

# Explicit Teaching of Literacy

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At a time when our brains are constantly challenged by media and technology, cognitive overload reigns supreme. Explicit teaching is the answer to fostering students' intellectual autonomy. By providing a precise pathway to deep and authentic reflection, this pedagogical approach strengthens students' mastery of the cognitive processes essential to the development of literacy and critical thinking. This article highlights the approach I used in my literature course.

Literacy is "the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, discuss and think critically" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). The development of literacy is complex. It draws on "prior knowledge, culture and experiences in order to instill new knowledge and deepen understanding" (*ibid.*, p. 3). It is also multifactorial: social, economic, historical, cultural and educational factors are all part of the equation.

Consequently, the starting point is not the same for everyone.

For example, in the Drummondville area, 66.4% of the population between the ages of 25 and 64 does not have a college education (Statistics Canada, 2024). A survey conducted two years ago at our CEGEP revealed that 26.6% of the students are the first generation in their family to attend college. In Quebec, at all levels of education, more than 50% of students have parents who did not attend university (Bonin *et al.*, 2015, p. 2).

Whether in terms of economic, cultural or educational capital, there is no shortage of inequalities. How can literacy be developed in such a context? How can we ensure effective teaching?

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## Literacy, critical thinking and cognitive overload

Critical thinking, also known as *authentic, rational* or *deliberative thinking*, has several key characteristics. According to Willingham (2007), it is first and foremost *novel* and *original*, not limited to the simple recitation of memorized information. It is also *autonomous* and *independent*, not subject to dictated instructions (e.g. by law, rule, ideology or belief). In addition, critical thinking avoids shortcuts: it is based on valid facts and evidence, and carefully examines the various facets of a reality. It also involves controlling automatic thinking and biases (Houdé, 2022). Finally, it is *useful* and *effective*, as it contributes to understanding, problem-solving, decision-making and position-taking (Willingham, 2007).

At the college level, the *Littérature québécoise* (103) course is the last in a sequence in which students develop their literacy skills. They learn to appreciate Quebec literature from a variety of periods and genres (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017, p. 14). This is the highest-order cognitive skill in their literature courses, and appreciation is closely linked to critical thinking.

A significant obstacle to the development of literacy and critical thinking skills in literature courses is the *cognitive overload* that occurs when students read and write. This load is of three kinds.

The intrinsic cognitive load is imposed by the structure of the information to be acquired; the unnecessary cognitive load depends on the presentation of the information; finally, the relevant cognitive load depends on the effort required to acquire and automate the relevant schemas. Each of these sources of cognitive load requires [working memory] resources. Because the effect of these types of cognitive load is cumulative, when they combine to exceed the capacity of [working memory], the cognitive system will fail to process the information. Under these conditions, the way we teach must be reconsidered in order to enable learning (Chanquoy, Tricot & Sweller, 2007, p.163).

What's more, when we observe students at work, we find that their attention is fragmented by a series of back-and-forth movements between the steps of analyzing the text and then planning, formulating and revising their written production.

The use of working strategies is less frequent or ineffective, especially in the case of struggling students. The latter sometimes use strategies that require too much cognitive effort or that don't allow them to solve the problem more easily. However, they often fail to recognize the ineffectiveness of their approach and persist in an unsuccessful course of action (Bosson, 2009, p.15).

This is where explicit literacy teaching comes into play. This type of teaching reinforces the foundations for developing critical thinking skills.

## Explicit teaching

In 1964, when Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron published their famous critique of the inegalitarian French school system, Siegfried Engelmann was working on the challenge of learning in disadvantaged environments in the USA. In this context, he developed direct instruction, a pedagogical method that proved to be highly effective.

A few years later, direct instruction was put to the test in a large longitudinal study: the *Follow Through* project (1967-1977). Comparing nine different pedagogical approaches, the study found that direct instruction outperformed all others, with remarkable results. In the 1980s, Barak Rosenshine enriched direct teaching by transforming it into explicit teaching. He drew on a wide range of pedagogical principles to formalize the method through various modalities and procedures.

Explicit teaching rests on two pillars: effectiveness and explicitness (Gauthier & Tardif, 2017). Effectiveness refers

to teaching strategies that have a real impact on learning, as demonstrated by educational research (Gauthier & Bissonnette, 2023). Explicitness, on the other hand, involves making visible what is usually implicit. It involves

revealing knowledge and strategies, showing them in action and practising them regularly in class. The goal is to build and support the learner's reasoning in order to consolidate learning in a visible and concrete way.

