Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from The Measured Mom, and I'm taking a quick break from my series of short episodes leading up to my own book release to interview Melissa Loftus and Lori Sappington, who are of course Melissa and Lori Love Literacy.

I'm honored to call these two ladies my friends. We had a lot of fun sitting down and talking about key things from their book, which I highly recommend. We talk all about it throughout this episode. When this episode goes live, the book will be just a few days away from being released, so be sure to check out "The Literacy 50" on Amazon. Here we go!

Anna: Welcome, Lori and Melissa!

Lori: Hi, Anna! Thank you for having us!

Melissa: We're so excited to be here, on YOUR podcast.

Anna: I know, talk about the other side of the table, so this will be fun. I'm sure everyone listening to my podcast knows the two of you on Melissa and Lori Love Literacy, but let's go ahead and have you take turns talking a little bit about your teaching background, and then we'll talk a little bit about what led you to begin your podcast. Lori, do you want to go first?

Lori: Sure. I have been a teacher, a K-2 teacher, an intermediate grade teacher, a high school teacher, also a coach, and a district-wide coach and leader. I kind of did it all, and I ran the gamut of everything from balanced literacy all the way to learning about structured literacy through high quality curricular materials. That was really my avenue in. That's where I met Melissa, so I'll hand it to her.

Melissa: Yeah, so it's kind of a similar background that I have as Lori. I was mostly a middle school teacher, a little bit of high school in there, but I went down all the way to

sixth grade, that's where I could get down to with my secondary certification.

I just found that I had kids there who were still struggling to read, and I didn't know what to do. I had my curriculum, but I wasn't sure what to do. I went back and got certification to be a reading specialist where I learned a little bit. I did not learn enough to teach those kids what they needed though. It was pretty disheartening.

I also went to the district level, again trying to find out, "Where do we solve this problem?" And here we are, still learning how to solve this problem. I met Lori on that journey and we started our podcast and here we are!

Anna: So talk to me a little bit about where this podcast came from.

Lori: Yeah, so Melissa and I were working as district-wide coaches and leaders at the time in Baltimore City Public Schools. We were implementing Wit & Wisdom ELA, and we had already implemented Fundations, or I should say I had actually helped with Fundations. I think, Melissa, I don't think you were involved so heavily in that, right?

Melissa: A little bit, yeah.

Lori: So after that training, I was like, "Huh, this is different from what I learned before and what I learned in college." Then we started reading all the research and sitting in professional development sessions for Wit & Wisdom ELA, and when we saw that curriculum, we were like, "Oh, my. This is really different!" We had never seen this research before, so what is going on? I mean, I remember we started reading Natalie Wexler stuff and thinking, "Knowledge building? What the heck is this?"

And so I was having all of these great conversations with Melissa because we were tagged to work together to help teachers learn about this. Meanwhile we were learning too, so we were really trying to model learning and make it as easy as possible for teachers to learn about it. We were having all of these amazing conversations and I said to her one day, "I'm coming over on Thursday and we're going to start a podcast. We're going to do a podcast. We have to do this." She was really hesitant at first, but I was like, "We've got to do it!"

Melissa: I was like, "Who's going to listen to us on a podcast, Lori? No one's going to listen to us."

Lori: It turns out if you work really hard, people listen.

Melissa: Yeah, but we weren't really even sure where it was going to go at first. Our first few episodes, I think, was just me and Lori chatting with each other. We didn't go in with the idea that we were going to interview these big people. We didn't know! We just kept going and kept learning, and as things came up...

Then Emily Hanford came out with Sold a Story, and I think that blew our minds, like, "Oh, wait. Yes, in Baltimore we shifted to a systematic, explicit phonics curriculum years ago, but that's not the case everywhere, and that's a big deal! We need to talk about this and learn more about it and what's going on in classrooms." And so we just kept on asking people to come on and learn with us, and they kept saying yes, so we just kept going!

