

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF THINK-ALOUDS

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The power of effective teacher-generated think-alouds is indisputable. However, teachers often struggle to plan and implement think-alouds in routine classroom instruction. This article breaks down the process of planning effective think-alouds into three easy-to-follow steps.

There are many steps between knowing what an effective teaching strategy is and knowing how to do it. The more I prepared and tried out think-alouds, the more confident I became in my knowledge that this was something I both *should* do and *could* do.

Ms. Hynes (pseudonym) was a third-grade classroom teacher enrolled in a graduate-level literacy methods class. The course focused on instructional theories, strategies, and practices to improve K–6 students' reading comprehension across content areas. A significant component of the course was teacher-generated think-alouds as a tool to model effective reading comprehension strategies. As the university instructor (Molly, first author) and teaching assistant (Mary Beth, second author), we assigned multiple readings on think-alouds, modeled think-alouds across text genres, showcased video excerpts of exemplary think-alouds, and led small-group planning sessions where teachers practiced thinking aloud with their colleagues (see Table 1 for more information on the scope and sequence of think-alouds in the graduate coursework).

We invited teachers to participate in a research study to explore how to better prepare K–6 teachers

to conduct think-alouds in their future classrooms (Ness, 2014). Over the course of the semester, teachers wrote and implemented multiple think-aloud lesson plans. Teachers selected narrative or nonfiction texts appropriate for their students, listed their Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) objectives, identified stopping points in their texts, and provided an exact script of what they'd say to their students in modeling a particular comprehension strategy. After conducting the think-aloud lesson, teachers then followed Kucan's (2007) suggestions to transcribe a short portion of their instruction for further reflection. We closely examined questionnaires, lesson plans, transcripts of lessons, and written reflections; these data sources indicated that participants made significant growth in the quantity and quality of the reading

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Table 1 How Think-Alouds Were Incorporated Into a 15-Week Graduate Course

Overview	Weeks and Agenda
Background Readings Completed by Teachers Across the Semester	Weeks 2–5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers read several practitioner-appropriate journal articles about how, when, and why to use think-alouds (Barrentine, 1996; Block & Israel, 2004; Oster, 2001; Walker, 2005).
Teacher Modeling by University Methods Instructor	Weeks 1–10 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructor modeled 10 weeks of read-alouds of both nonfiction text and narrative text.
Collaborative Practice Between Teachers and University Instruction	Weeks 6–9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> During class sessions, teachers viewed video clips of teacher-generated think-alouds and critically analyzed the lessons.
Guided Practice Among Teachers	Weeks 10–12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers worked in small groups to plan lessons with assistance, feedback, and evaluation from instructor.
Independent Practice by Teachers	Due in Weeks 12–15 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers planned, implemented, and reflected upon three think-aloud lesson plans.

Note. This follows Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) gradual release of responsibility model.

comprehension strategies that they incorporated into teacher-generated think-alouds. Across the semester, teachers grew in their confidence in creating think-aloud lessons with logical stopping points, a variety of relevant comprehension strategies, and rich monologues designed to help young readers understand the metacognitive processes of reading. When teachers received meaningful instruction on why, how, and when to think aloud, they increased their own self-efficacy in creating well-prepared think-alouds. We have used our findings from this research (Ness, 2014) to devise a step-by-step process to plan and implement

think-alouds into K–6 teaching. The goal of this article is to provide teachers with a clear way to plan think-alouds so that the process becomes clearer, more explicit, and more rewarding.

