

# Reading Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities

by Dr. David Moore and Dr. Michael Smith

**FOR EDUCATORS OF OLDER STUDENTS** with learning disabilities (LD), the increasing expectations for advanced literacies require increasingly sophisticated instructional responses. Research reviews on teaching reading to adolescent students with LD testify to the importance and timeliness of this issue, and they present valuable instructional guidance (Edmonds, 2009; Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008; Gajria et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007). This research tends to emphasize three areas of instruction: 1) word study, fluency, and vocabulary, 2) comprehension, and 3) motivation and engagement. It shows that when research-based reading instruction is implemented, older youth with LD can succeed.

## Word Study, Fluency, and Vocabulary Instruction

**Word Study** Reading research at the secondary-school level distinguishes basic word study instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics from advanced word study instruction in multisyllabic and morphologically derived words (Roberts et al., 2008). Many older students with LD can decode single syllable words but struggle to decode longer words. Whether older readers struggle with basic or advanced word study, they can improve. Youth with underdeveloped word study can make small to moderate gains in reading comprehension when they receive instruction that builds word study along with comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009).

**Fluency** Students having LD tend to read haltingly, laboring over word and sentence structures. Fluency instruction helps students process texts automatically, freeing cognitive resources for comprehending the texts (Roberts et al., 2008). Fluency instruction is effective when it engages readers with texts that embed targeted

words. Repeated exposure to such words is more useful than encounters with numerous unfamiliar words in overly difficult passages. Engaging youth with quantities of texts they can and want to read, then supporting their efforts with the texts supports fluency. Research with older readers who struggle with fluency suggests that targeted fluency instruction, like targeted word study instruction, is most effective when it is part of a complete intervention that includes comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009).

**Vocabulary** Knowing the meanings of many words is crucial for success in reading and academics. Struggling readers tend to avoid reading, thus limiting their acquisition of new vocabulary. In addition, many of the textbooks used by older students with LD offer inappropriate support for vocabulary learning (Roberts et al., 2008). The research points to direct instruction as well as to activity-based and computer-assisted methods as effective methods to improve vocabulary acquisition (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008). It is important to note that students with LD may require more exposures to new words than other students in order to develop deep understandings of the words. Along with teaching the meanings of specific words, instruction is needed to develop youth's independent vocabulary learning strategies such as analyzing words' contexts and morphological composition. Assessment of students' vocabulary knowledge and progress monitoring are other important features of vocabulary instruction.

## Comprehension

**Domain and Prior Knowledge** Secondary students with LD are required to read a good deal of informational and expository text, and they often struggle because they fail to link their prior knowledge

to the texts' contents (Gajria et al., 2007). Activating prior knowledge involves readers in calling up what they already know about a topic and using this knowledge to make sense of a text's ideas and information. Key ways to help readers utilize and develop the knowledge they need include anticipatory activities such as previewing headings or discussing key concepts before reading, and review activities such as paraphrasing and summarizing after reading.

**Graphic Organizers** Graphic organizers can benefit readers greatly before, during, and after reading (Roberts et al., 2008). Before reading, they serve as ways to activate prior knowledge and make predictions. During reading, they help students capture connections among ideas. After reading, they facilitate students' consolidation of a text's contents. Students benefit from the ability to match graphic organizers with corresponding types of text. A graphic organizer for comparing literary characters is different than one for depicting historical timelines.

**Cognitive Strategies** Older readers with LD who fail to apply cognitive strategies such as determining importance and self-questioning benefit from explicit direct instruction in these strategies (Edmonds et al., 2009). These youth do especially well when they learn to apply strategies before, during, and after reading. The most effective instruction begins with a teacher explicitly modeling and explaining the use of a strategy, then gradually releasing to students the responsibility for using the strategy independently (Torgesen et al., 2007).

## Motivation and Engagement

**Interesting Texts and Goals** As students move up the grade levels, their texts become more difficult and the instructional environment tends to deemphasize their motivation to read (Roberts et al, 2008). Providing texts that students want to read is a widely known approach to improving reading motivation. Research establishes the gains readers with LD can make when engaging, relevant texts are at the core of a lesson (Faggella-Luby and Deshler, 2008). Motivation and engagement also improve when students actively define their learning goals. Instructional research supports a combination of interesting texts and goals along with instruction in reading strategies (Roberts et al., 2008). When students develop interest and control in their learning, when they take an active role in their learning, achievement improves.

**Social Interactions** Struggling readers' motivation and engagement can be increased through meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities (Roberts et al., 2008). Older students tend to become motivated and engaged when they interact with one another, responding to texts and ideas worth talking about. Collaborative learning tasks increase student ownership of their literacy learning, generate rich thinking, and can be expected to improve reading achievement (Faggella-Luby and Deshler, 2008).

## Applying the Research

*Edge* is based on instructional principles derived from the top research in adolescent literacy. Furthermore, effectiveness research has shown *Edge* to lead to substantial growth in language, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Throughout this innovative language arts program, older students with LD find unmatched supports that can improve their reading and develop their motivation to be lifelong readers and learners.

**Language and Vocabulary Instruction** *Edge* provides comprehensive vocabulary instruction that is appropriate for older readers with LD. The program provides rich and varied language experiences that embed multiple opportunities for word study and vocabulary development. *Edge* explicitly teaches critically important academic vocabulary along with strategies for learning such words. The program regularly promotes word consciousness as well so students will be motivated to develop vocabulary incidentally.

To help teachers bring best practices into their classrooms, *Edge* provides Daily Vocabulary Routines. These routines can be part of daily instruction. They expose students to targeted vocabulary multiple times, a practice that is very important for struggling readers with LD. In addition, *Edge* presents numerous opportunities for students to read targeted vocabulary words in context and to reinforce their understandings through various experiences.

Along with the vocabulary routines, *Edge* provides Daily Oral Reading Fluency Routines such as timed repeated readings. Various routines are presented so teachers can select different ones over time and keep their fluency instruction fresh.

*Edge* also features the Online Coach. The Online Coach's structured supports give struggling readers with LD a private, risk-free way to improve pronunciation

and fluency, acquire academic vocabulary, and work through comprehension tasks. The Online Coach links to the literature selections in *Edge*, providing immediate feedback and record keeping as students read orally and silently.

*Edge* assessments provide progress monitoring and re-teaching opportunities. These assessment for learning tools enable students and teachers to refocus and refine their academic efforts.

**Comprehension** Getting readers off to a good start certainly is crucial in the early grades, but ongoing instruction in the later grades is necessary for maintaining and, in many cases, accelerating readers' growth. The cognitive strategy instruction found in *Edge* was designed with the principles of direct, explicit instruction and a show, don't tell approach that is very appropriate for older students with LD.

Traditional comprehension instruction consisted of having students read a selection then asking them questions about it. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the questions are passage specific. Answering a question about one passage doesn't teach students how to answer questions about other passages. Second, in asking a question, the teacher or text has done the interpretive work by calling readers' attention to a particular aspect of the passage. Readers need to know how to focus their attention independently.

*Edge* takes a different approach. Each *Edge* unit opens with an overview of one of its seven comprehension strategies, then each unit cluster follows with explicit step-by-step explanations of how to apply the strategy to different passages and genres.

The "Big Seven" reading strategies found in *Edge* are

1. Plan and Monitor
2. Determine Importance
3. Ask Questions
4. Make Inferences
5. Make Connections
6. Synthesize
7. Visualize

These general strategies are known to promote reading comprehension. In every instance, the explanatory steps contain model responses so students actually see an example of what is being emphasized; no step is merely mentioned. With *Edge*, students with LD receive the direct, explicit instruction they need to develop the cognitive strategies that will help them be better readers.

One of the great challenges of teaching older students with LD is the difficulty they often have transferring what they have learned to new situations. This is why *Edge* provides students plentiful opportunities to apply their strategies in a variety of reading contexts.

**Motivation** A crucial aspect of motivation is believing that you can succeed, something that is especially important for older students who have been told for years that they are not good at reading. The *Edge* explanations of each comprehension strategy fit students' funds of general knowledge and facility with everyday strategic thinking. In *Edge*, students see how the strategies they already use outside of school apply to their reading comprehension strategies inside of school. This practice permits students to believe they can succeed; it encourages students to begin applying their everyday strategies to their academic reading.

Students are also motivated by the Essential Questions (EQs) that are at the center of every unit. The EQs and the meaningful reading selections

in *Edge* which speak to adolescents have been shown to engage youth in sustained reading. They provide superb contexts for explicit, direct instruction in the components and processes of reading. Because EQs have no single simple answers, they require students and teachers to take on new roles. Students become active agents in their learning, and teachers become part of the inquiry, too. The generative discussions about the EQs and reading selections contribute much to the notable improvements in comprehension, motivation, and engagement youth have demonstrated with *Edge*.

