

# Experience-Text-Relationship-Approach



The *Experience-Text-Relationship* or ETR approach provides a framework for planning and conducting guided discussions in small group reading lessons. This approach is based on the strategy of beginning with students' background knowledge and linking new text ideas to this knowledge.

In traditional reading groups, students engage in round-robin reading, taking turns reading aloud from the text. The appropriate model for small group reading lessons is not round-robin reading but guided discussion. In guided discussion, the teacher leads students to construct a theme. Students engage in silent reading, and the focus of the lesson is on appreciating and understanding the literature, not on oral reading performances.

The ETR approach involves three phases of discussion. In the first or *experience phase* of discussion, the teacher has students discuss background experiences related to the theme she intends to develop for the story. In the *text* phase of discussion, she uses questioning to guide students through the text, section by section, clarifying points unclear to students. Finally, in the *relationship phase*, she guides students to draw relationships between the text and their own background experiences. A single ETR lesson usually lasts from 20 to 30 minutes. The series of lessons based on a particular work of literature may take from three days to several weeks. The description of ETR lessons presented below focuses on picture storybooks.

## Planning

The teacher first selects a high-quality piece of literature appropriate to the thematic unit and to students' interests. The literature should be at the instructional level of students in the reading group, since students are expected to read the text independently. Because this piece of literature will be the focus of reading and discussion for three or more lessons, it should be a text with ideas worthy of this amount of attention.

The teacher then decides upon a possible theme to be pursued in discussions. Many works of literature offer several possible themes. The teacher chooses a theme in order to plan the course of the discussion. However, she realizes that another theme may prove more meaningful to the students. If students begin to develop another, equally plausible theme, she will shift her line of questioning.

After deciding upon a theme, the teacher looks for a hook, or a way of drawing the students into the story. She thinks of what she knows about the students' backgrounds and interests. Then she jots down the question she will use to start the discussion.

The teacher completes the planning process by dividing the text into sections or chunks for silent reading. With a picture storybook the chunks may be small, just a couple of pages. Students will do the reading during the lesson, while the teacher observes.

## Experience Phase of Discussion

During the first lesson, the teacher guides students in a discussion of their background experiences related to the literature and the theme. The teacher begins with the question she developed. Follow-up questions are based on the answers students generate. Once the students have shared their experiences, the teacher introduces the book and connects it to the discussion.

## Text Phase

The teacher tells the students the pages they will read for the first chunk of the story. She also sets a purpose for reading. For example, "Read to find out about the characters and setting in the story. Also see if you get any hints about what the problem in the story is going to be." The teacher monitors the students as they read and responds to questions they may have about difficult words. When the students have finished reading, the teacher resumes the discussion by picking up on the purposes set for the reading.

Although the teacher systematically follows up on the purpose set for reading, she is also alert to signs that students have spotted other interesting ideas in the literature. Students are encouraged to initiate topics for discussion, as long as these topics are relevant to the literature.

### **Writing**

At the end of each lesson, the teacher gives the students a written assignment. The assignment may be a review of the discussion, or it may be connected with the reading the students are supposed to do on their own. For example, at the end of the first lesson, the teacher may ask the students to write about what they think is going to happen in the story. At the start of the second lesson, the teacher has the students share their writing.

As students become more independent, the teacher can let them choose how they wish to respond in writing to the literature. At this point the teacher will let students pick from a menu of possible writing ideas.

### **Relationship Phase**

When the students have finished reading and discussing the last chunk of the text, the teacher begins the relationship phase of discussion. She first has the students summarize the story, to review the key events and issues. Then she has the students reflect on the theme of the story.

Finally, the teacher has the students draw relationships between the ideas in the story and their own lives.

### **Adapting the ETR Approach to Novels**

By the time they are in third or fourth grade, most students are able to read novels with several chapters. These students can read silently, without monitoring from the teacher. The teacher may wish to use the ETR approach with small groups of students if she believes the novel will be particularly challenging for them.

The ETR approach may be adapted for use with a novel by taking the following steps. The teacher conducts a small group lesson to introduce the novel with an Experience discussion. She sets purposes for the reading of the first chapter and has students write in response to literature, perhaps choosing from a number of options. The students read the first chapter silently, back at their seats, and complete their written responses. The next day, the teacher has students share their writing and follows up with a discussion of the first chapter. After this lesson, students read and respond in writing to the second chapter. In the following day's lesson, they share their writing and have a discussion of the second chapter. The pattern continues until students have finished the novel. During these discussions of the text, the teacher pursues a line of questioning to highlight the theme. Finally, the teacher conducts a Relationship discussion, as described above.

Sometimes, after the teacher has led a small group in guided discussion of the first few chapters of a novel, she believes that students will be able to read a number of chapters on their own, or even to finish reading the novel by themselves. In this case, the teacher will stop holding daily discussions and only conduct discussions after students have read a number of chapters or finished the novel. However, she will still monitor the students' progress every day. This may be accomplished through a quick check of individual students' work or by calling the group together for a brief meeting.

In summary, the ETR approach allows teachers to provide students with guidance during the reading of literature. Through questioning, teachers can raise the level of students' thinking about literature and improve their comprehension. The ETR approach gives teachers a framework for making literature meaningful, by drawing relationships to students' background knowledge and experiences.

Au, K.H. (1993). Literacy instruction in multicultural settings. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.

# ETR Planning Sheet



Author

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Title

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Possible Themes (Put an asterisk by the theme selected.)

“Hook” to Draw Students into the Story

Questions to Open E Phase of Discussion

Chunks for Silent Reading