

Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3-8

BOOK REVIEW BY LINA B. SOARES AND CHRISTINE A. DRAPER

The role of close reading in the 21st century has become a necessary component of reading comprehension more than ever. Given the extraordinary amount of informational texts presented in print and digital formats that students encounter in today's classrooms, the need for students to engage in critical reading to determine what a text says explicitly is essential for students to become critical consumers of information. In addition, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) place further emphasis on the importance of teaching students to engage in "close, attentive reading" as critical text analysis relates to 80% of the Reading standards at each grade level (International Reading Association Common Core State Standards [CCSS] Committee, 2012). Sunday Cummins' (2013) Close Reading of Informational Texts; Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3-8 offers teachers a wealth of tools to teach close reading wrapped in one book. According to Cummins, close reading is the process of understanding how the words on a page fit together to support the author's central ideas. Students examine the text's structure, key vocabulary to build conceptual meaning, and connect to their own prior knowledge to use the information and ideas

drawn from texts as the basis to grasp meaning. As a former classroom teacher, Cummins understands the needs of classroom teachers and the actions that can be taken when challenged to meet the diverse reading abilities of their students. While close reading is a concept that is more familiar in the content areas of middle and secondary classrooms, the beauty of this text lies in the effective how-to instructional strategies, lesson plans, student work samples, and a study guide that elementary teachers can adapt to their own classrooms.

The book's strength lies in its comprehensive scope and practical guidance. Beginning with an introduction to close reading, Cummins (2013) follows with "as assessment-driven, structured approach to teaching" (p. 4) that emphasizes the importance of ongoing assessment before, during, and after instruction in the teaching and learning cycle. The author then brings the role of synthesis to the forefront through interactive read-aloud, detailing a continuum of lessons that classroom teachers can follow to develop students' close reading skills. Further reading introduces the significant role that text features play in reading

comprehension, followed by strategic practices to set the purpose for reading. Attention is then given to selfmonitoring strategies students can use to increase comprehension while reading informational text, followed by strategies to evaluate the effectiveness of information sources. The text concludes by returning to the importance of synthesis to close reading.

Chapter One, "What Does 'Close Reading' Mean?" builds a strong case for students to comprehend new information encountered in content studies. As Cummins (2013) points out, the first two Common Core Strands (CCSS, 2010) require readers to determine what the text explicitly says and determine authors' central ideas – requirements that signify the importance for close reading. The chapter delineates a sensible and logical approach to teach students the important aspects of how informational texts are structured and to develop close reading strategies:

- Tapping one's prior knowledge related to information text structure
- Topical and vocabulary knowledge
- · Setting a purpose for reading
- Self-monitoring for meaning
- Determining what is important
- Synthesizing (p. 10).

Chapter Two, "An Assessment-Driven, Structured Approach to Teaching," explains in detail the essential components of Cummins's (2013) instructional approach outlined in the first chapter. To begin, the author first introduces readers to her epistemological reasoning on how knowledge is constructed. For readers who may not be familiar with the sociocultural theory of learning, Cummins offers that the sociocultural perspective perceives reading to be the involvement of daily social interactions within classroom settings that are crucial for the attainment of literate practices. Borrowing from Vygotsky (1978), literacy is not an isolated cognitive skill; learning is inherently social and all learning involves the process of inquiry whereby members within a social group are involved in the construction of meaning. This theory of learning is the philosophical underpinning of the entire text and grounds the author's position that meaning-making is a process of appropriating the necessary tools for comprehending in a socially situated literacy activity.

The chapter then moves to the crux of assessment. Cummins (2013) endorses an ongoing approach throughout the teaching and learning cycle. This process allows for a "gradual release of responsibility" from which teachers move from teacher-centered discussions (explicit instruction and modeling), in which they control the flow of activity, to shared stances (scaffolding and coaching), in which responsibility is more equally shared, to more student-centered stances

(facilitating and participation) in which students take primary responsibility and engage in self-assessment. To do so, Cummins provides readers with a model to illustrate the assessment-driven, structured approach:

- · Assessment of students' strengths and needs
- Lesson preparation and text study
- A focus lesson explaining the instructional objectives and modeling
- Guided practice
- · Independent practice
- Student self-assessment (p.32)

Chapter Three, "Introducing Synthesis with Interactive Read-Alouds," describes the merits of read-aloud experiences and offers teachers useful strategies to employ read-aloud and model written responses to demonstrate understanding. Cummins (2013) introduces readers to a clever method she has used many times to teach students how to synthesize text by showing students a framed photograph and having the students determine why the events in the picture are significant. Using questions such as: What do you notice?; What is the event in this photo?; and Why would I frame this picture? (p. 51), the visual image serves as a tool to help students articulate the central ideas of the photograph and build meaning. The chapter then follows with detailed methods that teachers can use to teach students to craft written responses. The author builds a strong case through students' work examples that written responses are an essential component of synthesis because the undertaking permits students to critically think about the author's key ideas.