## Conclusion

*Edge* provides older students with LD rich and meaningful opportunities to take control of their reading. It effectively supports students' word study, vocabulary, and fluency; comprehension; and motivation

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**“A crucial aspect of motivation is believing that you can succeed.”**

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and engagement. *Edge* provides the resources that youth with LD require in order to comprehend complex reading material.

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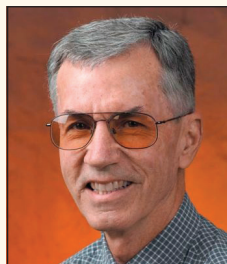
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Dr. Smith has focused his research on how experienced readers read and talk about texts, as well as what motivates adolescents' reading

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# Reading Comprehension Strategies

by Dr. David W. Moore

**IF YOU ASK PROFICIENT READERS** how they make sense of print, you might get replies such as:

- “Sometimes I make movies in my mind. I use my imagination to make what I’m reading come to life.”
- “I figure out what the author doesn’t just come right out and say. This way I can get what’s happening behind the scene.”
- “When I need to learn what I’m reading about, I take notes.”
- “How is this like what I already know? That’s the question I ask when I want to stay really focused on what I’m reading.”

As these statements suggest, proficient readers use their minds actively to build meaning. They read purposefully and selectively. Whether they are reading for pleasure, to acquire new knowledge, or to perform a task, proficient readers use strategies to achieve their goals (Kintsch, 1998; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

In high school, adolescents might be reading short stories like “Amigo Brothers” or lengthier nonfiction like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*. To get a head start in understanding such works, proficient readers preview the text then approach it with an appropriate mindset. They continually connect what they already know with what they are reading. When all is going well, these youths’ mental

processes are functioning skillfully and automatically, with little conscious attention.

## Robust Reading Strategies: The Big 7

When proficient readers get confused or off track, they realize this right away then consciously shift mental gears and apply appropriate strategies. They might identify the source of the confusion, reread it, and then explain it to themselves. They might knowingly make connections to fill in what the author leaves unsaid. And they might record important ideas and information, form sensory images, or ask themselves questions. Adolescent readers benefit from robust, general strategies that can be applied to a range of situations (Alexander & Jetton, 2000).

Along with having a repertoire of general strategies, proficient readers know how to adjust these strategies according to the particular texts and tasks at hand. For instance, readers continually make inferences to comprehend texts, but the specific types of inference vary (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). When reading imaginative fiction, readers make inferences to interpret characters’ motivations; when reading scientific exposition, readers make inferences to link technical details.

*Edge* presents seven general strategies known to promote adolescents’ reading comprehension. The strategies are ones that proficient readers use regularly and across a wide variety of texts:

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**“Low-achieving adolescent readers improve their comprehension performance when they learn to apply strategies.”**

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- **Plan and Monitor:** controlling one’s mental activities; it is metacognitive in nature, centering about readers’ awareness and control of their comprehension. When engaged with this strategy, youth are taught planning skills—how to preview texts and how to set a purpose for reading and make predictions. They are also taught how to clarify ideas by using fix-up strategies and how to clarify vocabulary by using context clues and other word-level fix-up strategies.
- **Determine Importance:** identifying essential ideas and information. This is the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff in text. Youth are taught how to identify stated and implied main ideas, how to summarize texts, and how to note the personal relevance of ideas and information.
- **Ask Questions:** interrogating texts for a variety of purposes, such as checking one’s understanding, querying the author about his or her writing, and discerning relationships among ideas and information within a text
- **Make Inferences:** linking parts of texts that authors did not link explicitly. Using what one already knows to form links across sentences and paragraphs. Often known as “reading between the lines.”
- **Make Connections:** using what is known to enrich authors’ meanings; taking what has been learned from one’s own life experiences, other texts, and cultural and global matters to deepen understandings of what the author presents. Otherwise known as “reading beyond the lines.”
- **Synthesize:** putting together ideas from multiple sources; deciding how ideas go together in a way that is new; figuring out how what one is reading and learning fits together in a way not thought of before. Youth are taught how to draw conclusions, form generalizations, and make comparisons across texts.
- **Visualize:** forming sensory and emotional images of textual contents, especially visual images. This strategy also includes an aspect specifically for teens who don’t consider themselves to be readers: the strategy of recognizing that one is having an emotional response while reading and to identify what the author did to invoke that response.

This set of seven is based on the reading comprehension strategy research that has been reviewed at length since the early 1990s (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams & Baker, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992) and especially the research that

embraces adolescents (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Alvermann, Fitzgerald, & Simpson, 2006). There is striking agreement that low-achieving adolescent readers improve their comprehension performance when they learn to apply strategies. This improvement has been demonstrated among adolescent native English speakers as well as adolescent English language learners who struggle with reading (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

## Best Practices for Teaching Strategic Reading

The International Reading Association’s Commission on Adolescent Literacy stated succinctly, “Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed” (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 3). Getting readers off to a good start certainly is crucial in the early grades, but ongoing instruction in the later grades is necessary for maintaining and, in many cases, accelerating readers’ growth. Comprehension strategies are vital components of adolescent literacy instruction. The comprehension strategy instruction in *Edge* was designed with the following principles and practices in mind.

### 1. Direct, Explicit Instruction

Effective comprehension strategy instruction for adolescents includes direct, explicit teaching (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Such instruction calls for teachers to scaffold students’ learning by guiding them to a particular strategy then openly and plainly describing it. Teachers model, or demonstrate, the strategy—frequently thinking through the process aloud—to show it in action.

On every Before Reading page in *Edge*, the “how to” of each reading strategy is explicitly modeled, using the actual text to be read. Strategy questions during and after reading provide additional scaffolds, allowing teachers to gradually release responsibility for the use of the strategy to students, so that they can make it their own.

### 2. Show, Don’t Tell

An important part of direct, explicit instruction calls for teachers to demonstrate and explain why particular strategies are useful as well as how and when to use them (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

In *Edge*, every strategy has explicit step-by-step explanations of how to perform the strategy. The explanations are tailored to fit youths’ funds of

general knowledge and facility with everyday strategic thinking. In every instance the explanatory steps contain model responses so youth actually see an example of what is being emphasized; no step is merely mentioned.

### 3. Connect Reading to Students' Lives and Their Out-of-School Literacies

We know that youth come to school with substantial funds of everyday knowledge acquired from their families, communities, peers, and popular culture (Moje, et al., 2004). In effective secondary schools, teachers regularly form webs of connections between this knowledge and the lesson being taught (Langer, 2002). Teachers overtly point out these connections and invite students to make their own.

Every strategy introduction in *Edge* (“How to Read Short Stories”, for example) begins with an inductive learning experience, in which students are able to connect the skills and processes involved in the reading strategy to something they already know how to do in their everyday lives. “Connect Reading to Your Life” shows students who may have negative opinions about their abilities as readers that they really do have valuable cognitive abilities that they can bring to bear on texts.

### 4. Focused Instruction

Focusing comprehension strategy instruction—one strategy at a time—guards against overwhelming students (Nokes & Dole, 2004).

A noteworthy feature of *Edge* is its focus on a single reading strategy in each unit. Throughout each unit students have multiple, varied opportunities to develop expertise with a particular strategy.

### 5. Promote Transfer Across Genres

A time-honored finding among researchers is that the characteristics of various genres present readers varying challenges (Jetton & Alexander, 2004; Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Strategies for reading fiction in an English/language arts class do not travel well to reading algebra in a mathematics class.

In *Edge* students meet recurring commentaries on one particular strategy along with multiple opportunities to perform it with different genres and passages. Every main reading selection in *Edge* is paired with a secondary, or adjunct, selection with which the targeted reading strategy is also taught.

This pairing helps students understand, for example, that the way that they relate main ideas and details in expository nonfiction is both similar and different than the way that they do it with poetry. Explicitly teaching how the same reading strategy works across genres helps students truly own the strategy and apply it independently to whatever reading they do in the future.

### 6. Encourage Cognitive Collaboration

Bringing students together to work through comprehension tasks is another effective practice (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). Youth team with others, mixing perspectives and insights to solve problems. They converse in the form of a dialogue, with speakers responding to what one another said. Thinking is aloud/allowed. Among other things, youth think and talk about the ways they apply comprehension strategies to particular texts.

*Edge* intersperses prompts throughout the reading selections for students to voice their applications of the targeted reading strategy. This scaffold provides a forum for publicly exploring what was just presented, for demystifying ways to comprehend texts.

Additionally, each literature cluster and unit in *Edge* ends with opportunities for learners to jointly review and refine their applications of the strategy. This practice positions students as members of a learning community, a place where they can interact and improve their understandings of comprehension strategies.