Anna: I have found that to be the most surprising thing about doing a podcast. There are so many people that don't know me from anyone, and they're like, "Oh, sure! I'll talk to you about it."

Melissa: Exactly.

Lori: It's so kind.

Melissa: It's really lovely, yes.

Anna: It is! It's amazing and very generous of these very busy people - researchers, professors, and regular teachers who also are full of wisdom, and of course they need to meet with you in the evenings. Yeah, it's wonderful.

Like you said, it's really a learning opportunity for you. I've listened to most of your episodes, and going back from the beginning, the quality of your questions changes, you understand more, and I can speak the same for myself. They're your teachers, right? You learn from them and-

Melissa: Absolutely.

Anna: It's so cool. How many people get to just sit down with somebody like Jan Hasbrouck and ask her a bunch of questions about fluency? Not many people. So, yeah.

Melissa: We have to pinch ourselves sometimes, and I'll text Lori as we're on like, "Can you believe we're talking to this person right now?"

Anna: It's really cool.

Lori: We feel that way about teachers too.

Anna: Yes.

Lori: I know you said that, but just to reiterate, it is everyone. We are just constantly in awe of the people that we talk with.

Anna: Yes, agreed, and I think it's such a nice blend to talk to the researchers and then the people who are on the ground doing the really hard work every day, because they can see what's really working and what's not working, and we appreciate all their perspectives so much.

How many years has it been that you've been doing your podcast?

Melissa: Five years.

Anna: Five years? That's crazy. Now you've come out with a book, which is incredible. Can you tell us the name of your book and why you wrote it?

Lori: We've been calling it "The Literacy 50: A Q&A Handbook for Teachers" because it

gets very tongue-twisty after that, Anna. It's "A Q&A Handbook for Teachers - Real-World Answers to Questions About Reading That Keep You Up at Night."

Anna: Yeah, it's a great subtitle!

Lori: Yeah, it's a great title. We decided to really integrate the podcast into the book because so many teachers, and leaders, and coaches, and even professors, are using it in ways where they will do professional development around it or have different focus groups or little PLCs. We thought this would be a really great opportunity to support all of the listeners and also get some real answers to questions about reading that are hot topic questions, big-button questions. Melissa, I'll turn it to you.

Melissa: Yeah, well you touched on a little bit of everything. I mean, we were also getting a ton of questions, even as we were putting out so many podcasts. Every time we put out a podcast, it was like, "Yes, but now I have these questions about what you answered for me in that podcast." We would just get more and more questions, and so we thought that we have to have a way to answer these questions. We were sending emails back, and it was just taking a ton of time to send emails back to so many people.

You mentioned, Anna, how we've learned so much along the way, and to look back at nearly 200 episodes and to be able to synthesize that learning in some way we thought, "We have to put this together somehow." So that's why we did it.

Plus we learned along the way, too, that one of the things people love about the podcast is it is an easy way to get information. We always hear that. It's like instead of going to a journal article that might be... If they can even get it, it still is really daunting to sit down with a journal article sometimes and make sense of it. But in a podcast, when you hear the author talking about it, that's so much easier. I can do it while I'm driving my car, cleaning, or taking a walk, so it's really accessible, and we wanted our book to be the same way.

It was a way for them to get those answers in a way that didn't feel daunting. It's just us teachers talking to you, giving you really simple answers for complex topics, but in a way you can understand it and implement it in your classroom.

Anna: Yeah, so it's part of the really wonderful series from Scholastic, The Science of Reading in Practice, which are really just beautiful. They're just a delight to read because Scholastic does such a beautiful job laying their books out.

Also, like you said, your book is very organized around the big topics, it synthesizes what you've learned in a really easy-to-read way, and it also includes, "You want to learn more? Here's the podcast episode." It would be a very good book study because it's very digestible in just the book format, but for people that want to learn more, they can follow up and listen on double speed, like I always do, so you learn twice as fast.

