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Close Reading Strategies for Difficult Text: The Effects on Comprehension and Analysis at the Secondary Level

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An Action Research Report by

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Abstract

Literacy skills are an essential component in transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn. But reading to learn has several levels of difficulty. This research focuses on exploring in what ways close reading strategies of difficult text can impact comprehension and analysis. The participants of the intervention were ninth-grade students of various reading ability levels at a rural public high school. During the six-week period, students used formative assessments, annotations, and written responses to determine if gains in comprehension and analysis scores can be connected. The pre- and post-intervention data reflects how students achieved with and without close reading. Both quantitative and qualitative data showed an increase in both comprehension and analysis scores on student assessment using these strategies. Observations also indicated that the intervention was engaging to students and held them accountable for their successes. The research project suggests that a more extensive investigation on other interventions may have positive effects on vocabulary and reading.

Keywords: analysis, close reading, literacy, comprehension, reading strategies

Freshman year of high school is an intimidating time. The social, emotional, and academic life increases rapidly for students. Academic success requires patience and focus from students and at times, juggling several tasks can seem strenuous. I noticed multitasking-overload was evident in a freshman Language Arts classroom in southern Minnesota. Students started to feel the pressure to ready themselves for college and career. An excitement consumes the air knowing that the lifelong goal towards graduation lies ahead, but how can a student focus when there is so much to manage? Patience and focus play a vital part of lifelong learning, especially when it comes to academics such as reading.

In 2012, a southern Minnesota school focused on close reading and literacy through all content areas. The studied freshman Language Arts class is within a rural public school district in the south-central region. The Pre-K-12 school contains district and open enrolled students totaling 890. The student population consists of predominantly white (89%) and just over 20% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

The school implemented new reading curriculum for grades K-10. A committee spent several months deciding which curriculum would meet the literary needs of the school. After reviewing several curricula, the committee decided to choose a curriculum that focused on vocabulary and close reading strategies of various and difficult text. But, according to State Longitudinal Educational Data System (2015), the test scores in reading remained stagnant for the following years after the new curriculum was implemented (Minnesota Department of Education). The committee determined that

viable curriculum is needed, but strategies to get the most out of the viable curriculum are necessary.

After this realization, literacy standards became the top priority at the southern Minnesota school. Teachers looked closely at not only what they were teaching, but how they were teaching the material. Faculty in content areas such as math and science were unsure why students were not doing well on their vocabulary tests, yet the same students were receiving higher scores on vocabulary tests in Language Arts classes. The answer was the amount of time and depth that was given to the vocabulary tests. The math teacher gave students a list to study, but did not review or discuss the words in class when the Language Arts teacher gave students a list of words, discussed and reviewed the words using examples. Teachers realized that time and focus on the content is needed for proficient understanding.

The administration provided extensive training on how to teach literacy throughout all departments. The main discussion was that teaching reading and writing is not just a requirement for Language Arts class, but for all courses. The faculty discussed how background knowledge may affect comprehension of the text. If students could not connect the subject with what was previously learned, it may create a challenge with all other work that is connected to the text. I watched how the literacy conversation evolved throughout the school and spread in all content areas. The collaboration grew beyond departments and conversations pinpointed one practice in literacy, close reading.   The curriculum supported the Common Core standards which include opportunities for close reading in informational, nonfiction, and technical reading. It was uncertain just how

close reading strategies could affect the reading and comprehension of this freshman class in southern Minnesota.

Review of Literature

The Common Core requires students to read a variety of complex texts proficiently to interpret the material. Students should acquire strategies to cope with the demands of reading (Attaprechakul, 2013 p. 82). This literature review provides researched strategies to increase comprehension of complex text for students, which includes close reading strategies (defined as looking closely at elements of the text to develop in-depth ideas). Brown and Kappes (2012) define close reading as an "investigation of a short text gradually releasing responsibility to students who can employ strategies to read independently" (p. 4). The research chosen will address what is pertinent before, during, and after close reading and explore ways to increase reading comprehension and analysis for students.

Pragmatics: Background Knowledge

Many studies suggest that background knowledge affects the ability to analyze a text. Researchers explored whether harnessing background knowledge is the most constructive focus for reading. However, to some extent, instructional activities completed during and after reading can increase student comprehension even for students who lack any background knowledge on a particular topic.   In one study, twenty-four participants were asked to read using a text with 11th-grade complexity. The study concluded that 84% ranked the reading extremely difficult citing the lack of prior knowledge as the main cause of text difficulty (Attaprechakul 2013, p. 85). However, after group discussion and tutorials of the text, 60% of students performed at a

satisfactory level in summarizing, syntax, and main idea (Attaprechakul 2013, p.85).

Studies find that background knowledge may have limiting effects on comprehension.

The literature concludes that background knowledge can affect the initial reading process

and drives comprehension and analysis of complex text. Specific guided practice and

discussion drive any further impact after the initial reading process. Therefore, intentional

reading strategies can ameliorate the negative impacts for students with limited

background knowledge around the content (McNeil 2011, p.886).

Guided Questions

Students who lack the background knowledge prior to reading can build their

comprehension and understanding of the overall purpose for reading the text through

guided questions that drive the learning towards the overall purpose. Shryock (2012)

suggested that essential questions help model how to identify patterns of a text and build

a discussion between author and reader (p. 4). When comparing the importance of

background knowledge with questioning, the studies found that the majority of the

success came from questioning (McNeil 2010, p. 897). Gallagher (2009) also

emphasized that students may need guidance to search for prior knowledge, but must also

identify a purpose for reading the material (p. 103). The literature pointed to background

knowledge as the initial starting point but concluded that essential questions are the most

effective strategy to improve comprehension and analysis before reading.

Meaningful learning

Intrinsic motivation tends to be higher in problem-solving courses and lower in

critical thinking courses such as reading (Winstead, 2004 p. 45). Using effective

methods-- based on goals--creates metacognitive learners and allows students to take

control of the learning (Winstead, 2004 p. 46). Instead, Winstead (2004) suggests that

prior knowledge does help possible questioning strategies, but the instruction provided by

the teacher is the most essential for increasing information retention (p. 39). It is

important for students to understand how the background knowledge and questions

connect to the reading. Students can become intrinsically motivated when instructors

discuss methods of having a purpose before reading (Froiland, Oros, Smith, Hirchert,

2012 p. 93). The literature stresses the importance of intrinsic motivation and concludes

that it can be achieved through teaching goal-setting and purposeful reading. Initially

providing students with a purpose for reading the text will assist in goal setting. The

study concluded that the most constructive close reading strategy before reading is to

guide with questions and a purpose to trigger any background knowledge or intrinsic

motivation.