Table 1

## The five phases of an explicit teaching lesson

1	<b>Opening the lesson</b>	The teacher explains the objectives of the sequence and recalls any prerequisite knowledge.	Link to prior knowledge
2	<b>Modelling</b>	The teacher puts a «microphone on their thinking» and explains aloud the reasoning they use when applying a strategy.	«I do it.»
3	<b>Guided practice</b>	With the teacher's help, students apply the strategy step by step.	«We do it together.»
4	<b>Independent practice</b>	Without the teacher's help, students take responsibility for the process on their own.	«You do it.»
5	<b>Closing the lesson</b>	The teacher works with students to objectify their learning and formalize it in long-term memory.	Consolidation of learning

Explicit teaching clearly and regularly sets out learning objectives and aligns them with performance criteria. It is based on a progressive approach that encourages learner autonomy: modelling shows the learner how to proceed, guided practice allows the learner to apply it under supervision, then independent practice confirms the learner's mastery. Questioning and frequent feedback play a crucial role in guided practice. They clarify grey areas, stimulate reflection and increase student mobilization and engagement.

Explicit teaching provides concrete tools for developing student success

and makes it possible to monitor student progress in a tangible way. Evaluation must accurately measure its impact. As we'll see below, the SOLO taxonomy is a powerful tool for doing just that.

### Explicit teaching of keys to reading

Given the inequalities in students' educational and cultural capital, it's an illusion to think that everyone can draw on a vast pool of knowledge to interpret literary works and grasp their contemporary resonance. That's why teaching keys to reading is a

relevant approach. These "keys" are declarative knowledge (made up of words) comprising facts and information to describe the world. They are of two types:

- Concepts, events, episodes, principles and basic notions borrowed from other disciplines (sociology, psychology, criminology, etc.)
- Socio-historical knowledge to contextualize the works and their ideas

These keys to reading contribute to the development of literacy because they provide each learner with the words, concepts and tools to analyze the works they read. They provide a foundation for thinking, inferring, situating, proving, connecting, deducing, inducing and, ideally, generating new, authentic ideas that are useful for taking a stance.

More specifically, these key ideas provide a framework for reading. For example, they could be notions about :

- traditional and modern societies to explain the values and behaviours of the characters in Michel Tremblay's *Les belles-sœurs* ;
- deviance and delinquency to analyze the characters in Jean-Pierre Gorkynian's *Tireur embusqué* ;
- social class and disadvantage to discuss the family environment in Mélanie Michaud's *Burgundy* ;
- forms of violence or concepts describing racism and discrimination to study Éric Plamondon's *Taqawan*.

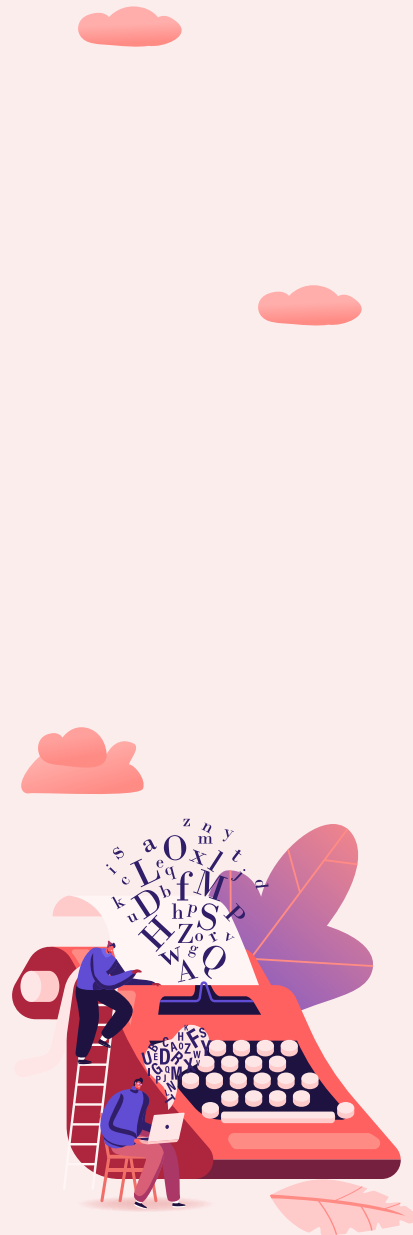
To be relevant, these notions must be related to the themes and purpose of the work. To be useful, they must be observable and enable inferences to be made. Reading keys are declarative knowledge, yet they are taught quite succinctly. This teaching takes around 30 minutes in class. This is followed by the modelling of their retrieval, then guided practice, through various reading activities. The next module teaches procedural knowledge, i.e. cognitive strategies enabling the student to develop a skill with a view to acquiring competency.

