English Foundations II

The Research Base

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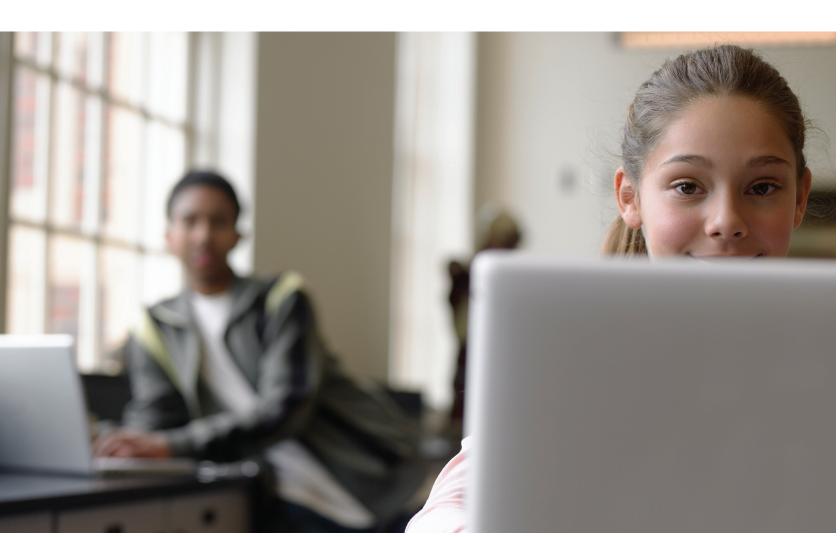
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Table of Contents

Introduction

Students with below-proficient achievement are not the lowest performers in our classrooms. These students are able to meet some of the expectations established for their grade level; however, their reading and writing abilities are low enough that they are not prepared to do grade-level work (Perie, Grigg, et al., 2005).

As readers, adolescent students with below-proficient achievement have some strengths. They can read many texts at or close to grade-level difficulty, can determine the literal meaning of a text, and are able to make some simple interpretations of the texts they read. They may be able to make some connections between the text and their own lives or other things they have read.

However, adolescents with below-proficient achievement lack many of the reading abilities necessary for reading success across the curriculum (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007). They may not be able to make sophisticated interpretations or connections. They may have difficulty comparing texts, may struggle to interpret figurative language, and may not consider author's purpose as important to comprehension.

Each of these is an important skill necessary to become a competent, independent reader. Adolescents with below-proficient literacy achievement may have limited but growing vocabularies, recognize some but not all words found in grade-level text, and may be unfamiliar with the multiple meanings of even common words. Limited vocabulary continues to make reading with comprehension a difficult task for below-proficient readers (American Institutes for Research, 2007; Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007).

Adolescents with below-proficient literacy achievement also struggle with writing. While they may have a foundation of writing skills, they are not yet writing grade-level appropriate texts. In their response to a prompt, these students can include some relevant supporting details and can choose words that make sense for their purpose; however, their writing lacks the specificity, clarity, organization, and sophistication of those whose writing meets grade-level expectations. Typically, their writing may contain many errors of mechanics, including spelling, grammar, and punctuation (ACT, Inc., 2007).

This white paper provides a brief overview of the research-based instructional practices in reading and writing that support students whose literacy achievement is below proficient.

The Research Base: Instructional Strategies for Students Whose Literacy Achievement Is Below Proficient

Students whose achievement is below proficient are supported by many of the same instructional practices that support students whose achievement is below basic.

- Students with below-proficient achievement benefit from extended opportunity for reading practice. Reading practice supports the development of comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, and background knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; Krisch et al., 2002; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

- Students with below-proficient achievement need to be given accessible texts for reading practice (Ivey, 2000). Texts are more likely to be read and understood if they have controlled vocabulary, repetition of new and rare words that are easy for students to read, and engaging topics (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

- Students with below-proficient achievement particularly benefit from explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, such as summarizing, making connections, and making interpretations, and are ready to learn additional strategies for comprehending texts. Comprehension strategies can be taught through explicit instruction, modeling, and guided practice (Duffy, 2002; Pearson et al., 1992; Pressley et al., 1994).

- Students with below-proficient achievement benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction and strategies for figuring out the meanings of unfamiliar words (NICHD, 2000). They are also still developing as writers and benefit from instruction in the writing process (Graham & Perin, 2007; Perin, 2007).

Because students with below-proficient achievement have a foundation of emerging skills in reading and writing, they are ready to read more difficult texts, to work on acquiring and applying reading strategies, and to write increasingly difficult texts in a variety of genres.

Adolescents with below-proficient achievement are ready to learn comprehension strategies for before reading, during reading, and after reading.

