledge about cats to understand Dip Dip’s reasoning.</p>
<p>“Fine!” said Dip Dip. “I’m coming. Don’t move!” With her tongue sticking out, and a frown on her face, Dip Dip wheeled herself close to the tree...</p>	<p><i>Earlier on in the story, the author mentions that Dip Dip sticks her tongue out whenever she thinks very hard. So here she must be thinking hard about the best way to climb up the tree, to reach Kaapi.</i></p>	<p>This inference involved applying previous information in the story to the current scenario.</p>
<p>That’s when Dip Dip heard voices below. “There she is, on that tree!”... Her father brought her down. Everyone scolded and smiled and hugged her.</p>	<p><i>Earlier, I’d inferred that no one in her family knew where she was, remember? They must have got worried and started looking for her when she did not return. This must be why Dip Dip’s family scolds her even though they are happy to see her safe. When I was younger and got lost in the flower market, my parents did the same thing.</i></p>	<p>Here, the teacher used an earlier inference and a text-to-self connection to understand the family’s reaction.</p>

Concluding the Session

Okay, did you see how I stopped and made inferences to make sense of the story? I used clues like words, sentences and images in the book and connected them to what I already knew to understand things that the author did not mention directly. Like, Dip Dip used a wheelchair to move around or that she and Meemo were good friends. Do you think doing this helped you notice things that you didn't catch yourself? Did that help you understand the story better?

I also feel that I understand Dip Dip better now. From what she says and does in the story, I inferred that she is very smart, brave and independent. She is also very positive and such a good friend! Understanding Dip Dip this way helps me see what the author was perhaps trying to tell us – that children with disabilities are just like other children – they want to be on their own, explore, help others and have lots of fun!

Let's try to make inferences this way in the storybook we read together in the next class, okay?

Teacher summarises what she has done, invites comments from the students and encourages them to try applying the strategy.

Practice After Think-alouds

Remember the GRR model? Thinking-aloud a comprehension strategy is an important first step, but it alone won't work! Give your students opportunities for collaborative and guided practice where they can *use* this strategy. Some examples include:

- Invite students to work with you on applying the strategy as you read a book together.
- Encourage older students, who can read and write on their own, to leave their questions, inferences, predictions in the book/text using post-its or record them in their notebooks.
- Use specific formats/organisers to encourage strategy use. See Figure 4 for the *It Says - I Say* chart for inferencing (Beers, 2003).

Allow students to do what they are capable of on their own, intervening and supporting only as needed. Continue modelling as students' needs indicate that they need more support with a strategy or when the type or level of the text changes. Finally, encourage students to use the strategy independently as they pursue their own reading.

Question	It Says...	I Say...	And So...
Step 1... Write the question (created or provided)	Step 2... Find information from the text that will help answer the question	Step 3... Think about what you know about that information.	Step 4... Combine what the text says with what you know to come up with the answer.
<i>Example:</i> <i>Why did Goldilocks break Baby Bear's chair?</i>	<i>It says she sits in the baby chair but she is not a baby. She is a young girl.</i>	<i>Baby chairs aren't very big. They're for babies but she is bigger, so she weighs more.</i>	<i>So she is too heavy for it and it breaks.</i>

Figure 4. It Says - I Say chart with an example (Beers, 2003, pp. 166-167)

Learning strategies takes a long time! It is important that you start early and give your students many, many opportunities throughout the elementary school years to learn new strategies, and apply and refine the previously learnt ones.

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