General and Discipline-Specific Strategies and Adolescents Who Struggle: What Can an SLP Do?

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Abstract

Students who lack proficiency with general literacy skills and strategies will be doubly challenged to successfully acquire discipline-specific skills and strategies necessary for success in rigorous classes. The Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) providing services in middle and secondary school settings can play a significant role in shaping how a school addresses the school-wide literacy needs of all of its students but especially for students who struggle with general literacy. Researchers have examined the literature and made recommendations for teachers to impact the literacy outcomes of adolescents. This paper draws together recommendations and makes suggestions that can be carried out specifically by SLPs.

The Case for the SLP's Role in Literacy

Truly, the role of the speech-language pathologist in the arena of adolescent literacy is a particularly good fit. The SLP working at the secondary level can play a critical role as a key member of the school faculty. As ASHA's (2010) position statement describes, the critical roles and responsibilities of SLPs in schools are many, not the least of which are *Ensuring Educational Relevance* and *Highlighting Language/Literacy*, roles particularly relevant to the needs of adolescents who struggle with literacy.

Adolescent readers and writers who struggle may be challenged for a number of reasons. As various researchers have established (Lee and Spratley, 2010; Scammacca, Roberts, Vaugh, Edmonds, Wexler, Reutebuch, Torgesen, 2007), students who struggle may (a) lack general vocabulary knowledge, (b) lack a general fund of knowledge in regard to topics and text structures (c) not know what to do when their comprehension breaks down, and/or (d) lack the ability to monitor their own reading. Often, they do not possess all of the foundational skills and strategies necessary to be proficient within the literacy of the disciplines that they encounter in rigorous courses. The demands in biology, for instance, are not the same demands in chemistry despite both being categorized within the discipline of science. Hence, poor basic or general literacy skills and few effective strategies can mean fewer options for diploma completion and opportunities after graduation in an ever-changing job market.

Further complicating the landscape for students who struggle and their teachers is the most current standards movement, including Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Although the new standards pose

opportunities and challenges for students who struggle (Bulgren, Graner, Deshler, 2013), this newest or renewed focus certainly has heightened pressure on all stakeholders for students to perform competitively on high stakes assessments.

What is Discipline-Specific Strategy Instruction?

Shanahan and Shanahan (2012) define disciplinary literacy as emphasis on "the knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within the disciplines" (p. 8). An assumption by receiving teachers is that the background knowledge and how to read and process the vocabulary and text for that discipline may exist in the student's repertoire or can be developed. Meyer's (2013) survey of content teachers revealed that content teacher knowledge is limited to their content area and indicates that the teachers, even English Language Arts teachers, may not possess the knowledge of adolescent literacy necessary to support their students who struggle.

Discipline-specific strategies are "the unique tools that experts in the discipline use to participate in the work of that discipline" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Instruction in these strategies assumes general strategy knowledge. The instruction seeks to surface and teach students the specialized strategies, routines, skills, language and practices inherent in specific content. Such strategies are not general purpose and are unlikely to be applicable to other disciplines. However, students at the secondary level who will earn a regular diploma must learn how to navigate the unique and more complex language structures within disciplines (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010).

What is General Strategy Instruction?

In general strategy instruction, teachers seek to surface the strategies that can be universally applied to reading and writing. These are the ubiquitous strategies used by proficient readers who employ a variety of purposeful strategies that augment and enhance their comprehension. Pressley and Afflerbach's (1995)

good reader model describes *good readers* as those who are extremely active with text, using a recursive process of making and confirming predictions, asking themselves questions, and making a conscious effort to summarize what they have read. The National Reading Panel's (2000) list of strategies to enhance comprehension includes self-directed activities such as re-reading to resolve confusion, paraphrasing and summarizing to enhance memory and understanding, making explicit connections from text to prior knowledge, underlining and note taking, and visualizing relationships and events. Good readers test hypotheses as they read and monitor their understanding, applying fix-up strategies when necessary (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Duke and Pearson (2002) point out that text is just more complex at the secondary level and the demand for learning more from text is greater, especially expository text, further complicating the challenge. Just to maintain their level of reading and writing proficiency, students must become more sophisticated in the breadth, flexibility, and application of comprehension strategies. Yet, this is not enough to accelerate their learning as they progress through school.

To summarize, discipline-specific strategies cannot replace general strategy instruction for adolescents who struggle with reading and writing. A multi-pronged approach that supports the collaboration of content teachers, literacy and other specialists, including SLPs, to improve instruction is optimal. These collaborators should first instruct students in durable, general strategies that can then be "kicked up" to transdisciplinary instruction. This approach can lead to better outcomes for many students, not just students identified with disabilities (Faggella-Luby, Graner, Drew, & Deshler, 2012).

