

Creating, Organizing, and Managing Comprehension Centers

Comprehension centers provide purposeful, authentic opportunities for students to independently apply their comprehension strategies. Students may work in small groups, with partners, or on their own in this setting. Comprehension centers promote the integration of reading, writing, and discussion while offering a variety of ways for students to integrate and practice their comprehension strategies.

Student-facilitated Guided Comprehension centers for English learners are described in detail in this chapter. (It should be noted that the suggested activities will benefit a variety of students.) The chapter begins by explaining the nature of the comprehension centers and delineating their purposes. Next, issues related to center organization and management, including scheduling and student accountability, are explored. Finally, descriptions of a variety of comprehension-based centers for English learners and sample activities are presented.

Creating Guided Comprehension Centers

The time students spend in comprehension centers should be meaningful. This means that we need to be aware of students' abilities to work independently, create engaging activities, and provide motivational, accessible text. It is important to take time to teach students about the purpose of each center and how it functions. Using the five steps of explicit instruction—explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect—facilitates this process.

Center activities for English learners should accommodate a variety of learning levels, be open-ended, and be able to be completed independently, without teacher assistance. The activities should be purposeful, address a variety of interests and intelligences, and help students to think critically and creatively. The activities also should be engaging, foster discussion, extend learning, and promote decision making and student ownership of learning.

Guided Comprehension centers feature a number of supports for English learners. These include offering students opportunities to work in pairs and trios, as well as on their own. The centers also provide multiple ways in which students may represent their thinking, such as writing, sketching, dramatizing, taking photos, and singing. Texts in the centers are leveled so students can read text at their independent levels. Students can also listen to and read along with text on CDs

to practice fluency. In addition, there are a variety of culturally relevant titles available in students' native languages, as well as in English. As noted earlier, teachers will explain and demonstrate each of the centers and, whenever possible, integrate visual supports, interaction with text, and hands-on learning into center activities.

The centers are usually located around the perimeter of the classroom and away from the area used by teachers and students participating in Guided Reading. The centers vary in appearance from tabletop trifold displays to file folders, pizza boxes, and gift bags. It is important to remember that the content of the center is more significant than its physical appearance.

A variety of centers can be used when implementing the Guided Comprehension Model for English Learners. Some centers are specific to reading skills, such as the ABC center and vocabulary center; others, such as the theme center, are more focused on content; still others, such as the fluency center, are process based. In addition, some centers, such as the sentence center and the writing center, are language based. Centers may be permanent throughout the year, but the topics addressed may change with themes. For example, in the poetry center, the resources could change from poems about families to poems about rain forests depending on the current theme.

During center time, students can work independently on their own or in pairs, trios, or small groups. They can make words, apply strategies while reading theme-related texts, write stories, complete form poems, work through projects, or engage in other theme-related activities. The teacher should provide a structure for these projects but make sure that the activity is open-ended to allow for students to apply thinking and personal interpretations.

The Guided Comprehension center activities for English learners are designed to promote students' language development, as well as their use of comprehension skills and strategies. (A graphic organizer to facilitate planning literacy centers can be found in Appendix B, page 292.) Suggested centers, accompanying open-ended projects, and other extensions for learning are described in this chapter; additional center activities are embedded in the theme-based lessons in Part Two.

It is important to remember to explicitly teach all students how to use each center. Demonstrating how to use the centers is especially important for English learners. When the students begin to use the centers independently, they should feel very comfortable—as if they are engaging in a well-known routine.

