

Think Aloud – a Reading Comprehension Technique

Introduction

The Think Aloud technique is an excellent way for instructors to help students improve their comprehension by understanding how a good reader uses comprehension strategies to understand what she is reading. Think about your students watching a good reader read something. What would they see? They would see the good reader moving her eyes from left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom of the page, and turning pages so that she's moving from the front of the book to the back. The students would probably assume that the good reader is able to decode the words on the pages, that she knows what they mean, and that's how she understands what she's reading. What the students wouldn't see is the good reader thinking about why she was reading. They wouldn't see her drawing on what she already knows about the topic or stopping after a paragraph to think about it and try to put it into her own words. The students wouldn't see her thinking about what might be coming up and what she should look for. All of these are comprehension strategies that good readers use but are invisible to the naked eye.

In the Think Aloud technique, the teacher reads a passage aloud to the students. As the teacher reads, she periodically "thinks aloud" as she applies different reading comprehension skills. By doing this, students observe how good readers interact with what they are reading through a variety of comprehension skills and strategies.

Six Steps for Using the Think Aloud Technique

Before using the Think Aloud Technique in the Classroom

1. Select a passage that is at a comfortable reading level and length for the students. Select something that is at or slightly below the students' independent reading level. You want the students to be able to concentrate on the use of the comprehension strategies without being distracted by trying to decode words. For beginning level readers (about a first grade level) consider limiting the reading selection to 1-2 paragraphs. You can increase the length for higher level students, but keep in mind that the selection should be short enough that students can remember what strategies you used and how you used them so that they can discuss the strategies later. Long selections may make this difficult. As you use the technique, you'll get a better feel for how long the selection can be.

2. Review the reading and select the reading strategies you will use. While there may be many strategies you would actually use, you should try to limit the number you focus on to 3-5. In some models the teacher identifies the strategies she will use to the class before reading. She explains the strategies and why they are useful so that students can more easily identify them when they hear them used.

Using the Think Aloud Technique in the Classroom

3. Set the purpose for reading and be clear about it with students. This is the first thing a good reader does, but many students don't do this, especially if they've been assigned a reading.

4. Read the article and model the strategies you identified. Model the strategies by stopping during the reading and thinking aloud. It's important to rehearse when you'll use the strategies and what you'll say, rather than demonstrating this "on the fly." This will help you focus on the specific strategies and present them clearly. It is OK, even preferred, to demonstrate the thinking process as not perfect. You can make predictions that are wrong, for example, just explain why you've made them and why you're correcting them. While you're doing the think aloud technique, have students follow along in the text and mark where you use different comprehension strategies.

Reviewing and Extending the Think Aloud Technique

5. Identify the strategies and discuss how they were used. For short reading selections, do this step after you've finished reading the entire selection. If it's a longer reading selection, pick a good stopping point to review the strategies used, then continue on with the reading. Have students identify where you used each strategy and why that particular strategy was useful. Ask students if they can think of other things they've read where that strategy would be useful. Ask them to think of other strategies that you might have used.

6. Give the students something else to read and have them do the think aloud technique, using the same strategies. You can do this many ways. You can have each student read a portion of a passage and think aloud to the entire class. You can have students work in pairs and think aloud to each other, while you go around the room and listen.