

● Engaging and supporting ● all our students to read ● and learn from reading

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● Classroom teaching is a highly complex activity. In planning and teaching lesson after lesson, teachers are expected to simultaneously cover the demands of the curriculum, improve their students' learning outcomes, by providing sufficient support and extension for all students, and manage the needs and behaviours of a roomful of individual children.

● PETAA Paper 202 outlines a set of strategies that are designed to help teachers meet all these demands successfully, by teaching through reading and writing. The strategies are based on decades of practical research in classrooms and teacher professional learning programs, and are currently being used by thousands of teachers in Australia (Courier Mail, 2014; Culican, 2006; Rose, 2011a, 2013, 2015) and internationally (Aga Khan Foundation, 2015; Coffin, Acevedo & Löfstedt, 2013).

There are two main dimensions to these strategies. One is a technique for interacting with a class that enables teachers to engage and support all students, to succeed with learning tasks that challenge the top students. The other is a technique that supports all students to read, and to learn from reading,

texts at the top level for their grade and subject area. The strategies combine these techniques to accelerate the learning of all students, while closing the achievement gap in each classroom.

Engaging and supporting all students

The strategies are based on a model of learning that refines the popular notion of ‘scaffolding’. The idea of scaffolding is that a teacher provides support for a learner to ‘build’ skills, and then removes the support as skills develop, and the learner becomes independent. Our research question was how this support actually happens as teaching and learning unfold over time, not only with individual learners, but with whole classes of students at the same time.

Learning tasks

Part of the answer can be found in the changing roles of teachers and learners as a learning activity unfolds. Learning activities are organised as cycles, in which roles alternate between teachers and learners. The central step in each cycle is a **learning task**. All learning happens through tasks of some kind. Only the learner can do this task, a teacher cannot do the learning for them. These basic principles underlie most teaching practices and theories about learning, whether they are made explicit or not. There is no difference on these points between so-called ‘teacher-centred’ and ‘learner-centred’ theories. The disagreement is about where the knowledge comes from. Learner-centred theories believe that knowledge comes from inside the learner, while teacher-centred theories believe the knowledge comes from outside. The concept of scaffolding is that knowledge is actually created through interactions between a teacher and learner.

Preparing for learning tasks

By definition, a learning task is one that the learner has not done before, at least not successfully. Learning happens when a task is done successfully, and learners are more likely to succeed with a task if they are supported by a teacher. As teachers cannot do the learning task, we must give the support first, and then **hand control to the learners to do the task themselves**. So scaffolding actually happens in sequences, in which the first step is a teacher **preparing** for the learning task. This now gives us two roles in teacher-learner interactions. The learning task is the role of learners; preparing for the task is the role of teachers.

Often in school, preparing and learning tasks are not distinguished. For example, new knowledge may be presented by the teacher demonstrating and explaining. The learners’ task is to watch and listen, which some students can do better than others. Conversely, learners may be expected to ‘discover’ knowledge for themselves without teachers preparing. The alternative is to carefully analyse each learning task, and design our preparations to ensure that all learners can do each task successfully, **at the same level**.

Evaluating success

Following each learning task, learners are almost always evaluated on their success. Evaluations in school continually rank students as more or less successful, and are central to the organisation of the school. A major task of teachers and schools is to continually record and report on students’ evaluations. These include not only formal tests but the continual feedback and directions we give students in all classroom activities and interactions.

Differences in evaluations are often conceived as differences in ‘learning ability’. More able students are expected to be more successful than less able students. Again there is no difference on this point between teacher-centred and learner-centred theories. In both practices, more successful students may be given higher level tasks, and less successful students may be given lower level tasks. The currently fashionable word for this is ‘differentiation’, but this has always been the practice of schools. The result of giving different learning tasks in primary school is that students finish primary education with different abilities to cope with the secondary school curriculum. The result of streaming students into different classes in the secondary school is that they finish school with different

opportunities for work and further education. As differences in evaluations are conceived as ‘ability levels’, they are assumed to be somehow innate to the child. These beliefs justify the school’s inequality of outcomes.