In addition, a number of modifications have been made for English learners when they engage in the comprehension centers. These include the following:

- Ensuring that books written in the students' native languages are among the texts available in the centers
- Making culturally relevant texts available in the centers
- Integrating multiple modes of representing thinking in student responses (sketching, singing, dramatizing)
- Inviting students to work with other English learners of the same culture when reading texts in their native languages
- Encouraging English learners to partner with native English speakers when working in centers such as fluency, question and answer, vocabulary, and other centers focused on fluency and language development

Art Center

Students use materials at the art center to visually represent their understandings of published text, to create illustrations for the texts they are writing, or to design projects they are constructing. A variety of materials and examples of specific art techniques should be available at the center. The following materials are suggested:

- All kinds of paper—colored, lined, construction, large, textured, adhesive notes
- A variety of writing and illustrating utensils—washable markers, crayons, paints, colored pencils, pencils, water colors, texture paints
- Scraps of fabric, scraps of wallpaper, contact paper, cotton balls, and macaroni (and other items to provide texture for illustrations)
- Glue sticks, white glue, tape
- Scissors—straight and patterned—and hole punchers
- Stamps—alphabet, textures, symbols, designs
- Printmaking supplies
- Wire, yarn, sticks with rounded edges, ribbon, rubber bands
- Magazines, catalogs

The center should include samples and directions for a variety of art techniques, such as drawing, collaging, painting, printmaking, and puppetry.

Fluency Center

To enrich activities at this center, teachers may encourage English learners—depending on their language development—to work with partners who are fluent, native English speakers or students who are English speakers and are also fluent in the English learners' native language. Texts in native languages provide support and help English learners to learn content.

Books on Tape or CD: Students listen to and read along with texts at their independent (easy) levels to practice their oral reading fluency. They can do this with a more fluent partner or on their own. Older students or community volunteers can put books on tape or CD so students can use them at this center. Students with expertise in the English learners' native languages can also record dual-language books to be placed at this center.

Poems: Students work with partners to read aloud engaging poems to practice their oral reading fluency. Poems may range from short, simple rhymes to humorous story poems, such as those authored by Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky.

Choral Reading and Echo Reading: Students read books with repeated phrases at their independent levels to improve their oral reading fluency. Pairs or trios of students can choral read the text (read it together orally) or they can take turns being the lead voice as they engage in echo reading (one student reads a line or two, the other[s] repeat it).

Readers Theatre: Teachers provide Readers Theatre scripts based on a variety of interests at multiple levels. Students use their voices to dramatize stories. They use texts that are already in Readers Theatre format. Then they rehearse the dramatization using their voices and facial

expressions as their only props. Students use Readers Theatre scripts during the performance. Scripts are available from a wide variety of sources, including publishers and websites. Examples of websites include the following:

- Reader's Theater Editions: www.aaronshep.com/rt/RTE.html
- Reader's Theater Scripts and Plays: www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm
- ReadingLady.com: www.readinglady.com/index.php?name=Downloads&req=viewdownload&cid=7
- PBS Zoom by Kids, for Kids!: pbskids.org/zoom/activities/playhouse

Repeated Readings: Teachers provide passages at multiple levels that accommodate a variety of interests. These passages are selected from books and articles that have a variety of text supports, including illustrations. Students work in pairs to practice their oral reading fluency while reading passages at their independent or easy level. In the pair, one student takes on the role of the *teacher*, the other assumes the role of the *student*. The role of the *student* is to read a passage; the role of the *teacher* is to follow along in the text and listen as the *student* reads. So, both students are getting practice with the passage. The passage is read four times. Students switch roles after each reading (Samuels, 2002).

Making Books Center

Students can retell key events from stories, gather data and create reports on content area topics, or write creative pieces that can be published. These may be self-created or follow a familiar structure, such as alphabet books. The following is a list of book types and suggestions for using them.