Melissa: Me too.

Anna: What we're going to do today is we're going to just talk about some of the topics in the book, some of the questions that people have, and then we'll wrap it up. We're going to basically take questions that align with The Big 5 that we talk about a lot - phonemic awareness, phonics, and so on.

Let's start with phonemic awareness. There is a debate about oral deleting and substituting of phonemes. For example, say the word stop, take out /t/, put in /l/, then you get slop. Is there... Sorry, that was a weird example, but anyway-

Lori: It's all good. We're here for it, Anna!

Anna: So there are a lot of the one minute drills that people do, but now there's the question, well is there even a point to doing that orally? Should that all be with letters? What's your take on that?

Melissa: Yeah, it's a really good question. I'll start us off. Is that okay, Lori?

Lori: Mm-hmm.

Melissa: I'll come back to the deleting and substituting, but I will say, in our book, we do talk about blending, isolating, and segmenting words. We do say that those three are the three PA skills, especially oral-only, that you really want to focus on. They're the ones that do have a lot of research that show that if students are doing those well, it's going to help them to be able to decode. It will help them to be able to spell words. They're the ones you really want to hit home, especially if you're taking time to do it oral-only.

Those skills that you mentioned, deleting and substituting (and I'm glad you did the example so I don't have to do it, thank you), they came to be known as advanced phonemic awareness skills, and like you said, there is some debate around it. They came from Kilpatrick's book, and so a lot of people were like, "This sounds great! It sounds wonderful."

But there's a really great article that Tim Shanahan did in one of his blog posts where he actually talked to David Kilpatrick about this, which... This is why I love it, because he's like, "I'm going to go talk to Kilpatrick about this. We don't need to debate it. Let's talk to him."

Kilpatrick himself said that he thinks maybe that it was kind of a hypothesis for him that this would be helpful, so there wasn't actually research behind it. He felt like it would be helpful for older readers who might still be struggling, but that there really wasn't research around that, so it was just a hypothesis.

I liked the way Shanahan ended that article where he said there would just need to be more research to be done to know if that would be true or not.

What I think is helpful is for teachers who are limited on time, teachers who-

Anna: Always. Every teacher, right?

Melissa: Every teacher is limited for time. You think about, "What can I get rid of?" Doing those drills, oral-only deleting and substituting, just might not be the best use of time. And so-

Anna: Yeah.

Melissa: ... maybe you don't need it.

Anna: A substitute would be the word building, the word chains, where you're basically doing the same thing, but you're putting letters with it on a dry erase board. We can very much see the direct connection of that to reading and spelling.

Melissa: Absolutely. Yeah, and they even say that if you can do those skills, you're probably already decoding, because most of the time you can picture the word in your head and you're swapping out the... I'm swapping out M for T, and now it's top instead of mop. You're almost doing it in your head because you can see the letters.

Anna: So you're not accomplishing anything, you're-

Melissa: You're not accomplishing it just by the sounds, right. It's usually not just the sounds.

Lori: Yeah. I'll add to that, Melissa. I think the purpose of the deleting and the substituting is to increase that cognitive flexibility, and so I think that that's something to keep in mind. It's called set for variability, when we want students to be able to understand the different sounds that combinations of letters or letters make and to be able to try those sounds out. I think this could be helpful for that. For example-

Melissa: But we don't need to do it oral-only.

Lori: No, not oral-only.

Melissa: Add those letters in.

Lori: Exactly. Add the letters in.

For example, thinking about... I'm going to give an example from our book. A student is trying to decode the word blow. I'd like to blow a bubble. When they pronounce the word, let's pretend they say blow, and that would rhyme with the word plow, right? A student who has been exposed to the word will be able to then understand, "Oh, let me try another sound for this," right? It's the same idea of deleting or substituting. Let me try a different sound. I'm trying to substitute that different sound.

