Reading expository text: The challenges of students with learning disabilities

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There is substantial evidence that for most of our students, expository reading poses a challenge that contributes to their difficulty in becoming successful in literacy learning. This is an unfortunate reality inasmuch as by fourth grade students read more expository material to gain content information. At the secondary level, a majority of students’ instructional time is devoted to reading expository text (Barton, 1997; Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Hudson, et al., 1993).

A number of studies suggest that students find reading expository text difficult because of the very nature of its organizational structure—exposition being rooted in classical rhetoric which is “learned” rather than “acquired” rhetoric (e.g., Anderson & Armbruster, 1988; Garner et al., 1986; Olson, 1990). A good deal of writing in an expository genre, such as those found in textbooks, is often described as “inconsiderate text”—information too densely packed, too much assumed prior knowledge, too many missing cohesive connections, and too much irrelevant information included (Beck et al., 1997 as cited in Donovan & Smolkin, 2002, p. 415; also Lester, 1998; Moss, 1991; Olson & Gee, 1991; Smith, 1992); non-chronological, structured by linguistic features such as the use of passive voice (e.g., in science textbooks), and a number of reiterations in an effort to explain quite complex new ideas in few words although vocabulary is often abstract and technical (e.g., Derewianka, 1990; Pappas, 1991; Ferrera, 1986; Unsworth, 1999); and characterized by registers that are different from those used by writers of a literary genre (Littlefair, 1991). Consequently, children in the upper elementary grades who have not been immersed in reading expository text at the primary level, often find it difficult to comprehend these texts (Beck et al., 1997).

The difficulty in reading expository text can be worse among students with a learning disability (e.g., Bender, 1998; Englert & Thomas, 1987; Wong & Wilson, 1984). Nevertheless, students with learning disabilities are presented with the same expectations for reading expository text across grade levels.

In an article, “Examining the Reading Difficulty of Secondary Students with Learning Disabilities: Expository Versus Narrative Text,” Saenz and Fuchs (2002) examined the skill areas in which secondary students with learning disabilities exhibit differential reading performance on narrative versus expository text, particularly the narrative and expository reading skills of these
students. In this study, the authors claim that students’ difficulty with expository reading can be associated with the conceptual density and less familiar concepts and vocabulary (e.g., highly technical, multisyllabic words) in expository text. This is supported by Espin & Foege's study (1996) which showed that vocabulary knowledge is the strongest predictor of successful comprehension of expository text among secondary students. Prior knowledge is another factor that can be associated with students’ difficulty with expository reading. The students’ schema can assist the reader in making “educated” guesses about the content of text, as well as establishing expectations to facilitate comprehension (Graesser et al., 1991).

In identifying the skill areas in which secondary students with LD exhibit differential reading performance on narrative versus expository text, the researchers asked two major questions: (1) Do secondary students with LD exhibit differential performance on reading fluency as a function of text type (i.e., narrative versus expository)? and (2) Do secondary students with LD exhibit differential performance on reading comprehension as a function of text type and question type? (p. 34)

To answer these questions, they recruited 111 students with LD from six high schools in 20 remedial and special education reading classrooms located in a southeastern urban school district. These secondary students had an estimated reading grade levels between Grades 2 and 6 based on teachers’ judgment of their most recent statewide testing, classroom observations, and diagnostic data. Each participant was asked to read aloud two passages of each text type—narrative and expository. Trained examiners determined the reader’s (1) words read correctly in 2 minutes, (2) total questions answered correctly, (3) literal questions answered correctly, and (4) inferential questions answered correctly. When answering to 10 comprehension questions (8 literal, 2 inferential) read to them by the examiner, a student was not allowed to reread the passage or look back at the passage being tested. Student performance was scored as the number of literal and inferential questions answered correctly. Scores from the two 10-question samples were averaged in order to measure text type performance. The scores include (1) average number of literal questions answered correctly for narrative passages, (2) average number of inferential comprehension questions answered correctly for narrative passages, (3) average number of literal questions answered correctly for expository passages, and (4) average number of inferential comprehension questions answered correctly for expository passages. (pp. 35-36)

The results of the study showed that secondary students with LD have more difficulty with expository reading than with narrative reading, both in oral reading and comprehension. (p. 37) Earlier research studies have established similar findings (e.g., Englert & Thomas, 1987; Parmar et al., 1994; Wong & Wilson, 1984). The study also showed that students’ performance in comprehension on expository and narrative text depended on the type of questions asked. There was no difference between students’ literal comprehension of narrative and expository text. However, there was discrepancy between their inferential comprehension of narrative and expository text. Secondary students with LD demonstrated poorer inferential comprehension on expository text than narrative text. (p. 37)