- *Dual-Language Books:* Students, typically an English learner and a native English speaker, partner to create either a page for a dual-language book that the class is writing or an entire book that they will author. These books often relate to social studies, math, and science and have titles such as *The Dual-Language Book of...States, Countries, Insects, Weather, Clouds, Math*, and so on. The dual-language books are often written and illustrated electronically. For example, the dual-language book *What Is a Vertebrate? ¿Qué es un Vertebrado?* was completed in PowerPoint.
- *Class Alphabet Books:* Students can create individual pages to contribute to a class alphabet book. The class alphabet books might be based on the students in the class or on a theme, such as rainforests, oceans, or weather. Titles of student books might include *Our Class Community ABC Book*, *The ABC Book of Seasons*, or *The ABC Book of Students' Hobbies*. These can be completed electronically. Older students can create alphabet books with a partner or on their own. (See Appendix B, page 288, for a list of published alphabet books that serve as great models for this activity.)
- Other types of books:
 - Accordion:* retelling, content area facts, creative stories with illustrations
 - Origami:* word books, retelling, facts, short stories, story elements

Flip/flap: word work (parts of speech, antonyms, synonyms, rhymes, prefixes/suffixes, story elements, riddles)

Slotted: journals, reading response, word books, alphabet books

Dos à dos: dialogue or buddy journal, research and report, compare/contrast

Stair-step: riddle books, sequence story events, timelines (See Appendix B, pages 299–301, for directions for making these types of books.)

Making Words Center

Students use a variety of activities to construct words. (For related blackline masters, see Appendix B, pages 309–310.)

Making Words (Cunningham, 2008): In the original version of *Making Words*, students manipulate the letters of a mystery word to create other words. They begin with short words and progress to longer ones. They may create the words based on clues or just list as many words as possible. Then they guess the mystery word. When creating the words, students may manipulate plastic letters, arrange magnetic letters on a cookie sheet, or use letter tiles. We can modify this activity to offer support for English learners by providing them with the completed word at the start of the activity. This is the mystery word that students typically guess at the end of the original version of *Making Words*. When English learners begin with the completed word, they can work with a partner or on their own to manipulate the letters to create two-, three-, and four-letter words. For example, if the students were reading Seymour Simon's *The Heart: Our Circulatory System* (2006), *heart* might be the word English learners will use to create two-, three-, and four-letter words. The word would be shared and students would make as many words as they could using the letters in that word (only once, unless a letter was repeated in the word provided). Following are some of the words they might create:

- Two-letter words: *at, he*
- Three-letter words: *tea, tar, eat, ate, art, rat*
- Four-letter words: *rate, heat, hear, tear*

Making and Writing Words (Rasinski, 1999a): In this adaptation of *Making Words*, students write the words they create from the letters in a mystery word. For English learners, we would again provide the completed word (the mystery word in the *Making Words* activity explained previously), and students would create the two-, three-, and four-letter words and then write them. *Making and Writing Words* provides students with opportunities to practice their handwriting and spelling.

Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns (Rasinski, 1999b): In this adaptation of *Making and Writing Words*, students use rimes (word families) and other patterns as well as individual letters to create words. Then students transfer their knowledge to create new words. Finally, they cut up the organizer to create word cards, which they use to practice the words in sentences and sorts.

Poetry Center

Teachers keep a large supply of poetry books and poetry cards at this center. They also provide blacklines for form poems and copies of lots of poems that students can read, act out, or illustrate. The following are activities students can complete at the poetry center.

Form Poems: Students create their own poems using structured formats, such as acrostics, bio-poems, cinquains, and diamantes. Blacklines of poem formats (see Appendix B, pages 312–316) for students to use and examples of completed poems are available at this center.

Poetry Frames: Students create their own versions of published poems. The teacher can create frames in which students can write their own words, keeping the structure but changing the content of the original poem. (See Appendix B, page 305, for a poetry frame for “If I Were in Charge of the World.”)

Poetry Theater: In small groups, students plan and practice acting out a poem. These dramatizations include minimal theatrics and props and maximum expression through voice and actions.

Project Center

Students work on specific extensions or projects related to the theme or current events. These may include multiple modes of response such as reading, writing, illustrating, and dramatizing. Various reference materials, from newspapers to magazines to books to bookmarked sites on the Internet, should be readily available.

Author Biographies: Students self-select a favorite author and research his or her life through bookmarked websites. Then they write the biography (which includes a photo of the author) on the computer, print it, and hang it in the class’s authors’ corner, where other students can read it.

