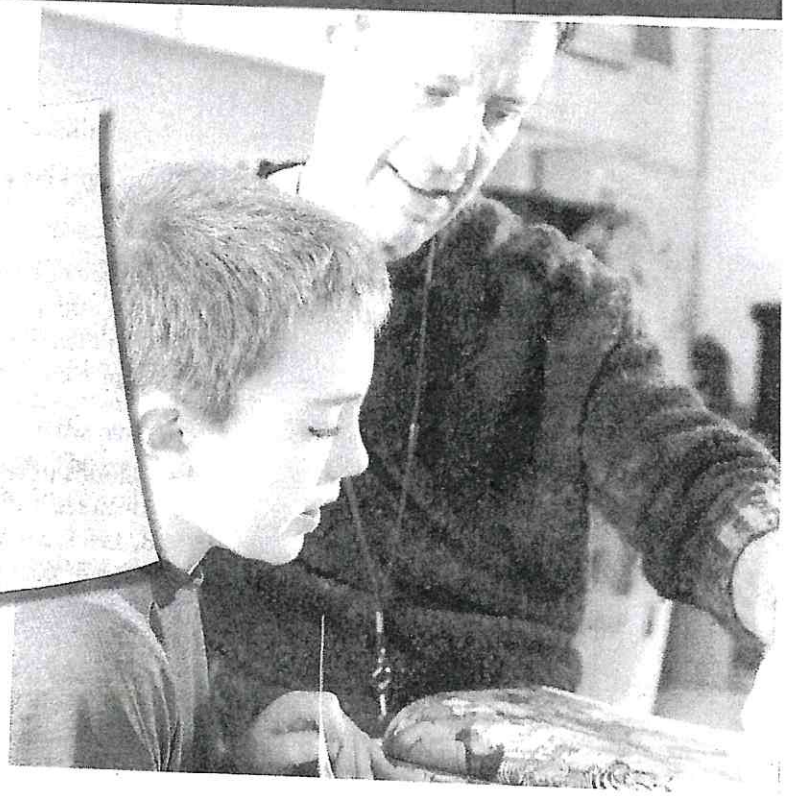
Think Big with Think Alouds

CHAPTER 2

Think Aloud With Focus

Five Comprehension Strategies That Go the Distance



© Rick Harrington Photography

Let me start this chapter with a golden oldie that taps into a teaching truth—"Time in a Bottle" by singer-songwriter Jim Croce. Though I was not yet born when it became a megahit, it somehow is in my emotional DNA. The line "But there never seems to be enough time to do the things you want to do once you find them" especially gets me. It is so darn true, and gets truer with each passing year. Time *is* the most valuable commodity. On a day-to-day work basis, teachers feel this especially acutely, with the needs of dozens of learners tugging at the instructional minutes each school day.

Add to that the long list of instructional priorities bombarding teachers and that "urgency" and "efficiency" and "accountability" are values du jour, and it's no wonder my pre-service and in-service teachers often say to me, "How do I find the time for this?"

The answer is: We make time by boldly, honestly jettisoning classroom practices and activities that don't have strong support from either published research or our own data. We prioritize the relevant, useful methods and strategies that yield positive outcomes for student learning. In my role as a teacher educator, I often say, "These are the ones that give the most instructional bang for our buck." By this, I mean strategies that are easy to plan and implement, that generate meaningful conversations and interactions around the classroom, and that leave a lasting impact on student learning. Think alouds fit all of these criteria.

How Think Alouds Benefit Our Readers

When teachers think aloud, students benefit. According to Lapp, Fisher, and Grant (2008),

> [a]n interactive think aloud provides a means for modeling, scaffolding, and practicing. It offers struggling readers the opportunity to see and hear how proficient readers approach a text, and it allows advanced students to engage in conversations that draw on their prior knowledge. (p. 378)

Effective teacher think alouds positively impact student achievement. The research spans three decades and is compelling (e.g., Anderson & Roit, 1993; Bereiter & Bird, 1985; Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Ortlieb & Norris, 2012; Schunk & Rice, 1985; Silvén & Vauras, 1992; Ward & Traweek, 1993). Think alouds are effective for children of all ages, from preschool (Dorl, 2007) to secondary levels (Coiro, 2011; Lapp et al., 2008). Think aloud instruction benefits students across text formats and genres: in online text (Coiro, 2008; Kymes, 2005), in narrative text (Dymock, 2007), and in informational text (Coiro, 2011; Lapp et al., 2008; Ortlieb & Norris, 2012). Equally promising are the effects of think alouds on struggling readers (Anderson & Roit, 1993; Migyanka, Policastro, & Lui, 2005; Smith, 2006) and on English language learners (Ghaith & Obeid, 2004; McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007). More specifically, there are three patterns among the research into how readers benefit from teacher-generated think alouds.

