

The Line between Questions, Responses, and Readers

None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and remained upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were gray, except for the tops, which were white, and all the men knew the colors of the sea. The line between sky and water narrowed and widened, and fell and rose.

A man likes to take a bath in a bigger area than this boat could provide. These waves were frightfully rapid and tall; and each boiling, white top was a problem in the small boat.

—Stephen Crane, “The Open Boat”

Between January 2 and January 4, 1897, the American writer Stephen Crane was lost at sea off Florida’s Atlantic coast. That harrowing experience subsequently inspired Crane to author a story of 15 pages, divided into seven sections. More than 100 years later, “The Open Boat” remains a staple of the U.S. public high-school literature curriculum; the American English website has a compilation where teachers and students from around the world can access a selection of Crane’s exceptional narratives (see <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/red-badge-courage-and-other-stories>). The excerpts in this article, including the one at the beginning, are from the American English resource center (Crane 1996).

“The Open Boat” describes the fate of four men drifting at sea in a small dinghy, not much larger than a bathtub. As the story unfolds, the four men catch glimpses of the shore about 20 miles distant—too far to swim in the icy winter water. Thirty hours later, as they realize no help will come, they steer the small boat as close to shore as they can. Finally, as the boat catches a final wave, they dive into the rough surf in a desperate attempt to swim to land. Three of the men survive and are met on the shoreline by a crowd carrying them warm blankets and hot coffee. The fourth man, Billie the oiler, washes up dead on the beach—“a quiet and wet shape” (Crane 1996, 15).

In previous collaborations, we have explored the potential of text-based, participatory, and multimodal vocabulary-building and visualization strategies for accessing the American short story with adolescent readers (Salas et al. 2019, 2021). Here, we refocus our efforts on an approach based on question-making and responding. Specifically, in this article, we take up the Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) framework (Raphael 1986), with “The Open Boat” as an anchor text. Our purpose is to explore how QAR might be leveraged as a scaffold for reading comprehension and meaning-making with English language learners.

Creating more transparency around question-making and response construction in classrooms is a rehearsal for question-making in our own communities.

We begin with a snapshot of the research literature surrounding the importance of developing learners' reading-comprehension strategies. We outline the categories of questions that QAR emphasizes with examples drawn from "The Open Boat," followed by concrete steps for making productive use of QAR in classrooms. However, besides the reading-comprehension benefits that QAR promises to achieve, creating more transparency around question-making and response construction in classrooms is a rehearsal for question-making in our own communities. Our hope is that readers of *English Teaching Forum*—whether they are university-based teacher educators, English teaching professionals, or students—might bring layered question- and response-making to their instructional contexts, reading lives, and broader participation in civil society.

STRATEGIC-READING LITERATURE REVIEW

In many parts of the world, we teach English at the secondary level through great literature. It is a tradition that teachers hold dear because short stories, novels, and poetry have motivated us to learn a new language—to access the stories that a language records. However, more than simply knowing a language, entering the artistry of a writer's world requires that we interact with the text as readers (Day 2020; Popko 2015). In other words, reading is complicated and multilayered—and in classroom settings it is something that requires motivation, focused engagement, and practical understanding. A vast body of literacy research frames reading as a multidimensional meaning-making process that involves readers' "construction of a coherent mental representation of the text" (Kendeou, McMaster, and Christ 2016, 63; see also Wilhelm 2016). Comprehending

a text also depends on our ability to generate meanings around words and their message across sentences, make use of relevant background knowledge, generate new inferences, identify textual and rhetorical structures, consider the authors' goals and motives, and more. The interplay of all these overlapping reading moves is cognitively demanding. As such, reading is a complex human activity. Students who struggle to make sense of texts are likely to struggle throughout their education; in many cases, those same readers are unaware of strategies that might help them understand what a writer is trying to say (Vacca, Mraz, and Vacca 2021).