Contextual: Annotating with Purpose

Because reading is a staple in college and career, it is important to proficiently

understand the content. The following studies determined the most effective close reading

strategy to learner comprehension and analysis. Annotating a text is a more cognitive

approach to recognizing arguments and patterns than simply reading and discussing a text

(Zywica and Gomez, 2008 p. 156). Studies showed offering students an "annotation

symbol method" provided success. The method consisted of asking students to circle

difficult text, twice-underline key facts and once-underline supporting evidence (Zywica

and Gomez, 2008 p. 158). As constructive as this may seem, other studies argued that

students should not go into annotation blindly or create certain highlighting and shape

techniques. According to Stuart (2015), who based his studies on Kelly Gallagher's

methods of annotating using a focused goal, annotation overload creates a loss in meaningfulness to the reader and in turn becomes compliance instead of a connection. (Stuart, 2015).

Other literature stated that the annotations must go beyond highlighting and line drawing. Porter-O'Donnell (2004) argued that annotations happen before, during, and after the reading and should consist of what students notice, questions they have, and connections they make (p. 83). In the study, students were asked to complete more marginal annotations rather than shape drawing and highlighting. Gallagher (2009) may also disagree with "annotation symbol method" as being "over-teaching of academic text" and taking away the focus of making meaningful connections to the reader (p. 72). Gallagher agreed with Porter-O'Donnell in terms of annotations consisting of writing and not shape-drawing. He also suggested offering students one-three response questions before reading (Stuart, 2015). Students can then annotate as desired using answers and connections to questions. This method creates a purpose for annotations as well as the freedom to annotate as needed.

Annotating Effects

The purpose of annotating a text during reading is to improve the critical thinking of students after reading. Studies that explored ways to annotate during reading concluded with different results in reading assessments. In a study with freshman students in a large urban setting, students showed a minimum of three-point gains out of twenty-five on their reading assessments after using "annotation symbol method" (Zywica, 2008 p. 164). These gains were only evident in science and no other content area. However, a study with a freshman English class in Indiana who used Gallagher's

methods showed students experienced overall gains in 2003 reading test scores and achieved AYP as well (Porter-O'Donnell, 2004 p. 89). It is clear that annotations are an essential close reading strategy to improve comprehension and analysis. The literature concluded to have increased comprehension and analysis of difficult text; students must have a focused goal for annotations. Readers must annotate according to targeted questions and find connections towards an overall purpose instead of focusing on specific drawing and highlighting.

Propositional: After Reading Strategies

Students with a purpose to read and a focal point for constructive annotations will receive optimal comprehension of the text. However, analyzing does not stop after reading. Students need time to connect their purpose for reading to their lives for the process to come full circle. Studies indicated the best way to improve reader retention to increase analysis is through independent response. Students who respond to the text in writing or orally are more likely to think critically about the text and find purpose in the reading than those only exposed to a multiple-choice response. A current study shows that Finland finished first in an international reading study out of fifty-seven countries (Gallagher, 2009 p. 115). Students in Finland must demonstrate their thinking through written or oral responses.

Another study by Beers and Probst (2013) argued that students will not improve reading analysis unless they are asked to respond to the text by using the text as their driving piece of evidence (p.36). Students must identify a purpose for reading and analyzing, but be given the time to respond independently. Carol Jago argued that instruction should begin with a guided tour and end with a budget tour (Gallagher, 2009

p. 79). In other words, students need to appreciate the purpose of reading the text before any independent discussion can begin. The literature pointed to a deficit in providing opportunities to think critically about a text in a more organic way. Students must be given time to respond to the text both written and orally to improve analysis and create lifelong learners.

Collaboration to Create Culture

Several scholars argue whether there is a need to teach complex texts, such as Shakespeare or other classics that do not "speak" to the generation. Although the Common Core requires reading challenging material and mandates it in many curricula, many studies showed by reading similar complex texts create a common culture of understanding. Gallagher (2009) stated that there is value when every ninth grader in the country reads *Romeo and Juliet* by "sharing a foundation as a culture" if we are expected to communicate with each other (p. 92).

Students can collaborate on the reading in a more meaningful way when given a solid purpose and effective annotations. Zywica (2008) added that "reading-to-learn tools, like annotation" can be tied to other content areas as well (p. 165). Collaboration on the text can benefit both gifted students and struggling readers. Group and whole class discussion allows students to share their critical thinking and allows struggling readers to comprehend difficult words, inferences, and analysis making them more likely to engage in self-monitoring. (Katz and Carlisle, 2009 p. 333). The literature stated that students can improve their comprehension and analysis of complex texts through critical thinking discussion in a more organic manner.

Schools and curricula exercise high literary standards through difficult text and it

is a concept students must learn to develop to be college or career ready. The literature reviewed different methods in three trends of close reading to determine an effective strategy to improve reading comprehension and analysis. Establishing a purpose and guiding question before and after reading the text is the driving force to improve reading comprehension and analysis. When students understand not only how the text applies to them, but why they are reading it, they will become more engaged throughout the process. Based on the literature, it is important to keep annotations as focused and simple during the reading process. Providing shapes, highlights, and signposts may become overbearing in annotating and the task could be viewed as a chore instead of a tool. The focus of annotations should be offered in a more organic fashion allowing students to use any method to develop their understanding. However, close reading does not stop after annotations.

The literacy mission continues in many schools, especially in the freshman Language Arts class in the southern Minnesota. Even after new common core curriculum and literacy push in all content areas, the test results remain stagnant compared to the state average (Minnesota department of education, 2015). The research addresses how beneficial patience and focus can be to respond critically and organically to the text. After reviewing the research the big question that remains is in what ways, if any, can improvements be made to reading comprehension and analysis using close reading strategies on difficult text in the secondary classroom?

Methodology

In early January, the ninth-grade class started to close read various types of difficult text (see Appendix A), both nonfiction and fiction. The goal was to 1) read and

make annotations based on a goal 2) identify comprehension and analysis of the material

based on summative assessments 3) compare scores during the intervention to those

prior.

        The review of the literature defined close reading as an "investigation of a short

text gradually releasing responsibility to students who can employ strategies to read

independently" (Brown & Kappes, 2012 p. 4). The targeted objective over the next

several weeks was to determine in what ways close reading strategies of challenging texts

can impact student comprehension and analysis. A variety of difficult text, both

nonfiction and fictional text were used in the study.

        The first part of the research focused on nonfiction text where the students learned

about rhetoric and rhetorical devices. Students were exposed to devices prior to January.

Therefore, much of the formative assessments were used to trigger background

knowledge. Students' knowledge of the words "ethos, pathos, logos, parallelism,

restatement, repetition, and analogy" was assessed (see Appendix B). It was important for

students to know the rhetorical devices before attempting to closely read the material.