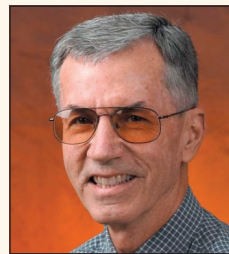
## Conclusion

The reading comprehension strategy instruction found in *Edge* provides adolescents rich and meaningful opportunities to take control of their reading. It shows youth that reading proficiently is not a matter of being innately smart but, in part, a matter of applying appropriate strategies. ❖

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# Why Vocabulary Instruction Matters

by Dr. David W. Moore

## Lessons from the Field

### WE UNDERSTAND THAT VOCABULARY

knowledge is essential for success in reading. Students cannot understand what they read without understanding what most of the words mean. Decades of research have confirmed the important role that vocabulary plays in reading comprehension and in students' overall academic success (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005). Yet there is an alarming word-knowledge gap between students who come from economically advantaged backgrounds and those who live in poverty (Hart & Risley, 1995). The differences in vocabulary knowledge begin before children enter school and—without intervention—the gap grows even wider as students move from grade to grade.

Given the pivotal role of vocabulary, it is surprising that typically very little class time has been focused on vocabulary instruction. Researchers including Durkin (1979), Scott and Nagy (1997), and Biemiller (2005) have documented the small percent of instructional time dedicated to vocabulary teaching and the general absence of systematic, explicit vocabulary instruction. The same situation exists in programs serving English language learners (Dutro & Moran, 2003; Gersten & Baker, 2000).

In the past, vocabulary instruction was often unplanned and incidental, primarily driven by student questions and “teachable moments.” When students encountered an unfamiliar word, they were directed to the glossary or a dictionary, or were given a quick oral definition. It's not surprising that this limited, on-the-fly exposure did not result in long-term word learning. Students need multiple exposures to words in multiple contexts before they understand, remember, and apply them (Nagy, 2005).

Dictionary definitions typically have been a primary vehicle for teaching words' meanings. However, even proficient adult readers often have difficulty deciphering a word's meanings from conventional dictionary definitions. By design, dictionary definitions are extremely concise and precise. The result can be so cryptic that it's difficult to grasp a word's meanings or apply those meanings in context (Beck, et al., 2002).

In addition to relying on dictionary definitions, vocabulary instruction has usually placed a great deal of emphasis on using context to figure out word meanings. Context clues do support incidental word learning, but it's important to recognize the limitations of contextual analysis. The odds of accurately predicting a word's meaning from written context is very low—ranging from 5 to 15% for both native English speakers and students who are English language learners (Beck et al., 2002; Nagy et al., 1985).

While the probability of learning a word from a single encounter is low, Swanborn and de Glopper (1999) found that students at higher grade levels and students with higher reading ability are better able to use context. Graves (2006) sums up the descriptive research on learning from context:

**The probability of learning a word from context increases substantially with additional occurrences of the word. That is how we typically learn from context. We learn a little from the first encounter with a word and then more and more about a word's meaning as we meet it in new and different contexts.**

## Best Practices

What does effective, comprehensive vocabulary instruction look like? Graves (2006, 2000) has identified four key components:

1. Rich and varied language experiences
2. Direct teaching of individual words
3. Independent word-learning strategies
4. Fostering word consciousness

But first, we must answer one of the most fundamental questions—which words to teach? This question actually has a simple answer: we need to teach the words that matter most. In *Edge* Key Vocabulary words are those that are:

- **central to comprehension**—without knowing these words, the selection (its theme, main idea, or plot) just won't make sense
- **personally valuable**—students need the words to discuss the Essential Question
- **high-utility academic words**—words students will encounter in multiple subject areas and in life

This balanced model of vocabulary development is broad enough and intensive enough to meet the needs of students who have relatively limited vocabularies, are English learners with limited oral vocabularies in English, possess adequate but not exceptional vocabularies, or already have rich vocabularies and are ready for the challenge of deepening their word knowledge and developing increasingly sophisticated vocabularies.

### 1. Rich and Varied Language Experiences

Immersing students in rich and varied language experiences permits them to learn words through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students of all ages, including English language learners, benefit from participating in authentic give-and-take discussions in which they have the opportunity to thoughtfully discuss topics (Alvermann, 2000). From the intermediate grades on, reading becomes the principle language experience for promoting vocabulary growth. In fact, some researchers believe that increasing the amount of reading students do is the single most powerful thing that we can do to increase their vocabularies (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Stahl, 1998).

### 2. Direct Teaching of Individual Words

Explicit instruction in vocabulary has been shown to increase specific word knowledge and long-term reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Instruction is most effective when it is rich,

deep, and extended and when it leads students to actively process new word meanings in multiple contexts. In this new view of robust instruction, vocabulary is introduced using a consistent, predictable routine (Beck et al., 2002):

- a. **Pronounce** Teachers guide students in correctly pronouncing the word (by syllables and as a whole).
- b. **Explain** Students are given a clear, student-friendly explanation of the word's meaning.
- c. **Study Examples** Students study examples of the word in a variety of contexts.
- d. **Encourage Elaboration** Students elaborate word meanings by generating their own examples and through practice.
- e. **Assess** Teachers check student understanding through both informal, ongoing assessment and summative evaluations. In all cases, assessments go beyond simple memorization or matching, requiring students to demonstrate a deeper level of thinking and understanding.

### 3. Independent Word-Learning Strategies

Estimates of student vocabulary size vary dramatically because researchers count words in different ways. Nagy and Anderson (1984) estimated that an average twelfth grader knows about 40,000 distinct word families (e.g., *history*, *historian*, *historical* are part of one word family).

Clearly there are far more words to be learned than can be directly taught. That is why *Edge* gives students powerful tools for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words that haven't been taught in class. Word-learning strategies include using knowledge of word families and cognates, morphological analysis, contextual analysis, and consulting appropriate references. In line with research on metacognitive word-learning strategies (Lublinter & Smetana, 2005), *Edge* also teaches youth a comprehensive approach for clarifying word meanings while reading.

### 4. Fostering Word Consciousness

Another key aspect of effective vocabulary instruction is fostering word consciousness. This means developing students' interest in and awareness of words and how they can be used. It can occur throughout the instructional day with practices such

as modeling adept diction, word play, researching word origins, and examining students' and professional writers' word choices.

## ELLs and Language Development

The four-part approach outlined above has been shown to be effective with English language learners. However, instruction must address the special challenges that these students face (Graves, 2006).

- **Idioms and other non-literal language** present a particular challenge for English learners. Many texts, particularly those with an informal, colloquial tone, contain idioms and slang that must be taught.

In addition to explicit strategy instruction on how to interpret non-literal language, every selection in *Edge* contains a feature called In Other Words, which provides students with restatements of idioms, slang, and dialect (in addition to difficult or obscure terms that may cause comprehension difficulties, but do not meet the criteria of being Key Vocabulary). These restatements are not definitions; they are designed to be seamlessly substituted into the reading so that students can continue reading.

- **Academic language** presents another challenge. As Cummins (2003) has explained, it may take at least five years for English learners to bridge the gap in academic English between themselves and their English-speaking peers. Therefore, it's vital to focus instruction on academic English. One excellent source is the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) which lists 570 word families that occur in many academic texts. Many of the Key Vocabulary words selected for direct instruction in *Edge* have been drawn from this list.
- It is also important to note that many academic terms have **cognates** in other languages. Kamil and Bernhardt (2004) estimate that from 20% to more than 30% of English words have Spanish cognates. Research has shown that teaching Spanish-speaking students to take advantage of their cognate knowledge can greatly increase reading comprehension (August et al., 2005).

## Conclusion

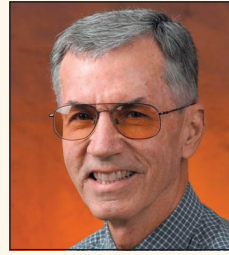
Knowing the meanings of many words provides youth access to countless worlds of ideas and information. Youth deserve a comprehensive program of vocabulary instruction to gain this access. ❖

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# Developing Academic Literacy in Adolescent English Language

by Dr. Deborah J. Short

**WE HAVE A GROWING NUMBER** of adolescent English language learners in the United States who need specialized support to learn academic English and to be successful in high school. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 1.5 million adolescents who were in grades 6–12 were not proficient in English. Fifty-seven percent of these students were second- and third-generation immigrants. Although their lack of academic English proficiency is a product of multiple factors (including poverty and mobility), many students who have been through U.S. elementary schools have not developed the skills necessary for school success. Further, the 43% of adolescent ELLs who were foreign-born are more challenged than younger learners because of fewer resources at the secondary level and less time to learn English and master academic content areas (Capps et al., 2005).