Evaluation also has a powerful effect on learners’ feelings and identities. Positive evaluations make learners feel good, while negative evaluations have the opposite effect on learners. Because they feel good, positive evaluations increase learners’ capacity and motivation for further learning, while negative evaluations decrease learning capacity and motivation. If learners are continually successful and affirmed, their learning builds steadily, but if they are unsuccessful and less affirmed, their capacity and motivation is limited, and the gap is maintained. Over time, continual positive evaluations build identities as successful learners, while negative evaluations build identities as failing learners. This is one reason why learning tasks are differentiated, so that weaker students can be successful at their own levels, though this does not help their outcomes in primary and secondary school.

Elaborating learning

Because success with a learning task increases capacity and motivation, the next step in a learning sequence is often a

higher level of understanding. We will call this step **elaborating**. Elaborations contain the goal of each learning activity. They may involve teachers giving new knowledge, or a discussion of learners’ knowledge, or practice applying new knowledge. So elaborations may include roles for teachers or learners or both. If learners have been successful with the learning task, they will be ready for the elaboration, and gain maximum benefit. If they have been less successful they will gain less benefit.

The three steps in a learning activity, of preparing, learning task, and elaborating constitute a repeated sequence that we will call a **learning cycle** (Martin, 2006; Rose & Martin, 2012; Rose; 2016a). This model of learning re-interprets ‘scaffolding’ as a sequence shown in Figure 1. We can use this model to analyse and plan learning activities so that every student is continually successful.

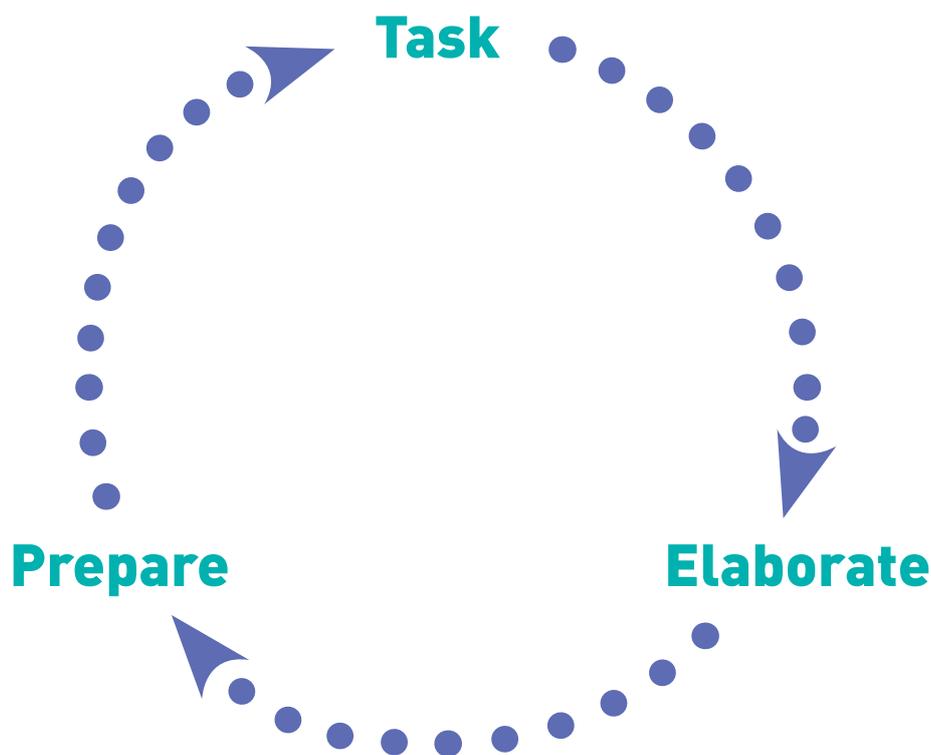


FIGURE 1 • Learning cycles

Classroom interactions

When we understand learning in terms of tasks, it is easier to analyse what we do as teachers. For example, in school we try to avoid teaching by lecturing, because the tasks of listening, understanding and remembering a long lecture are beyond the capacities of most school students. Instead we break up the task of learning by interacting with our classes. Ask yourself the following questions about your own practice:

- How do you interact with your students in teaching activities?
- What is the students' task when you ask a question?
- What is the very first thing you do when you get the answer you want?
- Do you just stop with affirming the answer, or do you use students' responses to elaborate with more information?
- What do you do when you get an answer you don't want, or no answer?