Research in the field of literacy education has done much to demystify what readers do to make meaning with texts by examining the behaviors of proficient readers. In turn, this knowledge supports the development of pedagogical strategies to raise our students' reading achievement. Taken together, reading-strategy pedagogies are forms of deliberate and transparent instruction to support students in making sense of poetry, prose, and multimedia—be they fiction or nonfiction. Often, students are unaware of strategies that can help them in the meaning-making process. Honing reading strategies enables adolescent readers to reason strategically as they work to comprehend various texts. However, along the spectrum of "reading behaviors," for our students, asking and responding to questions about a text can be challenging and not simply because of the level of difficulty of a nineteenth-century author's vocabulary or the archaic syntax and structures the author might employ. Rather, taking up short stories in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom can be daunting because reading stories like "The Open Boat" requires us to decode, analyze, and engage in dialogue with

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the author and ourselves (Murray, Salas, and Ni Thoghdha 2015; Salas et al. 2016, 2021).

On the one hand, proficient readers constantly monitor what it is they are, or are not, understanding about a text as they read. They expect the text to make sense. When it does not make sense to them, they recognize that comprehension has been disrupted, and they adjust their reading by applying strategies that help them restore comprehension. For English language learners, this includes learning new words—what they mean and how to pronounce them—and then stringing them along across sentences and a narrative. Along the way, when something about a text is unclear or when readers feel they are not “getting it right,” they pause and repair whatever it is that is missing or that they are missing. To do so, they apply strategies they have been explicitly taught or that they learned intuitively. They might turn to the teacher to translate or to explain what it is they are missing. Or proficient readers might have internalized strategies to repair comprehension, including having a high threshold for not understanding everything at once—and believing that they will figure it out as they continue to read on. They usually do.

On the other hand, less proficient readers who encounter obstacles to comprehension might simply give up on the text and just wait for the teacher to tell them what it all means. Research on reading comprehension has established that adolescents can become confident readers when teachers curate and model comprehension strategies—coaching students as they practice applying different strategies with different types of texts (Vacca, Mraz, and Vacca 2021).

But reading is also an act of making meaning of the world we live in (Freire 2000;

Wilhelm and Novak 2011). That is to say, when we take up a text we make connections between what we are reading, other texts we have read (words), and our lived experiences (worlds). Taken together, reading is a dialogic process of asking questions, making predictions, and connecting with the text visually, physically, emotionally, and existentially. At their best, great stories transport us to faraway places and take us within ourselves and beyond ourselves. Thus, the persistent challenges students face with reading comprehension call for concerted efforts. It is something we have to work at. For all these reasons, teachers can empower their learners with strategies that scaffold and support their interactions with the text, such as the QAR approach, which we describe in the next section.

THE QAR APPROACH

The QAR approach to reading comprehension was developed by Taffy E. Raphael (Raphael 1984, 1986; Raphael and Au 2005; Raphael and Pearson 1985) and has since been integrated into the repertoire of literacy professionals in U.S. contexts. That said, QAR is widely unknown in the greater English language teaching community of practice. As its name would imply, the QAR approach emphasizes reading comprehension as strategic question-making at the intersection of text, author, and reader. QAR’s emphasis on organizing and approaching questions according to where their answers lie can improve formal measures of students’ comprehension (Cummins, Streiff, and Ceprano 2012) and support higher-level thinking (Raphael and Au 2005). Further, the QAR approach hones students’ abilities to generate reading-comprehension questions on their own (Ezell et al. 1992).

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Not all reading-comprehension questions are created equal, and the QAR taxonomy distinguishes between four types of questions. Readers can learn to identify these types and, by consequence, learn where to look for a response—at a specific moment in the text, across a text, in a space between the author and themselves, and within themselves and their lived experiences. Additionally, different types of questions require readers to respond at different levels of conceptual difficulty.

Questions connected to the *literal* level of comprehension ask readers to *read the lines*. In other words, the answers to literal questions are contained within the lines of the text. Questions connected to the *inferential* or *interpretive* level of comprehension ask readers to *read between the lines*. To answer such questions, the reader will need to focus both on what the author said and on what the author means. The answer to these questions will not be stated explicitly in the text. Questions connected to the *applied* level of comprehension ask readers to *read beyond the lines*. These questions invite readers to synthesize what the author said with their prior knowledge and experience. Such questions invite them to evaluate, make connections, and think critically about how what they have read connects to their experience. By understanding question types, the approach goes, readers will be more intentional about where to look as they construct responses. Following is an explanation of the four types of questions associated with the QAR approach, which draw upon the work of Raphael (1984, 1986).

