Supporting Struggling Readers in English Education

with Apex Learning Digital Curriculum

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Introduction

The study of English generally involves literary texts, including short stories, novels, essays, drama, and poetry. Frequently, students are expected to read texts from the canon, texts that have been deemed to be models of excellence or that have historical importance (Postman, 1995). As they read these, students are expected to use knowledge of literary elements (e.g., plot, character, setting, or imagery) to comprehend, analyze, and critique the text (Milner & Milner, 2008). In addition, the study of English can include composition and grammar. However, many adolescents do not possess the literacy proficiency they need to comprehend and analyze the literary texts that they are expected to read in secondary English courses.

Although the lowest performing eighth graders made some strides toward improvement on the most recent implementation of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the majority of eighth graders still perform with below-proficient achievement in the literacy abilities necessary to function successfully in the English classroom.

- In reading, 64% of eighth graders were unable to summarize the main ideas andthemes of a passage, make and support inferences about a text, connect parts of atext, analyze text features, and fully substantiate judgments about content andpresentation of content. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

- In writing, 73% of eighth graders were unable to consistently develop a clearlyorganized essay with appropriate details and transitions, varied and sophisticatedsentence structure, good word choices, and appropriate grammar and mechanics(National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

What unique literacy challenges do adolescents face in English?

The study of English literature is important. Literature opens a window into the world, exposing students to cultures and lives far beyond the community and even the time period in which they live. When students have opportunities to respond to and make connections to literature, those texts can help them to better understand themselves, others, and the world (Maxwell & Meiser, 2005). However, the level of reading and writing necessary for success in the secondary English classroom may pose particular challenges for struggling adolescents. Literary texts may be written at a reading level that is difficult or even inaccessible to struggling readers (Beers, 2003). Literary text often uses detail, imagery, and plot to show rather than explain or tell, and reading literary text requires students to make sophisticated inferences. Each genre of literary text poses its own challenges.

Narrative texts

Narrative texts, including short stories, novels, and narrative poems, generally make use of a story structure that includes characters, setting, plot, and theme. Being able to identify and analyze these story elements can support readers' comprehension. Narrative texts are often written in sequential or chronological order, but can also make use of literary devices such as foreshadowing, flashback, flash-forward, and other manipulations of time and sequence that readers must make sense of. Most narrative texts have a theme, or main point, which readers must be able to interpret (Milner & Milner, 2008).

Poetry

Poems require students to make sophisticated inferences and to understand the relationship between form and meaning while at the same time not losing sight of personal response and pleasure in the craft of language that poems provide (Goldberg, 1986). Many students have had limited or negative experiences reading and writing poetry (Scholes, 2001).

Drama

Drama also requires high levels of inference. Because drama generally does not include a narrator, students must be able to draw conclusions about characters' actions and events. Reading drama, rather than seeing it performed, requires readers to interpret the script and to make mental images based only on dialogue and the scant information provided in stage directions (Milner & Milner, 2008).

Essays

Essays are generally short pieces that present and defend a point of view (Dillard, 1988). Students must be able to read, respond to, and critique the point of view of an essay, and they must be able to compose their own essays by taking a stance on an issue, using appropriate supporting details, including, quite frequently, evidence from one or more texts that they have read (Milner & Milner, 2008).

All literary text poses challenges that may not be found in expository text. To be proficient readers of literary texts, students must be able not just to recognize but to analyze and critique the use of literary devices such as tone, mood, voice, imagery, symbolism, and irony. Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Scholes, 1985) has helped reframe English education by putting an emphasis on supporting students' abilities to construct responses to literature that build on both their experience and the text. Interpretations must be well supported by the text, but there is no one "right" reading of literary text. Learning English means learning to support and justify your reading of a text.

What does current research tell us about best practices for supporting struggling readers in English?

Because literary text is written using detail and action to show, rather than using explanation to tell, readers in English courses must become active readers, readers who deliberately apply reading strategies to comprehend the text. Eight research-based active reading strategies are defined in the white paper Supporting Struggling Readers in Content Area Learning (Brenner, 2015). Here, a few literacy strategies that are especially helpful in English classrooms are briefly discussed.

Accessing prior knowledge

Constructing responses to literary text requires students to make connections between what they read and their prior knowledge and experience (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Struggling readers, however, often do not consider what they already know as a tool to make sense of text (Beers, 2003). Teaching students to think about and make connections to their prior knowledge can support comprehension and response to literature before and during reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; NICHD, 2000).