What are Helpful Resources?

Some good news, as reported by Scammacca and colleagues (2007), is that adolescents who struggle with literacy *can* benefit from intervention and students with learning disabilities can benefit *even more*.

There are two especially valuable resources for anyone working with adolescents and lit-

eracy to have in their repertoire. One, *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger & Torgesen, 2008) is a practice guide available online through the federally supported Institute for Education Sciences (IES) and the What Works Clearinghouse at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc. The authors of this practice guide present specific and understandable evidence-based recommendations for educators to implement with students in grades four through twelve. This IES guide presents five recommendations based on the strength of the evidence supporting each area in the research. Each recommendation is supported with actions that educators can implement in their classroom. The first three recommendations are strategies that educators, including SLPs, can incorporate into their practice as a way to instruct students and help them to derive more from content reading. Only the first three will be addressed in this paper.

Another valuable resource is the document, *Interventions for Adolescent Struggling Readers: A Meta-Analysis with Implications for Practice* (Scammacca, et al., 2007), from the Center on Instruction (COI). It is available at http://www.centeroninstruction.org/interventions-for-adolescent-struggling-readers-a-meta-analysis-with-implications-for-practice. This resource is a meta-analysis that provides guidance regarding interventions designed to improve students' use of reading comprehension strategies and presents nine implications for practice. The knowledge from this COI document combined with the IES document becomes a beneficial, practical resource for guiding educators and SLPs toward strategies and practices that can be implemented in classrooms to benefit students.

Recommendations, Implications, and What SLPS Can Do

This next section provides a "mash up" of the two resources, the first three of the IES recommendations and the COI implications, to guide SLPs in regard to general literacy strategies and approaches. This section provides the types of strategies and practices that SLPs will

see are within their purview in highlighting language and literacy.

IES Practice Guide Recommendation 1: Provide explicit vocabulary instruction. When teachers make vocabulary instruction a regular part of their instruction, they strengthen students' independent skills of constructing meaning of text. For this to happen, teachers must regularly dedicate class time to vocabulary instruction, provide repeated contextual exposures, both orally and in written form, provide numerous opportunities for students to use the vocabulary, and instruct students in vocabulary strategies that they can learn to use independently. A general vocabulary strategy can be very useful for teachers and students to know, apply, and learn to apply in various settings.

Two examples of general vocabulary strategies include (a) the keyword method, which employs using a word clue, or key, to help the students understand and associate the word, and (b) word maps, which include the development of a graphic to help readers acquire understanding through development of the graphic showing qualities, examples, and classification of words. Evidence-based vocabulary strategies that have proven to be quite powerful include two Strategic Instruction Model™ (SIM ™) strategies from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KUCRL). Although they require professional development for access, both the *LINCS Vocabulary* and the *Word Mapping* strategies have been used successfully as general vocabulary strategies that can be taught explicitly to students or can be embedded by content teachers in their practice. Though SLPs cannot instruct the class, they can support content teachers in selecting the *best* words (specialized, high-frequency, or critical words) to teach and suggest efficient, effective strategies for increasing a vocabulary focus.

The COI (2007) report supports intervention instruction at the word and text level for older students (word study) as well as direct vocabulary instruction for improving students' success in school. Such word study, however, must be conducted using materials that are student age appropriate (Marchand-Martella,

Martella, Modderman, Petersen, 2013; Schumaker & Deshler, 2005). Hence, teachers must accumulate a variety of materials at varying reading levels. The report confirms that vocabulary instruction is essential across all content areas and suggests initiating a set of school-wide vocabulary practices that will benefit a wide range of students. The SLP can guide the discussion about such practices.

IES Practice Guide Recommendation 2: Provide direct, explicit comprehension strategy instruction. Teachers can improve students' reading comprehension when they instruct students in the routines and procedures that help students to make sense of text, when they model and explain comprehension strategies, and when they provide active participation opportunities for students. Tactics for meeting this recommendation include (a) the teacher providing a variety of text at various levels, (b) modeling, through think aloud, content-specific strategies using controlled materials, (c) ensuring students understand the goal of the strategy as well as the process, (d) front loading strategies for upcoming content, and (e) directly and explicitly instructing students in comprehension strategies that will be most useful for the current content and in the future.

Specific teacher behaviors are necessary, including modeling, providing explicit explanations, feedback, guided and controlled practice, and promoting sufficient independent practice so that the students can use the strategy with automaticity for similar assignments and activities. A multiple strategy toolbox will be most beneficial to students who lack sufficient literacy skills. Strategies for finding main ideas, summarizing, and drawing inferences will serve students well. When teachers use well-designed graphic organizers to surface critical prior knowledge and new information, support analysis of key ideas, teach discrimination of evaluation or categorization, and engage students in such enhancement of the content, they go a long way toward ensuring comprehension of and enhancement of the content. The IES (2008) guide suggests professional development as a means to helping content teach-

ers engage in the behaviors listed.