## Explicit teaching of strategies

A cognitive strategy is defined as a procedure, i.e. an ordered set of tasks, used to perform a task or solve a problem. Much more than mere facilitators of learning, strategies promote its consolidation and sustainability (Gauthier, Bissonnette & Richard, 2013).

The competency targeted by the course (appreciating texts) is thus divided into different steps, each of which is associated with a specific strategy, a way of doing things that is explicitly explained to the students. For the *Littérature québécoise* course, I have chosen eight specific strategies.

As **Table 2** shows, each strategy mobilizes a different level of cognitive ability, or even several levels. Given the limits of our working memory, the sequential application of the strategies makes it possible to break up the work and avoid cognitive overload and exhaustion.



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Table 2<sup>1</sup>

## The eight strategies taught and their levels of cognitive ability according to Bloom's taxonomy (1956) as revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)

Cognitive abilities	Strategies							
	Take effective notes	Analyze assignment instructions	Activate prior knowledge	Apply reading strategies and annotate text	Map the structure of one's own thinking	Plan the content of a personal text	Write the text	Revise the text linguistically
<b>6 Create</b> Produce something new and original: design, compose, imagine, invent, plan, produce					x	x	x	
<b>5 Evaluate</b> Assess the value of information: argue, choose, conclude, criticize, determine, organize					x	x		
<b>4 Analyze</b> Break down a whole into its constituent parts and understand their relationships: analyze, classify, compare, determine, distinguish, identify		x		x				x
<b>3 Apply</b> Use acquired knowledge and competencies: apply, demonstrate, illustrate, put into practice, solve, use				x				x
<b>2 Understand</b> Interpret and extrapolate information: describe, discuss, explain, interpret, summarize, translate	x	x	x					
<b>1 Memorize</b> Memorize and retrieve information: cite, define, list, identify, name, recite	x							

<sup>1</sup> Generative artificial intelligence was used to produce part of this summary table of strategies and cognitive abilities taught.

### Take effective notes

This taught strategy implements the Cornell University method of organizing knowledge, to facilitate revision, reflection and subsequent use of notes. Students learn how to organize information. To help them, I have designed my electronic slide shows to always use the same graphic organization. Regularly completing the notes and reviewing their organization promotes long-term memorization.

### Analyze assignment instructions

Students learn to identify key concepts. They must also be able to understand the relationship between the statement and the text being studied. I guide students through the process of identifying the objectives of an assignment and the structure needed to meet those objectives.

### Activate prior knowledge

Students learn to mobilize their prior knowledge to shed light on the instructions and the text being studied. They also need to be able to make connections between different terms and concepts. As I model, I ask a few questions aloud to clarify my thinking: "What do I know about this topic? What have we seen in class about this period, this work, this author? What have I also seen in other courses that might help me answer this question?" Together, we make an inventory of our relevant knowledge: we list all the notions that might help us formulate ideas and interpret the work or excerpt.

### Apply reading strategies and annotate text

Different reading strategies are taught to identify the important elements of a literary text: identifying themes and emotions, portraying characters, characterizing relationships between them, observing symbolic dimensions, etc. Students learn to annotate the text and underline passages relevant to their reflection. They use colour and self-adhesive bookmarks. A few years ago, I worked with transparencies and an overhead projector; today, I use a stylus and project the screen of an iPad. I explain my thoughts aloud to the class as I model, and then ask lots of questions during guided practice.

### Map the structure of one's own thinking

Creating a mind map helps students to synthesize thinking, identify main ideas and structure arguments. During guided practice, I provide large 11 x 17 sheets of paper for the maps, and students work on them in teams

of 2 or 3. The maps are colourful and very effective because they show the connections between ideas.

### Plan the content of a personal text

After structuring the reflection, a detailed outline is prepared. It allows learners to interpret, explain and develop their ideas, while avoiding as much as possible the production of a rough draft (which in this case would be hasty writing). The outline is modelled and practised for significant periods of time.

### Write the text

While mapping and planning help to organize ideas and avoid cognitive overload, writing is the implementation of previously structured and planned ideas. Because the previous steps require the most complex cognitive skills, writing becomes easier. The text produced is often clearer and more fluent, quotations are better integrated and the quality of French is improved.

### Revise the text linguistically

At the very end, a language revision strategy focuses on ten targets covering, among other things, syntax, punctuation and grammatical agreement. Current grammar, with its syntactic manipulations, greatly facilitates modelling and guided practice.