Think alouds prepare students to apply reading comprehension strategies to independent reading. Perhaps the most obvious reason that teachers think aloud is to model their reading moves and steps so that readers will adopt similar strategies in their independent reading. Just as I model good table manners at a restaurant, in hopes that my daughter will see my choices and emulate my behavior, teachers can do the same with their reading behaviors in their classrooms. Block (2004) surveyed 630 second through sixth graders, asking them what their teachers could do to help them better comprehend. Students most frequently responded that they wanted teachers to better explain their reading processes. More specifically, they wanted teachers to explain "just about everything that they did in their minds to comprehend." Similarly, English language learners and struggling readers requested think alouds from their teachers (Garcia, 2002). While conducting think alouds in a science text with kindergartners, Ortlieb and Norris (2012) found that students who received think aloud instruction outperformed their peers in the control group on reading comprehension scores. When teachers model how they address unfamiliar vocabulary, challenging concepts, and complicated text

features, they build their students' ability to succeed in these challenges (Lapp et al., 2008).

Think alouds promote readers' self-efficacy and metacognition. Psychologist Albert Bandura defined self-efficacy as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. Bandura (1977) proposed that people with stronger efficacy beliefs are more likely to attempt novel tasks and experiences. A 2012 research article by Kadir Yoğurtçu posited that readers with high self-efficacy are more likely to develop reading strategies that are "effective, interactive, strategic, and quick" (p. 382). As our students witness us talking through the troublesome spots in a text, they increase in their ability to do the same. The more adept they are at applying comprehension strategies to text, the more confident in their reading skills our students become.

Think alouds help readers think about their own thinking. Readers who comprehend are metacognitive, or aware of their own processes. Flavell (1976) defined metacognition as "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products" (p. 232). In metacognitive reading experiences, readers are aware of any comprehension failures and which strategies they apply to comprehend a text. Inherently, successful readers are more metacognitive than less successful readers (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1994). Furthermore, metacognition plays an important role in reading motivation. Logically, readers who struggle to comprehend lack an awareness of fix-it strategies to help repair their comprehension; poor comprehension can decrease students' motivation to read (Israel & Massey, 2005).

Think alouds build student engagement by turning passive readers into active readers. A 1996 article by Shelby J. Barrentine explains that "many teachers are dissatisfied with straight-through storybook readings that relegate listeners to a passive role" (p. 36). Another key point about think alouds: our students like them! Ivey and Broaddus (2001) reported that middle schoolers were more likely to stay engaged and motivated while listening to their teachers think aloud. In a survey of 1,765 middle schoolers and follow-up interviews, students reported that they enjoyed and were motivated by listening to the teacher reading and thinking aloud, and that such interaction provided "scaffolds to understanding."

Arming Yourself With the Five Essential Think Aloud Strategies

Instructional time is precious, so I offer a list of the five most essential comprehension strategies to model during think alouds. As I define each strategy, I explain how it contributes to reading comprehension. These strategies—as listed below—are rooted in the rigorous standards

set forth by the collaboration between the International Literacy Association (founded as the International Reading Association) and the National Council of Teachers of English, as well as the anchor standards of the Common Core. I focus on a small number of strategies because, as suggested by Wilhelm (2001), it is "better to focus and really address a few goals rather than diffusing energy by trying to address too many" (p. 44). Additionally, multiple-strategy instruction is more effective than teaching strategies in total isolation; readers use more than one strategy as they encounter text (Duke & Pearson, 2002). For this reason, the think alouds in this book use multiple strategies concurrently. Should you want additional support in focusing on a single strategy, those transcripts are available in Appendix I.

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

In my work with teachers, a question that I frequently encounter is "Which reading comprehension strategies should I incorporate into my think alouds?" Knowing the importance of depth over breadth, I focus on five strategies. In developing my list of strategies, I looked to the legends in the field of reading research. In his 2001 book *Improving Comprehension With Think-Aloud Strategies*, Jeffrey Wilhelm focused on the following reading comprehension strategies:

1. Set purposes for reading
2. Make predictions
3. Connect personally
4. Visualize
5. Monitor comprehension
6. Use fix-up strategies to address confusion and repair comprehension

In her 2009 book *Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons*, Lori Oczkus maps out the "Super Six" comprehension strategies incorporated by good readers: (1) connect, (2) predict, (3) question, (4) monitor/clarify, (5) summarize/synthesize, and (6) evaluate. I've modified Oczkus's list slightly to meet the demands of close reading and today's high-rigor expectations. For example, I've eliminated connections because too often I've seen this strategy veer readers off course. In addition, Oczkus lumps together predictions and inferences in her Super Six. In my experience, predictions come readily to most children, whereas making inferences is a struggle. While the two are certainly not the same strategy, they draw on the same skill set—as discussed below.