Saenz and Fuchs (2002, pp. 37-38) offer the following plausible explanations for the disparity in reading fluency between narrative and expository text, and inferential comprehension of expository texts than of narrative texts: (1) Students found the content and structure of expository passages to be less familiar and more challenging (Graesser, et al., 1991 as cited in Saenz & Fuchs, 2002); (2) Students may not have possessed sufficient word identification skills such as syllabication and identification of word parts to help them decode the unfamiliar, multisyllabic words that are characteristic of expository texts (Bryant, et al., 1999 as cited in Saenz & Fuchs, 2002); (3) Students have ineffective utilization of prior knowledge—they may have lacked the prior knowledge needed for answering the inferential questions (Carr & Thompson, 1996; McCormick, 1992; Snider, 1989 as cited in Saenz & Fuchs, 2002); and (4) Students are unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the expository texts.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ALTERNATIVES TO READING EXPOSITORY TEXT**

What can teachers do to help secondary students with LD succeed in their content area reading?

Saenz and Fuchs (2002) suggest that “secondary students with LD need instruction with expository reading materials, inferential skills, vocabulary, and reading fluency.” (p. 38) It would be helpful for teachers to differentiate instruction to meet these students’ needs, and model to them how they can become strategic readers.

Among the strategies that have been found to work best with students with LD, summarization and outlining, especially when taught via direct/thorough instruction, contribute significantly to improving these students’ expository reading skills.
These skills can be taught before, during, and/or after reading.

Cooper’s (2000) *Literacy: Helping Children Construct Meaning* includes strategy posters to use in teaching “identifying important information in expository text” (p. 398), “summarizing informational text” (p. 401), and “question generating strategy for expository text” (p. 402) that teachers might find helpful for secondary students with LD. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate Cooper’s (2000) steps in summarizing and question generating strategies in expository text.

### Table 1. SUMMARIZING INFORMATIONAL TEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP 1</th>
<th>The topic is the <a href="#">Empire of the Rising Sun</a> (Chapter from Social studies textbook on causes of WWII).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look for the topic of the paragraph or text. Delete trivia.</td>
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<tr>
<th>STEP 2</th>
<th>It mentions the rise of democracy during the reign of Emperor Hirohito.</th>
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<td>Look for information that is repeated. Include it once.</td>
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<th>STEP 3</th>
<th>Voting rights, Japanese Diet (Japanese parliament) and business leaders</th>
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<tr>
<td>Group related terms or ideas under one term. Example: candy for M&amp;M’s, Snickers, Mars.</td>
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<tr>
<th>STEP 4</th>
<th>As political parties grew stronger, and elected members to the Japanese parliament increased, they exerted their power.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Look for a main idea sentence.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>STEP 5</th>
<th>The impact of democracy on Japan</th>
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<tr>
<td>If there is no main idea sentence, make up one.</td>
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<tr>
<th>STEP 6</th>
<th>During the early reign of Emperor Hirohito voting rights were extended to all Japanese men. During this shift to democracy Japan’s nationalism grew, and military generals plotted to overthrow the civilian government. In 1937 the civilian government was forced to accept military control. The rise of Japanese nationalism and military influence would lead Japan to war with America.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Put your summary together. Check all rules.</td>
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Strategies will be more effective when teachers use think-alouds in modeling them to the students and gradually withdrawing support, moving students toward independent application of the strategies.


**Step 1.** **Scaffolding strategy use.** Teacher establishes a purpose and models orally while students observe.

**Step 2.** **Apprenticeship of use.** Teacher uses strategy, and students talk about and help identify when and how strategy should be used.

**Step 3.** **Scaffolding strategy use.** Students work in small groups using the strategy, and the teacher scaffolds providing feedback and help as needed.

**Step 4.** **Independent use.** Teacher observes and assesses students independently using strategies, demonstrating competence by using techniques like think-alouds.

This also means that teacher and students should participate in rich strategic discussions of the expository text being read. Teachers should also provide more time for in-class reading and application of the strategies until such time students can apply them independently.

Additionally, below are three guidelines to help teachers facilitate and support the comprehension processing of secondary students with LD who are reading expository text.