1. In the Text/Right There Questions

When readers look at and around a story, sometimes the answer to a question is as clear as a single word or combination of

words on a page. That is, the words used in the question and the words used for the answer can be located in a specific word, phrase, or sentence of the text. For example, an In the Text/Right There question about Crane's "The Open Boat" might be something like, "What color were the waves rocking the small boat?" The answer, "The waves were gray, except for the tops, which were white," is something that the reader can find by rereading or by scanning the text and looking for specific key words such as *color* or *waves*. In the Text/Right There questions support literal comprehension and leave little room for negotiation. There is a single response somewhere in the reading waiting to be identified.

2. In the Text/Think and Search Questions

In other cases, literal-comprehension questions require that readers look beyond a single phrase or sentence and across a text to assemble a response. The answer to an In the Text/Think and Search question is in the text, but the words used in the question and those used for the answer are not in the same sentence. To respond, readers need to assemble information from different parts of the text.

Often, In the Text/Think and Search questions require that students scan the text for important information or piece different parts together to support literal comprehension. For example, in the opening pages of "The Open Boat," Crane reveals the identities of the four male characters. We slowly learn who is in the boat—a cook, an oiler named Billie, a correspondent, and the hurt captain.

*The cook sat in the bottom, and looked
with both eyes at the six inches of boat which*

separated him from the ocean. He had bared his fat arms as he worked to empty the water from the boat. Often he said, "God! That was a bad one." As he remarked it, he always looked toward the east over the rough sea.

The oiler, guiding with one of the two oars in the boat, sometimes raised himself suddenly to keep away from the water that poured in. It was a thin little oar, and it often seemed ready to break.

The correspondent, pulling at the other oar, watched the waves and wondered why he was there.

The hurt captain, lying in the front, was feeling defeat and despair. (Crane 1996, 1–2)

To answer the In the Text/Think and Search question, “Who is in the boat?” the reader needs to scan across the first page and a half of the story to respond—the cook, the oiler, the correspondent, and the hurt captain. Along the way, readers might also notice that Crane gives readers only one of the actual names of the four characters—Billie, the oiler, who dies at the end of the story. Similar to In the Text/Right There questions, In the Text/Think and Search questions aim to reinforce literal comprehension. Learning how to identify literal information in a text is an important skill for readers. Students benefit from being taught how to recognize essential information in a text in response to literal questions. Comprehension, however, should not stop at the literal level. The following QAR question types can help students to read and think at comprehension levels that are more conceptually challenging.

3. Author and Me Questions

The two types of questions we have already described support literal comprehension. Often, these are the types of questions that teachers favor. The answers are specific and limited to the text.

However, reading a short story involves more than scanning a page for a specific word

or combination of words. Author and Me questions ask the reader to engage in dialogue with the text. In other words, these questions ask readers to think about themselves and to use their background knowledge to work out events of the story. As such, Author and Me questions support interpretive or inferential comprehension.

For example, with “The Open Boat,” Author and Me questions might be along the lines of the following:

- For the four men, what were the comparative risks of waiting in the boat versus swimming to shore?
- Do you think the four men made the right decision to swim to shore? Would you have done the same? Why? Why not?
- Why do you think the author names only one of the four men? What does naming “Billie” achieve?

Here, the reader’s responses are still linked to the text. However, for any of these questions, there is no single definitive answer. Readers must look inside themselves to respond.

4. On My Own Questions

On My Own questions ask readers to go beyond the text for an answer that the author does not explicitly provide. To answer, readers need to think seriously about what they learned from reading, what they still do not know, or what they are still unsure of and why that is so. On My Own questions support applied comprehension: How can I take this story and apply it to my own experience? In terms of “The Open Boat,” On My Own questions could include the following:

- What is our place in the universe?
- How do hardship and danger bring out the best and worst in people?
- What’s a time you have felt “lost at sea”?

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On My Own questions ask readers to move outside the text and into their own lives, feelings, dreams, and worlds. They are asked to take what they have read in the text and apply it to their own experiences and prior knowledge. On My Own questions invite personalization and multiple points of view, and the story becomes a springboard to larger human issues.