Research on reading comprehension shows that proficient readers engage in before-reading strategies, during-reading strategies, and after-reading strategies. Breaking the reading process down into before, during, and after reading can help students to better comprehend what they read (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991).

Students comprehend more when they prepare to read by engaging in a variety of prereading strategies (Gunning, 2008; Tompkins, 2006). Pressley (2000, 2002) identified several prereading strategies that facilitate comprehension. Setting a purpose for reading helps students to focus their attention and decide how to read the text. (For example, you might read more quickly if you are reading for entertainment, but you might need to read more slowly if you are reading to learn particular information.) Predicting before reading helps students to engage in reading. When readers activate their prior knowledge, they consider what they already know about the topic before they read. This can help them comprehend the information in the text.

Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) tell us that proficient readers are active readers. That means they work actively to make sense of the text during reading. Active readers may take notes in the margins, identify key information, and think about what they are reading. Skilled readers use graphic organizers and their knowledge of text structures to help them comprehend as they read and to recall information when they finish the passage (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002).

In addition, active readers are aware of whether the text makes sense; that is, they monitor for comprehension as they read. When reading falters, proficient readers are able to deliberately apply fix-up strategies; these strategies help them make sense of the text (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Students with below-proficient achievement often do not apply or even know about fix-up strategies. But readers can be taught to make strategic decisions—such as slowing down, rereading, and thinking about their prior knowledge of a topic—when what they are reading doesn't make sense.

Effective instruction in monitoring and fix-up strategies takes place through think-alouds and modeling that focus on the metacognition (thinking about thinking) that good readers use to monitor, fix up, and comprehend texts (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Duffy, G., et al., 1987).

Proficient readers continue to think about the text as they engage in after-reading strategies that help them to interpret what they have just read (Gunning, 2008; Tompkins, 2006). Proficient readers may respond to the text by considering their own thoughts, feelings, and opinions about the text. They may connect the text to other things they have read and compare the information and how it was presented. Proficient readers also often summarize the text, determining the main ideas and important supporting details (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). Finally, after reading, proficient readers return to their purpose for reading to see if they have learned what they set out to learn.

Students who engage in these before-, during-, and after-reading strategies tend to comprehend more and remember what they read long after they have finished reading.

Adolescents with below-proficient achievement need help becoming critical readers.

From text messages to e-mail, from Wikipedia to commercials, adolescents are inundated with texts. One of the most important tasks for the adolescent reader is to become a critical reader—to be able to judge whether the text's message should be believed and used and to evaluate why the author is writing the text (Hobbs, 1997; Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, & Hubbard, 2004; New London Group, 1996). Struggling readers can be explicitly taught to consider the author's purpose and how that purpose should affect the student's interpretation of the text. Because below-proficient readers tend to take the text at face value, they need explicit support in learning to distinguish fact from opinion and in learning to evaluate the truthfulness or validity of those facts and opinions. Finally, to become critical thinkers, struggling adolescents need opportunities to engage in reading and writing that require an increasing depth of knowledge (Webb, 1997), and literacy experiences that move beyond simple recall of facts to application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. It is especially important to support students' critical reading of media texts, such as advertisements, Web-based texts, and even television and film (Hobbs, 1997). Below-proficient readers are supported when they have opportunities to consider how visual and media texts persuade, inform, and even mislead.

Adolescents with below-proficient achievement need to learn study skills.

Adolescents whose achievement is below-proficient can read many grade-level texts and are approaching readiness for grade-level academic learning. However, they need support learning a variety of study skills. Students with proficient achievement seem to come to school already knowing study skills that help them to organize their learning and remember information. Students with below-proficient achievement have often been more passive at school and do not know—or don't know when to use—the specific behaviors and mental strategies that can help them to learn in an academic setting.

Study skills are a combination of specific behaviors and mental steps or strategies that support learners in academic tasks (Lenz, Ellis, & Scanlon, 1996). Students learn study skills when they receive explicit instruction in those behaviors and strategies and self-directed opportunities to practice them in context (Purdie & Hattie, 1999; Sobrol, 1997).

Developing study skills can help below-proficient students develop self-regulation (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Self-regulated learners believe that their independent efforts make a difference, and they are able to use strategies and behaviors to persevere even through difficult tasks. Some study skills that benefit below-proficient learners include note taking, outlining, being an active and independent reader, remembering information once it's been read, and knowing test-taking strategies (Weinstein, 1996). Acquiring these skills, strategies, and learning choices better positions below-proficient students to join their on-grade-level peers in the regular classroom.

Adolescents with below-proficient achievement need to learn to read and write a variety of text structures.

Text structures are organization patterns—such as sequence, cause-and-effect, and compare-contrast—that are found in many texts (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). Many text structures use specific key words (e.g., first, second, next, on the other hand, because) to mark transitions between ideas and to help mark the way text is organized. Text structures organize information and therefore support both comprehension and composition of texts.