My top five strategies are as follows:

Five Essential Think Aloud Strategies

1. Asking questions
2. Making inferences
3. Synthesizing
4. Understanding the author's purpose
5. Monitoring and clarifying

I see these five strategies as the "path towards understanding and accessing complex texts" (Frey & Fisher, 2013, p. 17).

The remainder of this chapter is a detailed explanation of the five strategies that I rely on while thinking aloud. For each of the strategies, you'll find the following elements:

- A brief explanation of the strategy, as well as a bit of its research base
- A *student-friendly definition* of the strategy, written exactly as you'd give it to your students
- A strategy symbol, or quick image that visually represents the strategy
- Sentence starters, a framework to jump-start your think aloud

A Note About the Strategy Symbols

Next to each strategy, you'll find a visual image. I call these "strategy symbols"; each one represents a comprehension strategy. In the second step of my three-step process, I quickly sketch these strategy symbols on my sticky notes to denote which reading comprehension strategy I will incorporate. This way, I've made my work in the third step a bit easier as I have a reminder of what strategy to use. The symbols are meant to be quick sketches; by no means am I an artist!


For asking questions, the strategy symbol is obvious: a question mark.


For making inferences, I draw three vertical lines because making inferences is often described as "reading between the lines."


For synthesizing, I draw a circle with inner spirals, because this is a skill of continually intertwining strands of a text into a whole.


For understanding the author's purpose, I draw the letter A.

For monitoring and clarifying, I sketch two arrows, because so much of monitoring and clarifying is the process of rereading. The arrows represent how readers go back and forth in text to address their confusion.

A Note About the Sentence Starters

I've modified Oczkus's (2009) "strategy starters" into my *sentence starters* (also available in Appendix D). Sentence starters remove the difficulty of generating the correct academic language associated with each strategy. They are a crutch to rely on to get your creative juices flowing. As you become more adept at thinking aloud, you may come up with your own sentence starters. I encourage you to use my sentence starters at the beginning of the script that you say out loud to students as you think aloud.

The Five Essential Think Aloud Strategies

Asking Questions

Good readers are inquisitive. They ask questions both of the text and beyond the text. Rarely, if ever, does a reader pose a question for which there is one correct answer. Instead, authentic questions are those that can be explored—rather than definitively answered. The reader pursues them by simply reading on, perhaps by rereading, perhaps by discussing them with others, or even by having them come to mind hours, weeks, or years later! Our students must become amazing at being inquisitive and curious—not amazing at answering. In many schools and in our testing culture, this requires a significant shift in mindset.

The power of student-generated questions is indisputable. Key studies point out that proficient readers ask questions and that asking questions is a favorable strategy to enhance reading comprehension (Chin, Brown, & Bruce, 2002; Davey & McBride, 1986; King & Rosenshine, 1993; Ness, 2015; Nolte & Singer, 1985; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996; Taboada & Guthrie, 2006; Taylor, Alber, & Walker, 2002; Therrien & Hughes, 2008; Wong & Jones, 1982). As explained by Harvey and Goudvis (2000), asking questions pushes readers forward in their understanding of text. In their meta-analysis of question generation, Therrien and Hughes (2008) reported thirteen studies highlighted significant gains in reading comprehension scores with the use of question generation. Taboada and Guthrie (2006) noted that question generation contributes to the active reading comprehension process by helping students to initiate cognitive processes, concluding that "[w]hen asking questions, students are involved in multiple processes requiring deeper interactions with text" (p. 4). As they pose questions, students become focused readers with stronger understanding of the written text (Chin et al., 2002).

In addition to the reading comprehension benefits, question generation benefits children in other cognitive and motivational capacities. In posing questions, children think critically, activate higher-level thinking skill

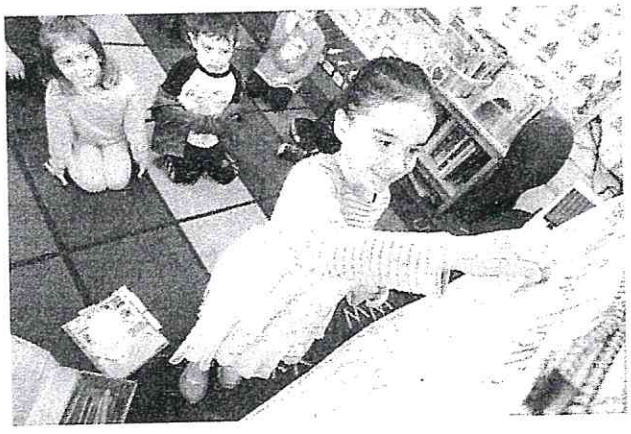
and focus on essential information to synthesize their understandings. They learn not to accept information at its face value, but instead to extend their learning in a self-directed manner. A research team from the University of California, Davis (Singh, 2014), monitored brain activity to measure how engaged learners were in reading questions and their answers. When learners' curiosity was piqued by questions and their answers, the parts of the brain associated with pleasure, reward, and creation of memory underwent an increase in activity.