## ELLs Face Double the Work

Our adolescent English language learners are faced with doing *double the work* in order to succeed in high school. They must learn both academic English *and* all the core content topics of a standards-based curriculum. We know that English language learners need 4–7 years of targeted English language development in order to reach average performance levels on state or national exams (Thomas & Collier, 2002) but many schools do not provide programs for that length of time. However, if these learners are provided with consistent, effective programs and appropriate materials, they can be successful in school. Former ELLs who were in sustained programs of specialized instruction have, upon exit, performed better than the state or district average for all students (New York City Department of Education, 2004; State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

## How Can ELLs Catch Up?

One finding from *Double the Work* (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) is that teachers need to use research-based instructional strategies in their lessons, whether the students are in an ESL, sheltered, SEI, or bilingual program. Teachers need to incorporate both language and content objectives into their lessons to promote academic literacy and use instructional interventions that can reduce the achievement gap between English language learners and native English-speaking students. Research-based strategies that have shown positive student outcomes include:

1. Integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in all lessons for all proficiencies
2. Teaching the components and processes of reading and writing
3. Focusing on vocabulary development
4. Building and activating prior knowledge
5. Teaching language through content and themes
6. Using native language strategically
7. Pairing technology with instruction
8. Motivating adolescent ELLs through choice

With each of these strategies, instruction must fit the cognitive and development levels of teens. Materials and activities intended for primary grades are not suitable. Let's take a closer look at each strategy.

### 1. Integrate Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking Skills

ELLs benefit from the integration of all four language skills in all lessons across the curriculum, regardless of student proficiency level (Genesee et al., 2006). Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing skills, and oral language development facilitates English literacy growth (August & Shanahan, 2006; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Explicit

instruction in these skills is critical, especially as they are used in academic settings.

For instance, students need to participate in classroom conversations with more than simple phrases and one-word responses. They need to articulate their opinions, share their observations, make comparisons, and so forth, through speaking and writing. They need to listen to classmates to make informed comments or to take action, and they need to read about the topics they are studying. Therefore, teachers should incorporate all four language skills in their lessons, and oral language practice should not be sacrificed for more time on reading and writing.

The lessons in *Edge* are carefully designed for language development and integration of instruction, along with practice and application, for all four language skills. Here is how a typical literature cluster integrates reading, writing, listening, and speaking:

- **Build Background and Language** Students view a selection-related visual and learn the language associated with an important function of language, using the Language and Grammar Lab.
- **Make a Connection** Students discuss or write about the upcoming selection-related topic.
- **Learn Key Vocabulary** Students participate in listening to, discussing, and writing key vocabulary in advance of reading the selection.
- **Read and Respond to the Selection** After previewing the selection and building additional background about the author, topic, or other context of the selection, students read and/or listen to a professional recording of the selection. Then they write responses that connect the reading to the theme and essential question of the unit.
- **Integrate the Language Arts** Explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction after reading—built into the student books and augmented with full teaching tools in the Language and Grammar Lab—facilitate appropriate usage of the four language skills.

## 2. Teach the Components and Processes of Reading and Writing

Adolescent ELLs who do not read or write in any language must be taught the components of reading, beginning with phonemic awareness and phonics (the sounds of a language and how the sounds together form words) and adding vocabulary, text comprehension, and fluency (August & Shanahan, 2006). If students can read in their native language, knowledge and usage of many of these components will transfer to English. But, it is useful to discuss areas of transfer explicitly and also target differences between that language and English, such as some of the English sounds that do not exist in other languages (e.g., Spanish has no phoneme *sh*). Students must also learn vocabulary and syntax, of course, to make sense of text. Plus, they need explicit instruction about reading comprehension strategies (Bernhardt, 2005; Garcia & Godina, 2004). The comprehension strategies for second language learners are the same as those for native English speakers.

After adolescent ELLs acquire basic literacy skills, they need to actively use reading and writing processes, such as previewing, paraphrasing, inferring, brainstorming, drafting, and editing. Researchers have found that adolescent ELL literacy is enhanced when teens are taught using a process-based approach (Garcia & Godina, 2004; Valdés, 1999) and engaged in academic and “real-life” reading and writing. The process creates awareness about the functions of language, and the reflection inherent in the process helps students practice highly abstract thinking that is essential for success in high school and beyond.

*Edge* has been built to teach reading and writing to English language learners strategically. The **Fundamentals Level** allows non-readers to develop initial literacy, with its prime focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, basic vocabulary, and simpler writing tasks. Each unit of the next three volumes, **Levels A–C**, features one key reading strategy (e.g., determine importance; make connections) that is taught explicitly and practiced with multiple genres and several techniques. The *Edge Interactive* reading practice book lets students have hands-on experience with the text by, for example, highlighting key passages, jotting notes in margins, brainstorming ideas for a written response to literature, and more.

Across each level, six major writing projects are presented that address a variety of academic genres and each of the traits of good writing.

### 3. Focus on Vocabulary Development

Research has shown how important a robust vocabulary is. Adequate reading comprehension depends on knowing 90–95% of the words in a text (Nagy & Scott, 2000), and students with better vocabularies tend to be more successful on tests and other measures of achievement. Among native speakers of English, it has been shown that eighth graders, on average, have a reading vocabulary of 25,000 word families; twelfth graders, a reading vocabulary of 50,000 word families (Graves, 2006). A word family is a basic word and all of its other forms and meanings. So the word family for *run* includes *run, ran, running, runner, run into, run on, run over*, and the like.

We know that teaching vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) and English language learners (Carlo et al., 2004). However, for ELLs, especially those who begin the study of English in secondary school, there is a lot more vocabulary to learn than teachers can reasonably teach. Therefore, we need to instruct students in word learning and word awareness strategies and in cognate recognition and use. We have to help them develop knowledge of words, word parts, and word relationships so they understand topics in a content area and develop strong reading comprehension and test-taking skills (Graves, 2006).

Students can learn new words through a variety of methods. Visuals, graphic organizers, demonstrations, and other instructional aids help students better understand and remember words and their meanings. Also helpful are word attack techniques, such as identifying words in English that are similar and related to those in the student's native language and inferring the meaning of a word based on context clues and structural analysis (August, 2003; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Teachers must teach multiple meanings of words and help students incorporate words into their

expressive vocabularies. Some researchers have found that students need 12 practice sessions with a word in order to comprehend it in text. For ELLs, teachers may also need to distinguish between content-specific words (e.g., *hypotenuse, equilateral*), process words (e.g., *scan, draft, clarify*), and words related to English structure (e.g., prefix, *dis-*; suffix, *-ly*) (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Graves, 2006).

*Edge* acknowledges the critical importance of vocabulary development and incorporates a wide variety of instructional techniques and daily routines to ensure students have rigorous practice with key words, academic vocabulary, and word-learning strategies. Some of the techniques include use of visual supports, graphic organizers such as semantic maps and concept charts, analysis of word structure, vocabulary games and activities, presentation of cognates, and more. Weekly oral and written reviews of the words provide the repeated practice and connect the vocabulary to the Essential Question.

### 4. Build and Activate Background Knowledge

Reading research has shown the benefit of having teachers activate students' background schema before reading a text to aid comprehension (e.g., Bernhardt, 2005). This is useful in some cases for ELLs, but not always sufficient. Many adolescent ELLs lack background knowledge of the topics taught in middle and high school content classes or have gaps in information learned. Students who have been in U.S. schools since the early grades generally have some of the background knowledge expected by teachers, textbooks, and curricula in the secondary grades, but students who are new to the United States may not. Although these students often have a great deal of background knowledge, not all of it applies to the schooling context. In these cases, teachers must explicitly build background schema.

Connecting instruction to what the learners know and then explicitly discussing how that knowledge applies to the topic at hand is a strategy all teachers should use with ELLs (Gonzalez, et al., 1993; Moje, et al., 2004). For example, immigrant students may not have studied the U.S. Civil War,

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**“Linking language instruction to real-life experiences is beneficial for ELLs.”**

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but they may have lived through a military conflict at home and that experience could give them special insight into U.S. history.

*Edge* has been designed to both build and activate background knowledge for the learners.

- To gain an understanding of the types of texts being read and their purposes, for example, the **How to Read** feature precedes the literature in each unit.
- At the beginning of every cluster of literature, teachers can use the **Language Function transparency** from the Language and Grammar Lab to both build background and language functions before reading.
- **Make a Connection** presents anticipatory tasks to make connections between what the students will read and what they know.
- **Learn Key Vocabulary**, with the Make Words Your Own routine, helps teachers develop deep word knowledge.
- With the **Look into the Text** feature in Before Reading, not only do the ELLs learn about features of genres (e.g., use of captions and illustrations in nonfiction articles, the role of character and setting in short stories), but they become familiar with a portion of the text as they do so.
- Additional background building occurs by sharing information about the selection's author or the historical context of the text.