Teachers all over the world interact with their classes by asking questions. We do not ask questions randomly, but continually plan our questions to get responses from students that we can elaborate with new knowledge. The elaboration contains our teaching goal, the kernel of knowledge we want the whole class to understand. We use students' responses as stepping stones towards new knowledge. If we don't get the response we need, we often take a step back and rephrase our questions to get the needed response.

▶ Is this not an extraordinarily complex skill? To be continually thinking how to phrase and re-phrase our questions, to get the answers we need to elaborate with new knowledge, moment-by-moment, in every lesson, every day. Where did you learn to do this?

Unequal participation, unequal learning

Although it is an extraordinarily complex skill, there is one common problem with teacher/class interactions. How many students in your classes consistently respond with the answers you need? When we ask this question in professional learning programs the world over, most teachers say 2-3 students, sometimes 4-5. These students have understood our questions, and are able to infer the answers we want. They get our affirmations, and are well prepared for our elaborations. These few students get the maximum benefit from the conversation we have with our classes. So what's happening with the other students? We all hope that some are benefitting passively by listening to the exchange, but we know that others are not engaged enough and get little benefit. As teacher educator Graham Nuthall explains:

...teachers are very largely cut off from information about what individual students are learning. Because of the numbers of students that teachers have to manage simultaneously, and because of the individuality of student learning, teachers must rely on routines and rituals that we believe are good for students... Typically, a few students contribute the majority of the ideas, a few more students contribute one or two ideas, and most students are silent.

This hierarchy of engagement in classroom learning is a fundamental problem of school education that is not adequately addressed in either teacher training or education theory. In contrast, can you imagine being able to prepare your classroom interactions, so that every student could always give the response you wanted, get affirmed, and be ready for the elaboration? Imagine the boost this would give to learning for all students and how much easier it would make classroom management. Instead of directing or admonishing inattentive and disruptive students you could ask them a question, get an appropriate answer and affirm them. In this way you could manage classroom behaviour by giving students continual

success and affirmation. How pleasurable teaching and learning could be in such a utopian classroom.

Of course, such a utopia is not possible if every student cannot give the answers we need for our questions. This is only possible if we ask them for what they already know. We can do this if the topic is within all of our students' experience, but then we have to somehow extend their knowledge. In practice, most of the questions that we ask our classes are interpretive, asking for knowledge or ideas that only a few students can offer with confidence, and that we can elaborate towards our teaching goals. We want our students to think, to do the mental work to extend their understanding, so the questions we ask demand interpretive thinking. The unfortunate side effect is that very few students feel confident to keep responding, so the classroom conversation excludes many others. Teachers cannot be blamed for this situation. With variations, the practice is the same the world over, and nowhere are teachers specifically trained in how to conduct the intricately complex conversations we have with our classes. Rather we learn how to do it from experience, and get better with experience, but rarely overcome the problem of unequal engagement.

Using success and affirmation to teach reading

However, the problem can be solved if every student has access to the same information to respond to our questions. This does not mean that classroom discussion must be limited to low-level information. Learning cycles, as discussed earlier, consist of three steps: the preparation, that enables every student to give an appropriate answer, the task of identifying the appropriate answer, and the elaboration, that extends students' knowledge. It is the elaboration that contains the interpretive or 'higher-order' level of understanding, so our initial questions do not actually need to be interpretive.