READING “THE OPEN BOAT” ONE QUESTION AND RESPONSE AT A TIME

The QAR taxonomy asks readers and teachers to think closely about what they are asking and where the answer lies. For teachers, QAR is a reminder to push readers to do more than locate a specific word or series of words in the text (Right There/Think and Search). The approach also asks teachers to push students beyond the page and into their memories, imagination, and realities (Author and Me/On My Own) as they transact with the text.

Here is a method for introducing QAR into classrooms. We recommend starting with a familiar text so that the primary focus will be on the strategy itself rather than initial comprehension. That is, start with a story that students have already read in class so they can focus on the QAR question types and strategies for responding as opposed to spending their energy on understanding the narrative.

Make four columns on the blackboard or whiteboard, labeling the columns left to right with the four QAR question types (In the Text/Right There, In the Text/Think and Search, Author and Me, On My Own), and talk about each one—their similarities and differences—and how students will generate responses for each question type. Again, in the case of an In the Text/Right There question,

the answer is a specific word or phrase of the text. The response to an In the Text/Think and Search question is distributed across the text and requires that students scan the reading—pulling the response together from here and there. An Author and Me question is still very much related to the reading; however, this kind of question asks for some sort of interpretation from the reader. Finally, an On My Own question departs from the text and asks readers to ponder something peripheral to the reading; the response lies within the reader.

When students have grasped the notion of question types, read aloud a brief section of a familiar text to the students. Then, present students with four questions mirroring the four question types of the QAR strategy. As teachers and students read each question aloud together and then silently, the teacher might “think aloud” and model how to categorize each of the questions into the correct QAR question type—referring the class to the shared visual aids.

For an In the Text/Right There question, that might sound something like this:

Teacher: The first question is, “What color were the waves rocking the small boat?” Hmm. This question is asking for a specific piece of information—the color of the waves. I bet they were blue like the ocean. Let me see if this is something I can find “In the Text/Right There” [teacher takes up the story and scans for the word *waves*]. Waves, waves, waves. Here it is! In the third sentence of the opening paragraph, Crane writes, “These waves were gray, except for the tops, which were white, and all the

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men knew the colors of the sea.” So the answer is “Mostly gray with a little bit of white on the tops of the waves.” Or I guess we could say, “Gray and white.” Since I found the response so quickly all in one sentence, I’d say this is an In the Text/Right There question because it is asking for a very specific piece of information, and I was able to find the answer in a single sentence. What do you all think?

A teacher think-aloud in response to an In the Text/Think and Search question would emphasize and model the need to look across the text. For example:

Teacher: “Who is in the boat?” Hmm, well, there’s a cook. He doesn’t have a name, though. And then if you keep reading, there’s an oiler. There is a correspondent—I guess some sort of journalist. This looks like an In the Text/Think and Search question because I’m having to read a few parts and piece together an answer. There’s also a captain. There’s someone named Billie. I think Billie is the oiler. That’s strange; the others don’t have names. I wonder why that is?

Author and Me and On My Own questions sound different because such questions ask us to move beyond the text. For example:

Teacher: “Why do you think the author names only one of the four men? What does naming ‘Billie’ achieve?” Here, the answer isn’t really in the reading because the question is asking me why I think the author only names Billie the oiler. So it’s

an Author and Me question. I can only speculate that maybe Crane was trying to memorialize Billie by naming him. That would be my guess. Billie died. So it’s Crane’s way of honoring that loss. But that’s just my interpretation, and there could be another reason.

Finally, an On My Own question does not really require that you have read the text. It’s something that depends entirely on the individual.

Teacher: “Have you ever felt ‘lost at sea’?” Well, that’s a great question and, not literally, but yes, I have experienced a sense of hopelessness and uncertainty in my life. This is an On My Own question. Here’s what happened . . .

Another option is to have students work in small groups to decide the appropriate QAR category for each question and the answers to each question—or vice versa. After they have worked together in groups, invite students to share some of their reflections on the QAR approach and their answers to the QAR questions with the whole class.