Understanding Teacher-Generated Think-Alouds

The CCSS (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010) hold students accountable to sophisticated levels of reading comprehension; students are asked to compare and contrast, to evaluate and analyze, to explain their thinking with text evidence, and to judge and interpret. One of the most effective ways for students to learn these higher-order thinking skills is through teachers' proficient modeling, often done in a think-aloud. A *think-aloud* is a teaching strategy in which a proficient reader (in this case, the teacher) verbally reports or models his or her thinking as he or she approaches the text. Think-alouds require a reader to stop periodically, to reflect on how a text is being processed and understood, and to relate orally what reading strategies are being employed (Baumann, Jones, & Seifert-Kessell, 1993; Block & Israel, 2004; see Table 2 for a list

of common reading comprehension strategies). The ultimate goal of a think-aloud is to help students independently engage in similar cognitive processes (Davey, 1983). In the era of CCSS, teachers' role in scaffolding, modeling, and supporting students in close reading of text is increasingly important. When teachers think aloud "in a conversational manner of a text, in a way that illustrates and scaffolds for students how to build the new knowledge and language about a topic and about the features and the structure of the text", our students are one step closer to being proficient and independent comprehenders (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011, p. 232).

The Power of Teacher-Generated Think-Alouds

Effective teacher think-alouds can positively impact student achievement (Anderson & Roit, 1993; Bereiter & Bird, 1985; Caldwell & Leslie, 2010; Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011; Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Ortlieb & Norris, 2012; Schunk & Rice, 1985; Silven & Vauras, 1992; Ward & Traweek, 1993). 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. Think-alouds are effective for children of all ages, from preschool (Dorl, 2007) to secondary levels (Coiro, 2011; Lapp, Fisher, & Grant, 2008). Think-aloud instruction benefits students across text format and genre: in online text (Coiro, 2011; Kymes, 2005), in narrative text (Dymock, 2007), and in informational text (Coiro, 2011; Lapp, Fisher, & Grant, 2008; Ortlieb & Norris, 2012). Equally promising were the effects of think-alouds on struggling readers (Anderson & Roit, 1993; Migyanka, Policastro, & Lui, 2005;

Pause and Ponder

- What role does thinking aloud play in your classroom instruction?
- What are some of the challenges that you have encountered in thinking aloud in your classroom?
- How have you previously planned think-aloud instruction in your teaching?

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Table 2 Reading Comprehension Strategies Commonly Applied During Think-Alouds

Strategy	Brief Description
Overviewing the Text	When a reader looks over the text before reading, paying particular attention to the text features and how those features are relevant to his or her purpose for reading
Visualization	When a reader creates and adapts mental images to make reading three-dimensional
Activating Prior Knowledge	When a reader thinks through what he or she already knows about a topic to make sense of how the text connects to that prior knowledge
Asking Questions	When a reader constructs, revises, and questions the meanings he or she makes during reading
Recognizing an Author's Writing Style	When a reader recognizes an author's vocabulary choice, sentence complexity, connection between sentences and paragraphs, length of paragraphs, and introduction of ideas (Block & Israel, 2004, p. 160)
Making Inferences	When a reader forms a best guess using evidence from the text to make predictions and draw conclusions
Making Connections	When a reader makes personal connections with the text by using his or her background knowledge. There are three types of common connections: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text-to-Self (T-S): Connections made between the text and the reader's personal experience • Text-to-Text (T-T): Connections made between a text being read and a text that was previously read • Text-to-World (T-W): Connections made between a text being read and something that occurs in the world
Making and Revising Predictions	When a reader uses information from the text and from his or her own personal experience to anticipate what he or she is about to read
Determining the Most Important Ideas	When a reader distinguishes between what information in a text is most important and what information is interesting but not necessary for understanding
Synthesizing Information	When a reader not only restates the important points from a text, but also combines ideas to allow for an evolving understanding of text
Monitoring Comprehension	When a reader identifies what he or she does and does not understand and applies appropriate strategies to resolve any problems in comprehension
Restatement	When a reader rephrases portions of the text in simpler terms
Determining Word Meanings	When a reader tries to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and/or concepts in a text to deal with inconsistencies or gaps in knowledge
Backtracking or Rereading	When a reader monitors his or her understanding and makes adjustments in his or her reading as needed

Note. See Block and Israel (2004), Davey (1983), Duke and Pearson (2002), Maria and Hathaway (1993), Migyanka, Policastro, and Lui (2005), and Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003).

