

Hands-On Reciprocal Teaching: A Comprehension Technique

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All teachers want students to be independent readers. Targeting comprehension skills is one way to help teachers and students accomplish this goal. However, studies focusing on comprehension indicate that although assessment of comprehension is common in the classroom, strategy instruction to teach comprehension skills to students is not (Kelly, Moore, & Tuck, 1994; Sporer, Brunstein, & Kieschke, 2009). Hands-on reciprocal teaching encourages teachers to use a research-based technique in a fresh way that encourages active student participation.

What Is Reciprocal Teaching?

Palincsar and Brown (1986) created reciprocal teaching, which uses the four strategies of predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing to increase comprehension. Oczkus (2005) coined these components the “Fab Four,” which are summarized and extended in the “Introducing the Fab Four” section of this article.

With reciprocal teaching, students predict before reading and then check their predictions during reading. They stop to clarify unknown words or ideas during reading. They ask “teacher questions” during and after reading to check for understanding. And they summarize either a page or the entire text selection after reading.

Teachers show students how to apply the Fab Four but do not use the strategies directly. For instance, rather than questioning students about a text, a teacher would charge students to create their own questions. Teachers have three primary responsibilities during a reciprocal teaching session:

1. Before reading, activate prior knowledge of words or ideas students will encounter during reading.

2. During reading, monitor, guide, and encourage individuals or groups in their use of the Fab Four.
3. After reading, encourage student reflection and ask students to share which strategy helped them the most and why.

This last part is critical to the overall success of reciprocal teaching. Metacognitive thinking is an important tool that gives students insight into their learning styles and allows them to reflect on which tools help them gain the most understanding (Israel, Block, Bauserman, & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2005).

Introducing the Fab Four

When introducing students to reciprocal teaching, it is crucial to make an impact. The goal is to have students remember the Fab Four, so they can use the strategies independently. Introducing elements of fun and adventure, as well as costumes and props, will help accomplish this goal. For example, you may use the Fab Four characters to model what each represents (Oczkus, 2005). The following examples, based on Oczkus's work (2010), illustrate how to model the characters using the book *Wolves in Yellowstone* by Randy Houk.

Predicting motivates students to read and helps them form a purpose for reading. Prior to reading *Wolves in Yellowstone*, introduce Paula the Predictor, who wears a scarf and holds a crystal ball (or snow globe). In a fortune teller voice, say,

Hello, I am Paula the Predictor, and I love to make predictions about the future. I also love to make predictions about what is going to happen in books. Let me look at this book and make a prediction. I see pictures of wolves and hunting, so I think I will learn how wolves hunt and live. What do you think you will learn from this book?

Clarifying words and ideas helps students make connections in the text rather than skipping unknown

words and ideas. During the reading of *Wolves in Yellowstone*, introduce Clarence the Clarifier to clarify the word *pack*. To embody the character, consider wearing glasses and holding a magnifying glass. Then, in a detective voice, say,

Good morning, I am Clarence the Clarifier, and I like to solve mysteries. I look for clues that help me understand words and ideas. I see this word *pack* [hold magnifying glass over the word]. I know I can get clues by reading before and after the word. Ah, I see that wolves can be in a pack or wolves can be alone. If you're not alone, you're with others, so *pack* must mean a group of wolves. That reminds me of a six pack of Coke. Another important part of my job is interviewing people. Who can tell me more about a pack?

Questioning promotes students' comprehension, because students must understand what they have read to ask their peers knowledgeable questions. To prompt questioning about *Wolves in Yellowstone*, introduce Quinn the Questioner, a game show host who holds a microphone. Then announce,

Welcome to the game show *Reading Is Fun*, where you get the chance to ask and answer questions for a cash prize! I'm your host, Quinn the Questioner. I'll ask the first question for \$100. Who can answer the following "what" question: "What is the name for a group of wolves?" [student answers correctly] That's right! You win \$100! [hand out play money] Now, who can ask a "why" question for \$1,000?

Summarizing helps students concentrate on the main idea and supporting details of the text. After reading *Wolves in Yellowstone*, introduce Sammy the Summarizer, who wears a cowboy hat and holds a lasso. Then, in a country twang, say,

Howdy, folks. I am Sammy the Summarizer. I like to lasso cows, but I also like to lasso information about a story. The information has to be short and to the point [make lasso small]. This page was about how black, gray, and silver-blue wolves gather in a pack and howl at the moon. Yeehaw—that's it!