I think the big takeaway too is to build students' oral language vocabulary so that they

have that vocabulary to substitute with. Because if you've never heard that, you're not going to be able to substitute... Or seen that. Heard or seen. We're keeping those letters top of mind. That's something to keep in mind as well.

Anna: Yeah, you're talking about set for variability, which Marnie Ginsberg calls mispronunciation correction.

Lori: Yeah, I love it.

Anna: She always uses the example of mother, where you would look at it and you might say mother, but then you would think, "That's not a word. How can I adjust it?"

To your point of oral language, I don't know that we always think about that enough, but for so many of these longer words, kids are never going to get to it if it's never been read to them, right?

Lori: Correct.

Anna: Or if they've never heard it spoken.

Moving into phonics a little bit, I think some people hear about set for variability (I know they do, because I see this in Facebook groups), and they think, "Well, that sounds like three-cueing. We can't do that!"

I understand it sounds a little scary because we know that with three-cueing, kids are taught to identify words with different cues. They use context even though they haven't tried to sound out the words. The reason why this is different is because our first line of attack is always to work at sounding out, but we know that because English is so complex and because English is morphophonemic, not just phonemic, the letters do not perfectly match up to the sounds every time. That's okay; that's how English works. Phonics isn't going to get you there all the way every time.

Maybe you can talk to us about, a little more, another controversial topic in the area of phonics, and that is how long kids should be using decodable text and why it's important for them not to use it indefinitely.

Lori: We should use decodable text to support students in practicing phonics skills and high frequency words we have taught explicitly and systematically, that is word-for-word verbatim a sentence from our book. Things that they've already been taught. Maybe we're calling them controlled readers, I've heard that recently too, decodable books/controlled readers.

When we think about which decodable books are right for our students and when to transition them out of them, we can observe our students reading them. So instead of focusing on percentages, which I hear that all the time, I see that all the time, that question, "Well, what percentage of the book should be decodable for students?" I don't think that's the right question to ask. I don't think we're going to find a good answer to that question. I think if students are having a difficult time decoding and reading fluently, give them texts that are more decodable.

Anna: Yeah.

Lori: Right? If students are having an easier time or being more successful, then we give them texts that are less decodable. I think that just makes perfect sense and it aligns with another one of Shanahan's blogs.

I think, very practically, we can all along the way connect decoding to word meanings so that we are truly orthographically mapping those words. Instead of thinking of it like a percentage or a finite number of, "Okay, if they read this many words correct, then they can move on," instead think of it like a continuum. A continuum from more successful to least successful, and we want to move them to more successful. We do that through books that are more decodable as needed, or less decodable as needed. I just think we're going to move up and down on that continuum, and then finally transition, as we get to those less decodable, less decodable, less decodable books, then we'll finally transition to authentic books, also known as trade books.

Melissa, is there anything you want to add?

Melissa: Yeah, I do. I would just say I think often in education we hear about a good thing that maybe we haven't done in the past, decodable books I think is one of them, and everyone is like, "Oh, yes. Now we need decodable books!" Lindsay Kemeny used the term over-correct when we talked to her, and I love that. It's where we say, "Oh, now this is all we do. We just do decodable texts and that's it," right? "And now we want them not just in the K-1 classroom, let's have them all the way through high school.

This is the new thing!"

We don't want to do that. We don't want to over-correct and have that be the only kind of text that students see. It is a great tool, especially when students are just learning to decode, but...

We didn't actually talk about this in our book, but I'm just going to throw it out there, which is Share's self-teaching hypothesis, which is that once they hit this sweet spot where they have enough of the knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences, it's okay that they get to words they've never seen before, and they can start to figure that out.

Like Lori said, if they have that oral language, then they can go, "Oh, this is that word. I've read it and I can connect it with my knowledge of oral vocabulary. Now I just taught myself that word by reading it on my own because I have the knowledge of those spelling correspondences."