Smith, 2006) and on English learners (Ghaith & Obeid, 2004; McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007). These positive findings led Caldwell and Leslie (2009) to call think-alouds “an effective instructional tool” (p. 420).

Though think-alouds are widely recommended, they may not yet be commonplace in today's classrooms. Walker (2005) wrote, “Seldom are the teachers modeling the think-aloud process as students read” (p. 688). Teachers may

struggle with modeling the complex process of thinking aloud (Dowhower, 1999; Duffy & Roehler, 1989; El-Dinary, Pressley, & Schuder, 1992; Jongmsma, 2000; Pressley, 2002). Though a text may be difficult for students, teachers often struggle to see where and why students struggle with a text that they interpret as easy.

Practice Makes Perfect: Thoughtful Planning of Think-Alouds

Effective think-alouds do not emerge extemporaneously but rather require diligent planning. To help the teachers in our literacy methods course to effectively think aloud, we taught our teachers to read a text three times prior to lesson planning. The next sections describe this approach in more detail.

First Reading

We begin planning our think-alouds with a stack of sticky notes in hand. The purpose of this first reading is to mark the pages or paragraphs where we identified “juicy stopping spots.” A juicy stopping spot offers a range of possibilities, either comprehension opportunities or stumbling blocks. More specifically, juicy stopping spots are the following points in a text:

- When the reader asks questions about unknown things and wants to try to find the answer
- When the reader uses clues to make educated guesses and predictions about the text
- When the reader stops because of confusion
- When the reader thinks about the text in relation to his or her life, the world, or other texts
- When the reader gives himself or herself an additional chance to make sense of the text

“The process of condensing and eliminating stopping points also must be purposeful.”

- When the reader creates pictures in his or her mind connected to the text
- When the reader takes important information from the text and puts it into his or her own words
- When the reader has a general comment, a question, or a reaction, or simply wants to say something about the text
- When the reader notices a cliffhanger opportunity or a suspenseful or action-driven point in the text to make a guess about what happens next.

After this first reading, we have identified 12–15 juicy stopping spots in a typical children’s picture book.

Second Reading

In our second reading, we examine each stopping spot and critically reflect upon the need for that particular spot. We ask the following questions to determine the usefulness of each juicy stopping spot:

- What is my intent as a reader with this particular stopping spot?
- Does this stopping spot align to a particular reading comprehension strategy?
- In what ways is this stopping spot effective or ineffective for showing young readers my metacognitive processes?
- What do young readers gain from hearing my talk during this particular think-aloud?

- Is this stopping spot a necessary and advantageous one?

Our objective is to narrow down our original set of juicy stopping spots to a more manageable number. These questions help to identify the stopping spots that are critical and those that can be eliminated. Because the overarching goal of the think-aloud is to model metacognitive processes, we do not want to overwhelm our students by stopping unnecessarily and detracting from the comprehension process. The process of condensing and eliminating stopping points also must be purposeful. We must keep several factors in mind as we make our decisions, including our overall purpose for selecting this particular text, our learning objectives in this lesson, and which comprehension strategies are familiar or unfamiliar to students prior to this text. After our second reading, we typically end up with five to seven stopping spots; these are the bare bones of the think-aloud that we will model in front of students.

Third Reading

The goal of our third reading is to identify the script of exactly what we will say in front of students. We find it very helpful to actually write out what we will say on a sticky note, then put that sticky note on the back cover of the book so it is easily viewable (but only to us!). These sticky notes serve as a crutch so that we know exactly what to say at the right point. Too many times, we vowed that we would remember what we intended to say, but in the hectic nature of classroom instruction, we lost our train of thought or had to ad-lib. Our scripts typically incorporate the following prompts:

- I wonder...
- I predict...
- I don’t understand...

- This reminds me of...
- When I read this, I think...
- This does not make sense to me because...
- I already know something about...
- I think I will learn...
- I wonder what it means when...
- I can picture...
- I think...because it said...
- The most important thing I have learned so far is...
- It was interesting to me because...
- I really like how the author...
- I think/I bet...
- Now that I reread, I...
- I am confused by this, so...