Readers who are familiar with text structures are able to use this knowledge to help organize their ideas as they read. This improves both comprehension and recall of information (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002). Writers who know how text structures work can use that knowledge to plan and organize the ideas in their writing so that their message is clear (Graham & Perin, 2007). Explicit instruction in text structures can support below-proficient readers and writers' comprehension and composition (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2008).

English Foundations II and the Research Base

Research provides a great deal of information about the strategies that can help adolescents with below-proficient achievement to become more competent readers and writers. English Foundations II has been built on these research-based principles to provide reading and writing skills and strategies that can support adolescents' literacy development.

English Foundations II provides ample reading practice and opportunity to read accessible texts. The text in Foundations II, including lessons, instructions, and assessments, has been written at a sixth- through eighth-grade reading level and is accessible to students who are below-proficient in reading.

English Foundations II is structured around learning to engage in a variety of types of reading. Each unit teaches before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading strategies for a variety of purposes, including reading for entertainment, reading to gain information, and reading to analyze text. As they learn to read for a variety of purposes, students are also taught about the text structures, text features, and reading strategies that can support the reading of particular genres of texts. Units focus on genres such as fiction, magazine and newspaper articles, essays, textbooks, business texts, and poetry.

English Foundations II uses modeling, demonstrations, explicit instruction, and guided practice to teach comprehension strategies. A demonstration of a reading strategy, for example, might include the presentation of a text. As the virtual reader "reads" the text, he or she may take notes, slow down, reread, highlight, or otherwise demonstrate how and when good readers apply particular reading strategies. Once a reading strategy has been both explained and modeled, students get scaffolded support in learning to apply the strategy.

The Active-Reading Assistant, a unique feature in Foundations II, is an interactive tool that includes both text to be read and space for keeping track of reading strategies being used. As students use the Active-Reading Assistant, they are prompted to preview the title, graphics, and illustrations; to make predictions and think about background knowledge; and to make note of their predictions before reading. As they read the text, students can use the Active-Reading Assistant to highlight in three different colors, mark up the margins with smiley faces, or take notes on their reading. After students read, the Active-Reading Assistant prompts them to respond to the text and summarize their learning. The Active-Reading Assistant provides an engaging interface that scaffolds students into using effective reading strategies—strategies proficient readers use when they read texts on their own.

Each unit in English Foundations II includes a lesson on media literacy. During the unit "Reading for Information and Newspapers," for example, the media-literacy lesson is about comparing the ways that different media present the same information. The media literacy lessons in Foundations II help students to evaluate and critique the print, visual, and multimedia texts they encounter and to be more critical readers.

Each unit in English Foundations II also teaches a specific study skill that supports students' transition to grade-level learning. These study skills include note taking, remembering information, test-taking strategies, and active reading; each is taught through explicit explanation, modeling, demonstration, and guided practice. Foundations II helps students not just learn about study skills but learn when and where to apply those strategies in real-world and school-based learning situations.

English Foundations II helps students acquire knowledge of text structures to organize writing and support reading comprehension. In Reading Skills and Strategies, students have opportunities to use graphic organizers to help them comprehend, organize, and remember the concepts as they study a particular genre.

Students also learn text structures as they work through the writing portion of the course. In each unit in Writing Skills and Strategies, students use graphic organizers and prompts to write a paragraph or essay that uses one of the main text structures as its organizing pattern. As students write using the text structure, they begin to develop generalizable knowledge that supports future reading and future writing.

Writing Skills and Strategies is structured around learning to write paragraphs and then essays in genres that are important to learn for academic success, including cause-and-effect, example, description or classification, compare-contrast, personal, persuasive, literature, and workplace writing. As students write, they have the opportunity to use the Writing Generator. The Writing Generator is an interactive, step-by-step tool that scaffolds students as they use each phase of the writing process. During prewriting, students set a purpose and select their topic for writing. They use the Writing Generator to generate main ideas, followed by supporting details. Students can arrange those ideas on screen to create an outline. Then, students can use the Writing Generator to draft their piece, and as they write, they might generate new ideas, expand their thoughts, or even delete some ideas. During the revision phase, students have the opportunity to get feedback for their writing and revise by rearranging, adding, or deleting. They are also reminded to edit their work for punctuation and mechanics. Finally, students can print the writing they have generated.

Conclusion

Sound instructional programs for students with below-proficient literacy achievement include comprehension instruction that focuses on study skills; critical literacy; and reading strategies for before, during, and after reading. Sound instructional programs also include writing instruction that focuses on the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. English Foundations II, with its interactive format and focus on reading and writing a variety of genres and texts, supports students' acquisition of these reading and writing skills and strategies and can help students become ready for grade-level academic work.

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