Finally, when students have had some success at categorizing questions, answering questions, and sharing their thinking, it’s time for them to practice creating their own QAR questions with a shared reading. One way to do this is to take one question type at a time and have students brainstorm as many In the Text/Right There questions that they can, for example. Then, once they have written the questions on the board in the appropriate column, have the class try generating responses. As the students

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do this, they will be able to confirm whether the question is or isn't the type of question their classmates intended it to be. They can then either adjust the question so that it fits the category or move the question into a different category. This last step is especially important for reinforcing the relationship between question construction and response construction.

CONCLUSION: THE LINE BETWEEN WOR(L)DS

For decades, students' proficiency in reading comprehension has been a measure of their academic achievement and a barometer for future success in formal schooling. So it matters tremendously when learners struggle with reading and, even worse, when they give up on themselves as readers. But beyond the achievement gap, great stories matter; for many of us, reading such stories is a large part of why we became English teachers. We read, and as we figure out the story and its characters, we react and interact logically, physically, and emotionally. Across these layered transactions, we come to ask courageous questions about our individual and communal experiences such as the terrifying force of the natural world and the fragility of human solidarity.

When we enter a story such as Crane's, we start asking questions—first about words, syntax, and narrative. But more than decoding, we also start asking questions about ourselves and our world and our place within it. However, many of us teachers learned to read at a time when reading was considered something that you were simply good at or not. Only fairly recently has literacy research

attempted to break down and catalogue what proficient readers actually do and then look to replicate those cognitive behaviors through strategy instruction.

Here, with “The Open Boat” as an anchor text, we have centered on the QAR framework to explore how understanding the nuances of a question might enable readers to respond with more confidence as they locate specific information within a text or turn to themselves to answer questions that require thinking beyond the text. We began with a brief survey of the research on how building reading strategies might also build adolescents' reading comprehension. Using the opening paragraphs of “The Open Boat,” we outlined the four types of questions that QAR emphasizes and steps for taking up the approach in classrooms.

We recognize that in this article we have limited our illustrations of QAR to the first few lines of “The Open Boat.” However, QAR is a robust system for building reading comprehension of other text types—nonfiction across content disciplines, for example. We encourage teachers and students to take up QAR across content areas—for instance, with their science and history texts.

For sure, QAR isn't a magic wand for raising reading comprehension; it is one of a large assortment of strategies that we encourage teachers and readers to employ as they make meaning with words and the world. We also recognize, as with anything new, that the QAR approach takes time and lots of practice. This is true both for students and for teachers who might be more familiar and comfortable with literal-comprehension questions and responses that are limited to a moment in the text.

Great stories matter; for many of us, reading such stories is a large part of why we became English teachers.

Applied questions that revolve around what the student thinks about an author's message or a character's motivation—or questions that ask readers to dig into their own thoughts and values—require instructional environments that honor and even celebrate multivoiced differences. This can be a stretch, especially if classrooms and communities frame teachers as authoritarians whose opinions are the only ones that matter. Teaching QAR and, more generally, teaching reading strategies are ways of chipping away at the mystery of reading comprehension and the monopoly of knowledge carefully guarded by more-authoritarian teachers and authoritarian societies.

A long-standing classroom refrain is that “there’s no such thing as a stupid question.” We agree. However, what would be absurd is that we might come to not ask questions at all; or that we might fail to analyze the motivation behind a question; or that we might accept a response as definitive or something exclusively the propriety of teachers. Our hope is that QAR can achieve more than orienting our students to the range of questions that can be asked of a text or to the directions they can use to find those answers. QAR also embodies the notion that question-making and responding is our shared right and responsibility, especially in a new millennium bombarded by fake news, disinformation, and manipulation of texts of all sorts.

We can all agree that the waves of the Florida Atlantic coast, per Crane, “were gray, except for the tops, which were white.” However, what has less consensus is how we might have felt, what we might have done, and what the Crane story might mean to each of us as individuals had we been stranded off the winter Florida coast in the open sea. What QAR forwards is the notion that

question-making and responding is something that is not limited to words in a text or across a text. In other cases, a response lies somewhere between an author and ourselves. Or maybe, and probably, the best questions that a text can generate and the best answers we can craft are somewhere deep within and across the line between who we are and who we are still becoming as individuals, as readers, and as communities.

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