We find it helpful to use the think-aloud blank chart in Table 3 to write a script of our think-alouds; this script helps us to identify exactly what we will say to model our comprehension and metacognitive strategies. In the first column, we write the text *exactly as it appears*. The last sentence in each row indicates a stopping point. In the second column, we write a first-person narrative of exactly what we say to students. In the third column, we identify which comprehension strategy (or strategies!) our think-aloud evokes. Though this process may be time-consuming initially, the explicit nature of writing think-alouds increases our confidence in implementing these lessons. We equate this process of writing the script of a think-aloud to teaching a young child to ride a bike with training wheels. Just as training wheels provide stability and confidence in learning a new skill, so does the word-by-word script of a think-aloud. Our end goal is to be able to think aloud with comfort, ease, and skill, just as a young child hopes to ride a bike independently.

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Table 3 Think-Aloud Blank Chart

What the Text Says (Write out the last few words of the sentence before you will think aloud.)	Teacher Think-Aloud Script (Write exactly what you will say, in first-person narrative.)	Associated Reading Comprehension Strategy (Name the comprehension strategy you are employing in this think-aloud.)

Sample Think-Aloud

To demonstrate this process, we planned a think-aloud lesson for a fifth-grade class. Our intent was to align this lesson with the Common Core reading anchor standard of “reading closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it.” Because our students were wrapping up a unit on fables, we selected a fable available in the public domain. We used our three-step process to plan this think-aloud:

- Step 1: Peruse the text to identify any potential juicy stopping points.
- Step 2: Reduce the number of stopping points to a manageable number.
- Step 3: Write the corresponding script aligning with each stopping point.

Table 4 shows our think-aloud plan for the fable *The Lion and the Spider*. In the first reading, we identified 11 potential stopping points. In the second

reading, we narrowed them down to five. It was more important that our selections were appropriate in relation to our Common Core standard rather than meeting a predetermined number of selections. For example, we eliminated the first stopping point we initially identified, which came at the conclusion of the first paragraph. In the first reading, this point seemed to be an appropriate place to make a mental image, or use visualization as a reading comprehension strategy. The first paragraph paints a rich image of a tired lion lying in the

Table 4 Sample Think-Aloud for *The Lion and the Spider*

Stopping Point and Corresponding Text	Teacher Think-Aloud Script	Associated Reading Comprehension Strategy
(1) “How clever you are,” it said to the spider.	“I’m not familiar with the word <i>clever</i> , so I’m going to use context clues to try to figure out what it means. The spider can jump from plant to plant, and it leaves string to make a web. That’s tricky to do, and something that can do that must be skilled and smart. I’m guessing that <i>clever</i> means smart or bright.”	Using context clues for unknown vocabulary
(2) “But why do you do that when you could just grab your food, the way I do?”	“The lion here is watching the spider do things that he cannot do. He’s questioning why the spider is doing things. It seems like the author is indicating the lion is unfamiliar with how a spider survives.”	Recognizing an author’s writing style
(5) “And you could not live by eating flies.”	“I remember that lions are carnivores, meaning they eat meat. I know that the lion’s plan will not work.”	Activating prior knowledge
(6) And it bit the lion.	“I wonder why the spider bit the lion here. Was it out of revenge for ruining his web? I’ll have to read on to find out.”	Asking questions
(7) “And some of us may be small but very smart.”	“I know that fables have a moral, or a lesson for the reader to learn. What the spider says here gives me a hint about the lesson to the reader here. The lion was lazy and unkind to the spider, but the spider teaches the lion about hard work and cleverness. The author is telling me here that hard work pays off and that I should not be unkind to others.”	Recognizing an author’s style

“Think-alouds are a complex skill for teachers to master.”

sunny grass. In the second reading, we eliminated this point because we were already confident in our fifth graders' ability to visualize and because visualization did not closely align with our objective of making inferences.