Additional discussions and formative assessments were used to ensure understanding of

the devices (Appendix C). The teacher then discussed the definition of annotations and

what it meant to annotate a text. According to the literature review, annotating a text is a

more cognitive approach to recognizing arguments and patterns than simply reading and

discussing a text (Zywica & Gomez, 2008 p. 156). The review also indicated how

annotations should be more qualitative and less quantitative as it is suggested to offer

students focus questions before reading so they can annotate as desired (Stuart, 2015).

        The class completed a first reading of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"

where the entire class read the text straight through, without stopping for questioning or summarizing. The teacher reviewed the rhetorical devices again and asked students to think about how the rhetorical devices connect to the essay. The next day, the class read the story a second time while annotating with two questions in mind: "What is happening in each section?" and "How does the speaker use rhetorical devices to persuade the audience?" The students based their annotations on how they would eventually answer the two questions.

Before students annotated the text, they were shown how to annotate using various types of methods. The teacher illustrated how to highlight information, circle words if needed, and how to create effective marginal notes. Students had the freedom to annotate using their preferred method, but the content of those annotations remained on the focused questions mentioned earlier.

According to the review, studies indicated the best way to improve reader retention to increase analysis is through independent response. Students then reviewed their annotations to create a short, written essay called, Reader's Response to both questions stated earlier (Appendix E).

Once students completed the reader's response, the teacher reviewed the rhetorical devices, offered classroom discussion about specific annotations made, and allowed students to share their essays. Students then completed a summative assessment to determine what level of comprehension and analysis was achieved (Appendix F). The pre-assessment was used to determine student understanding of specific objectives, but formative and summative assessment were used to determine understanding on how objectives apply to the text. The annotations, reader's response, and summative

assessment were used to determine students' overall comprehension of the text (see

Appendix D, E, and F).

Throughout the nonfiction study, the teacher took notes, collected pre-assessment,

annotations and reader's response scores on a spreadsheet, and made copies of student

work. During the end of the unit, the students took a post-assessment survey with

questions about students' experiences with annotating a text (see Appendix G).

The second part of the study considered in what ways close reading strategies of

fiction can impact comprehension and analysis. In the review of the literature, several

scholars argue whether there is a need to teach complex texts, such as Shakespeare, but

studies show that reading similar complex texts creates a common culture of

understanding (Gallagher, 2009, p. 92). The teacher then used *The Tragedy of Romeo and*

Juliet as the selected challenging fictional text.

The play consisted of five acts that were each covered within a one-week span.

The teacher spent the first few days discussing the dramatic elements and how they

connect to that certain sections of the play. The first target objective was for student to

know the words "text aids, rhyme scheme, stage direction". Once students were able to

master the objectives, the class moved on to reading the material and creating

annotations. The first reading of *Romeo and Juliet* consisted of students acting out the

roles and stopping to summarize and answer questions. The teacher then reviewed the

dramatic elements and students spent time rereading the text individually and made

annotations by summarizing each line of a selected text in more familiar words. Students

then completed a short, written essay on "How are dramatic elements used within Act I?"

and were given a summative assessment to show their comprehension and analysis of the

section (Appendix F).

During the following week, the targeted objective was to identify rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter in closely reading the text. The literature showed that offering various ways of annotating can be beneficial as long as students understand the purpose of annotations. Students acted out Act II, which also consisted of summarizing and class discussion. Students once again read the text individually and annotated noting the rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter as their purpose. The teacher provided an essay prompt as well as a summative assessment to determine how it affected comprehension and analysis.

In the following section of *Romeo and Juliet,* the objective was to have students define "soliloquy, monologue, and aside" and identify how they are used in the text. Once the teacher determined that students were familiar with the objectives, the class acted out Act III being prompted to summarize and answer questions about the section. As stated in the study, close reading involves a rereading of short text to create a better understanding (Brown & Kappes, 2012 p. 4). Keeping this in mind, the teacher had the student reread smaller sections of Act III while annotating with a focused goal of "What important information can help you understand the meaning of the section?" Students created annotations according to the question while determining whether the section was a soliloquy, monologue or an aside. Students then explained their understanding in a written response and summative assessment.

The unit ended with a final cumulative assessment on comprehension and analysis questions from Acts I-V of the text. The data recorded for formative assessments was logged using Kahoot reports and spreadsheets. A rubric was used to grade the

annotations and written essays (Appendix D and E). All summative tests determined the

student's level of understanding with questions pertaining to reading comprehension, and

literary analysis. The summative assessments were logged not only as the total score for

the entire assessment but also how students did on specific questions that targeted either

comprehension or analysis.

Analysis of Data

The primary goal of the research was to determine whether the implementation of

close reading strategies with nonfiction and fictional text would affect secondary school

student learning, specifically by improving comprehension and the ability to analyze

difficult text. In addition to the quantitative data collected before, during, and after

reading the text, various qualitative data was collected such as teacher observation and

post assessment questions. The discussion will present details of the data and explain

notable findings.

Over a six-week period, students experienced close reading strategies with

challenging nonfiction and fictional text. Data was recorded both before and after the

intervention to determine improvements if comprehension and analysis can be correlated

with the close reading strategies. Before the reading, students were assessed to identify

prior knowledge of specific objectives that was pertinent to analyze the reading. Students

annotated the text with specific goals incorporating abilities to recall and summarize

while connecting objectives from the pre-assessment, into the formative assessment, and

finally to the summative assessment. These steps were collected for quantitative analysis

to explore if any gains were made in assessment scores.

By definition, for students to analyze reading, both fiction and nonfiction, it is

important to understand how concepts or techniques can affect the text as a whole. The

purpose of the pre-assessment is to create a basic understanding of those concepts or

techniques beforehand (Appendix B). To determine if any improvements were made in

analysis, the teacher issued a formative assessment (Appendix C) during reading and a

summative assessment after the reading (Appendix F). The quantitative data was

recorded from formative and summative assessments were collected as total points and

converted to percentage values.

It must also be considered that the pre-assessment only determines student

understanding of a specific objective unlike formative and summative which determines

understanding of the specific objective applied to the text. For this reason, only formative

and summative scores are shown in the graph to provide a more comparable connection.

Findings in the nonfiction data show that most students had an increase in ability to

analyze the text according to their summative scores compared to during the reading.