The COI (2007) meta-analysis underscores that teaching comprehension strategies to older students is a good idea that can yield a gain of about one standard deviation! Arriving at such a gain requires additional professional development if the strategies are to be taught to students with fidelity. And while the meta-analysis revealed that gains were greater when researchers provided the intervention, positive gains were also made when teachers provided the interventions. Important to know is that in reading comprehension, specifically, smaller gains were made than in other reading-related areas.

The SLP can help secondary schools maintain a comprehension strategy focus by being a resource to, participating in, or leading discussions and demonstrations in schools about the tactics and strategies most beneficial to the adolescents with whom they work.

IES Practice Guide Recommendation 3: Provide extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation. Classrooms in which teachers devote time to high-quality discussions and build deeper understanding of the text can help to improve students' reading comprehension. Critical analysis of authors' meaning or challenging the authors' conclusions or reasoning can give students opportunities and reasons to draw upon their own background knowledge and experiences and to learn about other points of view. All are essential skills in the new standards.

Suggested practices include developing questions that link the content. In other words, help students by explicitly surfacing the connections between lessons and units and the course; create questions with connected concepts and big ideas. This is a time for teachers to model how to explain positions, reasoning and counter-arguments and to provide a format that students can follow in small, safe groups. Teach students how to ask questions to sustain discussions that require them to make inferences, connections, and draw conclusions. Teachers will go a long way by providing a safe, supportive environment for such discus-

sions and by recognizing good reasoning.

While the COI meta-analysis does not specifically address such discussion, it does relate that adolescents benefit from improved knowledge of word meanings and concepts. SLPs can help teachers to become aware of functional language analysis (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010) to then help students make meaning from text. Additionally, they can bring unique contributions, as Ehren and Whitmire (2009) have suggested, by focusing on the language and related cognitive underpinnings of the curriculum to uncover the language roots of the problem and focus a language lens to clarify the demands of the curriculum and the types of student responses expected.

*IES Practice Guide Recommendation 4 (*increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning) and *IES Practice Guide Recommendation 5* (make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided in trained specialists) are important and require more significant support than a few general strategies. Plans to address these recommendations should be examined by a school's literacy team that can examine the tools and necessary professional development to impact those areas. However, SLPs can be valuable members of such literacy teams given their (a) understanding that language problems are at the root of literacy problems and (b) distinct knowledge of interventions.

Conclusion

Language problems are at the root of literacy problems (Ehren & Whitmire, 2009). SLPs, serving in secondary schools, are distinctively positioned to *contribute* to creating solutions to the literacy challenges of students in their schools because they know how to intervene. Their specialized knowledge in regard to the three recommendations addressed here—(a) provide explicit vocabulary instruction, (b) provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction, and (c) provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation—can provide better academic opportunities and outcomes for students. Being

such a resource can create a renewed appreciation and understanding of the value added by the SLP in the secondary setting.

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Graner: Continuing Ed Questions

1. Discipline-specific strategies
   a. should be generalizable across disciplines
   b. should be generalizable across all content within a discipline
   c. are specific to certain content areas and not to others
   d. can be universally applied to content area learning and across domains or disciplines.

1. Academic diversity indicates classrooms
   a. composed of students of different ethnicities, academic skills, and grade levels.
   b. composed of heterogeneous groups of high-, average-, and low-achieving students.
   c. composed of students with a variety of disabilities.
   d. composed of students who struggle and students with disabilities.

2. The Institute for Education' (IES) made five recommendations for improving adolescent reading. Which recommendation is supported by the highest effect size?
   a. Vocabulary
   b. Direct Explicit Instruction
   c. Text Meaning and Discussion
   d. Increased Motivation and Engagement
   e. Intensive Interventions

3. How can SLPs support content teachers in providing explicit vocabulary instruction?
   a. Teach vocabulary to students
   b. Teach vocabulary strategies to content teachers
   c. Collaborate with content teachers in selecting the best words to teach.
   d. Focus on vocabulary with caseload students.

4. Why are SLPs able to contribute to creating solutions to literacy challenges in their schools?
   a. SLPs understand that language problems are at the root of literacy problems and possess distinct knowledge to intervening.
   b. SLPs know better than content teachers about the language demands of specific content.
   c. SLPs possess specialized strategies and routines to teach to caseload students.
   d. SLPs possess distinct, therapeutic knowledge and skills.

Answer Key:
1. C
2. B
3. A
4. C
5. A