We followed this protocol with an end result of five stopping points (noted by numbers in Table 4) that challenged students to make inferences about vocabulary words, about text genre, and about the author's message. In the third step of the protocol, we transcribed the exact script we planned to use with our students. The Appendix shows samples of the think-aloud scripts submitted by teacher participants. These scripts are powerful in the explicit nature of the think-alouds employed and their associated comprehension strategies.

Honing Your Skills in Thinking Aloud

Think-alouds are a complex skill for teachers to master. It is particularly important to practice thinking aloud in a greater variety of text. Though we made efforts to model thinking aloud with nonfiction text, the majority of our teachers thought aloud with narrative text. Perhaps they were not as comfortable thinking aloud in less familiar text genres. It is also possible that some were unsure of how to apply comprehension strategies to nonfiction text. Whatever the case, teachers must be supported in thinking aloud in nonfiction text, especially as this text genre carries so much weight in the CCSS.

We also suggest that teachers think through differentiation of think-alouds. In our graduate course, we intentionally

modeled think-alouds for a variety of grade levels in K–6, but our teachers only planned lessons for their current teaching placement. We see the need for an examination of how to differentiate think-alouds to meet the diverse needs of students of different grade levels, diverse language backgrounds, and various levels and learning needs.

Teachers may also benefit from thinking aloud with frustrational text. As many teachers are avid and proficient readers themselves, they may not understand or remember how it feels to struggle during reading and the nature of that struggle. To simulate this experience, we incorporated thinking aloud through a college statistics textbook, a medical dictionary, and legal documents. As teachers understood how their lack of background knowledge and their limited vocabulary impeded their comprehension of these domain-specific texts, they felt what it was like to be a struggling reader.

Our goal in this article was to provide a clear method for teachers to implement and plan think-alouds. We cannot understate the value of teachers who effectively and confidently think aloud. We encourage teachers to reflect upon how these think-alouds impact student performance. Perhaps you might collaborate with your colleagues and begin a focus group to conduct informal case studies or inquiry projects around think-alouds. Such work might lend us the compelling evidence that the hard work and thoughtful preparation of think-alouds translates to a difference in students' comprehension. Until teachers gain the confidence and skill to effectively think aloud, think-alouds may be one more task on our mounting to-do lists. We hope that, with the three-step planning process and the other ideas we have presented here, you will grow in your skill and confidence to think aloud.

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TAKE ACTION!

Our three-step process to planning think-alouds is as follows:

- Step 1: Peruse the text to identify juicy stopping spots. Use sticky notes to mark up to 15 potential stopping spots.
- Step 2: Examine each stopping spot and critically reflect upon the need for that particular spot. Use the reflective questions provided to determine the usefulness of each stopping spot. Reduce the number of stopping spots to 5–7.
- Step 3: Use the Think-Aloud Blank Chart (Table 3) to write the corresponding script aligning with each stopping point. Write out your script on a sticky note, then put that sticky note on the back cover of the book. Use the prompts provided to write your script.

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Appendix

Selected Portions of Effective Think-Alouds

Sample Text 1: <i>Knuffle Bunny Free: An Unexpected Diversion</i> by Mo Willems (Conducted in a Second-Grade Classroom)		
What The Text Says	Teacher Think-Aloud Script	Associated Reading Comprehension Strategies
Trixie was sure that she wouldn’t be able to sleep another night in a strange bed without her Knuffle Bunny.	“So even though I was right that Trixie really does miss Knuffle Bunny, I was wrong in predicting that her Oma and Opa would take her on many adventures to help her forget. I think that even though the new bunny Trixie’s Oma and Opa bought for her was really cool and could do lots of fun things, she just wants her doll back.”	Making and clarifying predictions
Right there, on that very plane, Trixie noticed something... “KNUFFLE BUNNY!!!” Trixie was so happy to have Knuffle Bunny back in her arms.	“I can’t believe it! Trixie must have the best luck in the world! On her flight home, she was on the very same plane and in the very same seat and Knuffle Bunny was still there! Thumbs up if you lost something and then forgot about it. Now keep your thumb up if you finally found what you had lost, and even though you forgot about it, you were <i>so</i> happy to have it back!”	Clarification, making connections

