



Common Core in the Primary Classroom

SUMMARY

A primary level teacher shares his experience working with the Instructional Shift of asking *text-dependent questions* during a read-aloud. This Shift can be implemented in developmentally appropriate ways that can set a foundation for future student success.

The article is written

to help primary level teachers understand and utilize the Instructional Shifts that underlie the *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (CCLS/ELA)*. The New York State Education Department emphasizes six Instructional Shifts (see Shifts in English Language Arts & Literacy). I will describe how I approached developing text-based questions to accompany a read-aloud lesson for my kindergarten students (Shift 4). Text-based questions have answers that are found in the text itself or inferred from statements in the text. While this Shift needs to be implemented in a developmentally appropriate way for children of this age, the early grades can set a foundation for the development of critical thinking skills.

Implementing the Instructional Shifts is a Process

My goal is to explain how the process of focusing on this Shift unfolded for me, and how working in depth and detail with a few lessons helped me become more fluent with this Shift. While planning is an important element of all teaching, it becomes increasingly important when working with the CCLS/ELA.

Starting with Standards and Objectives

The lesson being described is from our unit on farming, and the focus of the lesson was a read-aloud of the popular book: *No, No, Titus!* by Claire Masurel (1997). The CCLS/ELA put significant emphasis on a balance between informational and literary texts. While the focus of this read-aloud was a work of fiction based on a farm, a range of materials (literary and

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informational) representing a range of difficulty levels was used throughout the unit. The standards and objectives

that guided my planning for this particular lesson are found on the next page.

Shifts in English Language Arts & Literacy

Shift 1	Balancing Informational & Literary Text	Students read a true balance of informational and literary texts.
Shift 2	Knowledge in the Disciplines	Students build knowledge about the world (domains/content areas) primarily through text rather than through the teacher or other activities.
Shift 3	Staircase of Complexity	Students read the central, grade-appropriate text around which instruction is centered. Teachers are patient, and create more time, space, and support in the curriculum for close reading.
Shift 4	Text-based Answers	Students engage in rich and rigorous evidence-based conversations about text.
Shift 5	Writing from Sources	Writing emphasizes use of evidence from sources to inform or make an argument.
Shift 6	Academic Vocabulary	Students continuously build the transferable vocabulary they need to access grade-level complex texts. This can be done effectively by spiraling like content in increasingly complex texts.

From EngageNY.org of the New York State Education Department. *Instructional shifts for the common core.* Retrieved from <http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts>

Standards and Objectives

This activity was developed with the following Standards as guides:

With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text. **(RI.K.1, RL.K.1)**

With prompting and support, describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text. **(RI.K.3)**

Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic. **(W.K.2)**

With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story. **(RL.K.3)**

Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood. **(SL.K.2)**

Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts. **(L.K.6)**

Objectives:

During a read aloud of the story *No, No Titus!* the students will answer text-based questions about the story with a focus on characters and setting.

During a read-aloud of the story, the students will make inferences based on information in the text.

After listening to the story, the students will demonstrate understanding of targeted vocabulary.

After listening to the story, the students will paint a picture of a farm, include two characters from the story and write a sentence using words that describe a farm.

Developing Text-dependent Questions for a Read-Aloud

Kindergarten teachers use read-alouds extensively. As noted in the *Instructional Practice Evidence Guide For Common Core State Standards*, “In Kindergarten and 1st grade text dependent and text specific questions should primarily be focused on read aloud texts” (*Achievethecore.org*). My goal was to use the read-aloud as a time to practice increased use of text-dependent questions and to orient students back to the text. (There were many other opportunities after the read-aloud and throughout the day for varied discussions and sharing experiences.) With a text from a reading series, the teacher is provided with many sample questions, but as I looked at developing skill with this Shift, the questions I planned changed extensively. I spent a lot of time thinking about what a good text-based question was, and I also needed to be aware of attention spans and the developmental needs of my students.

My planning for this was methodical and deliberate. I kept the Standards in the forefront of my thinking. Below are examples of questions. Some of the questions are literal — the answer is found on the page. Some of the questions require some degree of inference. All of the questions are *directed to the reading*.

Summary of Storyline and Examples of Questions

The farmer welcomes a puppy, Titus, to his new home and tells him the farm needs a guard dog. Titus wants to be a good guard dog but isn't sure what he's supposed to do.

Literal questions:

Where does the story take place?
(*On a farm*)

Who is new to the farm?
(*The puppy*)

The school bus comes for the children and goes "HONK, HONK." Titus wonders if his job is to go to school. But, no, that's not what he is supposed to do.

Question that requires inference:

Why do you think the author capitalized all of the letters in "HONK, HONK" and "WOOF, WOOF"?
(*So when you read it, you make the sound or read it louder. It adds excitement to the story.*)

The farmer is plowing the fields on a tractor and Titus wonders if *that* is his job.

Literal questions:

What is the farmer doing?
(*Plowing the fields*)

What does the farmer use to plow the fields? (*A tractor*)

Questions that require inference:

What was Titus trying to do?
(*Plow the fields*)

Why? (*He is trying to find out what his job is on the farm*)

The farmer's wife is milking the cows. Is that his job? The cat was chasing mice. Is that his job? The chickens are laying eggs. Is that his job? "No" is always the answer. He crawled into his doghouse.