So how can every student have access to the same information to respond to our questions? This is possible if the information comes from a text that everyone can read. If the task is simply to identify words in a text, and if we can effectively guide students to identify them, then we can ask any student and affirm them. If the preparation enables all students to identify the wording, then all will be successful and prepared for the elaboration, even though only one says it aloud and gets affirmed. The elaboration follows naturally because wordings in a text almost always have more than one level of meaning. Our preparation can be focused on the literal meaning of the

words, so that identifying them is easy, but our elaboration can connect them to the higher understanding that is our teaching goal.

A further problem is that our students have different levels of reading abilities. How can we achieve our teaching goals and extend more successful students, if we can only use texts that weaker students can read? Well, the kind of interaction I have just outlined can be used to enable all our students to read texts that challenge the top students. But to understand how, we need to look at the nature of the reading task and how it can be effectively taught.

Four levels of reading tasks

Reading is a very complex task that involves recognising and using patterns of language at three levels – the text, the sentence, and the word. A written text consists of patterns of sentences, which consist of patterns of words, expressed as patterns of letters. Within each of these levels of language are more complex patterns, for example:

- A text is not just a string of sentences. It includes phases of meaning, such as episodes in stories, or blocks of information in factual texts, that are expressed as paragraphs in writing.
- A sentence is not just a string of words. It is made up of word groups that present chunks of meaning. For example, the sentence *A frog was swimming in a pond after a rainstorm*, contains four word groups: who or what it's about (*A frog*), what it was doing (*was swimming*), where (*in a pond*), and when (*after a rainstorm*).

- A word is not just a string of letters. It consists of one or more syllables (*swimm-ing, rain-storm*), and each syllable consists of letter patterns (*sw-imm, st-orm*), that make up the English spelling system.

Patterns within written words are called ‘spelling’, patterns within the sentence we call ‘grammar’, and patterns within the text are known as ‘discourse’. We do not process these patterns one at a time, rather all these patterns must be recognised and interpreted simultaneously to read with fluency and comprehension.

We can use this model to interpret the task of reading at four levels (Figure 2).

Firstly, there is **decoding** – recognising the patterns of letters in each word; secondly, **literal comprehension** – recognising the patterns of meanings of words in a sentence; thirdly, **inferential comprehension** – inferring connections between meanings across a text, sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. Fourthly, **interpretive comprehension** means interpreting connections between meanings in the text and its context - its social purpose, subject matter, and relations between people.

Often learners can decode the words in a text, but cannot recognise enough of their meanings to comprehend the text. This requires both knowledge of word meanings, and the reading skill to infer their meanings from other parts of the text. Or they can read the words literally, but cannot infer many of the connections, and so cannot follow what it is about. This often occurs with texts that are more highly written, that use written language patterns which are unfamiliar to less experienced readers. But even if they are experienced readers,