If they don't have that, that's where you're in trouble. You don't want to give them those really tough books before you've taught them enough of those sound-spelling correspondences because then they'll get frustrated. That's the point of decodable text. It's to give them a safe space to start applying them as they're learning them, but once they have enough, it really is good to push students out and let them practice in those tougher texts.

Anna: Yeah, I think what I would want as a teacher is a very specific time to do this, and that's why the question is asked so much, and unfortunately it's just not that simple. I think the reason we over-correct with this one is because we were so off base.

Melissa: Yes.

Lori: That's right.

Anna: I was on my computer the other day, and I actually thought I deleted these files, but, oh, I still had them! It was my sight word books that I gave away on my website; it was 200 sight word books that I made that I used with my kids when they were really little. The one was about the word "and," and the pages were, "I have coffee and a donut. I have whatever and a whatever." And of course, they used the picture, there's no way they were reading coffee or donut as preschoolers or early kindergartners, but

the "and" was there over and over and it was just completely backwards in terms of how reading works.

I was just creating what I had seen lots of other places, but all of us that were doing that had the wrong idea about how reading works.

So then we over-corrected by saying, "Well, we've got to use decodable," and we DO have to use decodable. But what you said, Lori, about percentage decodability, research doesn't say, and there are a lot of voices very loud in groups now that say they have to be 100%. There is no research to say that, and it's confusing, right? Because if it has to be decodable, doesn't it have to be 100% because how else are they going to figure out the words, and when does Share's self-teaching hypothesis start to take over? It really depends on the kid.

Yeah, unfortunately, there's no easy answer to that, but it comes to being a good teacher and watching what your students are doing and seeing how able they are to tackle those other words. If they're looking at the word and they're looking at you for help, or if they're guessing, then you need to keep them in decodable longer, I would say.

Melissa: Yes.

Lori: Yeah, that continuum, it goes back to that more and less. Yep.

Anna: Let's move on to fluency. In the book, it felt like you talked a little bit more about fluency for older kids, so I don't know if that's maybe more what we could focus on? Kids that already know the code pretty well, but need to work on it, whether that's rate or prosody. What could fluency instruction look like in a typical school day?

Melissa: I just wanted to say really quickly, it was so hard to write this book in chapters the way we did with the pillars because there's so much overlap.

Anna: I know. I know!

Melissa: We talk about fluency in our phonics chapter because we were talking about

accuracy and what to do in small group instruction, and there's so much overlap. I'm glad you said it that way because I would say it looks very different, especially in the K-2 classroom where you might be more focused on accuracy than you are the rate and the prosody.

But if we're talking about grades 3 and up, then we'll talk about... The one thing I think that we wanted to really hit home with fluency instruction in a day is that it should be pretty short. This is something that can be pretty brief in a teacher's day, which is, as we said, always nice for a teacher to hear. This does not have to take up a ton of time.

I think it was Meredith Liben and Sue Pimentel who shared with us that they recommended about 15 to 20 minutes each day, and they recommended using grade level texts, so the actual complex text that students would be reading throughout the day. They should have a chance to practice it every day, so that was the key. 15 to 20 minutes-

Anna: Practice fluency every day?

Melissa: Practice fluency every day, but keep it pretty short and embed it within what else you're doing.

Anna: Yeah.

Melissa: This isn't really a daily thing, but to think about it over maybe a week because you want to build on it. So if you're using one complex text throughout that week, you want to do a lot more modeling of the reading at first, maybe some echo reading so they can hear it, and then practice it right back after you, choral reading even.

Then as the week goes on, and they've had some practice with it, now you might let them do some partner reading, so they do it on their own a little bit more. They still have a partner there, so it's safe. You might do maybe a little practice for them on their own before they're maybe able to perform it in some way, shape, or form, whether that's even just with a partner, or a small group, or they record it, or maybe they have an audience of some kind, but they have a chance at the end to show that they are able to now read this fluently.

You give them a little bit of practice with it each day until they can get to that point of being fluent.