## 5. Teach Language Through Content and Themes

A thematic approach helps students integrate language and content learning by, for example, reinforcing vocabulary through repeated use and deepening knowledge of content topics over time. Linking language instruction to real-life experiences, including the content or themes being taught in other classes, is also beneficial for ELLs (Garcia & Godina, 2004). With teacher facilitation, students can access their content knowledge to bolster their academic language development and similarly use their language skills to gain more content knowledge. Providing content- or theme-based instruction gives ELLs an important framework for assimilating new information and applying language

skills learned across the curriculum (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Garcia & Godina, 2004).

The Essential Question is the driver for each unit in *Edge*. It sets a theme for the readings and engages the students in higher-order thinking. Without a right or wrong answer, students can linger over their response, discuss possibilities, write down their ideas, change or strengthen their opinions as they gain new information and insights from the readings which touch the topic from various angles. The pairing of a main selection with a related adjunct also bolsters the students' language development, as a theme is woven across texts and vocabulary is utilized in different contexts.

## 6. Use the Native Language Strategically

One useful strategy for helping students understand difficult academic terms and content concepts is to explain the ideas in students' native language. In this way, students can develop a deeper understanding of the concepts while they are still learning the English words and expressions that define or exemplify them. If students share the same language background, they may also be able to explain concepts and terms to each other (Gumperz, Cook-Gumperz, & Szymanski, 1999).

*Edge* lessons make strategic use of the native language. Particular attention is paid to helping students recognize cognates (and false cognates), for example. Key Vocabulary glossaries and selection summaries (to build schema for reading the literature) are available on [www.hbedge.net](http://www.hbedge.net) in seven languages.

Teachers are also encouraged to link students' out-of-school literacy practices, which may be conducted in the native language, to instruction, such as during genre study (e.g., How is this poem like a popular Spanish song?), or a writing activity (e.g., how an email to a friend to persuade her to do something could be similar to a letter to a newspaper editor).

## 7. Pair Technology with Instruction

Many adolescents enjoy using technology for leisure literacy activities, writing text messages and emails, listening to songs, surfing the Web, and so forth. By incorporating technology with second language literacy practices, we can motivate the students and foster more language development (Kim & Kamil, 2004). Warschauer and colleagues



(2004) found that technology paired with other interventions, such as project-based instruction and interdisciplinary teacher teaming, related positively to adolescent ELL literacy development. Projects requiring students to partake in field work and present a product to a real audience by means of technology led to improved standardized test scores. Projects also provide opportunities for background reading, editing, and vocabulary development. The use of audio books can also support students' literacy development, as students follow along with a written text; the recordings provide students with models for pronunciation and oral fluency and can aid in vocabulary comprehension. In general, computer-based literacy instruction can promote reading and writing development for adolescent ELLs but that instruction should be scaffolded by teachers.

Technology is an integral part of *Edge*. Students have full access to its specialized Web site, the **Learning Edge**, which offers ideas and tools for the unit projects, background on the fiction selection authors, context for the nonfiction selections, research options, and many other resources. Each literature selection has been read by professional talent and is available on **audio CDs** for listening practice. The *Edge Online Coach*<sup>™</sup> is an important software tool to promote fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and text comprehension.

## 8. Motivate Adolescent ELLs Through Choice

Motivation can be a key factor in helping adolescent struggling readers be more successful in school. We have found that adolescents prefer to have opportunities to exercise choice in their learning. One option is choice of text. Students should have a wide range of diverse selections to choose from. High-interest, low-difficulty texts play a significant role in a successful adolescent ELL literacy program. Classroom libraries should include different topics, genres, and reading levels, so all students find something of interest suited to their ability. Choice of task is another way for students to become engaged. Not everyone needs to do the same assignment for every text read or skill practiced. By providing alternative tasks, teachers let students take some ownership of what they will do. Choice of partner is a third way to let adolescents get involved in their learning. From time to time, letting students pick their own partners can motivate them to do

their best on a project or activity.

*Edge* has been designed with the adolescent learner in mind. The *Edge* Library offers a diversity of texts, genres, and reading levels. Unit projects contain built-in choice of end product and grouping. Further, the Teacher Editions offer suggestions for student groupings and differentiation, based on both need and student choice.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we know from research and practice that we can help our adolescent ELLs learn academic English—and challenging core content through English—if we use research-based instructional strategies and materials in a consistent and sustained manner. The students need a program of studies that offers sequenced ESL instruction and develops academic skills that are applicable across the curriculum. They need to be exposed to a variety of text genres with targeted vocabulary development and they need to be treated like young adults who can take some responsibility for their own learning. Appropriate resources like *Edge* will help these learners and their teachers be successful in school. ❖

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# Motivating Adolescent Readers

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

**THE FIRST RECOMMENDATION** made in the *Reading Next* report on adolescent literacy is that teachers provide “direct, explicit comprehension instruction” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 4).

It sounds simple and obvious, but it’s not. Classic research by Durkin (1978) establishes that even at the early grades teachers tended to provide comprehension *assessment* rather than comprehension *instruction*. That is, teachers tend to assign work and then assess students on the basis of how well they do it.

In our study of the literate lives of adolescent boys both in and out of school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), Jeff Wilhelm and I found that the assign-and-assess approach is indeed prevalent. Only one student talked about a teacher who provided the kind of explicit instruction *Reading Next* calls for. His comments were inspiring:

**I haven’t started reading until this year pretty much. . . . I have been starting novels this year because Mrs. X kinda like assigns the homework and this is the only time it’s really been due so I’ve been reading pretty good novels now and I like John Steinbeck and stuff. A lot of novels like that get to me and Mrs. X’s been kinda showing me the road and the path. I kinda thought reading was dumb, but now I’m kinda getting more into it.**

One of the fundamental principles of *Edge* is that it provides the kind of instruction that *Reading Next* calls for and that the students in our study were looking for. It provides that instruction in two ways: through extended work with seven key strategies and particular work with specific genres.

## Share the Secrets of Reading

Margaret Meek (1983) does a wonderful job summarizing what we see as the central job of a teacher of reading or literature. She argues that as teachers we need to share the “list of secret things that all accomplished readers know, yet never talk about” (cited in Thomson 1987, p. 109). Literary theorist Peter Rabinowitz (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998) explains that some of these secret things are true across texts. But he offers a powerful caution:

**Let me stress again that . . . no particular rules of reading are universal: Different texts call upon different sets of procedures, just as putting together a bicycle and installing an internal modem require different tools and different skills. (p. 59).**

My point is this: The different demands of different kinds of texts mean that the readers must apply general reading strategies in different ways. That means both that readers need a chance to apply general strategies to a wide variety of texts and that they need to learn strategies that are specific to particular kinds of texts.

## Give Students the Strategic Edge

In *Edge*, students have repeated opportunities to work with seven robust reading strategies in stories, poetry, expository nonfiction, and many other kinds of texts. They also get a chance to explore how particular texts work through each unit’s genre focus.

A quick illustration: Readers have to make inferences in virtually every text that they read. When they read

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**“Let’s show students the road and the path to reading.”**

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stories, one particular kind of inference they have to make is about characters. That's why we work with students to recognize the kind of clues authors of stories provide to reveal their characters, for example, the characters' actions, their words, their physical appearance, how others respond to them, and so on. Readers have to make similar inferences when they read dramas, but making inferences about characters in plays depends more on dialogue. Understanding dialogue requires that readers attend to stage directions. The uniqueness of drama provides a significant challenge to readers, as the boys in our study told us: "I don't like reading plays because it's hard, it's just everything is talking." That's why we work with students to use the text features unique to drama to construct meaning (cf. Esslin, 1987).

If we want our students to be life-long readers, let's show them the "road and the path" to reading. We can't expect them to find it on their own. *Edge* is designed to do just that.

## Essential Questions

But strategy instruction alone is not enough to engage kids, according to expectancy value theory, one of the most powerfully explanatory theories I've encountered. In brief, the theory (cf. Eccles and Wigfield, 2002) holds that one's motivation is a function of both one's expectation for success and the value one places on a task. Even if the strategy instruction we provide increases students' expectation of success, they won't be motivated unless they *also* value what we are asking them to do.

One of the students who participated in our study said something in an interview that haunts us to this day:

**English is about NOTHING! It doesn't help you DO anything. English is about reading poems and telling about rhythm. It's about commas and [stuff] like that.... What does that have to DO with DOING anything? It's about NOTHING!**

His contention was echoed in one way or another by many of the other boys. This is likely a main reason that

many of them rejected the reading they were given to do in school.