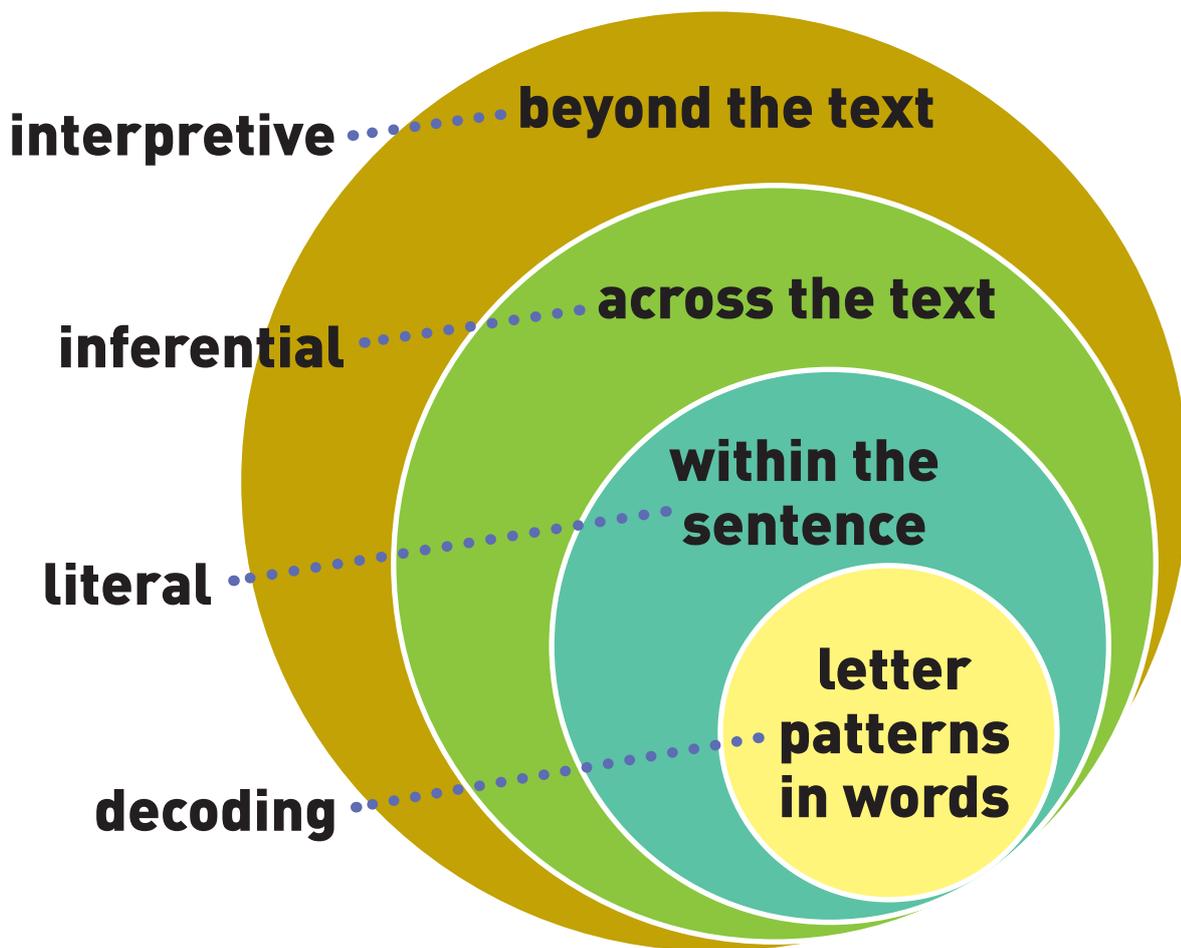


FIGURE 2 • Levels of comprehension and levels of language in context

if they are unfamiliar with the subject matter, they may struggle to interpret its meanings. Teaching reading must thus address all of these levels.

Teaching beginning reading and writing

So-called ‘balanced approaches’ to teaching reading attempt to address the complexity of the reading task by teaching its different components with different activities. Activities such as alphabet and phonics activities for recognising letters and sounds, spelling activities for letter patterns in words, sight word drills for memorising common words, practice with levelled reading books for recognising words in sentences. The problem with these standard practices in the early years of school is that they dis-integrate the reading task into separate activities, in separate program times, using different words, texts, letters and sounds, often in individualised activities. Children from highly educated families, who may spend 1000 hours in parent-child reading before they start school (Williams, 1995), can recognise the functions of all these activities, and rapidly become independent readers. But for children without this experience, many of these activities are meaningless. They cannot re-integrate them and so develop their reading skills more slowly, often very slowly indeed.

It is widely assumed that weak readers suffer from a deficit of decoding skills. This view is based on a misunderstanding of the complexity of the reading task, and the social nature of learning cycles. As a result, struggling readers are routinely prescribed endless drills with phonics and other programs, and continual testing with levelled reading books. These programs make a lot of money for their publishers, but they are the exact opposite of what these students actually need.

In fact, the most effective activity that early years teachers do is **shared book reading** (Holdaway, 1982), which may not be seen as a ‘literacy activity’ at all. In shared book reading, teachers talk through a picture storybook with their class, and tell them what it is about, in terms that all children can understand, before and while they are reading it aloud to them. What they are doing is preparing children for the task of following the story with understanding as it is read. Each story may be read many times, until all the children can understand and say many of its words along with the teacher, who often elaborates by asking children about the story.