Anna: I like the idea of incorporating it with what you're already doing.

I was just in classrooms for the last couple of weeks recording some videos that align with my book that's coming out, and I did some work with text structure. So when we were teaching text structure, we choral read a passage about beavers building their dams, and so we built in some fluency automatically to build knowledge, which we were already doing, and teaching something about how to understand text.

Melissa: Yeah, so it doesn't have to feel like something separate like, "Oh, now we're doing our fluency time." It should just feel like, "This is part of what we're doing. We're just reading the same passage that we have been." It really does build their confidence and it helps them understand it better, especially if it's, like you said, something difficult that they might not understand the first time. This gives them practice to hear it quite a few times, and then they can probably understand it better after a while.

Anna: I would say the biggest thing to encourage teachers in when building fluency is how many times can you get your kids to read out loud in a day? Right? Because I think that's easy not to do. It's really easy not to do it. But if it's always front of mind, you can find ways to build that in.

Lori: Yeah, and also keeping in mind that it is the grade level text that is the lever there. It's not giving students easier text; it's using that grade level text, and we've heard so many creative ways to do this.

For example, a topic in science class, you might pull that topic or put that section loaded into an AI, a ChatGPT tool, and come up with a reader's theater script for it.

Anna: Yeah.

Lori: You can be really creative with that content. ReadWorks, all that good stuff, they have tons of content that is grade level topics that you can select from to align with what you are learning about, what students are learning about. Of course, in ELA, you can pull the passages, pull small sections, that are really important to the story or the text that students are reading, whether it's an important paragraph from an article or a couple important paragraphs or a small section where... I usually give the example of in "Animal Farm," you could use one of Squealer's speeches. Those are really important to

understand in order to be able to understand the rest of the story.

The more that they're interacting and reading it, the more then that they're understanding the bigger picture of what they're reading as a whole, and the same goes for the content area subjects. The more repetition they have with that content, then the more they're going to understand.

Then also, that gives you the opportunity as a teacher to pull out some words where you can work on morphology, where you can work on, "Oh, gosh, this is a really tricky sentence here, the syntax of this sentence is confusing." There's so much opportunity when you kind of dive deep into a text over the course of a week.

Anna: Yeah, and, Melissa, like you were saying before about how hard it was to write the book in chapters, it's the same thing for a teacher. I don't have to think of this as, "This is my phonemic awareness, this is my phonics, this is my..." I mean, there is that foundational skills block, that's definitely true, but you also... It all goes together somehow, so how can you support all the learning that you're doing throughout the day? That just comes with practice, and I think the more skilled a teacher becomes, the easier that is.

Melissa: Yeah, and it helps students too. I mean, if you do a fluency time with some random text, then you get the questions, "Why are we reading this?" You get those questions and they don't get it. But if they're seeing, "Oh, this is part of what we're reading and we're learning about this topic," then it just feels like part of the day. It feels part of what we're doing. It makes sense for why they're doing it.

Anna: And it also increases their knowledge of the different areas, right? So if you're learning about amphibians and you're learning about it here, and here, and here, and here, then you're getting all that reinforcement of the vocabulary, you're building all these connections... So, yeah. We could talk about that a long time.

Melissa: Absolutely.

Anna: Okay, so let's talk about research-based ways to improve vocabulary. What would you say are some things to pick out from that section?

Melissa: All right. I can start with the overview, Lori, and then do you want to give

some examples?

Lori: Mm-hmm.

Melissa: We gave five different areas to really think about when you're thinking about research for vocabulary.

Meanings is one of them. When we talk about meanings, what we're really talking about there is going beyond the dictionary definition. We all know that just memorizing the definition that's in the dictionary doesn't really do anything. Most of the time it's hard to even make sense of what it is. I remember as a teacher, always having to be like, "Okay, yeah, it says that, but this is what it really means," and you say it in your own words. It's all of that, and giving them things to do, draw pictures of it, or act it out in some way, something that makes it really meaningful for them so they get it. That's really the key, that they get it.