But they didn't reject reading outside school. Every one of the young men in our study had an active literate life. Mark read golf magazines to straighten out his slice. Mick read model car magazines to make his model run faster. Maurice read and reread his driver's manual. Barnabas was always on the Internet looking for cheat codes for video games. Wolf was reading an investigation of the nature of evil because he wanted to have a better understanding of what might account for some of the historical events he was so fascinated by.

## EQs Make Reading Matter

*Edge* was designed to help students see that English is about something important. That's why we built our units around essential questions. EQs are the deep and abiding questions we all face as we think about our lives: Does an individual's success depend more on the individual or the environment? What keeps us together and what pulls us apart? Reading matters when it gives readers insight into questions like these. Robert Coles (1989) in *The Call of Stories* quotes a student:

**When I have some big moral issue, some question to tackle, I think I try to remember what my folks have said, or I imagine them in my situation—or even more these days I think of [characters about whom I've read]. Those folks, they're people for me... they really speak to me—there's a lot of me in them, or vice versa. I don't know how to put it, but they're voices, and they help me make choices. I hope when I decide "the big ones" they'll be in there pitching. (p. 203)**

*Edge* is built around EQs, so when students face similar questions in their lives, the texts they read will be in there pitching.

## EQs Foster Active Participation

Considering EQs requires students to be active participants in their own learning. Study after study of secondary education has noted how students are cast in the role of passive recipients of knowledge. Instead of

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**“Rich discussions result in notable improvements in comprehension.”**

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being asked to think deeply, students are often asked to fill in the blanks and to guess the answer that teachers are looking for.

Nystrand and his colleagues (1997) document how important rich discussions are. Discussions generated from what he calls authentic questions occur on average only “50 seconds per class in eighth grade and less than 15 seconds in grade 9” (p. 42). But such rich discussions resulted in significant improvements in comprehension.

One of the reasons that Nystrand and his colleagues found so few authentic discussions is the pressure teachers felt to “go somewhere” (p. 22) in their classroom discussions (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). That somewhere was usually to a shared interpretation of a text. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith’s study demonstrated that teachers often took on the role of classroom discussion leader and that students recognized and accepted their role as passive followers.

Because EQs clearly have no right answer, they provide a situation that requires students and teachers to take on new roles. Students become active agents in their learning, and teachers become part of the inquiry, too.

## EQs Promote Wide Reading

Another way that EQs foster students’ valuing the reading, writing, speaking, and listening we ask them to do is that EQs allow a wide variety of texts to be brought into conversation with each other. The big issues that EQs raise are taken up in stories and poems and Web sites and magazine articles, and on and on. Every single boy in our study was actively engaged in literacy, though most often they were not engaged with texts in school. Other researchers have come to similar conclusions (cf., Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2000). *Edge* provides students an opportunity to use text types that they value to shed light on the issues raised in literary texts. ❖

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has focused his research on how experienced readers read and talk about texts, as well as what motivates adolescents’ reading and writing both in and out of school. He has written

eight books and monographs, including “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys”: *Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, for which he and his co-author received the 2003 David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English, and *Going with the Flow: How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in Their Literacy Learning*.



# Teaching Writing to Adolescents

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

**IN THEIR ANALYSIS OF THE STATE** of writing instruction in the United States, Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer (2006) share this “disturbing” finding: “. . . students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length” (p. ii). Further, despite some increase in attention to writing, students’ performance on the NAEP test have been “remarkably” stable over time and not very good. The National Commission of Writing notes that few students are able to write “precise, engaging, and coherent” prose. In fact, only 27% of White students, 8% of African American students, and 13% of Latino/a students scored at or above proficient on the 2002 NAEP writing assessment.

## Best Practices for Teaching Writing

It seems clear that things need to change, and, fortunately, there is widespread agreement on the nature of that change. The National Commission on Writing reports that there was “broad consensus” among panel members that effective writing instruction

- encourage[s] students to bring the languages, experiences, and images of their home communities into the classroom to be used as resources in service of student learning
- position[s] students and teachers as both co-inquirers and co-learners, a process that allow[s] teachers to model inquiry, study, and learning for their students
- ask[s] students to use writing to collect, analyze, synthesize, and communicate information and opinions, since “writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge.
- call[s] on students to draft, compose, and revise a variety of writings for a variety of audiences, purposes, and occasions
- require[s] students to use all the language arts all at once and all together in the service of sharing ideas
- encourages students to make their writing public beyond the classroom, so as to gain a better understanding of how literacy works in the world.

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**“Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge.”**

—from *The Neglected “R”:  
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*Edge* does all of these things. Each unit provides a variety of opportunities to compose extended texts, in addition to a culminating writing project. A look at the features of those projects demonstrates how *Edge*’s instruction is in line with what we know about best practices.

### 1. Connect In-School and Out-of-School Literacies

The National Commission on Writing calls for curricula to build bridges between students’ in-school and out-of-school lives. *Edge* does so. Each writing project begins by asking students to “Connect Writing to Your Life.” This section of the projects is designed to help students recognize that many of the abilities required by writing are ones they demonstrate in their everyday lives.

As the father of two teenage daughters, I’ve always been struck by how odd it is that report after report finds that high school students have difficulty

writing argumentative papers when it seems that all my kids ever do is argue with me. They just don't seem to transfer their extensive experience with oral argumentation to written argument. The Connect Writing to Your Life feature invites them to make that crucial connection.

## 2. Teachers as Co-Inquirers, not Examiners

The National Commission on Writing calls for teachers to be co-inquirers with their students. However, according to Applebee's (1981) classic study of writing in the secondary school, the bulk of the writing that students do is to teachers as examiners. Embedding the writing that students do in units built around Essential Questions demonstrates to students that they are not writing to parrot what their teacher has said. One of the participants in Jeff Wilhelm and my study of the literate lives of young men both in and out of school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006) said to us:

**“I can't stand writing if I've been put on a line and if I walk outside of it something happens. I like to be able to just kind of go off in my own little rampage of self-expression.”**

Each unit writing project in *Edge* casts students in the role of authors who have a contribution to make to the on-going classroom conversation. Of course, teachers will want to assess that writing, but it won't be on the basis of whether it provides the single correct answer for which the teacher is looking.

## 3. Emphasize Developing Knowledge

The National Commission on Writing calls for students to collect and analyze information. Each writing project provides opportunity for doing so. The research of George Hillocks, Jr., establishes why doing so is so important. Hillocks (1986a, 1986b, 1995) points out that a crucial component of writing—developing procedures for generating content—is largely neglected in schools. But it's not neglected in *Edge*. Students are asked to do

interviews, memory probes, and a variety of other kinds of more traditional research.

## 4. Write for a Variety of Audiences and Purposes

The National Commission on Writing calls on students to compose a variety of kinds of texts for a variety of audiences and purposes. *Edge* provides the opportunity to compose a wide variety of different kinds of writing: position papers, persuasive essays, memoirs, short stories, and on and on. Some of these are formal projects in which students are helped to plan, draft, and revise their work, but others are part of unit projects, with peers or the public as an audience, or are responses to literature, purely for the student's own reflection. Composing such a wide variety of texts is extremely important because it helps students to consider how to transfer what they have learned from doing one kind of writing to their work on other kinds of writing.

As Haskell (2000) points out, the evidence on how well transfer is achieved paints a pretty bleak picture. He puts it this way:

**Despite the importance of transfer of learning, research findings over the past nine decades clearly show that as individuals, and as educational institutions, we have failed to achieve transfer of learning on any significant level. (p. xiii)**

To remedy this problem, he calls for teachers to cultivate a spirit of transfer. The writing projects in *Edge* work to develop this spirit of transfer by providing a similar structure for each writing task. Each project takes students through prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing. Different projects may teach students to use different tools; for example, the prewriting sections of different projects teach students how to use lists, graphic organizers, outlines, and charts in their prewriting. However, crucial conceptual understandings are reinforced in all projects: the importance of planning, the need to develop one's

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**“Edge casts students in the role of authors who have a contribution to make to the on-going classroom conversation.”**

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ideas, the significance of analyzing one's audience, the difference between revision and proofreading, and so on.

## 5. Integrate the Language Arts

The National Commission on Writing calls on students to employ all of the language arts in service of sharing their ideas. In *Edge* they do so. At the beginning of every unit, students are invited to participate in a unit project to explore the Essential Question. These projects vary widely, across print and non-print end projects, from Podcasts, documentaries, and television shows to magazines and ad campaigns. Smagorinsky's research (cf., 1997; Smagorinsky, & Coppock, 1995; Smagorinsky, Zoss, & Reed, 2006) has documented the rich critical engagements that can be fostered by composing non-traditional texts. Moreover, the writing projects themselves call for students to employ other language arts. Students talk in peer editing groups and do interviews. They use visual planning tools like webs as well as multimedia texts.

## 6. Make Writing Public

Finally, the National Commission on Writing encourages students to make their writing public. Each project provides a variety of suggestions to enable students to do just that.