Upper elementary students find these characters very entertaining and cannot wait for a chance to "be" each one. After modeling, organize students

PAUSE AND PONDER

- How am I currently teaching my students to predict, learn words, question, and summarize to become independent thinkers and readers?
- Are my students understanding the texts they read and relating the information to their lives?
- What simple steps can I take to make comprehension of text more engaging for my students?

into groups of four and allow them to take turns being each character for the rest of the book or for a new text.

If dressing up isn't appealing, consider using puppets to introduce the Fab Four (Oczkus, 2010). Predicting Paul is a parrot who predicts. Clarifying Clarabelle is a cow who likes to chomp on words and ideas. Questioning Queen is a queen bee who loves to question her worker bees. Summarizing Sam is a snake who likes to wrap himself around important information. Whether using characters or puppets, remember that your goal is to not implement the Fab Four yourself, but to teach students how to use the

strategies.

As students are learning how to use the Fab Four, they should practice in groups before moving on to independent use. Equally important is assigning the Fab Four "jobs" to group members so everyone has a chance to practice each strategy (Oczkus, 2010). To make job assignments easy and fun, consider using note cards with job titles that students can rotate after reading a section of text. Color-coded squares, name tags, necklaces, party hats, or puppets also would work well.

Visual and Hands-On Tools

To keep students engaged, it's important to make sessions fun and exciting. When I walk into a classroom as part of the weekly tutoring I do in area schools, I often hear a student say, "Hooray, Dr. Stricklin is here!" After a few sessions of reciprocal teaching using characters and paper plate dials, one student confided, "When I read, I don't understand a lot of the words. Clarence the Clarifier helped me not be embarrassed and have fun looking at words." I bring life to their learning by providing visual and hands-on tools, such as those described in the following sections.

Charts

Charts are effective visual tools that students can use during whole-class, small-group, or independent

work (Oczkus, 2005). A poster board divided into four sections can be used to record predictions, words with definitions, questions and answers, and summaries. Always model how to use the charts with the whole class before allowing students to record data in their groups or independently.

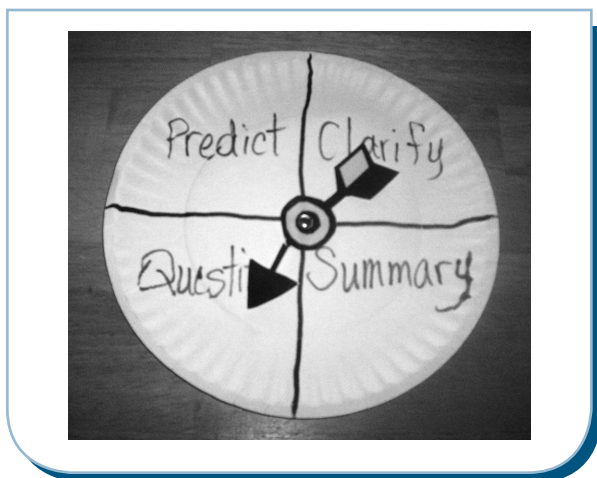
Bookmarks

Bookmarks are a great tool to remind students of the ultimate goal of reciprocal teaching—using the Fab Four while reading independently. Students first create their own bookmarks and then keep them as reminders to use the Fab Four. To make these, give each student a blank bookmark made from cardstock and have them list the Fab Four strategies, as well as draw a picture for each strategy.

Paper Plate Dials

Paper plate dials are both visual and tactile, allowing students to see and manipulate a tool. Have students divide each paper plate into four sections (one strategy per section) and then write the names of the strategies in their respective sections. Attach an arrow with a brad to the center of the plate and have the students turn the dial to the strategy they are using while they are reading. While students are working in groups or individually, they turn the dial to the strategy currently being used. Physically moving the dial helps them mentally and visually see the process of switching from one strategy to the next. For an example of a dial, see Figure 1.