According to Figure 1, Student 5 and 8 made the most gains whereas Student 2 showed a

slight decrease. In my observation notes, the student later made corrections in the test

and stated that there was a "misunderstanding of what the question was asking of the

student", but upon further examination, the student understood the questions (notes,

January 19, 2016).   The formative and summative scores determine how students can

apply targeted concepts to the text. Considering what the assessments measure, data

shows slight gains for most students.
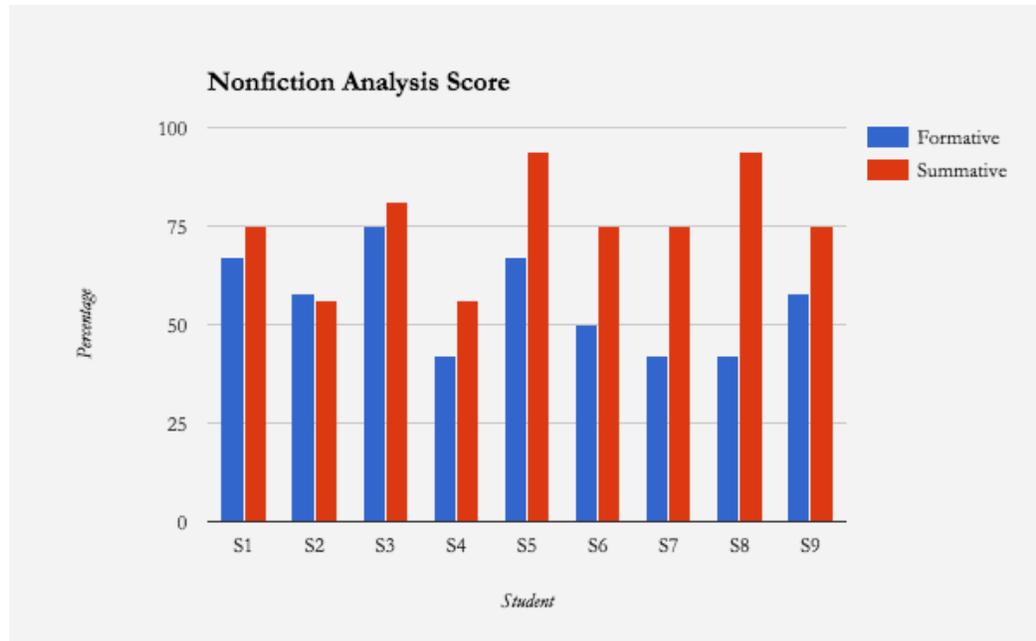
Figure 1. Formative and summative scores of nonfiction literary analysis.

A similar exercise was used with fictional text as well. Figure 2 shows gains from

the formative to the summative scores for most students.
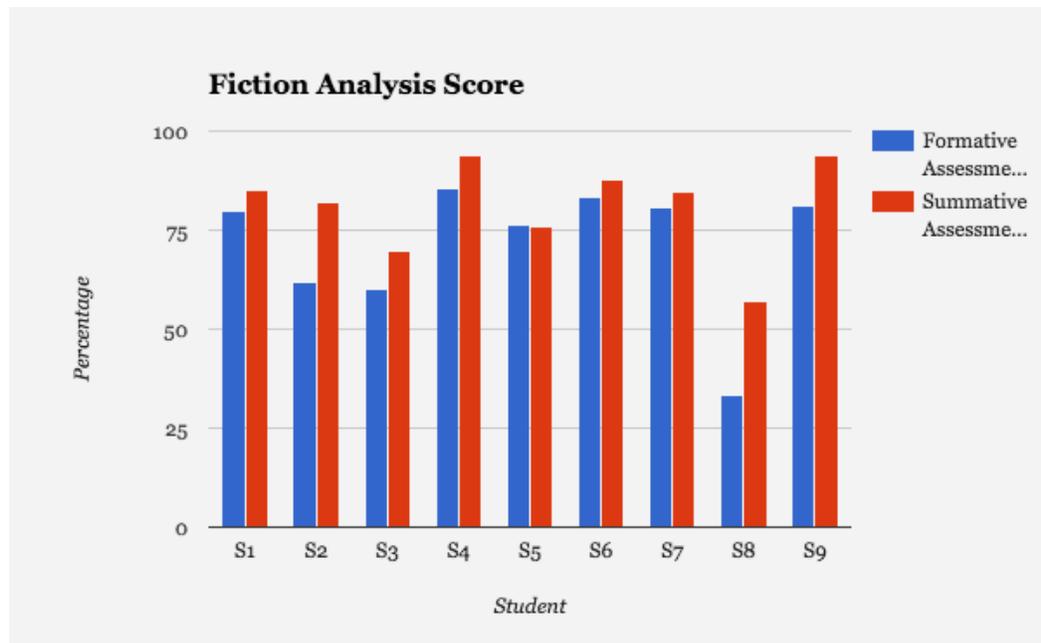
Figure 2. Pre-assessment, formative, and summative scores of fiction literary analysis.

After reviewing my notes, I commented on how "students were able to not only

define ethos, pathos, and logos, but also explain during class discussion how those

objectives were used within the text (noted January 6, 2016). Figure 3 furthers the data by

showing how formative and summative scores have changed before and after the close

reading strategies intervention. Both scores are an average of formative and summative

tests taken during a 10-week period. As shown, the increase from formative to summative

scores is evident as well as an increase from before close reading to after close reading.

The research question asks in what ways, if any, close reading strategies can help

comprehension and analysis. Overall, the average scores of the students showed gains in

analysis score using close reading strategies.
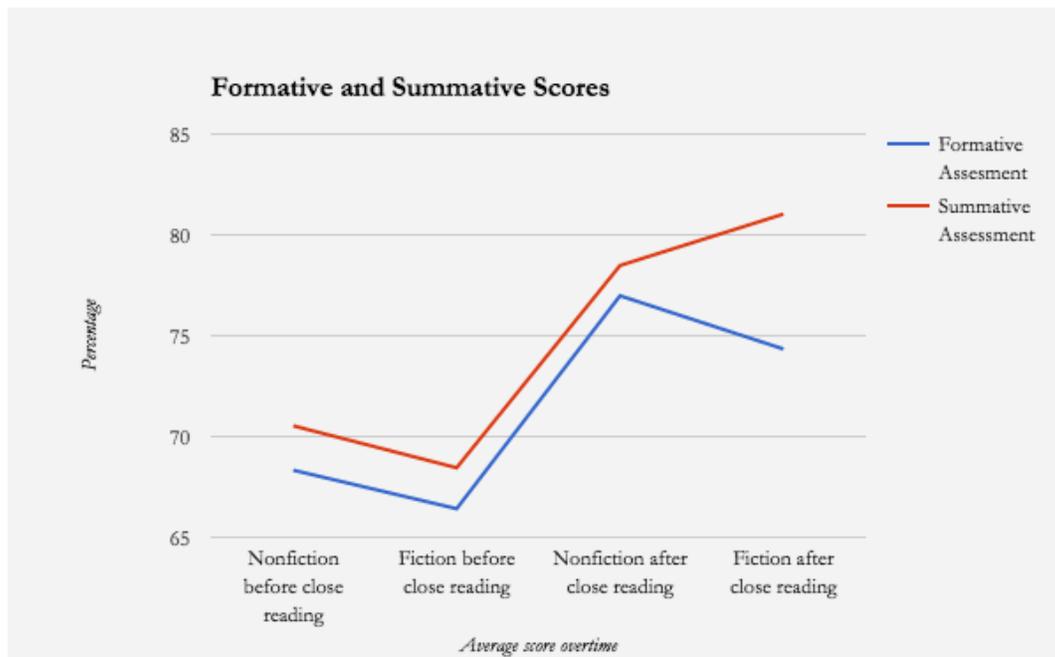
Figure 3: Formative and Summative Scores before and after close reading overtime.