As we can see, explicit teaching focuses on deliberate practice. It also allows learners to better understand expectations. On a broader level, this type of teaching gives them new tools to better manage their working memory and attention. The strategies reduce the tendency to

multitask and fragment attention, thus promoting concentration and stress management.

All classes follow a similar structure. At the beginning of each class, the objectives are clearly defined: "By the end of this lesson (or sequence of lessons), you will be able to..." Each strategy is taught through modelling and guided practice, before students are left to work independently (in class or at home). By providing students with structured ways of working and guiding them in their thinking, the explicit teaching of reading keys and strategies provides them with a wide range of tools to support their literacy and critical thinking development. These keys and strategies give each student the opportunity to think, infer, situate, prove, connect, deduce, induce and generate ideas.



To illustrate the strategies, I offer numerous examples taken from student work. They not only help visualize the feasibility of the task, but also provide inspiration. I spend a lot of time circulating around the classroom to monitor the development of skills, even during the first evaluations, which are very important learning moments.

### Evaluating learning outcomes

The essays are evaluated using a descriptive grid based on the SOLO taxonomy developed by John Biggs and Kevin Collis (1982). This taxonomy is an effective tool for measuring a student's depth of understanding, based on their ability to integrate and relate different types of knowledge.

Table 3

### The five levels of the SOLO taxonomy

•	<b>Prestructural</b>	Total incomprehension
I	<b>Unistructural</b>	Superficial and fragmented comprehension
	<b>Multistructural</b>	Comprehension of several relevant, but unrelated points
	<b>Relational</b>	Global comprehension and the ability to use convergent thinking to explain the connections between knowledge
	<b>Extended abstract</b>	Global comprehension and the ability to use divergent thinking to transfer learning to other contexts

At the prestructural level, students do not demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge or understanding necessary to appreciate a text and take a position. At the unistructural level, they start to be able to recognize a few elements—and several elements at the multistructural level—but do not yet make connections between them. They remain at the level of description and enumeration. The critical thinking we are seeking to develop takes place at the relational and extended abstract levels. At the relational level, students are able to compare ideas and explain their relationships. At the last level, they are able to extend their understanding to other contexts and transfer their knowledge.

This taxonomy helps to clarify the mental processes that students go through in constructing their reasoning. These levels of complexity are manifested in vocabulary, text organization, sentence structure

and logical relationships between parts of the text produced. It is very well suited for assessing literacy and critical thinking skills.

### Limits, obstacles and beyond

Explicit teaching is effective, but it's not a panacea. Like all experimentation, it is fraught with doubt and uncertainty. Teaching strategies, modelling them and guiding practice require careful planning and, above all, a *lot* of classroom time.

Consequently, teaching multiple reading keys and eight cognitive strategies may not be the ideal approach for a teacher who is just starting out or who has little time to put together a course. It would be more appropriate to start with one or two strategies and adapt them to students' needs. It's important to evaluate the impact of practice on learning. To do this, rigorous monitoring of results throughout

the session is a good practice. I also think it's essential to share results and reflections with other colleagues to put our observations and practices into perspective.

The gradual implementation of this pedagogical approach in my *Littérature québécoise* (103) course has led to significant improvements in both my teaching and my students' learning. My own experience has revealed significant improvements in the way I approach and explain course content. Guided practice and regular checking of understanding not only increased student engagement, but also strengthened the pedagogical relationship. Every student contribution, right or wrong, is an opportunity for me to provide constructive feedback and maintain a regular dialogue. Paradoxically, although the teaching

is quite directive, the courses have become more interactive and have taken on a more natural rhythm. I subsequently applied the same approach to my *Écriture et littérature* [*Writing and Literature*, Ed.] course (which is the first in the sequence). The results of the first experimental session are very promising.

I would like to think that implementing such a cognitive approach is one way to prevent the inappropriate use of generative artificial intelligence. Perhaps students will be more autonomous and less dependent on it if they are encouraged to engage in complex, authentic thinking. This cognitive engagement can generate something important: the joy of learning and understanding, which heightens our capacity for learning and discovery (Bengio, 2024, p. 181).

Explicit teaching of cognitive processes allows students to understand how their own thinking works, and to acquire the tools to analyze and evaluate it. This metacognition is a powerful tool for self-regulation.

Finally, the scope of explicit teaching is not limited to academic success. This pedagogical approach also promotes student success through the development of self-efficacy. This belief, in turn, also affects teaching staff and thus strengthens the motivation and engagement of both parties in the pedagogical relationship. ■

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