Making inferences

Because literary texts show rather than tell and use literary devices such as metaphor and symbolism, readers must make inferences. Inferences are made when readers draw a conclusion by blending information in the text with background knowledge and experience (Tovani, 2000). Struggling readers are often very literal readers (Westby, 1999). Modeling and explicit instruction in making inferences, as well as support in learning to identify metaphors and symbolism, can support readers' higher-level comprehension of literary text (Hanson & Pearson, 1982; Tovani, 2000).

Making mental images

Many literary texts are written to construct a sensory image in the readers' minds. When readers actively work to make a mental image of the scene, characters, and events, they may become more engaged and better comprehend the text (Gambrell & Javitz, 1993; Gunning, 2006). Poetry and drama, in particular, often use literary elements to paint a picture. Struggling readers, however, often fail to make mental images as they read. Modeling and explicit instruction in making mental images can support students' success in English (Gunning, 2006).

Asking questions

Proficient readers are problem-solvers who actively work to make sense of the text by asking themselves questions as they read (Raphael, 1982). Questions help students monitor for comprehension and engage deeply with the text, and therefore support deeper comprehension (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgeson, 2008; Allington, 1983). Because literary texts often do not directly state or explain, readers of literary texts must constantly ask themselves questions in order to develop an interpretation or response to the text. When students are supported in developing the strategy of asking questions, they become more deeply engaged and comprehend better (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003; Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002).

Using context clues

Authors of literary text use interesting words to make the text more interesting (Hiebert, 2007); for example, they may use synonyms to avoid repeating the same word (referring to the same character as large, gigantic, statuesque, and a behemoth). The lack of repetition and use of a wide vocabulary may make literary texts more challenging for struggling readers. Explicit instruction in using context to determine word meanings can support struggling readers in English (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgeson, 2008).

How is Apex Learning adopting those best practices in its English digital curriculum?

English Comprehensive Courses and Tutorials provide both adaptive and strategic scaffolding to support students' ability to take an active approach to reading and writing. Adaptive scaffolding is support provided in the curriculum that makes the text and content more accessible to students based on their needs (Hiebert, Menon, Martin, & Bach, 2009).

The digital curriculum uses text-to-speech features that allow students to listen to the text. Tutorials use browser plugins to support read aloud. In Comprehensive Courses, most instructional text and all of the more difficult literary text are accompanied by text-to-speech voiceovers so that students can listen to the text. In addition, the digital curriculum provides rollovers that pronounce and define key English vocabulary terms and interactive graphic organizers. Comprehensive Courses include study sheets to provide support for note-taking, drafting essays and personal narratives, and organizing ideas and information. Support Cards embedded throughout the course provide links to background knowledge, make connections between concepts, and provide reminders for students to apply active reading strategies when they will most support comprehension.

Strategic scaffolding is explicit instruction and support that helps students learn the mental processes, or strategies, of active readers (Hiebert, Menon, Martin, & Bach, 2009). As students use strategic scaffolding to learn strategies, they become more thoughtful, adept readers who can independently read and interpret a variety of literary texts. Strategic scaffolding in English Comprehensive Courses includes instruction in how to read the various genres of literary texts, such as drama, short stories, poems, and essays. Strategic scaffolding in Tutorials include hints and immediate feedback embedded in learning activities.

English Comprehensive Courses provide additional strategic scaffolding. Included in the appendix of each Comprehensive Course is a supplemental unit that introduces students to active reading strategies (accessing prior knowledge, making and revising predictions, using visual cues, making inferences, asking questions, making mental images, monitoring and fixing up, summarizing, using morphemes and context clues, reading compound words and phrases, and understanding word families). Finally, all active reading and vocabulary strategies are reinforced throughout the course, as when Reading Support Cards remind students to apply the active reading strategies most helpful for particular passages.

Apex Learning's English Comprehensive Courses provide adaptive and strategic scaffolding for students who need differentiated instruction. For struggling readers, the scaffolding provided in English Comprehensive Courses and Tutorials can facilitate mastery of rigorous, standards-based English content as they simultaneously learn active reading and learning strategies that support their ability to read literary text independently and with pleasure.

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Our digital curriculum is designed to actively engage students in learning—combining embedded supports and scaffolds to meet diverse student needs, actionable data to inform instruction, and success management, to ensure you get the outcomes you're expecting.

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