▶ In the best shared reading practice, these questions are always about what the children already know, or can see in the pictures, so that their answers are always affirmed. This activity is so valuable because it is precisely what happens in parent-child reading, which functions to engage children in the pleasure of reading, and prepares them to become readers (Williams, 1995).

This engagement, understanding and pleasure from shared book reading is a natural starting point to teach reading (Gray 1987). Instead of de-contextualised memory drills in alphabet, phonics and sight words, the logical step is to take sentences from the shared book that children already know, and use them to start reading. Instead of memorising meaningless ‘sight words’, children can easily develop on-for-one word recognition if we guide them to recognise the written words they can already say in a sentence, that we have written on a cardboard strip. We can prepare by pointing at each word and saying them, as they say along with us. Using this simple method, all children are very quickly able to accurately point and say each word in the sentence, because they are supported by the sequence of words they know, and what they look like. They do not need to ‘decode’ their spelling first. The next step is then to cut the sentence up into word groups, put them back into sequence and say it again. We can prepare by asking children who the sentence is about, what they are doing, where and when. Their tasks are then to identify and cut each word group, and put them back in sequence. This activity, known as **sentence making**, can then be repeated by cutting word groups into individual words, putting them back and saying them again. These

activities give children total control over recognising and understanding the words and meanings in a written sentence (see Figure 3).

At this point, we can guide students to cut words into their letter patterns, and practise spelling them. We can prepare by showing and asking them to say the syllables in words, and the letter patterns that start and finish each syllable. Their tasks are then to cut up the letter patterns, and practise writing them, ideally on small whiteboards that can be erased and rewritten (Figure 4). We can prepare by showing them how to form each letter, until they can form them accurately. Once they can spell the main words in a sentence, we can guide them to write the whole sentence. We can prepare by writing the other words and asking them to write the ones they know. We can elaborate by repeating the

activity until they can write the whole sentence accurately themselves.

This sequence of activities can rapidly teach all children to read and write sentences they know from shared reading books (Rose, 2011b; Rose, Gray & Cowey, 1999). It is so effective because firstly it deals with each level of the reading task in a ‘top-down’ sequence, and secondly it is carefully taught in learning cycles that prepare children for each task.

The teaching sequence starts at the level of context, with preparing children to follow the shared reading book with understanding, in other words with ‘interpretive comprehension’. As the book is read, the teacher explains connections between each event (using the pictures), giving the children ‘inferential comprehension’. As each page is read, meanings are explained as children learn to say the words, giving them ‘literal comprehension’. Decoding activities then start, not with letters and sounds, but with whole meaningful sentences, then the chunks of meaning that make up each sentence, then each word, then the letter patterns that spell each word. Writing then builds back up, from known letters, to words, to sentences. Each step in the sequence makes perfect



FIGURE 3 • Sentence making



FIGURE 4 • Scaffolding spelling

sense in the context of the preceding steps, so that all children can easily focus on each learning task in turn.

Each of these activities begins with whole-class teacher-directed tasks. We prepare, and all children listen and discuss the story. We prepare, and each child points, says, cuts up and arranges the words in the sentence, either in turn at the front of the class, or in groups with their own sentence strips, following our directions. In each cycle, the task is prepared and **control is handed to the children to do the task**. In the spelling and writing activities, we prepare by showing, and then hand control to children to practise on their own boards. If we have prepared effectively, each child will be able to do the task, and we can praise them. If not, we still praise and prepare again until they are successful. Children are never tested, but are repeatedly prepared and praised until they can do each task successfully.

Embedding reading in curriculum learning

While these are very effective activities for beginning reading and writing, the same principles apply to embedding reading

in curriculum learning, at all levels of school. The central principles are teaching in ‘top-down’ sequences, starting with whole texts, and carefully planning learning cycles to prepare all students to succeed. We do not need to be constrained by differences in our students’ reading skills, if we can support all of them to read curriculum texts with understanding. We can cover our curriculum content through reading together, at the same time as giving our students the skills they need to become independent learners. And we can extend all our students by designing our learning cycles, to continually elaborate with higher-level understandings.

