Book Review:

Jennifer K. Johnson
Teachers College, Columbia University

**ABSTRACT**
Sunday Cummins’ *Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-driven instruction in grades 3-8* is a practical resource for teachers seeking ways to promote close readings of informational texts across disciplines in accordance with the goals of the Common Core State Standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Cummins methodically illustrates strategies and techniques in preparing and implementing lessons and assessing student progress that can be adapted to suit a variety of learners in various learning spaces. She provides thoughtful guidance on how teachers can select informational texts, activate students’ prior knowledge, model strategic reading of all textual features, facilitate classroom dialogue and group work, scaffold independent reading, and support students in synthesizing information within and across texts at multiple stages of instruction.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Jennifer K. Johnson is a doctoral candidate in English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is also an adjunct professor of literacy at Manhattanville College and the founding director of the Teachers College Columbia University Debate Institute at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education. Jennifer can be reached at: Johnson222222@exchange.tc.columbia.edu.

The Common Core State Standards (2010) established numerous learning objectives for student reading. From these standards, we know what is expected but not how to get there. In *Close Reading of Informational Texts*, Sunday Cummins (2013), literacy consultant and facilitator for the New Schools Project at the Erikson Institute, shares her experiences with coaching students and teachers in how to promote close readings of informational texts in order to access the what students are supposed to be able to do which includes being able to: read independently and proficiently; strategically read within and across myriad informational texts, including all of their accompanying features; identify and synthesize key ideas and supporting examples; and critically analyze texts in order to make well-reasoned decisions as civic actors.

Although “close reading” is a term fraught with controversy in literary criticism (Rabinowitz, 1992), Cummins reappropriates the term “close reading” and applies it to the reading of informational texts. She provides thoughtful guidance on the selection of informational texts for read-alouds and independent work, modeling note-taking and
strategic reading of all textual features, scaffolding independent reading, and synthesizing at multiple stages of instruction. As her work is rooted in sociocultural theories of teaching and learning, Cummins methodically details techniques in preparing and implementing lessons and assessing student progress that can be adapted to suit a variety of learners in various learning spaces. Lessons also emphasize drawing upon students’ prior knowledge such that students do not have to coat-check their lived experiences at the door when they enter the classroom.

In her first chapter, Cummins explicates her notion of close reading. She defines close reading as analyzing multiple levels of a text: words, phrases, sentences, and accompanying features; and by “considering the weight of the meaning” of these features, “the student can begin to see how important details fit together to support the author’s central idea(s) in a section of the text of the whole text” (p. 8). Being able to identify central ideas and their supporting evidence provides a “basis for critiquing the author’s ideas, thereby moving into deeper thinking about the text as a whole” (p. 8). Cummins also identifies five strategies for close readings that she develops throughout her book: knowledge of text structures and topical vocabulary, establishing a purpose for reading, self-monitoring for meaning, determining what’s important in the text, and synthesizing. She also emphasizes the importance of using her lessons with content-area texts. Chapters four through eight detail these complementary strategies. A focus on synthesis is woven throughout each chapter as Cummins sees synthesizing as the goal of close reading which is supported by the other strategies. Instead of teaching synthesis sequentially as the last strategy taught in close readings, Cummins substantively introduces it in Chapter Three, arguing that synthesis must be introduced up front and in conjunction with each reading strategy. Within all subsequent chapters, Cummins offers suggestions for synthesizing, while Chapter Eight provides a guide to synthesize across multiple texts. She argues that knowing how to engage in this type of close reading is essential for students to meet CCSS Reading Standards for Informational Text K-5 and 6-12, as well as the standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.

Beginning with Chapter Two and continuing throughout her text, Cummins provides numerous if-then scenarios that teachers might face in the process of implementing lessons. She takes into consideration the new demands presented by the growing number of English Language Learners in classrooms as well as students with learning disabilities. Understanding that classrooms are not homogenous, and that students are at many different levels of development, through extensive tables, examples of student work, and detailing classroom lessons and follow-up reflection, Cummins offers ways for teachers to assess which stage of development a student is at, and how to tailor teaching strategies to support students in transitioning to the next stage of development moving from attempting and approaching to meeting and exceeding learning objectives. Throughout all of these stages, Cummins’s approach embraces the practice of teacher modelling, making the reading process transparent through such practices as thinking-aloud, writing-aloud, and note-taking aloud. Cummins is also clear that in modeling close-reading strategies and techniques, teachers must be fully present, patient, reflexive and committed to continuously finding ways to scaffold learning by tapping into students’ prior knowledge. Guidance in implementing lessons throughout the chapters includes ways that teachers can frame and establish the purpose of a lesson,
introduce and activate students’ background knowledge, select and execute a particular reading strategy by explaining its importance with real world and relatable examples, read and think aloud with the students, coach students as they engage in guided practice, and support independent or group work. Each strategy includes direct instruction and ongoing dialoging during the practice, the latter comprising most of the lesson. Each method is also complemented with extensive tables detailing different teaching and learning scenarios with possible coaching language and actions. The concluding activities are designed to help students reflect on and synthesize new information learned and what was accomplished. In other words, adhering to a theory of a gradual release of responsibility (Vygotsky, 1978) Cummins models reading aloud the main idea as well as the key words and phrases in supporting evidence; she then invites students to participate in co-construction by reading, note taking and talking with each other and the teacher. The lesson concludes by releasing the textual analysis to the students at the end with a probing question. Lastly, Cummins provides suggestions for teacher assessment of students’ work and planning for the following lesson.

