Drawing on Text Features for Reading Comprehension and Composing

**Victoria J. Risko, Doris Walker-Dalhouse
with Erin S. Bridges, Ali Wilson**

Texts have numerous structural and organizational features that affect students' comprehension and composing (Meyer & Wijekumar, 2007). Text features might include a serial ordering of events or descriptions of cause-and-effect relationships that are common to history and science texts, patterns of language rhythms in poetic texts, detailed (and often overlapping) illustrations to depict several story lines simultaneously in graphic novels, or the juxtaposition of gestures, visual images, and music representing characters' motives in digital texts.

As our examples illustrate, students are meeting different forms of texts, both in and out of school. This is particularly true in classrooms where teachers are purposely integrating multiple forms of texts—such as informational texts paired with narratives, newspapers, and brochures—to address students' interests, life experiences, and personal questions, all the while building knowledge, skills, and strategies (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). In this column, we discuss possible challenges to students' comprehension and composing as they relate to specific text features and draw on research to suggest instructional accommodations.

Multiple Genres and Comprehension

Providing quality reading material (e.g., full-length trade books, magazines, informational materials) beyond textbooks enriches students' access to content and world knowledge, as textbooks can lack "depth and perspective" (Johnson, 2008, p. 26). Yet features and organizational styles of each text can be problematic for students who have not learned to be strategic in their use to support comprehension. For example, Hedin and Conderman (2010), observing students' difficulty with inferring central text concepts, advocated for students' use of graphic organizers to illustrate connections among main ideas and supporting details or to map out cause-and-effect relationships.

Hedin and Conderman (2010) also illustrated how teachers could highlight or underline important text concepts to signal a need for rereading and use of problem-solving strategies to aid comprehension. They discussed the importance of previewing texts to highlight main ideas; such ideas are typically not stated explicitly but are needed to provide the conceptual glue for understanding what students may perceive as disparate and unrelated ideas (Alvarez & Risko, in press). Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) demonstrated the importance of teaching students how to use illustrations and photographs to enhance their comprehension, especially for reluctant readers. Similarly, Maderazo et al. (2010) found that drawing attention to both pictorial and written text in picture books developed primary students' critical thinking and comprehension of narrative texts.

Multimodal and Graphic Texts

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) and others reminded us that new forms of text, such as digital texts, have

multiple features that are not typical in conventional texts, with words, images, sounds, and movements presented simultaneously and within dynamic formats to enrich the ideas conveyed. And although the multimodal nature of these materials holds promise for deepening understandings and enhancing digital composing (Whitin, 2009), these features can also intrude on comprehension.

For example, there are two story lines in *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney: one developed completely within the illustrations and the other within the words. Conversely, text and illustrations are used interchangeably to develop one story line within *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick. Both texts exemplify the potential difficulties students may have as they navigate through the illustrations and text, especially if they are expecting that the illustrations are less important than the words for story development.

Graphic novels have rich images and flexible structures that provide options for navigating texts. These texts are useful for motivating students to read (Bucher & Manning, 2004); for deepening students' comprehension, language, and vocabulary development (Boatright, 2010); for connecting to students' experiences (Bitz, 2004); and for the study of social, cultural, and historical issues (Christensen, 2006).

Graphic novels also have particular characteristics that may have an impact on comprehension (Simmons, 2003). For example, Erin (third author) taught a group of English learners (EL) with Shaun Tan's wordless book, *The Arrival*, to make connections to the students' experiences with immigration.

As suggested by Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003), the illustrations captivated the attention of each student and served as fascinating motivators to read. However, some pages consisted of a variety of images within several frames. When faced with these pages, the students focused on small details and "read" each picture separately. As a result, their comprehension of the main ideas suffered, because they were unable to think beyond each image and make connections to the overall story. Pallenik (1976) noted the problem of middle school students attending only to parts of whole texts, such as a single panel in a series of illustrations, and advocated for teaching students how to read illustrations.

Ali (fourth author) used Jeff Smith's Bone series with another group of ELs and observed that her students enjoyed the text and actively engaged in meaning-making opportunities while reading.

Because the students did not automatically know how the pictures and text informed each other, they constructed meaning from the pictures and ignored the text. Although this allowed the students to build an understanding of the story in the moment, it resulted in comprehension problems later. As students read further, the text or pictures did not logically follow the meaning they had previously constructed.

Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) described their students' resistance to images that opposed their own visualizations. Yet Ali's students did the opposite, as they constructed meaning from the images and then resisted the conflicting textual information. Noting the challenges to their students' comprehension, both Erin and Ali adjusted their instruction. Erin helped her students read across the images for a more holistic understanding, and Ali demonstrated the importance of reading both illustrations and written text for further comprehension. Additionally, teaching text features can be embedded in text discussions during rereadings or when students are asked to paraphrase text ideas (Hedin & Conderman, 2010).

Teaching text features can be embedded in text discussions.

Composing Texts

Writing multiple-genre texts for authentic purposes enables comprehension (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007) and access to content (Landis, Umolu, & Mancha, 2010). When students compose their own texts, often within guided writing instruction, they access important events in their lives and represent diverse interests and cultural experiences while supporting connections to the school curriculum. Landis and colleagues (2010) illustrate how the use of a language-experience approach for generating group compositions provides content that is engaging and leads to teaching multiple skills, including the use of text features to organize and develop content.

A model of using graphic novels to develop students' comprehension through writing can be gathered from Lyga (2006). Struggling fourth-grade boys explored the artwork in graphic novels, paying close attention to the subtle changes in characters' facial expressions. Then they used sticky notes to dictate

their ideas for dialogue and captions before transcribing their stories. Each page of their stories corresponded to a scene in the novel. The final products reflected effective word choice, dialogue, and depth in comprehension.

Implications for the Classroom

Teaching with a wide variety of text structures and images holds possibilities for deepening students' interest, engagement, and comprehension and enhancing the complexity of their compositions. To achieve these goals, teachers should examine their texts carefully to identify features that might either support or intrude on meaningful understandings. This careful study of instructional texts can help teachers determine how to help students approach and explore text meanings and generate compositions with similar features.

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Risko is a professor emerita at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA; e-mail victoria.j.risko@ vanderbilt.edu. Walker-Dalhouse teaches at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA; e-mail doris.walker-dalhouse@marquette.edu. Bridges is a fifth-grade reading teacher at East Literature Magnet Middle School in Nashville; e-mail erinelizabeth721@gmail.com. Wilson is a program director with Teach For America in Nashville; e-mail ali.r.wilson@gmail.com.