

Text-based discussions and reading comprehension

Promoting reading comprehension through dialogic pedagogies

The importance of teacher talk

As students progress through the upper years of schooling, reading and writing demands become increasingly challenging for adolescents with language and literacy difficulties who may not have proficiency in the foundational reading skills necessary to access academic language in textbooks (Hall-Mills and Apel 2015).

With the increasingly specialised curriculum of secondary schooling, there is a growing need to ensure that students are taught how to access the academic language and conventions of different subjects. Text-based discussion is a form of **disciplinary literacy** that is designed to collaboratively build understanding of texts.

Disciplinary literacy

Disciplinary literacy instruction focuses on teaching literacy-related strategies, processes, and language that are specific to a discipline and not necessarily readily generalisable to other academic domains. In order to plan for and lead text-based discussions, teachers need to develop an understanding of how meaning is conveyed through discipline-specific text-features, language patterns and vocabulary.

When planning for text-based discussions, remember that students with language and literacy difficulties may not have mastered foundational spoken and written language skills. These students may still require **content literacy** instruction that, although applied in academic content, has general application across the curriculum.

Content literacy instruction

Both content and disciplinary literacy instruction should be explicitly targeted with adolescents who struggle with literacy proficiency (Wolter and Green 2021).

It is important to remember that students simply talking together in groups about curriculum content is not sufficient; rather, text-based discussions need to be a rich, purposeful co-construction of knowledge (Catts and Kamhi 2014).

Features of high-quality discussion:

- model, encourage and scaffold academic language (disciplinary and content)
- explicitly teach increasingly specialised and complex vocabulary or syntax
- structure and focus conversations – planned pauses, comments and questions
- pose open-ended, authentic questions (teacher or students)
- build on student responses
- lead conversation to prompt analysis, generalisation and speculation
- engage in individual or collective reasoning about topics raised by the text
- explanation claims, opinions and beliefs
- scaffold to engage diverse learners

What does high-quality discussion look like?

Next steps

For more information, contact your school speech language pathologist or the Reading and Writing Disorders Advisory Service. The Advisory service may be accessed by telephone or email on weekdays between 8:30am and 4:30pm.

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