To start thinking about how to embed skills teaching in curriculum learning, it is useful to recognise two kinds of reading tasks, and four kinds of writing tasks in the school. Each of these tasks

TABLE 1 ● PURPOSES OF READING AND WRITING TASKS IN SCHOOL

Tasks	Purposes
reading factual texts	learning curriculum knowledge
reading stories	engaging in literature and interpreting themes
writing factual texts	demonstrating curriculum knowledge
writing stories	engaging readers and presenting messages
writing arguments	evaluating issues and points of view
writing text responses	evaluating verbal, visual or musical texts

has different purposes and requires different sets of activities. Their purposes are briefly summarised in Table 1.

Each reading task must start with preparing before reading, as in shared book reading in the early years. We can call this an **overview of the text**. The overview must give students a step-by-step summary of what to expect as the text is read, in terms that all can understand. The effect is that all students can follow the text as it is read with general understanding, without struggling and losing attention. If it is read aloud, they will not struggle to decode unfamiliar words, but can follow the spoken words. This **preparation before reading** thus reduces the difficulty of the task, but enables us to work with texts that may be well beyond students' independent reading levels. If it is a story, the whole text or novel chapter may be read, and elaborated with a discussion about its themes and interesting details, that all students will be able to participate in. If it is a factual text with a lot of information, it may be read **paragraph-by-paragraph**. The task of understanding each paragraph can be prepared with a brief **preview** of what it's about, and elaborated by identifying and discussing its **key information**.

Instead of avoiding difficult texts because students cannot read them independently, if we teach our curriculum content by preparing and reading together in every lesson, all our students will soon develop the reading skills they need for independent learning. This skills development can be accelerated with the powerful strategy of **detailed reading**, in which we select short passages from reading texts, and guide our students to read them **sentence-by-sentence**. Detailed reading enables all students to read any passage of text with complete comprehension and fluency. It uses carefully planned learning cycles in which we first **prepare and read a sentence**, then prepare our students to **identify each group of words**, by giving them a meaning cue, such who or what it's about, or paraphrases of unfamiliar words. Students are asked in turn to identify the words, so that each student can be praised for successful answers. The preparation ensures that each answer is **always successful**. All students then highlight the identified words, whose meaning is then **elaborated**, by defining new words, explaining meanings, and discussing students' knowledge.

As with the sentence making activity outlined earlier, detailed reading can lead directly to writing. Detailed reading of story texts focuses on the *literary language patterns* that authors use to engage readers. These patterns are then directly borrowed in joint rewriting, in which we guide students to write new stories with the same literary language patterns but new characters, settings and events. This supports students to do what all accomplished authors do, to use the language patterns they encounter in reading. The same technique is also used with arguments and text responses, to practise using the *evaluative language patterns* of accomplished writers. Conversely, detailed reading of factual texts focuses on deep understanding of the information they present. Students then take turns to write notes of this information on the board, and the teacher guides them to use this information to create new factual texts.