Bookmarks: Students create bookmarks about the book they read. They may choose what to include on the bookmark, or the teacher can provide guidelines. For example, information for narrative texts may include title, author, main character(s), the student’s thoughts about the book, and illustrations of characters or events. For informational texts, students can include the title, author, key ideas learned, their reactions, and illustrations.

Book Mobile: Students create mobiles about books they have read. Students may create the mobile on their own to format the information. Information may include the title, author, setting, characters, problem, resolution, and illustration. Students may also use the mobile format to share information about the author, focus on a single narrative element (e.g., character mobiles), or review a book. Because the mobiles will be suspended from the ceiling, students can record information on both sides of the paper.

Newspaper/Newsletter: Students write newspaper articles related to a topic of study and publish them in a classroom newspaper format. Examples include articles about culturally relevant topics, articles on theme-based subjects such as coral reefs or pollution when studying oceans, book reviews, and collections of comic strip summaries/retellings presented as the comics section of the newspaper.

Press Conference (McLaughlin, 2010a): This inquiry-based activity promotes oral communication. Students choose a topic to investigate. Then they peruse newspapers, magazines, or the Internet to find at least two sources of information about the topic. After reading the

articles, focusing on essential points, raising questions, and reflecting on personal insights, the student presents an informal summary of his or her research to a group of classmates or the entire class. Members of the audience then raise questions that can lead to “I Wonder” Statements that students can record in their investigative journals (see the Press Conference Summary blackline in Appendix B, page 317). Students can use Questions Into Paragraphs (QulP) to organize the information for their Press Conference (see Appendix A, pages 251 and 278).

Questions Into Paragraphs (QulP) (E.M. McLaughlin, 1987): Students generate questions related to the topic and use two or more sources to find answers to each question. The information is recorded on a QulP Research Grid (see Appendix A, pages 251 and 278) and then used to write a summary paragraph or to organize research for a Press Conference.

Choose Your Own Project: Students make selections from a list of ideas to extend their thinking about what they have read (see Appendix B, page 296).

Question and Answer Center

Teachers place narrative and informational text, including theme-related books and articles, at this center. Bookmarked websites are also used. Ciardiello's (1998, 2007) levels of questioning are provided (see Chapter 3, pages 33–34). Pairs of students use Ciardiello's questioning levels and signal words to generate and respond to questions. The students can write the questions and responses in their Guided Comprehension Journals and then discuss them. Writing the questions and responses provides practice in writing the language. Students can also use the written questions and answers to review different levels of questioning.

Sentence Center

Teachers provide texts that include visual supports, examples of completed narrative and informational sentence strips, a list of suggested academic vocabulary terms, a picture dictionary, access to the class word wall, and blank strips for student use.

Story Sentence Strips: Sentence strips related to the theme being studied are kept at this center. Pairs of students can use these for numerous activities, including retelling stories and reviewing narrative text structure. Students can also create their own sentence strips.

Informational Sentence Strips: When working with informational text, pairs of students can create sentence strips that include appropriate academic vocabulary. Students can also either use teacher-provided sentence strips or create their own to recreate various text structures, including comparison–contrast and cause–effect.

Storytelling Center

Students can engage in storytelling, in which they focus on the narrative elements (characters, setting, problem, attempts to resolve the problem, and resolution) with a partner or small group. It is a good idea to provide a tape recorder at this center so students can listen to themselves tell stories.

Puppets: Students use bag and spoon puppets to retell stories the class has previously read or original stories the students have written. Puppets and copies of the related stories are kept at the center.

Realia Bags: Pairs of students tell stories based on miniature props found in bags provided at this center. The bags are labeled with story themes, such as “A Trip to the Mall” and “Snow Day,” and the props represent the narrative elements—characters, setting, problem, events (attempts to resolve the problem), and solution. The Story Map blackline can be used as a guide to facilitate storytelling because it is also based on the narrative elements (see Appendix A, page 283).