Chapter Four, "Understanding the Features of a Text," speaks to the importance, but often overlooked features, such as maps, charts, photographs, diagrams, captions, and illustrations. Cummins (2013) points out, "Together, the features and the running text are "the text," meaning that one cannot serve to convey the author's central ideas without the other" (p. 79). The chapter articulately provides lesson examples with step-by-step procedures from introducing key features to lesson implementation to assessing students' understanding. Again, the role of synthesis is brought to the forefront as the necessary ingredient to determine what the important central ideas are as students learn to grasp the content of the features with the main text.

In Chapter Five, readers come to understand the author's purpose for writing is the crucial first step for reading. The chapter builds upon students' knowledge of synthesis, coupled with their understanding about how texts are developed to establish a clear purpose for reading. "Strategic Previewing of a Text to Set a Purpose," offers the clever mnemonic strategy that

Cummins (2013) has termed as THIEVES which is defined as:

T = Title

H = Headings

I = Introduction

E = Every first word in a sentence

V = Visuals and Vocabulary

E = End-of-article or end-of-chapter questions

S = Summarize thinking (p. 103).

The mnemonic strategy is a tool to teach students to preview a text, make predictions about the author's central ideas, and then read with a sustained purpose to understand the author's words. The beauty of this strategy lies in its application. Students are taught to question while reading, pause and summarize as they read, and to monitor their understanding of the reading material.

"Self-Monitoring While Reading Information Texts," Chapter Six, addresses the reading skills students need to acquire to continually think, ask questions, and self-check for understanding. When students selfmonitor their understanding while reading, they are actively involved with an inner dialogue to determine if the text makes sense and they employ tools to enable comprehension. Cummins (2013) calls the selfmonitoring strategies "fix-up" strategies (p. 118), and the featured "fix-up" strategy that the author describes is Hoyt's (2008) coding method (as cited in Cummins, p. 118) that permits students to think about their thinking and to consider the author's key ideas in text. As with each lesson in this text, the author recommends that teachers model and think aloud how to apply the codes for their students to use while reading, and then gradually permit their students to apply the codes independently. The following codes are:

- + This is new information
- * I already knew this information
- ? I wonder...or I don't understand
- ! Wow!

The author does caution readers that coding should not be overused to the extent that students become too dependent or tire of the process. Rather, the goal is to model and guide students to acquire personal self-monitoring strategies while reading.

Chapter Seven, "Determining Importance in a Text," builds on the role of self-monitoring in the previous chapter and moves to a higher level of thinking whereby students learn to evaluate the usefulness, the credibility, and what is really important in an informational text. Using the analogy of making pasta, to illustrate why procedures must be followed and certain steps must be taken first – sequencing - the

author introduces readers to the importance of text structures. The chapter provides lesson examples and teaching strategies to help students evaluate information for accuracy, credibility, and usefulness that target important text structures, such as sequence, cause and effect, and compare and contrast, problem and solution, and description.

"Determining Importance and Synthesis across Texts" is the final chapter and brings together the essential components of close reading (e.g. synthesis, purpose for reading, text feature, self-monitoring strategies, and text structures) in order for students to engage multiple sources of informational texts and comprehend for meaning. The primary objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how all the essential components of close reading are needed for students to conduct a mini-research project. Hoffman's (1992) I-Chart (as cited by Cummins, 2013) is the featured instructional tool to help students formulate their research question, organize students' notes from different reading sources, synthesize the most important information, and then draft a research report. Throughout the chapter, the author provides lessons, step-by-step procedures, and examples of student work to emphasize how the instructional routine of close reading is a building block for strong critical analysis that can be realized when students are able to write a mini-research report.

Sunday Cummins' (2013) Close Reading of Informational Texts; Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3-8 offers classroom teachers a comprehensive framework to teach students in grades three through eight how to engage in critical thinking and informational texts. Elementary, middle, and secondary classroom teachers can benefit from the text's instructional strategies, lessons, and examples of student work that can easily be adapted for specific grade-level needs. In addition, Cummins practices by example such that each chapter demonstrates the best instructional practices that include teacher modelling, guided practice, interactive read-aloud, think aloud, and time for independent practice. For classroom teachers, Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3-8 is an informative text that will teach students to dig deeper beneath the surface level of the text and get to the real meaning of the author's words.

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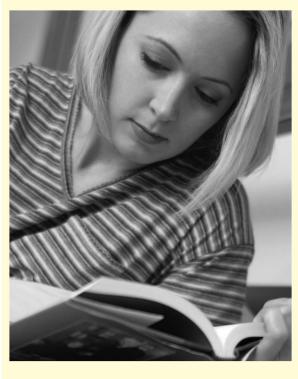
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