In her second chapter Cummins provides a thorough explanation of an assessment-driven structured approach to teaching, which is used throughout the text. This strategy includes assessing students’ strengths and needs, preparing lessons and ways to study texts, developing a focus lesson that explains objectives and models close reading strategies, and providing opportunities for guided and independent practice and student self-assessment. While the teacher initially has a large role to play in reading and thinking with students, this is in the interest of promoting students’ ability to work independently. Toward this end, she acknowledges that this means “The teacher, always cognizant of the students’ needs, has to engage in a dance of stepping in and stepping back to support students along the way” (p. 30). Borrowing from Johnston (2004) Cummins emphasizes the importance of teachers being very mindful about how to speak with students at all times in order to “nurture each student’s identity and self-efficacy related to academic achievement” (p. 31) in order to build a community of learners who are comfortable and confident in sharing what knowledge they bring to the community and what still needs to be understood.

Chapter Three emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for students to synthesize details within a text. To begin, teachers should select an excerpt of text, like a two-page spread, that is emblematic of the central theme of the whole text or provides information that helps students think about the key ideas in a unit of study. Writing responses that synthesize information requires that teachers develop and provide students with text-dependent questions related to content while students are reading so students can strategically read and develop a deeper meaning of the text. Other text-dependent questions can be shared that students can incorporate into their independent reading processes in pursuit of synthesis include: What is the main idea(s)? What is the author trying to convey? What details does the author provide, and which are the most important in working together to support the main idea(s)?

To teach the process of synthesizing, Cummins shares artifacts from students. This process begins with students referring to their notes and underlined portions of the text to orally share the main idea and supporting details followed by a statement about the relationship between the details and the initial message/idea. Here, the students synthesize the information from their notes using oral language as a first draft in
synthesizing what they have learned before writing it down. Making connections is in the interest of developing deeper understanding of the text. Assessing students’ various stages of development is necessary for subsequent lessons. For example, if students are able to identify supporting evidence but not all of the details, students may not have the vocabulary necessary for synthesis, indicating a need for a follow-up lesson using a text that uses domain-specific terms to call attention to missing details, and using theme-related vocabulary to draw out the main ideas.

Finding supporting details also requires being able to understand domain-specific discourses and textual structures. Non-narrative informational texts are structured differently than stories that have a plot, setting, characters, conflict and resolution. Cummins wants students to understand the various features of informational texts, from the organizing details found in an index or table of content, to images and captions, graphs and tables. She also wants to convey the flexible nature of text structures, as there are many different structures students encounter.

Chapter Four provides lessons to raise student awareness of macrostructures of the text: introductions, sections and headings within the body of the text; and the microstructures of texts: temporal sequencing, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and descriptive structures that are used by authors to create certain effects and convey ideas. Cummins walks educators through ways to model how to take notes on textual features to illuminate the various textual evidence that supports the main idea of a text. As one strategy, Cummins models the use of sticky notes to help students see how all of the features of the text work in tandem to support and extend an author’s ideas and provide myriad ways for students to make meaning of texts. All of her strategies are presented with a visual accompaniment so that readers can see how Cummins visually scaffolds close reading strategies for her classroom students.

Cummins wants her students to move beyond students’ general comprehension of texts. Using Nick Bishops’ (2008) text about frogs, she explains that a general understanding of the text would be that it’s about frogs eating. She is interested in cultivating more fine-tuned readings that will elicit additional details from the text like how frogs, and their many varieties, acquire food and how this shapes their overall lives. For example, a teacher can help students understand how to look at words, phrases, organization, and textual features in ways that helps students see supporting evidence in the text that goes beyond general claims to paint a much more nuanced picture. For example, statistics can signal that there is more information to glean from the text that can assist students in going beyond the general claim that frogs eat, to more detailed reports about when, how and what frogs eat and the ways the author might structure a text to indicate a time sequence, or an encoding of contrast indicating variations between different types of frogs. For example, awareness of the significance of signal words like “other frogs”, or signal phrases indicating a new location, provide clues that there is a contrast coming up about different frogs.