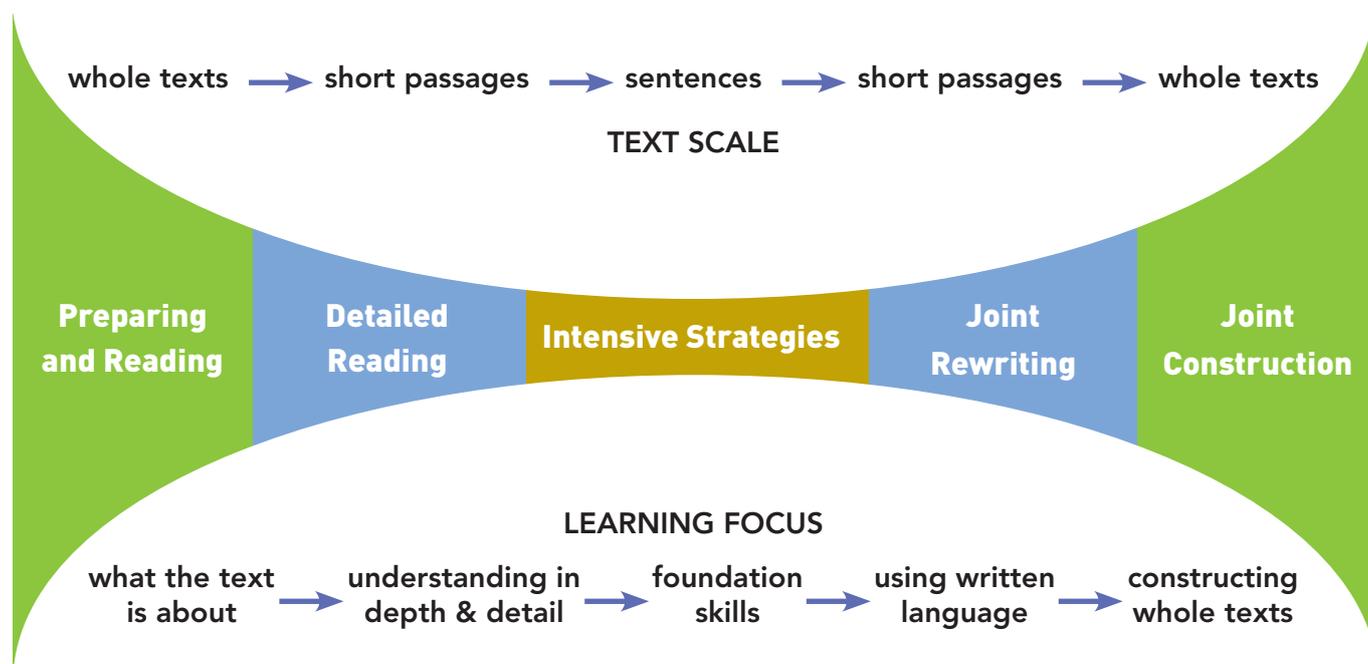


FIGURE 5 • *Sequence of strategies*

Detailed reading and rewriting may be daily activities in the primary school, and weekly activities in the high school. Every 2-4 weeks, students may be expected to write whole texts for assessment. The activities used to prepare whole text writing are known as **joint construction**. For factual texts, **notes** are made of the information identified in paragraph-by-paragraph reading, which we guide students to organise in new texts. For stories, well-written stories are used as **models**, to give the structure for the whole story. The same applies to writing arguments and text responses, in which well-written models are used to give structures for the text. The content of arguments and text responses comes from studying issues in factual texts, and the themes and aesthetics in literature, using preparing and reading activities.

Each of the strategies discussed here follow a carefully planned sequence (Figure 5):

- 1 reading whole texts together,
- 2 closer reading of selected paragraphs and sentences,
- 3 rewriting of sentences and paragraphs,
- 4 joint construction of whole texts.

Each of these activities involves carefully planned learning cycles, in which we **prepare** all our students to succeed with each learning task, continually **affirm** them, and **elaborate** with higher understandings (Figure 1). These learning cycles are planned at the level of whole activities, and at the level of teacher/student interactions in which classroom activities are negotiated.

Conclusion

In PETAA Paper 202, I have tried to give a useful outline of strategies for teaching reading and writing that can be applied in classrooms. I began with the issue of unequal engagement in the classroom conversation, as this is a central problem for school education that does not receive sufficient attention in education theory and teacher training. The answer to this problem lies in carefully preparing students to succeed with learning tasks, including the tasks of engaging in classroom discussions, through reading together. Supporting all students to read at the same level involves a carefully designed sequence of activities that address each level of the reading task in turn. Supporting them all to write successfully then starts with reading and builds back up. These strategies can be very effective in improving outcomes and managing classes, but they require consistent practice to use successfully, as well as knowledge about language and learning.

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