Comprehension is a student's ability to read a text, process it, and understand the

meaning. During the study, students read and then created annotations according to

specific questions that are similar to the summative assessment questions. Students then

responded to the text by writing a summary called a reader's response, which determined

the level of comprehension similar to the summative assessment (Appendix E). Both

annotations and reader's response were assessed based on a 4-point scale and converted

to a percentage value. Students then were summatively assessed with questions

connecting to the comprehension and analysis of the text. Figure 3 shows the progressive

gains from annotations, reader's response, and the summative assessment. Because all

three asked similar questions about the text, they are measured to note any effects within

a short amount of time. Although the scores were within a wide range of value, there

were increases seen from the annotations, to writing, and finally to the summative test.
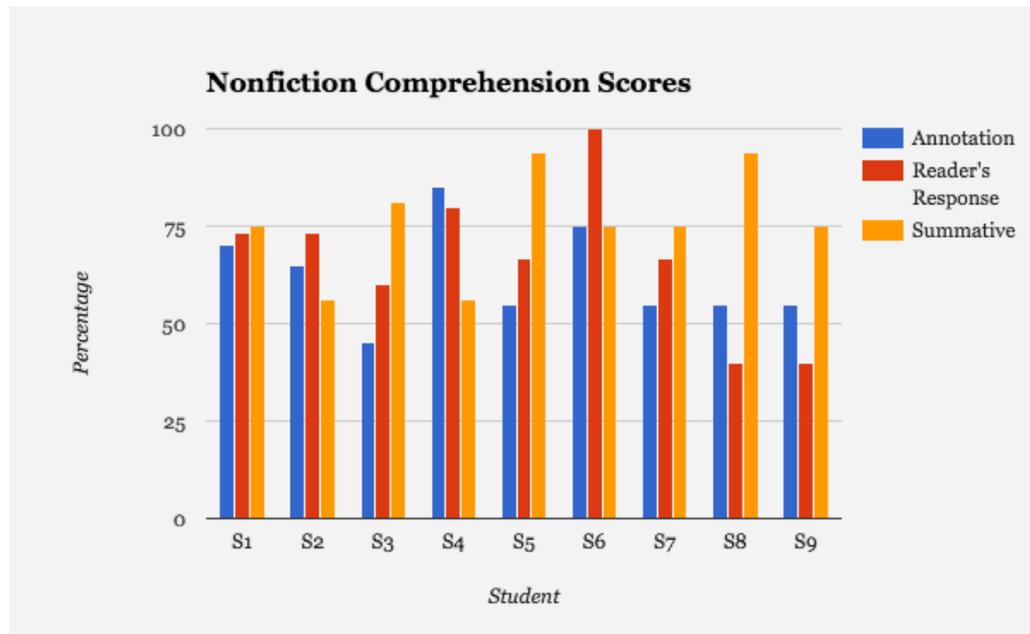
Figure 3. Annotation, reader's response, and summative scores in nonfiction comprehension.

The annotations created in both nonfiction and fiction were scored using a rubric to

determine if students were able to identify objectives learned and identify what

information was helpful in understanding the meaning of the section. In observation

notes, I noted that "most students spent time reviewing the annotations rubric carefully

before creating annotations" (notes, January 7, 2016). Although there is room for

subjectivity in scoring, the rubric provides students with details on how to meet the

standards. In Figure 4, the average nonfiction summative score for comprehension was

78% where fiction comprehension scores averaged at 80%.   My observation notes

suggested that "some students seemed engaged in the annotation process, while others made comments that it slowed them down too much in the reading" (notes, January 14, 2016). The different student opinions about annotations could have also play a role in the overall annotations scores.
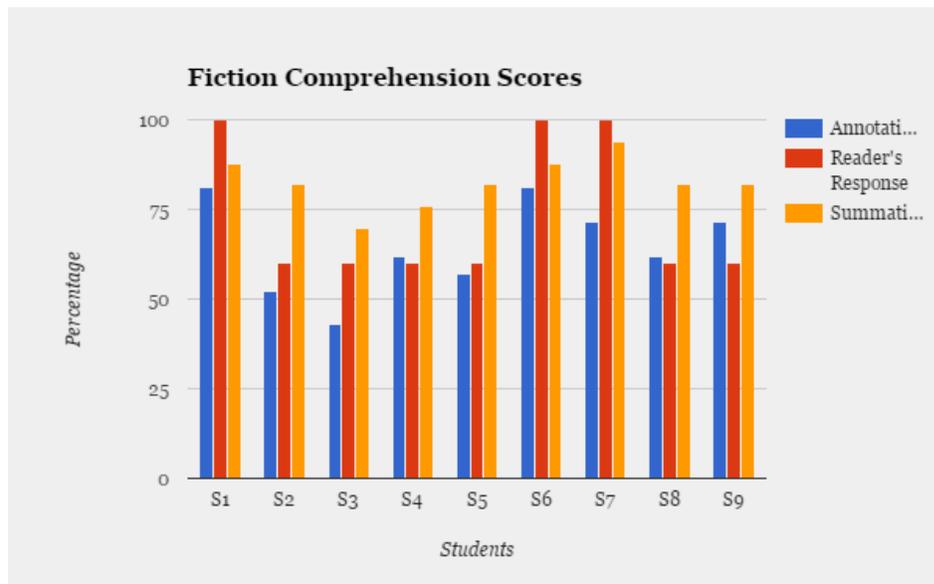
Figure 4. Annotation, reader's response, and summative scores of comprehension in fiction.

The comparisons earlier show increases during reading to after reading showing how annotations and reader's response affected scores. However, to further the data review, in Figure 5, the data during the intervention was also compared to scores from the same students before the intervention to show an overall effect overtime. The data shows gains in both comprehension and analysis scores while using close reading strategies.
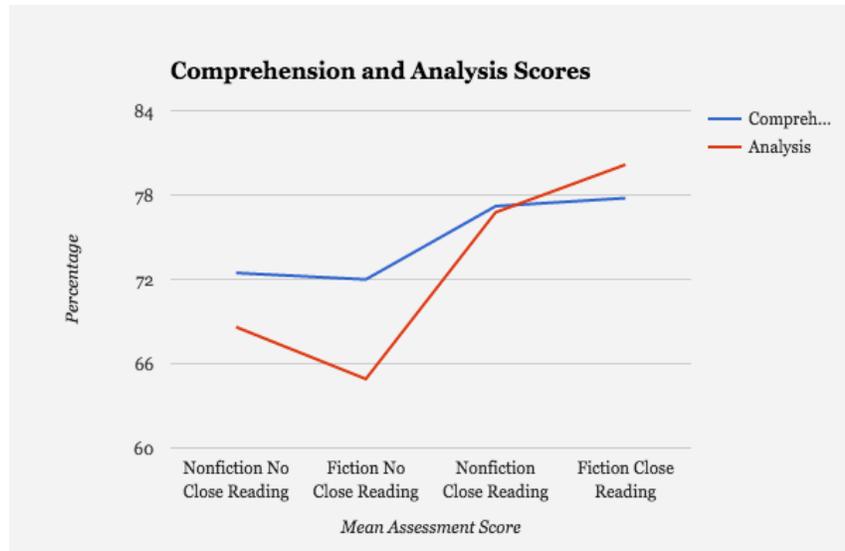
Figure 5: Comprehension and Analysis Scores with and without close reading strategies.