Core standards for reading informational texts include: finding evidence and textual support for claims and referring explicitly to specific details in the text for answers to questions (this means that the text is the first source for answers, but not the ultimate source). Determining a main topic or multiple topics in a text requires understanding how an author intentionally structures a text to convey this information. Knowing how certain words and phrases are signals foreshadowing significant
information enables the reader to stay focused on seeing what follows because it will be an elaboration, contrast, indication of significance, etcetera. “For example” would signal that the author is not necessarily introducing a new claim, but is about to provide an explanation of something already stated in the text. Chapter Five provides strategies for previewing informational texts, including the use of the THIEVES mnemonic borrowed from Manz (2002): bringing attention to titles, headings, introductions, every first sentence in each section, visuals and vocabulary, end-of-article or end-of-chapter questions and summarizing thinking (p. 103). The goal of using the mnemonic THIEVES is to help “students activate their background knowledge and make predictions about the content they will be encountering while reading” (p. 102). Cummins argues that students must understand their purpose for reading because different purposes create different meanings; reading for pleasure will elicit a different meaning than if one reads for information about how to do something. She also stresses that a reader must own this purpose: they must understand why they are reading and what they are trying to get out of it. At the same time, if a student knows they are reading to ascertain why an author is writing about a particular topic or concept, or if they are reading to see if the author can convince them with sufficient warrants, evidence and significance, this does not guarantee that this new knowledge is meaningful in the sense of serving a purpose in the students’ lives. Consequently, teachers are on their own for explaining why the subject matter is important and relevant to the lives of their students.

Chapter Six explains the importance of self-monitoring: the ability to know what we understand and what we do not. This also includes being able to analyze the text at multiple levels: words, sentences, paragraphs and sections. For example, students should be able to identify words that signal a shift from one idea to another, as is indicated by the word however, as well as decode unfamiliar vocabulary words. Monitoring also means being aware when we start to lose focus. I can relate. I remember times early on in my education that I would read several pages before I realized I had no idea what I was reading; I was thinking about work, family, if I had enough clean laundry to last for another week and so on. The words on the text might as well have been binary code. Chapter Six helps teachers ascertain if and when this walkabout takes place and how to respond to assist students in self-monitoring their reading practices to look out for times when they are looking at the text on a page, but not reading. To implement this instruction, a teacher must be metacognitively aware of her or his own techniques, perhaps even challenging previous notions about how to read strategically. Toward this end, Cummins employs the coded method (Hoyt, 2008) in her primary and follow up lesson.

Awareness of one’s reading practices through self-monitoring does not guarantee capturing the central ideas in a text. I had to clean my parents’ garage because they were planning on moving. I came across a box of my papers from high school. Some were atrocious! I couldn’t believe how off the mark I was in assessing the key ideas in a text and supporting evidence. I ran across my annotations of articles, with claims that seemed to come out of thin air; they might have incorporated some facts, but they were at times random and not necessarily supportive of the author’s main ideas. Sometimes there were claims, but no warrants. Sometimes there were warrants, but no central idea. I could have benefited from close-reading. Chapter Seven takes up that task by walking students through the process of being able to understand how informational texts are structured to
zero-in and take notes on the most important sentences, paragraphs, and sections, as well as other features in the text from side bars to illustrations and captions, as well as tables and figures, and synthesize these observations with summaries. By demystifying text structures she documents ways to teach students how to “strategically read feature-dense texts” (p. 134). This process, like those preceding it, begins with assessing students’ strengths and needs based upon teacher-student dialogue about their process of reading and what they take away from the text, as well as examining what students write about the texts they read. The goal is to enable students to keep moving toward higher stages of development. Cummins reminds us that the Common Core State Standards (2010) expect students to be able to “determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to support ideas as well as provide an objective summary of the text” (p. 135). Here she makes “pasta.” The pasta consists of the keywords and phrases to underlined in a text, whereas the underlined portions make up the water that is necessary to cook the pasta; one cannot make pasta without boiling it in water, but the water is ultimately not consumed. The pasta holds the clues about the central ideas of a text, their warrants and examples. When modeling, she explains why she underlines certain words and phrases and not others. This modeling takes time and thoughtful planning, but it is a transportable skill. Coupled with self-monitoring, understanding the process of close reading can free students up to use these strategies independently, transforming them into fully incorporated second-nature skills.

Chapter 8 builds on the previous chapters and provides a guide to research and synthesize across multiple texts to write a mini-research paper. The Appendix provides an additional study guide for each method.