Figure 1
Paper Plate Dial



Props

Props keep students' hands busy as they practice with the Fab Four. When students manipulate a prop, they are consistently reminded of the purpose of the assignment (reading comprehension), and the prop prompts them in a motivating way to complete the task at hand. Use props such as magic sticks or crystal balls for predicting. Word Wands (decorated popsicle sticks), magnifying glasses, or humorous-looking glasses are great reminders to clarify words. Use microphones for questioning and small lassos or snakes for summarizing.

Sticky Notes

Sticky notes are visual tools that students love to use, so take advantage of this during reciprocal teaching. The following are activities that students can complete on sticky notes:

- Before reading, activate prior knowledge by having students draw a picture of the topic (e.g., a rain forest animal for a nonfiction book discussing the rain forest).
- Before reading, have students jot down their predictions.
- During reading, have students write a word or idea that they don't understand.
- During or after reading, have students write a question. (Vary questions by providing starter words such as *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, or *how*.)
- After reading, have students write a one-sentence summary.

Sentence Starters

Sentence starters offer guidance to students new to reciprocal teaching. Written on index cards, sentence starters for each of the Fab Four strategies and metacognitive thinking may help in beginning group conversations.

- Predicting—"I wonder..." or "I think that..."
- Clarifying—"I was confused about..." or "I don't understand..."
- Questioning—"How...?" or "Why...?"
- Summarizing—"The author wants us to know..." or "The big idea is..."

- Metacognitive thinking—“What helped me most was...”

Discussion

Reciprocal teaching involves lots of discussion among students. The following ideas may encourage students to open up and share their thoughts:

- Partner sharing—“Turn to your partner and share your prediction.”
- Response cards—“Hold up your smiley face card if you agree, your frown face card if you disagree.”
- Face-to-face—Students form two lines and share their summaries with the person facing them (Oczkus, 2005).
- Passing notes—“Write a note to your friend about a word or idea you do not understand.”

Documentation

You will want to check for comprehension using both informal and formal assessments. Before assessing students, allow them to apply what they’ve learned several times and ensure that you have offered enough constructive feedback and guidance. Once students are comfortable using the techniques, meaning that they have practiced with them in small groups and independently, you can choose one of the following methods to assess your students.

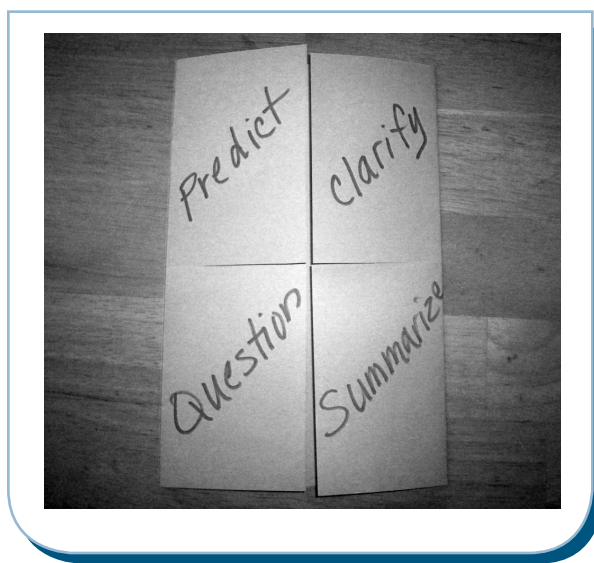
Four Door Chart

The Four Door Chart (Oczkus, 2005) is useful in determining students’ understanding and use of the Fab Four. To make the Four Door, have students

1. Fold both sides of a piece of construction paper toward the middle so they have a double door.
2. Cut a line across the middle of both doors to create four doors.
3. Label the doors using the Fab Four names.
4. Open the doors and record their work (predictions they have made, words they have clarified, questions they have asked and answered, and summaries they have written).

For an example of the Four Door method, see Figure 2.

Figure 2
Four Door Chart



Sequencing Strips

Summarizing, or sequencing, strips are useful in determining whether students are able to state the main idea and supporting details in the correct sequence. Organize students into groups. Assign each group member a different page or section of the text to summarize on a strip of paper. The group mixes up the completed summaries, reads them, puts them in chronological order, and glues them to a piece of construction paper to illustrate the correct sequence.