## 7. Marry Meaning with Mechanics

One subject on which the National Commission's delineation of best practices is silent is correctness. Although the Commission rightly argues that good writing is much, much more than correct writing, throughout the report the Commission does recognize that writing correctly does matter. We strongly agree. Therefore, even as *Edge* helps students learn to share complex thinking through engaging prose, it helps them learn the correctness conventions they need to keep their audience focused on their ideas and not on their errors.

Many studies have clearly established that teaching grammar and usage through skill and drill approaches that are isolated from students' writing is ineffective (cf. Hillocks, 1986a, Hillocks & Smith, 2003; Smith, Cheville, & Hillocks, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2007). Such isolated grammatical instruction not only doesn't help students, it actually hurts them, both because it takes instructional time away from more effective instructional approaches

and because it sours their attitude toward their English classes.

*Edge* embeds instruction in correctness into the work that students are doing on their own writing. Each writing project has several focal correctness areas. For example, the instruction on autobiographical narratives includes instruction on capitalization, punctuating quotations, homonym confusion, and sentence completion. Students are given instruction and practice and are then provided with an immediate opportunity to apply what they learned to their own writing.

Think about the students for whom this series is intended. Many of them will be plagued by a wide variety of correctness problems. And these problems will have persisted despite the fact that those students have been in school for years. A scattershot approach that tries to focus on every error in every paper is sure to be frustrating both to teachers and to students. It won't improve writing, but, as research on writing apprehension (cf. Hillocks, 1986a) suggests, it might shut students' writing down. Marrying meaning with mechanics is sure to be more effective.

## Conclusion

In short, *Edge* provides instruction that will help students become more competent and compelling writers, abilities that are crucially important both in and out of school. ❖

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skills, and dispositions experienced readers and writers need as well as what motivates adolescents' reading and writing outside school. He uses these analyses to think about how to design more effective curricula and instruction. In Dr. Smith's latest book with co-author Jeffrey Wilhelm, *Getting It Right: Fresh Approaches to Teaching Grammar, Usage, and Correctness* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), he explores ways of helping students achieve correctness, while also maintaining confidence and communicating important ideas.

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As the father of two teenage daughters, I’ve always been struck by how odd it is that report after report finds that high school students have difficulty

# Enabling Texts: Texts That Matter

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

**WHILE VISITING A BOSTON** public school, I asked more than 120 teenagers to construct their textual lineages, that is, a visual representation of texts that they have found to be significant in their lives. On average, the students identified two texts that held significance throughout their entire, albeit young, teenage lives. The reasons the text held significance converge on three major themes: **personal connection**, **empathy**, and **identity shaping**. The following comments provided by the students illustrated the three themes:

**I love *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998) because it's something that has to do with me and the girls in that book act like me.**

**The book, *Forged by Fire* (Draper, 1998), is a book that all young black males can relate to of how your life can go from negative to positive.**

**Just like any other book, *Tears of Tiger* (Draper, 1994) got me reading more and got me crying.**

**I like a *Child Called "It"* (Pelzer, 1995) because I learned that my life is not so bad compared to other people, especially David's.**

**The poem, "Our Deepest Fear" (Williamson, 1992) had me rethinking myself because I fear a lot.**

**I like the poem "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou (1995) because it reflects the pride of women and how they don't care what others think about the way they look.**

Sadly, however, more than 30% of the adolescents did not identify a single text they found significant.

Several of the students explained they did not believe they were encountering challenging, meaningful texts. One student shared, "It ain't going down. I don't see how just reading is going to help me, I need something more academic." Another student offered, "We need to learn harder vocabulary. [The vocabulary] is the same we learned in elementary school." The students were complaining about the text because "teachers [were giving] books that were boring and when the class [didn't] want to read, [the teachers] [got] aggravated."

The students ascribed the absence of meaningful texts in their lives to teachers' refusal to acknowledge their day-to-day realities couched in their adolescent, cultural, and gender identities. A young man offered

that "I need to read interesting topics like teen drama, violence, something you can relate your life or other people's lives to." A young woman commented, "They give us different books than we would read; the books are boring."

Summing up the sentiments that many of the adolescents held towards texts disconnected from one or several of their identities, a student shared, "I read them, but I do not care what they say." This reflects a stark contrast to the students who found value and direction in the text, as reflected in this young woman's

comment, "*The Skin I'm In* reminds me of real life in school. A girl so black in school, and she wanted to kill herself. If I was in her school, I would be her friend. Even the teacher hated her."

High school students need and benefit from a wide range of texts that challenge them to contextualize and examine their in-school and out-of-school lives. I agree

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**“Instead of trying to score with reading, schools have focused on increasing reading scores.”**

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with Apple (1990) who argues that ignoring text that dominates school curricula as being simply not worthy of serious attention and serious struggle is to live in a world divorced from reality. He asserts that texts need to be situated in the larger social movements of which they are a part.

However, in an era of accountability, where the focus is placed on research-based instructional practices, the texts that adolescents find meaningful and significant to their development are being severely compromised. Instead of trying to score with reading, schools have focused on increasing reading scores. This is problematic because texts can be used to broker positive, meaningful relationships with struggling adolescent readers during reading instruction.

## Powerful Texts

It is prudent to use a combination of powerful texts, in tandem with powerful reading instruction, to influence the literacy development and lives of adolescents. Texts should be selected with a clearer audit of the struggling adolescent reader, many of whom are suffering from an underexposure to text that they find meaningful. These students need exposure to *enabling* texts (Tatum, in press). An enabling text is one that moves beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include an academic, cultural, emotional, and social focus that moves students closer to examining issues they find relevant to their lives. For example, texts can be used to help high school students wrestling with the question, What am I going to do with the rest of my life? This is a question most adolescents find essential as they engage in shaping their identities.

The texts selected for *Edge* are enabling texts. First, they serve as the vehicle for exploring essential questions, but secondly, the texts are diverse—from classics that have inspired readers for decades (Shakespeare, Frost, St. Vincent Millay, Saki, de Maupassant, Poe, et al.) to contemporary fiction that reflects the diversity of the U.S. (Allende, Alvarez, Angelou, Bruchac, Cisneros, Ortiz Cofer, Soto, Tan, et al.).

The texts are also diverse in subject matter and genre, exploring issues of personal identity as well as cultural and social movements. Here are just a few examples of selections in *Edge* that deal with personal identity:

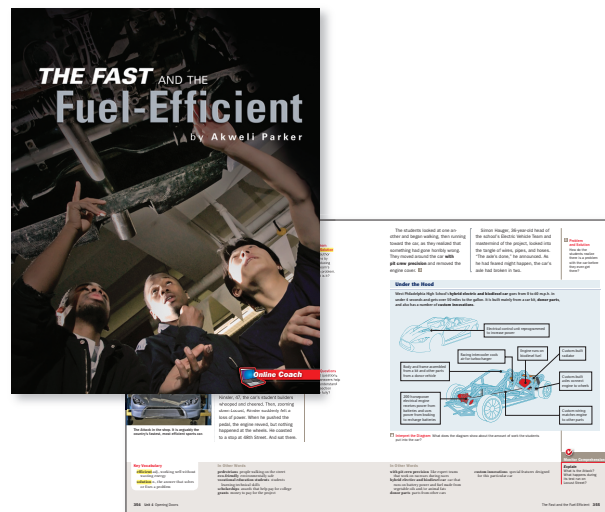
- “Who We Really Are”—being a foster child
- “Curtis Aikens and the American Dream”—overcoming illiteracy
- “Nicole”—being biracial
- “My English,” “Voices of America,” “La Vida

Robot”—being an immigrant to the U.S. And here are just a few examples of selections dealing with social and cultural issues:

- “Long Walk to Freedom”—overthrowing apartheid



“My English” reflects on the immigrant experience.



Teens develop eco-friendly cars.



Art has the power to build bridges.

- “Hip-Hop as Culture” and “Slam: Performance Poetry Lives On”—the power of art to build bridges and shape culture
- “Violence Hits Home”—how young people are working to stop gang violence
- “The Fast and the Fuel Efficient”—how teens are developing eco-friendly cars.

Unfortunately, many high school students who struggle with reading are encountering texts that are characteristically *disabling*. A disabling text reinforces a student’s perception of being a struggling reader. A disabling text also ignores students’ local contexts and their desire as adolescents for self-definition. Disabling texts do not move in the direction of closing the reading achievement gap in a class-based, language-based, and race-based society in which many adolescents are underserved by low-quality literacy instruction.

It is important to note that meaningful texts, although important, are not sufficient to improve literacy instruction for adolescents. High school students who struggle with reading and lack the skills and strategies to handle text independently need support to become engaged with the text.