Table 1 and 2 illustrate the average score of students before and after the close

reading intervention. Both genres show at least a 5% gain in comprehension and an 8%

gain in analysis scores when using close reading strategies. An interesting observation

was how analytical scores surpassed comprehension scores after close reading strategies

were implemented. These gains over time help solidify the positive impact the

intervention had on student scores.

Table 1
Mean of summative scores before and after close reading strategies in nonfiction

Genre	Nonfiction-Before	Nonfiction-After
Comprehension	72%	77%
Analysis	68%	76%

Table 2
Mean of summative scores before and after close reading strategies in fiction

Genre	Fiction-Before	Fiction-After
Comprehension	71%	77%
Analysis	64%	80%

Upon completing the quantitative data, students were asked to participate in a post-assessment to provide their input on the close reading strategies used. A total of forty-three students answered questions about their experience annotating the text. Over half of the students agreed that the annotations improved their ability to comprehend the text and close to 75% of students would prefer to annotate in the future (Figure 6 & 7).
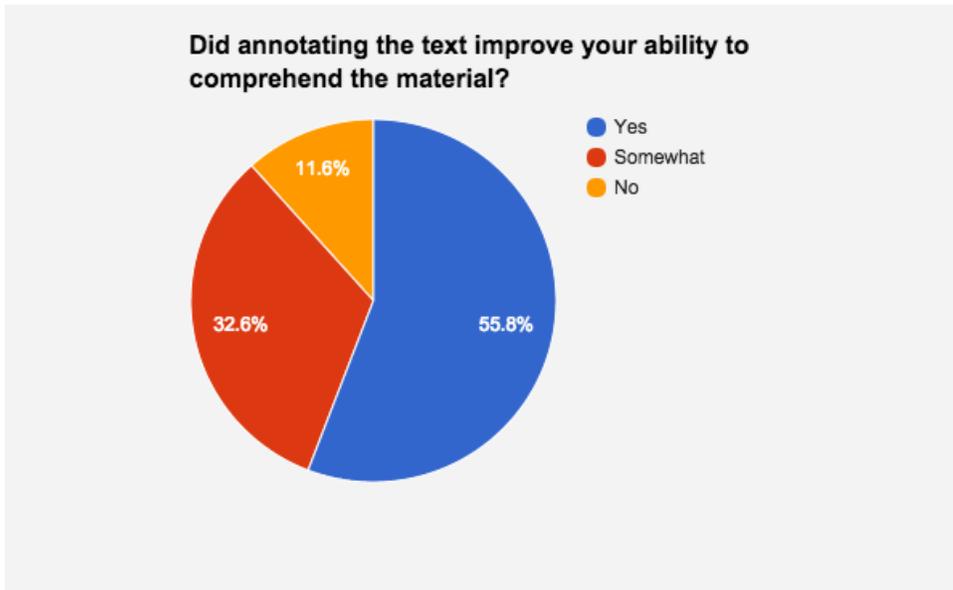

Figure 6. Post-Assessment Question about Text Annotation and Comprehension.
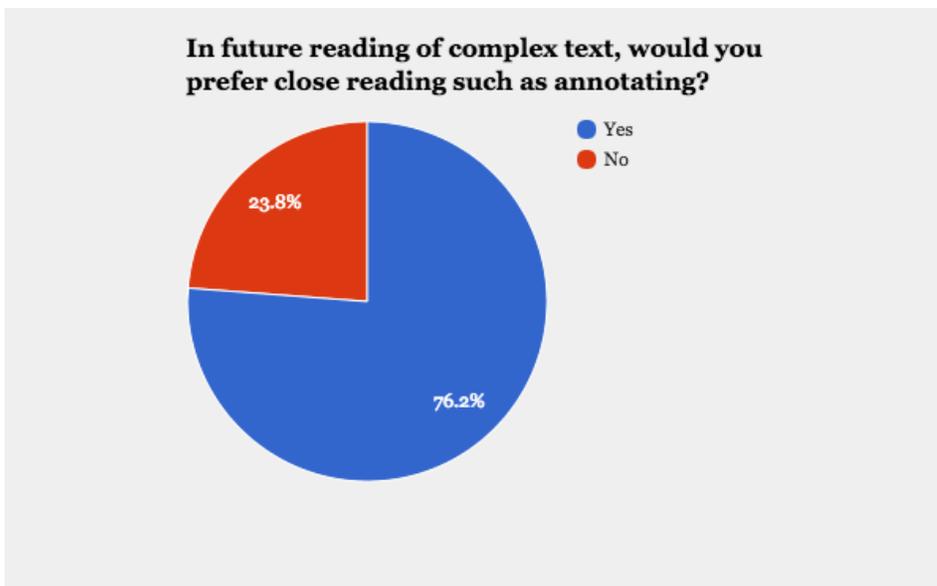
Figure 7. Post-Assessment Question on Text Annotation and Comprehension

