Think Aloud for Comprehension

We believe that given the right time and supports all students can learn to their full potential. Think Alouds are one such example.

What is a Think Aloud for Comprehension and what is its purpose?

Think Alouds for Comprehension provide an opportunity to share with students the use of comprehension processes or strategies as the teacher gathers meaning from written text. In nonfiction Think Alouds for Comprehension, this includes describing to students how to determine the main idea or the author’s purpose, use the author’s organization of text to help make meaning, how to access and use prior knowledge, and how reading often creates new questions that need to be answered. In a Think Aloud for Comprehension, the teacher is modeling for students how to gather meaning from text, while explicitly telling/modeling for students the comprehension process or strategy being used to understand the author’s message. This also includes how the teacher thinks about or approaches the task of gathering meaning using that strategy.

The Think Aloud is a self-analysis strategy that provides a way for students to identify the types of thought processes or strategies they encounter during reading. The Think Aloud for Comprehension process reveals to the students the strategies that are not a part of the reader’s conscious experience. Strong readers approach a text with confidence and competence in using reading strategies (e.g., self-monitoring, predicting, making connections, questioning, summarizing, etc.) that lead to deeper comprehension or meaning making. The Think Aloud process helps students to recognize which of these strategies they already use and which they need to build into their own reading repertoire.

One of the major instructional purposes for using nonfiction Think Alouds for Comprehension is to model the use of reading comprehension processes and strategies for students; however, the long-range goal is to have students use these processes and strategies themselves. In order to do this, they need many practice opportunities doing their own Think Alouds across a wide range of text. These opportunities to practice fit within the notion of Gradual Release of Responsibility (Calhoun, 2001).
What should be consistent about Think Alouds for Comprehension?

Student data should be the consistent starting point when planning for instruction and the learning environment. The teacher always uses student data, along with curriculum outcomes, as a foundation for planning targeted learning experiences for students.

In order to help students gain control over a repertoire of key skills and strategies, the skills and strategies need to be explicitly taught and practiced using the following steps:

- Introduce and explain the purpose of the strategy.
- Demonstrate and model its use.
- Provide guided practice for students to apply the skill or strategy with feedback from peers and/or the teacher.
- Allow students to apply the skill or strategy independently and in teams.
- Regularly reflect on the appropriate use of both the Think Aloud for Comprehension strategy, and the skills or strategies being targeted.
- Assess the students’ ability to transfer the repertoire of skills or strategies with less and less teacher prompting over time. (Saskatchewan Curriculum, 2010) (Wiggins and McTighe, 2007)
- As with other powerful teaching and learning strategies, it is important to co-construct anchor charts focused on the Think Aloud for Comprehension and ensure it is visible and posted in the classroom.

How will teachers know when they are effectively and deeply implementing Think Alouds for Comprehension?

- Students will be able to explain their thinking and thought processes more clearly.
- Students may be more emotionally invested in their reading.
- Students will be able to name the strategy they are using and explain how it helps them as a reader and what to do when they are stuck.
- More frequently, students may be observed in partnered or small group situations where they are using the Think Aloud strategy without prompting from a teacher or other adult.
- The teachers will frequently use the Think Aloud for Comprehension in the classroom – likely on a daily basis.
- The use of this strategy will begin to feel “second nature” to the teacher over time.
How is the consistent practice of Think Alouds for Comprehension supported in the literature or in research?

- Since 2000, it is rare that a person would read a professional text about reading comprehension without finding sections in that book or article that describe the power of the Think Aloud strategy.

- Looking closely at students’ responses, conferring, listening carefully, and making notes about what they say – gives me a clear indication of where they are as learners... [When using the Think Aloud], I learn which students are ready to move forward into more challenging or different types of text (Miller, 2002).

- Think Alouds ensure that the hallmarks of engaged reading don’t remain a big secret to a single child in our classrooms (Wilhelm, 2001).

- The Think Aloud for Comprehension reveals to students the “secrets” of how to make meaning out of a text. “Imagine learning to dance when the dancers around you are invisible. Imagine learning a sport when the players who already know the game can’t be seen. Bizarre as this may sound, something close to it happens all the time in this very important area of learning: learning to think” (Perkins, 2003).

- The Think Aloud helps readers think about how they make meaning. As students read, they pause occasionally to think aloud...This oral thinking not only helps the teacher understand how or why but also allows the student to analyze how s/he is thinking about reading. (Beers, 2003)

- Thinking aloud is the single most important teaching tactic at our disposal. It is different from modeling or demonstrating - it provides direct access to the readers’ mind allowing children to observe how understanding comes about. The Think Aloud is a powerful way of making a student's thinking visible to others. (Keene and Zimmerman, 2007)

- Several studies have shown that students who verbalize their reading strategies and thoughts while reading score significantly higher on comprehension tests (Oster, 2001).
What does the teacher do or who can they talk to for support with Think Alouds for Comprehension?

- Other teachers in their school
- Talk to the school’s teacher librarian
- The staff development teams
- Your administrative team
- The Literacy for Life Portal
- Professional Reading
- Resources (see below)

What evidence will the teacher have that Think Alouds for Comprehension are making a difference in student learning outcomes?

- Students will increasingly be able to speak with confidence about how they are making meaning from text selections.
- Products, observations and conversations will indicate that students are reaching deeper and deeper levels of comprehension while reading.
- Students may begin to use, in their own writing, some of the techniques or features from texts they are reading.
- Students will be able to do a Think Aloud for Comprehension on their own.
- Scores on comprehension assessments will increase.
- Students may begin reading more during leisure time because they are finding more joy and satisfaction from reading.
- More frequently, students may be observed in partnered or small group situations where they are using the Think Aloud strategy without prompting from a teacher or other adult.

Resource List

- Wilhelm, Jeffrey. 2001. Improving Comprehension with Think Aloud Strategies. Scholastic