Fortunately, asking questions is a skill that comes naturally to young children. Any parent or teacher will attest to the sheer magnitude of questions generated by young children. On an average day, mothers typically are asked an average of 288 questions a day by their children aged two to ten (Frazier, Gelman, & Wellman, 2009). Chouinard, Harris, and Maratsos (2007) revealed that children ask between 400 and 1,200 questions each week!

The ability to ask questions is a high priority in today's classrooms. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS Initiative, 2010) emphasize question generation throughout the developmental spectrum of elementary grades. As readers rise in grade level, the questions that they are expected to ask become increasingly complex. Second graders are expected to ask journalistic-type questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how) about explicit information in a text. By the end of fourth grade, students are expected to ask both closed-ended and open-ended questions, requiring both inference skills and critical thinking.

Building Students' Skills in Asking Questions

To model question generation, teachers must demonstrate how they wonder before reading, during reading, and after reading. Teachers should model rich questions, both within and beyond the text. Not only should thinking aloud include the basic questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how), but it should also include higher-order and evaluative questions that push readers to engage beyond the surface level of a text (Oczkus, 2009). In my experience with young children, questions beget questions (Ness, 2015). The more they see their teachers and classmates wonder about possibilities within and beyond the text, the more likely students are to ask similar questions of their own.



© Rick Harrington Photography

A student adds to a collection of student-generated questions about *A Bad Case of Stripes*.

Classroom Spotlight on

ASKING QUESTIONS

I recently had the pleasure of doing two different read alouds in a kindergarten classroom. For our first read aloud, I chose Tomie dePaola's Caldecott award winner *Strega Nona* (1975), which tells the story of an Italian witch doctor known for her successful remedies. By carving out instructional time to encourage question generation and by giving students simple questioning vocabulary (*who, what, where, when, why, how*), students eagerly share out a long list of questions:

- Will Big Anthony use the magic pasta pot?
- Why does Big Anthony never listen?
- What will Strega Nona do when she sees all of the pasta?
- Is there really magic?
- Where is Calabria? Italy?
- Could Big Anthony really eat all of that pasta?
- What is pasta made from?

In asking these questions, students become more engaged and purposeful in approaching the story. The same is true for a subsequent read aloud, with the picture book *Roller Coaster* by Marlee Frazee (2003). *Roller Coaster* begins with illustrations of a long line of people at a fairground. Ahead of them is a roller coaster named Rocket. As the line creeps slowly, passengers await anxiously. At last, twelve passengers—some calm and collected, others excited—climb into the cars. With vivid images and the typography mimicking the motion of the roller coaster, the illustrations depict the riders as they experience a variety of twists, turns, and loop-the-loops. Here, I encourage students to generate deeper questions—which cannot necessarily be answered within the pages of this book. They generate the following list:

- How does a roller coaster stay on the track? Does it ever fall off?
- What makes a roller coaster so noisy?
- Do you wear seatbelts on a roller coaster?
- Why do people put their hands in the air on a roller coaster? Aren't you supposed to hold on?
- I wonder why those riders are kissing in the back of the roller coaster.
- I wonder why that man is walking away from the roller coaster. Did he decide not to ride?
- How do you get to be a roller coaster ride operator?
- Why can't she open her eyes on the roller coaster?
- Why are most people dizzy after a roller coaster?
- I wonder if anyone threw up after riding.
- What do wobbly knees feel like? I wonder how a doctor might fix wobbly knees.

Defining Asking Questions for K–5 Readers

Purposeful readers are naturally curious. They ask questions about what happens in the text. Sometimes the answers to their questions are found in the text, and sometimes they are not.

The following sentence starters are useful to help generate the academic language associated with question generation:

- I wonder . . .
- I would like to ask the author . . .
- Who . . . ?
- What . . . ?
- When . . . ?
- Where . . . ?
- Why . . . ?
- How . . . ?
- This makes me wonder about . . .
- How is this different?
- How does this part here add to . . . ?