Wordless Picture Books: Students tell the story of a wordless picture book, such as Alexandra Day's *Carl's Summer Vacation* (2008), *Carl's Sleepy Afternoon* (2005), *Carl Goes to Daycare* (1993), *You're a Good Dog, Carl* (2007), and *Carl's Masquerade* (1992), or David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (1991), *June 29, 1999* (1995), *Sector 7* (1999), *The Three Pigs* (2001), and *Flotsam* (2006). Students may work in pairs and/or tape record their storytelling.

Teaching Center

In this center, students work with partners and take turns being the teacher. A variety of activities can be used in this center.

Transparency Talk (Page, 2001): In this center, a student assumes the role of the teacher. He or she places transparencies containing sentences, messages, or stories the classroom teacher has prepared on the overhead projector. The “teacher” then uses these for a variety of activities including finding words he or she can read, finding all the words that begin or end with a particular sound or pattern, or reading along with a partner. (Place the projector on the floor and use a white piece of paper for a screen.)

Read the Room: The “teacher” uses a pointer and the “student” and “teacher” take turns reading room labels, a bulletin board, or a morning message as the “teacher” points to it. Then the partners switch roles.

Theme Center

Teachers provide a variety of texts at multiple levels at this center. They ensure that texts are available in multiple languages and that culturally relevant titles are represented. They also select appropriate strategy applications for students to use while reading. For example, a teacher may include Concept of Definition Maps, Connection Stems, and Bookmark Technique. (Details about these teaching ideas and the related blacklines can be found in Appendix A.) Students may also select the mode of reading in which they will engage. This often includes using the following patterns from Patterned Partner Reading:

- *Read–Pause–Make a Connection:* Partners read, stop to think, and make text–self connections.
- *Read–Pause–Retell:* Partners read, stop to think, and retell what they have read to that point.
- *Read–Pause–Sketch:* Partners read, stop to think, and then sketch an idea related to what they have read.

(To learn more about Patterned Partner Reading, see Appendix A, page 246.)

Vocabulary Center

This center may include an illustrated word wall or other display designed to facilitate multiple exposures to words. For example, cognates or roots, prefixes, and suffixes may be featured. The words may also be theme-related. Sentences may be displayed so students can use context clues to determine words' meanings.

Illustrated Vocabulary Cards: These support English learners' reading and writing while offering alternative modes of representing thinking. The format also can be changed into an Illustrated Vocabulary Notebook in which terms can be organized alphabetically or thematically.

Illustrated Word Walls: These include visuals to support English learners' learning. Pairs of students can use the words to create sentences or entries in conversational journals. When creating conversational journals, students write what each would say if they were speaking.

Word Posters: Pairs of students select a word to be the focus of the poster. Then they create a satellite arm where they add the word's meaning and, if appropriate, an illustration. Each Word Poster has four satellites, so three other pairs of students can add information about the word. The poster is then displayed for class members to reference and discuss.

Word Sorts: Students sort vocabulary words into categories provided by the teacher (closed sort) or into self-selected categories (open sort). These might include parts of speech, word roots, and specific theme subtopics. This may be completed in a hands-on fashion using word cards; then students can record their ideas on a word-sort sheet. This activity also may be completed in writing on a web or other organized structure.

Word Storm: A visual display—such as a picture from a book, a piece of art, or a poster—provides the impetus for word brainstorming. Students look at the visual and brainstorm and record words that come to mind. Then they use some or all of the words to create a sentence or paragraph about the visual.

Writing Center

This center is a place for free and structured writing. Students may write informally or use the writing process. Teachers may also structure the writing using one or more of the following ideas.

Informational Writing: Students write restaurant menus and checks; use the Internet to create brochures about theme-related topics; write newspaper articles; and develop book, movie, and music reviews.

Journals: Students write about self-selected topics or respond to teacher-provided prompts.