## Powerful Instruction

One of the most powerful techniques is to *use the text to teach the text*. This is a productive approach to help struggling readers become engaged. It simply means that the teacher presents a short excerpt of the upcoming reading selection—before reading—and then models skills or strategies with that text. For example, if the instructional goal is to have students understand how an author uses characterization, the teacher could use an excerpt of the text to introduce the concept.

There are several pedagogical and student benefits associated with using the text to teach the text, namely nurturing fluency and building background knowledge. Because students are asked to examine an excerpt of a text they will see again later as they read independently, rereading has been embedded. Rereadings are effective for nurturing fluency for students who struggle with decoding and for English language learners. Secondly, the students are introduced to aspects of Langston Hughes; writing that will potentially shape their reading of the text. Having background knowledge improves reading comprehension. Using the text to teach the text provides a strategic advantage for struggling readers while allowing teachers to introduce the text and strategies together. It is a win-win situation for both teacher and student.

Figure 1



An example of using the text to teach the text before reading—a powerful instructional technique.

## Conclusion

It is difficult for many teachers to engage struggling adolescent readers with text. I hear the common refrain, “These kids just don’t want to read.” There are several reasons adolescents refuse to read. Primary among them are a lack of interest in the texts and a lack of requisite skills and strategies for handling the text independently.

It is imperative to identify and engage students with texts that pay attention to their multiple identities. It is equally imperative to grant them entry into the texts by providing explicit skill and strategy instruction. The texts should be as diverse as the students being taught. The texts should also challenge students to wrestle with questions they find significant. This combination optimizes shaping students’ literacies along with shaping their lives, an optimization that informs *Edge*. ❖

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### Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

began his career as an eighth-grade teacher, later becoming a reading specialist and discovering the power of texts to reshape the life outcomes of struggling readers.

His current research focuses on the literacy development of African American adolescent males (*Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*, 2005, and “Building the Textual Lineages of African American Male Adolescents,” 2007), and he provides teacher professional development to urban middle and high schools.

# Capturing the Readers, Not Responses

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

**AS I PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL** development to secondary teachers, I find the following scenario typical:

A ninth-grade teacher informs me that her students have difficulty responding to the questions she constructs to assess their comprehension. I ask, “What is causing the difficulty?” She responds, “They have difficulty with critical thinking questions and making inferences.” I then ask, “Why are they having problems with the critical thinking questions and making inferences?” She responds, “I do not know. They do not understand the materials.”

In this scenario, the teacher has been constructing assessment questions and capturing the students’ responses. It is clear that the students have difficulty responding to those questions. However, it is less clear why the students are struggling with the questions. This suggests that the teacher has not been able to “capture” the reader—that is see into the reader’s thinking processes to understand the source of the reader’s struggles.

Here is another example. Read the test passage and answer choices:

Very little was known about the structure of living matter until the development of the light microscope. Then Robert Hooke, an English scientist, made an important discovery in 1665 while using a simple microscope that he designed. He observed tiny, orderly spaces in a thin slice of cork, a type of dead plant material. These spaces reminded him of the small rooms in which monks lived. So he gave the tiny spaces the same name as the small rooms, cells.

Robert Hooke discovered

- a. a simple microscope
- b. tiny, orderly spaces in cork
- c. small rooms used by monks

Out of a group of 132 students, 53% of the students (n=70) identified *b* as the correct answer choice. However, 46% of the students (n=61) identified *a*, an incorrect response, as their answer choice. A brief diagnosis can be made for the students who answered the question incorrectly by looking at the passage and the question. They saw the same words in answer choice *a* – *simple microscope* – and the sentence with the name *Robert Hooke* and the word *discovery*. As a result, a relatively high percentage of students answered the question incorrectly. On the other hand, 53% of the students were able to use information from several different sentences to answer the question correctly. These are patterns that are helpful to analyze. Not only will teachers begin to capture the students’ responses, but they will begin to capture the reader as well.

There is often a thin line between capturing students’ reading responses and capturing the reader. A student’s response to a comprehension question indicates how well that student performs on an assessment. A score or a grade can be easily generated. However, identifying students’ reading-related strengths and weaknesses is more complex. Different students can answer the same question incorrectly for different reasons. For example:

- Christopher may provide a wrong answer for a question because of his over-reliance on decoding and his failure to pay attention to the structure of the text. He may view reading as a word-calling task.
- Sarah may fail to monitor her comprehension while reading. She may be interested in finishing the text and hope that she understands the material when she finishes. This may result in her failure to use fix-up strategies.
- Sidney, however, may not be familiar with the relationships between questions and answers and may not know that his background knowledge is important when reading materials.



This may cause him to look for the same words in the text and the comprehension questions as a strategy to respond to comprehension questions.

Each readers' concepts of reading can help him or her in some situations, but can adversely impact reading comprehension in others.

## How to “Capture the Reader”

As noted in *Reading for the 21st Century: Adolescent Literacy Teaching and Learning Strategies* (Kamil, 2003), about 10% of students enter middle and high school with reading problems that stem from not having mastered the alphabetic principle. The majority of struggling readers at high school do not view reading favorably because they lack successful experiences. These students are often not motivated to read. Other students can decode text, but they have difficulty comprehending texts written at their assigned grade level. Many of these students have “survival” strategies or use avoidance mechanisms to protect their identities as adolescents and to avoid the stigma of being viewed as a struggling reader. Many of these struggling readers have experienced reading-related failures over the years and are not open to receiving support from teachers because they believe failure is inevitable. In most cases, they attribute failure to ability, not effort. These issues make capturing the reader difficult. However, four considerations should be honored when assessing these students in order to provide responsive instruction.

### 1. Establish a Trusting Relationship

For many students, it is painful not knowing how to read. They know that they are falling behind their peers. To mitigate their problems and protect their identities, they often resist instruction and assessment until a personal rapport is established with the teacher. These students will begin to discuss feelings about their reading problems when they establish kinship with an adult they perceive as being responsive and caring. At this point, teachers can then begin to have conversation about the dilemmas associated with reading problems.

### 2. Allow Students to Fail and Recover

It is important to help adolescent students attribute their reading difficulties to effort or lack of strategy use, *not* to lack of ability. Give them opportunities to practice their strategy use under non-threatening conditions. Answering comprehension questions should not be a one-time proposition. Students should be made aware that some questions will not be graded, but rather used to give feedback about what they can do to increase their comprehension.

The *Edge Online Coach*<sup>TM</sup> is very useful in this regard, since it allows students to read at their own pace, to choose appropriate supports, to answer comprehension questions, to get feedback and hints, and then to attempt the question again. The software provides opportunities for students to both experience success and receive corrective, responsive feedback. The privacy of one student and one computer also helps lower students' affective filters and encourages them to take risks.

However, students must also be made aware that they will be held accountable for answering the same types of questions independently for a grade, as on the Cluster and Unit Tests provided with *Edge*.

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“‘Capturing’ the reader means seeing into the reader’s thinking process to understand the source of the reader’s struggles.”

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### 3. Involve Students in the Assessment Process

The voices of adolescents are valuable to the assessment process. They can provide insights into the variables contributing to their reading difficulties. When I was teaching, I went to conferences and read professional materials to find ways to engage my students with text. Then, it dawned on me one day to ask the students. They provided answers that allowed me to support them. They told me that they loved the reading materials and were learning a lot, but they had difficulty with the vocabulary, suffered from fear of embarrassment, and had limited experiences in school reading the types of lengthy pieces they were being asked to read. They also offered that no one expected them to succeed.

As a result of hearing their voices, I learned that students are in a good position to help teachers craft responsive instruction. However, this information is often not given voluntarily by the students. A sincere effort must be made by teachers to invoke and honor the voices of adolescents. Their voices are valuable resources for identifying the challenges they face when reading. Use the **Reader Reflection** affective and metacognitive measures, provided for every reading assignment in *Edge*, as one way of invoking students' voices and listening to their own ideas about their reading power.

#### 4. Assess Strategically

Here are four techniques that are built into *Edge*, which will help you reveal students' comprehension of texts:

- Ask students frequently to find supporting evidence in the text that shaped their responses.
- Give frequent daily and weekly practice with and feedback on students' use of reading strategies.
- Ask metacognitive questions that target the use of reading skills and strategies and therefore provide a picture into how students are using (or not using) those key strategies.
- Develop in students the practice of self-questioning.

With these strategies in place, you will be much more equipped to capture the reader, and not just the reader's response.

## Conclusion

Providing quality instructional support for struggling adolescent readers depends on assessment practices. All too often, struggling adolescent readers have little understanding of why they have difficulty comprehending text. *Edge* has been designed to help teachers "capture" adolescent readers, to give them chances to fail and recover, and to involve students in the assessment process. These assessment practices yield information that leads to responsive literacy teaching. ❖

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