Literal question:

What does Titus say on most of the pages? (*Woof, woof*)

Questions that require inference:

What is he trying to say? (*That he wants to do what the other characters are doing*)

Does Titus feel that he is a good farm dog? (*no*)

What in the story tells you that?
(*He crawled into his doghouse and went to sleep*)

Question that seeks to build vocabulary:

The author says that he "crawled" into his doghouse. What is another word, or words, that could be used in its place? (*Walked slowly, dragged himself*)

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He sees a fox approaching the chicken coop and barks. He found his job. He's a good guard dog. The farmer, his wife, the children, and all the animals shout "Hooray" and tell Titus he is a good watchdog.

Literal question:

Who are the characters on these pages? (*Farmer, his wife, children, cow, cat, fox and chickens*)

Question that requires inference:

Why are they yelling "hooray, hooray"? (*Because they are happy that Titus is a good watchdog*)

Planning for Vocabulary Development During Read-Aloud and Learning Centers

Key vocabulary words for the unit and the lesson were determined and reinforced during the read-aloud as well as in learning centers. The classroom environment includes various centers around the classroom (see Classroom Set-Up and Materials). These centers are crucial in the development of background knowledge and awareness of the theme or topic. Centers are an effective way for teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals, parents and other volunteers to engage students. As stated in the Introduction to the CCLS/ELA, "The Standards insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school" (2011, p. 2). School personnel and volunteers can circulate and discuss the key concepts and vocabulary.

The teaching role is very important at centers. While to a visitor, this looks like fun and play, this is a time when the teacher is increasing vocabulary development by interacting and facilitating conversations with the students about the theme. This also is a way to build and reinforce background knowledge that may be lacking in some children due to disability or limited experience with what is being studied. Centers are a great setting for interactions related to learning a new language.

Classroom Set-up and Materials

- The Block Area offered building materials and a variety of toy farm animals, a silo, a barn, various farm equipment and many other toy models that you would see on a real farm.
- The Computer Center was set up with Sheppard software (educational software found at <http://www.sheppardsoftware.com>). Students interacted with farm animal games while working on basic readiness skills for mathematics and language arts.
- The Writing Center had a word wall with key vocabulary with pictures related to the farm theme. Students could use this space to label their own pictures, write stories or complete picture starters of farm scenes.
- The Social Studies table had a large map of a farm and the students were able to place animals, characters, and farm equipment on the map pretending that they were "in charge" of the farm.
- The Reading Area had a variety of books about farms, animals on a farm and materials and equipment that may be seen on a farm. *Touch and Feel Farm* (DK Publishing, 1998) is a favorite due to the kinesthetic features of the book.

Personnel such as the special education teacher, occupational therapist or physical therapist are encouraged to push into the classroom to deliver services to students with diverse needs while reinforcing the concepts related to the unit.

Prereading can be offered at centers. A variety of books on farms as well as many pictures and posters are in place. Models of the culminating activity of a painting of a farm were available as needed for individual students. When writing the sentence, flash cards with key vocabulary were provided if required. And of course, since all centers have text of some sort, they can also be the setting for use of text-based questions.

Assessment

As Copple and Bredekamp state, “Assessment of children’s development and learning is essential for teachers and programs in order to plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the classroom experiences they provide” (2009, pp. 21-22). The objectives that are written for a lesson need to be accurately assessed so you know if learning has been achieved by your students.

Students were assessed in several ways. The teacher gains important

information during the read-aloud about student comprehension given individual responses. Students’ paintings of a farm (e.g., tractor, silo, chicken coop, barn) showing at least two characters from the story were also reviewed. A checklist was kept on a clipboard for the week, and as the students were working at centers and on their paintings I was able to assess student learning related to the objectives. Notes and comments were recorded to assist me when sharing results with other educators, parents/caregivers or when filling out progress reports. The students were expected, with supports as needed, to:

- Include two main characters
- Paint a picture of a farm setting
- Write a sentence describing a farm

Reflections on Planning and Implementation

While it is crucial to assess your students throughout the delivery of the lesson it is equally important for you as a professional to evaluate your planning and implementation of the lesson. As I planned, I was concerned about whether my students were going to stay interested in the story if I stayed “close to the reading,” as opposed to inviting the conversation to go in many directions. At the primary levels,

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students *love* to tell stories. They *love* to elaborate on their experiences. While telling stories and sharing experiences **are** important, I created opportunities for these interactions during other times — such as after the read-aloud, when students were in centers or at their seats engaging in activities. This practice also helped the students to focus their thinking. Their attention was not lost in response to a classmate sharing a lengthy story during the read-aloud.

I also found that planning the questions in advance, as opposed to developing them during the teaching process, allowed me to be more focused. As a result of making this investment of time in planning, the skill became routine in subsequent lessons, and the planning more streamlined.



Recommendations

Every teacher in our state is in the process of developing knowledge and skill with the CCLS/ELA since literacy is related to every area of a school's curriculum. As a primary teacher, I would recommend the following to other primary teachers based on my experience thus far:

1. Focus in detail on a few lessons where you invest time in the systematic development of a series of text-dependent questions. This investment will pay off as the planning and delivery of instruction related to the CCLS/ELA becomes more routine.
2. Appreciate that you are beginning to teach your students a process to utilize as they become readers. Our job as professionals is to help students internalize self-questioning strategies through the reading of text.
3. Collaborate actively with all school personnel who are in your setting, as well as parents and caregivers, so that you have a shared understanding of targeted vocabulary and key concepts and can reinforce each other's teaching.

Going through this process has made me more cognizant of making conscious shifts in my daily instructional practices. As I continuously build my skills as a professional, my students will achieve greater success.

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