The post assessment question in Figure 8 shows that out of the forty-three students who completed the assessment, 43% felt marginal writing was most beneficial where 31% indicated they benefited from using a combination of all annotation methods. These findings connect with the literature on Kelly Gallagher's methods of annotating using a focused goal. The study discusses how if a student is forced to use one type of annotations, it creates a loss of meaning to the reader and in turn becomes a compliance instead of a connection (Stuart, 2015). Instead, during the research, students were to focus more on the overall goal for annotating and less on how many words were circled or highlighted. Students were able to choose between several annotating methods, which may have created the positive effective of the process giving students the freedom to choose.
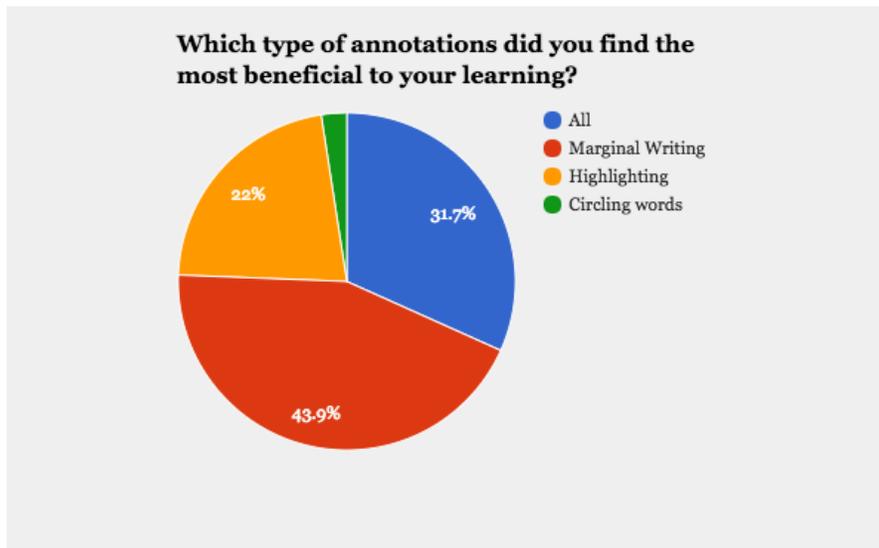
Figure 8. Post assessment question about annotations improving comprehension.

Also throughout the study, qualitative data was investigated to provide a more detailed view of students' opinions on close reading strategies. The students answered questions about their experience with annotating. In the nonfiction post assessment shown in Figure 9, students stated that annotating created more of a "careful read"

allowing them a chance to pay close attention to certain words and tone. The responses

from the fictional text in Figure 10 shows that close reading allowed students to

understand challenging vocabulary and as a result could comprehend the text better.

Did annotating the text improve your ability to comprehend the material?
If yes, in what ways did annotating improve your ability to comprehend the material?

Student Responses	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
It made me comprehend more of what exactly he was talking about because I had to carefully read through each paragraph and had to analyze each and every sentence.	Reading carefully and paying attention	Reading closely to help analyze each sentence
I understood different parts of the speech such as all his parallelism-structured paragraphs. I know now that he wasn't really talking about mountains or checks.	Understanding literary devices used in the text.	Able to connect devices to the text improved comprehension
It made me realize that what kind of emotion he was trying to show and how clever the piece really was.	Understood the tone of the text	Analyze tone and sentence structure
To understand where or what the repetition,emotions,and facts were located in the text. It also sort of gave me clues or examples to what they mean.	Finding necessary and important information in the text	Provided clues to create better analysis and comprehension

Figure 9. Nonfiction Annotations: Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have A Dream"

Did annotating the text improve your ability to comprehend the material?
If yes, in what ways did annotating improve your ability to comprehend the material?

Student Responses	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
It helped me understand difficult words and lines in the play better.	Understand vocabulary and the lines of the play	Improved vocabulary and comprehension
It was easier to understand the reading if you translated larger words into easier and more common words.	Can translate the larger words into common words	Rephrasing to improve comprehension
It helped me understand the meanings of words and the literature devices used.	Understand definitions of words and devices	Widens vocabulary and understanding of devices
It gave me a insight on different ways to switch words around or summarize the reading.	Changing words and summarizing the reading	Rephrasing to improve comprehension

Figure 10. Fiction Annotations: Shakespeare *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*

        In summary, the data supports the research project to determine if close reading

strategies can improve comprehension and analysis of a complex text. The investigation

centered around a "before, during, and after" reading process and divided the data into

information that determined analytical and comprehensive outcomes over time.

       The limitations of the data used to find significant conclusions were evident. The

findings revealed close reading strategies such as annotating and responding in writing

can create gains in analysis and comprehension of difficult text compared to scores

without close reading strategies. However, the potential of the study was not fully

realized because only one fiction and nonfiction text was considered. The data could be a

start of further investigation into different avenues of concern in close reading of

challenging material.

       The quantitative data between formative and summative assessment showed an

increase in achievement during the close reading process. Comparisons of summative

scores with and without close reading showed overall gains in reading and

comprehension as well. The qualitative data led me to believe that reading strategies used

were beneficial to student learning. I noticed students seemed more engaged in the

reading process, which increased the classroom discussion about the text. The data and

observations were intriguing and made me question what other variables may have been

at work during the study and how they could have played a role in the outcomes.

Action Plan

       The purpose of this action research project was to determine if close reading

strategies can positively impact comprehension and analysis scores of challenging text

in a secondary classroom. It was hoped that if the goal was achieved, the patience level

for reading difficult material would increase opening the door to more opportunities in

learning. As outlined above, the use of close reading strategies such as formative

assessments, annotating the text, and reader's response appear to be successful at increasing comprehension and analysis of students. This type of intervention, although limited in time, has the potential to be very beneficial to students.

After being in the teaching practice for some time, there tends to be many expectations that are assumed of students. One, for example, is that students know how to read to learn. But in our fast-paced, technologically-driven world, taking shortcuts is tempting and students may lack the skills needed to fully understand and synthesize what they read. As a result of this intervention, I have changed not only my practice, but my mindset as well. Close reading is an effective strategy to show students how to slow down and be more mindful of their reading. Students are asked to carefully read and focus on small details to make sense of the big picture. I also found myself being more detail-oriented with each lesson and paying attention to the details in the data to understand in what ways students were learning.

Aside from focusing more on details of the lesson, the success of the intervention showed how patience for both student and teacher can have positive effects. According to my observation notes, students seemed more invested in the reading when they were annotating the text. They were being held accountable for showing that they haven't read the text carefully. I too, have become more patient in my practice understanding the importance of modeling effective annotations and asking questions to check for comprehension. When examining the data in the future, I know to slow down when students do not meet the standards and to reteach areas that are in need of improvement.

Close reading seemed to affect student confidence as well. As students became familiar with the text, they provided effective and detailed comments during large group

discussion. They were able to answers questions quickly and used examples from the

text as the annotations served as a road map to their ideas. Self-efficacy and positive

attitudes about reading began to develop and creates a hopeful energy in the classroom.

Although the intervention covered a short amount of time, the impact on student

learning could be indefinite. Students can carry the skill of close reading strategies such

as annotations and responding to the reading in a written essay and apply them to other

content areas. Close reading can enrich research for science or social studies or be a

critical tool for future research papers while gaining advanced degrees. Students can

begin to see how skills from one content area can transfer to others. The hope is that

students understand that literacy is a concept that is needed in all aspects of life.

While conducting the research for this project, our administration was so

encouraged by the energy of close reading in our Language Arts Department that we

were asked to share the positive impact with the entire staff. We felt the pressure to

present it in a way that did not come across as "one more thing" to teachers' plates. Our

goal was to emphasize that all teachers are considered reading teachers. Afterwards,

teachers of different concentrations were using close reading strategies in their

classrooms and noticing gains in student learning.