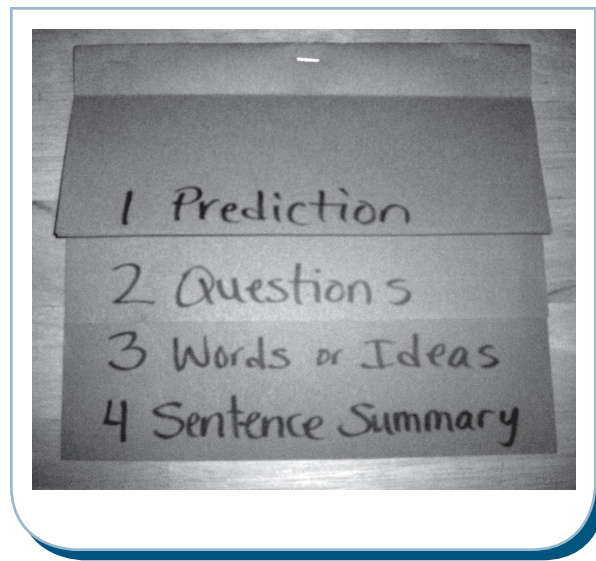
A “Clear” Summary

A “Clear” Summary (Oczkus, 2005) is useful in determining whether students are able to write a clear and concise summary. Organize the students into groups and give each group a transparency so each may summarize their reading in 25 words or less.

Question Booklets

Question booklets (Oczkus, 2005) are useful for determining the level of cognition occurring in students based on the types of questions (e.g., factual, inferential, critical, creative) they choose to write. Students write a question for each page they read as they preview the text. As students read, they answer their questions. Students also may trade booklets with their peers and answer someone else’s questions.

Figure 3
1, 2, 3, 4



1, 2, 3, 4

1, 2, 3, 4 is similar to the Four Door Chart in that it is useful in determining students' understanding and use of the Fab Four. To make 1, 2, 3, 4, give students two sheets of construction paper. Students fold the paper in layers and staple it so that four sections are visible. Ask students to write one prediction on the first fold, two words or ideas they don't understand (and possible meanings) on the second, three questions and answers on the third, and a four-sentence summary on the last. For an example, see Figure 3.

Benefits

Reciprocal teaching is appropriate for use with both fiction and nonfiction and with any grade level. It

also works well with standardized testing reading preparation passages and with literature circles (Latendresse, 2004).

When a teacher actively uses reciprocal teaching in most readings required of students, reading levels increase one to two grade levels in three to six months (Oczkus, 2005; Spörer, Brunstein, & Kieschke, 2009). English learners increase vocabulary knowledge and comprehension (García, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009). Students who have disabilities show marked success with this strategy instruction (Alfassi, Weiss, & Lifshitz, 2009; Takala, 2006). Struggling and disenchanted readers engage in reading (Goodman, 2005). Advanced and gifted students increase knowledge level and comprehension (Ash, 2005).

An added benefit of making reciprocal teaching fun and hands-on is students' enjoyment. They no longer dread reading but look forward to learning new information with their peers. They learn how to work collaboratively with classmates. They are engaged and become confident in their reading skills. I encourage you to try reciprocal teaching and the tools suggested here and watch the comprehension of your students continue to rise!

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Take ACTION!

1. Decide how you will model the Fab Four strategies to your students (i.e., using dress up, puppets, and so on). Determine what manipulatives your students will use when it is their turn.
2. Gather props and materials for the modeling session and student practice session.
3. Explain to students why you are modeling the Fab Four, and activate prior knowledge about the topic to be studied.
4. After modeling, break students into groups of four and assign each a Fab Four job.
5. Monitor and guide students as they try out the Fab Four, changing jobs after each page.
6. After the reading is completed, bring the class together to discuss which of the Fab Four helped them most and why.
7. Reflect on the experience and consider what instructional improvements you can make. Decide how you will implement your next hands-on reciprocal teaching session.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- “Reciprocal Revision: Making Peer Feedback Meaningful” by Donna Vorreyer

IRA Book

- *Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension* (2nd ed.) by Lori D. Oczkus

IRA Journal Articles

- “The Princess Storyteller, Clara Clarifier, Quincy Questioner, and the Wizard: Reciprocal Teaching Adapted for Kindergarten Students” by Pamela Ann Myers, *The Reading Teacher*, December 2005
- “Reciprocal Teaching for the Primary Grades: ‘We Can Do It, Too!’” by Paola Pilonieta and Adriana L. Medina, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2009

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