Patterned Writing: Students use a patterned text as a writing model. This includes repeated pattern stories, such as Laura Numeroff's (1985) *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (which is also available in Spanish) and form poems (see Appendix B for form poem blacklines). The pattern provides scaffolds for English learners to express their ideas.

Story Bag: Pairs of students remove items from a bag of story-related props the teacher has prepared. They write a story based on the props.

Story Collages: Instead of writing a story and then illustrating it, pairs of students create textured illustrations first and then develop stories based on them. Because the illustrations are textured (pine cones, aluminum foil, felt, sand), students can use their tactile modalities (Brown, 1993).

Story Trifold: Pairs of students write a story using a graphic that folds into three labeled parts: beginning, middle, and end (see Appendix B, page 323).

Organizing and Managing Comprehension Centers

Students can move from center to center in a variety of ways depending on the structure of the literacy schedule, the English learners' language development, and the students' level of independence. In many of the center activities, English learners work with native English speakers, who not only serve as productive partners but also as good oral reading fluency models. The following methods are used frequently.

Menu Board: One way to organize center time is to use a menu board that provides a visual organizational overview of Stage Three (see Figure 3, page 36). The students who will meet for teacher-guided small-group instruction (Guided Reading) are listed on the menu board. Center choices are also provided, and students put their names under the center name where they will work. The number of students who may work at a given center or at a given activity within a center is designated at that center and on the menu board. For example, three is the designated number of students for the making words center as posted at the activity site and on the menu board. Students continue working at their assigned centers until they complete the work they have scheduled for that day. For example, students may choose to complete a story trifold at the writing center or use a partner-reading pattern to read a book at the theme center. Using this organizational chart ensures that choice is being accommodated on multiple levels: Students can choose what goals they are trying to achieve that day, which centers to visit, how long to stay, and how to manage their time.

Required and Optional Centers: We can also provide students with a framework for required and optional centers (see Appendix B, page 322). Sometimes we may choose to assign students to the centers where they will begin, but they may choose to move later as openings at other centers occur.

Rotating Schedule: Some teachers prefer to move the students using a rotating schedule. Within this setup, students move among three or four activities, changing approximately every 20 minutes. This rotational format provides maximum control by the teacher but limits students' opportunities for choice and for learning to manage their own time.

Student Accountability

Students need to be accountable for the time they spend at the centers. Using a record-keeping system helps to keep track of which centers each student visits during the week. We can use a whole-group chart to monitor who visits which centers each week, or we can place charts at individual centers for students to record their visits. Students may also keep track of their work in their Guided Comprehension Journals (see cover sheet in Appendix B, page 304).

Student self-assessment can also contribute to our understanding of how students used their center time. Providing self-assessment forms that indicate which centers students visited, what they did, and how they think they progressed toward their goal on a particular day facilitates this process (see Appendix B, page 295).

Students can keep their center work and reflections in a two-pocket folder, where the teacher can review them weekly or biweekly. Students also can share their work with the teacher in individual conferences. Including a checklist, rubric, or other evaluative tool at each center facilitates this process (see Appendix B). At the end of Stage Four, selected works will be transferred to the students' Guided Comprehension Profiles.

Regardless of what the comprehension centers include or how they are managed, they are places for independent exploration by students. The centers should accommodate a variety of abilities, be open-ended, have clear directions, be motivational, and provide activities that are familiar to students so they can use them independently.

Ford and Opitz (2002) suggest the following guidelines for using centers to facilitate this process:

- Operate with minimal transition time and management concerns.
- Encourage equitable use of centers and activities among learners.
- Include a simple built-in accountability system.
- Allow for efficient use of teacher preparation time.
- Build the centers around classroom routines.

In the next chapter, student-facilitated comprehension routines—another setting in which students independently apply reading skills and strategies—are described in detail. The comprehension routines discussed include adapted versions of Literature Circles, Reciprocal Teaching, and Cross-Age Reading Experiences.