(continued)

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<i>(continued)</i>		
What The Text Says	Teacher Think-Aloud Script	Associated Reading Comprehension Strategies
Happy enough to make a decision. . . Trixie turned around and said: "Would your baby like my Knuffle Bunny?"	"What? I'm going to go back and read that again. I thought I read that Trixie gave up Knuffle Bunny. I'm not sure if that's right. Let me go back and reread."	Clarification, making connections, rereading to clarify confusion

Sample Text 2: <i>The Kissing Hand</i> by Audrey Penn (Conducted in a First-Grade Classroom)		
What The Text Says	Teacher Think-Aloud Script	Associated Reading Comprehension Strategies
<p>"I don't want to go to school," he told his mother. "I want to stay home with you. I want to play with my friends. And play with my boys. And read my books. And swing on my swing. Please, may I stay home with you?" Mrs. Raccoon took Chester by the hand and nuzzled him on the ear.</p> <p>"You'll make new friends. And play with new toys. Read new books. And swing on new swings. Besides," she added, "I know a wonderful secret that will make your nights at school seem as warm and cozy as your days at home."</p> <p>That night, Chester stood in front of his school and looked thoughtful. Suddenly, he turned to his mother and grinned. "Give me your hand," he told her. Chester took his mother's hand in his own and unfolded her large, familiar fingers into a fan.</p>	<p>"In my mind's eye, I see a nice, loving mom who is trying to comfort her child. This reminds me of how my mom used to comfort me when I was sad and did not want to go to school. I bet she will have a great idea to make Chester feel better and stop crying."</p> <p>"I am curious to find out what her secret might be to make Chester feel better while they are apart during school."</p> <p>"I wonder, is Chester going to give her a kiss on her hand, too?"</p>	<p>Visualization, making predictions, making connections</p> <p>Clarifying, setting a purpose</p> <p>Asking a question</p>

Sample Text 3: <i>The Circus Ship</i> by Chris van Dusen (Conducted in a Fourth-Grade Classroom)		
What The Text Says	Teacher Think-Aloud Script	Associated Reading Comprehension Strategies
<p>Through chilly water, all night long, the animals swam on, until they reached an island beach just before the dawn. They pulled themselves up on the shore—bedraggled, cold, and beat—then staggered to the village on weary, wobbly feet.</p> <p>His face was red. He scratched his head. He stood there with a frown. Mr. Paine looked high and low, but still he couldn't see the fifteen circus animals of his menagerie.</p> <p>He ran off in a fit of rage. His ship was leaving sight, so he jumped into a rowboat and he rowed with all his might. And from that day they like to say their lives were free of "Paine." It was a happy, peaceful place upon that isle in Maine.</p>	<p>"Wow, there are a lot of big words that I need to take a look at again. <i>Bedraggled</i> seems to talk about how the animals are feeling. If they were swimming all night long, I would think <i>bedraggled</i> must mean really, really tired. Now, <i>staggered</i> is an action word. If they 'staggered to the village on weary, wobbly feet,' they must have been walking but in a way that seemed like they would fall over at any minute. And lastly, <i>weary</i> is used to talk about the animals' feet that were wobbly and also probably very tired."</p> <p>"I wonder if I can find all of the animals in this picture. How can he not recognize some of them? If he can't find the animals, what will he do?"</p> <p>"The animals were free from their mean old boss! I was a little nervous when he first came back in the story, but I am so happy he left empty-handed. I wonder what it would be like to live on an island with a bunch of circus animals. This book showed me a lot about how it is better to be kind to others instead of being afraid if maybe they are a little different."</p>	<p>Activating prior knowledge, determining word meanings</p> <p>Asking questions</p> <p>Revisiting and checking previous predictions, summarizing</p>