While I was impressed with the logical sequencing and thoughtful lesson-plan development with extremely detailed tables, extensive visual examples of student work, and teacher modelling to illuminate close-reading strategies and assessing student development, I found myself thinking about what else was left to be considered. What still remains a critical task for teachers is to determine how we get students hooked so that they are interested in trying out close reading strategies. How do we make learning fun and relevant to the lived realities of our students? Given the amount of time required to go over a small amount of text to ensure close reading, a teacher must also think about their performance and how that comes into play when helping to sustain student engagement with the text being analyzed. Additionally, a teacher’s textual selection is important. If one fails to properly set up a text, or fails to make connections between the text and the lived realities of the students, even the most well-thought out lesson on close reading of an informational text might result in eyes glazed-over.

An additional consideration is the risk in supporting close readings of texts absent critical interpretation, especially given the ideological nature of texts (Street, 1993; Gee 2001). Close reading does not necessarily ensure our students will learn the skills to unpack the ideologies within texts or evaluate the veracity of warrants or their sources. Can a close reading include a questioning of the underlying assumptions of a text, reading between the lines to linger on what is not said? How can teachers support students in critical close reading? At the same time, how can students engage in a critical reading of informational texts without reading the texts closely?

A close reading as defined by Cummins, positions the reader as active. Reading is as a process of composition, wherein a reader constructs meaning through their
transaction (Rosenblatt, 1969) with the text individually and collaboratively. This collaborative process makes it such that the more a text is re-read, re-thought, and discussed, the greater the potential is for readers to generate new meanings, interpretations and counter-readings. Through a close reading, students can get at what the author has to say while also co-constructing meaning with the text.

Considering this co-construction, reading-as-composing must allow for “tentativeness, for confusion, for sustained attention, for failure, for metacognitive awareness, particularly if what is foregrounded and honored in the course of instruction is the efficacy of the reading process rather than any predetermined product or content knowledge that a teacher feels obligated to transmit” (Blau, 2003, p. 21). Cummins certainly emphasizes the process in her lessons; however, her emphasis on using content-area texts carries the risk that teachers adopting her strategy will privilege a particular reading, a “right” reading that reflects “the content that a teacher feels obligated to transmit”.

Critical literacy, or disciplined literacy (Blau, 2003), requires students’ sustained, active, independent and collaborative participation in meaning making; students do not passively defer to a teacher’s interpretation of a text. Students are invited to make their own interpretations that may agree with or contest other interpretations, and develop critical awareness of the epistemological and ideological assumptions within the text and its conclusions. However these interpretations are directly informed by the evidence in the text, which requires close and sustained focus in developing a deep understanding of a text, a process that takes time. Initial lack of understanding cannot be equated with the lack of capacity to comprehend a text; rather expert readers “are more willing to endure and even to embrace the disorientation of not seeing clearly, of being temporarily lost...Instead of ignoring or rushing in to plug up such gaps with weak evidence or rationalizations, they will probe them, opening up the possibility that their own formerly comfortable reading will collapse or require reconstruction” (Blau, 2003, p. 19).

Resilience is necessary, as is developing the courage to be reflexive, vulnerable, and take a chance in referring to evidentiary reasoning in a text to make a case for initial interpretations, honest responses, revised interpretations, and challenges to other readings, even if those interpretations, responses or challenges might be contested. Courage is also required to change one’s interpretation when other readings open up new perspectives and meanings.

To do this, one must be able to self-monitor their reading process. This metacognitive awareness is necessary for a student to know when to re-read, how to read strategically, reading her own reading to learn about her capacity as a reader in addition to information gleaned from a text, or content-based knowledge developed. Toward this end, the process must be made visible by the teacher. Students must be encouraged to systematically identify what they don’t understand in the text (vocabulary, phrases, paragraphs, supporting features, etc.). The classroom must be a collaborative, co-generative space for communities of practice and process, and not just producing products.

Thus close reading is an individual and collaborative process of composing meaning. Viewing reading as a process of composing, wherein a reader constructs meaning through their transaction with the multiple features of the text, the more a text is re-read and rethought, generating new meanings, interpretations and counter-readings.
What might be important to consider are ways to facilitate students accessing a full range of readings with content-driven texts. Also, in finishing a close reading, educators might check in with students to see if they think this means the case is closed, or that the truth has been reached. In other words, do readers feel encouraged to find definitive readings of text and then the world, reducing its complexity? Or are students learning that meaning making is dynamic, a process into which they can jump and shape by using the strategies of close reading? Either way, Cummins’ text provides a useful resource for anyone interested in understanding not only the what but the how of close readings of informational texts.