✓ **Content area reading must not be limited to textbooks alone.** Textbooks have been criticized for their condensed information, conceptual density and lack of coherence, among others, that make it difficult for students to read and comprehend, much less for students with LD (e.g., Armbruster & Anderson, 1984; Calfee, 1987; Heibert, 1999). Teachers need to complement the textbook with multiple resources (e.g., trade books, instructional software, electronic books, Internet, TV/video, etc.). Richardson and Morgan (2000) argue that there is growing concern that teachers in all content subjects must be adept at offering reading choices that reflect students’ interests, cultures, and customs, therefore, a **multitext** approach is necessary. (p. 62) They also suggest that for teachers who move to an integral, saturated use of multiple resources, **thematic units of instruction** is highly recommended. An example (see next page) of a cross-disciplinary thematic unit on WWII, “We are the Historians” developed by a team of teachers in Pulaski Middle School, New Britain, Connecticut demonstrates how multiple resources

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**Table 2. QUESTION GENERATING STRATEGY (Expository Text)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Readers Preview the text</td>
<td>✓ Read titles and subtitles&lt;br&gt; ✓ Look at illustrations&lt;br&gt; ✓ Read first paragraph&lt;br&gt; ✓ Make a prediction&lt;br&gt; ✓ Use your prediction to write a “think” question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Read on to find important information to answer your “think” question</td>
<td>✓ Write the answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Continue previewing and reading</td>
<td>✓ Ask yourself a “think” another question&lt;br&gt; ✓ Write down your question</td>
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Continue the process of reading and questioning until you have finished reading. When you are done look back over the text to see if you have any other questions.
can be integrated into math, science, social studies, art, English, and technology education over shared planning periods.

✓ **Determine/Build the reader’s prior knowledge and vocabulary for content material.** As have been suggested by research studies, there is a strong correlation between prior knowledge and vocabulary and comprehension. This is especially true in content area reading where readers must interact with highly specialized and technical language. Indeed, schema plays a significant role in meaningful learning. In activating what students might know about words, Vacca & Vacca (1996) provides this example:

**Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection**

Imagine yourself in a tenth-grade biology class in which the teacher assigns for homework a text selection titled “Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection.” In this assignment you may encounter a variety of scientific terms, such as: natural selection, organism, survival of the fittest, overpopulation, variations, theory, offspring, competition, necessities, spores, visible universe, species, reproduction, ancestors, spawn, maturity, and electrons.

The biology teacher recognizes that the vocabulary of her subject matter can create barriers to reading comprehension. … The teacher puts into practice plans and procedures that will contribute to students’ acquisition of vocabulary concepts. She knows that she can influence students’ long-term acquisition of the language of biology **before, during, and after** reading.

**Before Reading**

1. **Activate students’ prior knowledge of the vocabulary words in a text selection.**
   - **Strategy awareness:** Students need to learn how to ask the question: **What do I know about these words?**
   - **Instructional activities:** word explorations, brainstorming, knowledge ratings, word sorts

2. **Make connections between words, the main topic, and the structure of the text selection.**
   - **Strategy awareness:** Students need to learn how to ask the question: **How are these words related to one another?**
   - **Instructional activities:** semantic maps, semantic feature analysis
During Reading
3. Encounter words in context.
   Strategy awareness: Students need to be aware that while reading, they build and clarify word knowledge by encountering words in their natural context.
   Instructional activities: reading and constructing meanings based on the context in which words are used

After Reading
4. Define and clarify word meanings and concepts.
   Strategy awareness: Students need to learn how to ask the question: How can I use what I read to confirm and clarify what I think these words mean?
   Instructional activities: vocabulary self-collection, concept of definition, word maps, word sorts, postgraphic organizers, vocabulary extension and reinforcement, content analysis, word structure
5. Refine, extend, and apply words.
   Strategy awareness: Students must learn to recognize that “to make a word mine, I must know how to use it when I’m reading, writing, speaking, or listening.”
   Instructional activities: reading, writing, discussion, listening

The biology class has already studied changes in living populations through the ages. … Students in the class can bring a great deal of knowledge to the Darwin passage from previous study as well as from their prior knowledge and experiences. The biology teacher knows the value of activating what the students know so that they can bring that knowledge to their reading.

With permission of:

✓ Emphasize writing as a way to learn. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to write about what they are going to read about and what they have read. Through the reading-writing connection, students use writing as a vehicle for learning about and assessing what they have read. Teachers may extend the reading-writing connection by establishing a computer and writing connection, e.g., reader response via electronic mail exchanges or using the Internet to find additional information supporting content reading. Freewrites, reading response journal, learning logs, annotations, outlining, and summarizing are other ways of introducing students to writing to learn.

Despite the challenges secondary students with LD face in reading expository text, there are many classroom opportunities teachers can explore in order to support and facilitate their process of constructing meaning from text. The information and strategies suggested by the research reviewed in this article are valuable in informing teachers how best to teach expository text to secondary students with LD. However, the goal to keep in mind is to enable all students to become successful strategic readers of expository text.

REFERENCES
Carr, S.C. & Thompson, B. (1996). The effects of prior knowledge and schema activation strategies on the