My curiosity peaked after the data showed beneficial impacts in student learning.

I wondered what other areas of investigation could be explored in connection to close

reading strategies. As I would observe students during close reading activities, many of

the annotations or questions about the reading were targeting vocabulary. I believe part

of what made the reading "difficult" to students was the lack of vocabulary knowledge.

It makes sense to slow down when reading and look up unfamiliar words to create a

greater sense of control of the information. A further investigation could explore in what ways vocabulary knowledge is connected to reading comprehension.

I was also curious about the level of motivation students felt because close reading made them responsible for showing their work. Completing these strategies changes the classroom from teacher-centered, where the teacher would guide the reading and ask questions, to student-centered, where students had to prove they effectively read the material. I wondered how much intrinsic motivation played a role in the success of students.

There is something about students comprehending a challenging text and overcoming that difficult task that brings a certain energy to the classroom. An instructor can easily tell through body language when students are truly engaged or complying to the task. I noticed several students wide-eyed, leaning forward, with a pencil, highlighter, or both in their hands and focusing on nothing but the text. There was a moment during a lesson when the class finished annotating the material and one student asked if we can do this again tomorrow "because it was fun". These are the moments and reasons why we are part of this practice in the first place, to see that "ah-ha" moment when we have given students the tools to become successful learners.

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Appendix A
Common Core Text Complexity

Text Complexity Rubric: Leveled Texts		✓ I Have a Dream	✓✓ First Inaugural Address
Qualitative Measures	Context/ Knowledge Demands	America in the 1960s; Civil Rights Movement 1 2 ③ 4 5	America in the 1930s; biblical references 1 2 ③ 4 5
	Structure/Language Conventionality and Clarity	Repetition reinforces concepts; challenging vocabulary 1 2 ③ 4 5	Era-specific diction; challenging vocabulary 1 2 3 ④ 5
	Levels of Meaning/ Purpose/Concept Level	Accessible concept (vision of a just America) 1 ② 3 4 5	Challenging concept (allusions to works of literature) 1 2 3 ④ 5
Quantitative Measures	Text Length	Word Count: 1,597	Word Count: 1,464
	Lexile	1140L	1190L
Overall Complexity		✓ More accessible	✓✓ More complex

Text complexity is determined by both qualitative and quantitative measures. For this reason, the quantitative measure of a more complex selection may be lower than that of a more accessible selection.

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Appendix B
Pre-Assessment Example

Name: _____   **Date:** _____

Quiz name: Rhetorical Devices

1. Which rhetorical device is an appeal to credibility?
   - (A) Ethos
   - (B) Pathos
   - (C) Logos

2. Which rhetorical device is an appeal to emotion?
   - (A) Ethos
   - (B) Pathos
   - (C) Logos

3. Which rhetorical device is an appeal to reasoning?
   - (A) Ehtos
   - (B) Pathos
   - (C) Logos

4. Which rhetorical device uses the same word frequently to reinforce concepts?
   - (A) Parallelism
   - (B) Restatement
   - (C) Repetition
   - (D) Analogy

Appendix C
Formative Assessment

4. What does Dr. King mean when he says "every hill and mountain shall be made low"? 👁 Hide answers

△ The US will become the same everywhere | ⬤ Prejudice will exist everywhere in the US
⬤ The need to struggle for rights will no longer exist ✔ | ▢ Travel between states will be easy

30 Seconds | 4 Choices

5. Which of the following most accurately states the dream that MLK reveals in his speech? 👁 Hide answers

△ increased economic opportunity for all Americans | ⬤ liberty and justice for all Americans ✔
⬤ empowerment for women | ▢ an official apology for the evils of slavery

30 Seconds | 4 Choices

6. In the last part of the speech, which of the following does MLK use to create parallelism? 👁 Hide answers

△ if America is to become a great nation | ⬤ Let freedom ring ✔
⬤ we will be able to speed up that day | ▢ sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual

30 Seconds | 4 Choices

Appendix D
Annotation Rubric

Scale Content	4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Meets Expectations	2 Partially Meets Expectations	1 Does not Meet Expectations
Purpose	All annotations have a directed purpose towards the focused goal.	Most annotations have a directed purpose towards the focused goal.	Some annotations have a directed purpose towards the focused goal.	Few annotations have a directed purpose towards the focused goal.
Consistency	All pages of the text have effective annotations.	Most pages of the text have effective annotations.	Some pages of the text have effective annotations.	Few pages of the text have effective annotations.
Connection	Annotations show critical thinking, analyzing, and synthesizing of the text.	Annotations show key ideas and critical thinking of the text.	Annotations show key ideas and comprehension of the text	Annotations show some key ideas of the text.

Appendix E
Reader's Response Rubric

Reader's Response Rubric

Scale Content	4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Meets Expectations	2 Partially Meets Expectations	1 Does not Meet Expectations
Explanation	Student provides detailed explanation to answer all required material discussing key details and theme.	Student provides an explanation to answer required material discussing key details and theme.	Student provides little explanation to answer required material discussing some key details and theme.	Student lacks clear explanation to answer required material discussing key details and theme.
Evidence	Student provides a substantive amount of evidence to create a thorough discussion.	Student provides standard, required evidence to create a thorough discussion.	Student provides little required evidence to create a thorough discussion.	Student provides no required evidence to create a thorough discussion.
Completion	Student provides response in proper formatting and exceeds requirements of evidence and length while maintaining concise discussion using scholarly voice.	Student provides response in proper formatting and requirements of evidence and length while maintaining concise discussion.	Student provides response in some proper formatting and requirements of evidence and length.	Students may lack response in proper formatting and requirements of evidence and length while maintaining concise discussion.

Appendix F
Comprehension and Analysis Questions and Answers

_____ 5. Read the following excerpt from "I Have a Dream."

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

Which of the following rhetorical devices does this passage illustrate?
A. parallelism
B. emotionally charged language
C. repetition and restatement
D. simile and personification

_____ 6. In his speech, which of the following courses does Dr. King recommend to his own people?
A. to overlook the urgency of the moment
B. to meet physical force with soul force
C. to allow the end to justify the means
D. to turn out in large numbers to vote

5. ANS: B   **DIF: Challenging**   **OBJ: Literary Analysis**

6. ANS: B   **DIF: Average**   **OBJ: Comprehension**

Appendix G
Post-Assessment

Prior to reading, did you understand the overall purpose to reading the text?

○ Yes

○ Somewhat

○ No

Throughout the close read process, which activity, if any, did you participate in?

☐ Small group discussion prior to the reading

☐ Reading the text

☐ Look up difficult words

☐ Annotating the text

☐ Small group discussion after the reading

Did annotating the text while reading improve your ability to comprehend the material?

○ Yes

○ Somewhat

○ No

If yes or somewhat, in what ways did it improve your ability to comprehend the material?