Connections, which I think you already mentioned. That's encouraging students to think about relationships between words, and I do this all the time, even with my five year old, where I say, "What's the difference between tiny and small?" Just those little things like that.

Usage, so not even just... I mean, we do want them to use it in their own speaking and their writing, but even just pronouncing the words and letting them hear you pronounce it, having them practice pronouncing it, getting it into part of something that they might actually say so that they've heard it. It's like, "Oh, that's how you say that word. Okay, I got it."

Repetition is really important. I know oftentimes as teachers, there's so much to teach and that makes it so hard that you're like, "Okay, we did that word, moving on," but really bringing it back as much as you can. Make sure you're always bringing the words back and using them in different ways, having them use them in different ways over and over again, so it really becomes part of their vocabulary.

Then collaboration, so thinking of ways to get the students involved so it's not just, "I'm the teacher, here's your word, memorize it," but really having them have a voice. How do you get students curious so that when they get to a word that they actually bring it up and think, "I don't know this word," and they want to know what that word means and having it become really collaborative in that sense. We want them having that word consciousness to be able to think, "I want to know what this word is. Let's figure it out

together."

Anna: Yeah. I want to go back to where you mentioned having them say it out loud. I don't think I really did that when I was teaching vocabulary in the classroom, and that's one thing I've learned with learning about explicit instruction. It's so important to bring it back to them, involve them frequently, and have them repeating the word, but it goes back to set for variability, right? If you've never actually pronounced the word, it's much less likely that you're going to land on the right word. But if they learned that word in vocabulary in first grade, and now they're in third grade and they're reading the word, they're much more likely to get it right.

Melissa: Exactly.

Anna: Yeah.

Lori: Okay, so I'm going to give you a five-step routine for teaching vocabulary, Anna.

Anna: Okay.

Lori: We saw Anita Archer do this at The Reading League Conference, and we made a couple little adaptations - I wouldn't even say modifications, or maybe enhancements would be a better word - because we kept hers very solid, but it's super easy to replicate and just... You know Anita. She's so clear.

Anna: Oh, yes.

Lori: So here's a five-step routine for teaching vocabulary.

Number one, say the word, pronounce it with students, and explain the structure. For example, "This is the word. Feature. Say it with me, turn and say it out loud to a partner. Okay, now let's break it into parts. Fea-ture. Now put it together."

Then you can talk about it, "I noticed that the EA vowel team is making the long E

sound in feature, and I know sometimes the vowel team EA says /ē/. I don't hear that final E sound in feature, so it's a silent sound. That's really interesting. And, oh, the T is making the /ch/ sound in feature! Did anyone notice that?" So you're getting into the word with the students.

Then you're going to step two, define the word and explore its meaning. Give a kid-friendly definition. Anita recommends that kids say and write the meaning. For example, a great opportunity would be to have a vocabulary journal or a vocabulary word wall or something where you're... We talked about that in an episode with a guest, a fifth grade teacher, who has a vocabulary word wall and just breaks down words on the wall for students.

Step three, make it tangible. Look at photographs of animal features, for example.

Step four, have students practice using the word. Students use context through sentences. Practice using it in sentences, pull it out of texts that they're reading, have them read those sentences and explore that word in the context, or just come up with their own sentences. I get though there might be some challenges in that with younger students because they might not use it correctly, so there's nothing wrong with saying, "Here's a sentence from a book that we're reading. Here's a sentence from our science reading that uses the word features. Let's all look at it together and explore the way that it's used."

Then also, step five, provide ongoing use. Use it throughout the day, the week, the unit, the module, and bring it back. Again, I love the idea of posting it to a vocabulary wall because then that does truly promote that ongoing use, but make sure that wall is an interactive wall because I think we all know how those word walls went back in the day when they were not so useful, so really get into using it in a way that is useful. Build habits for your class and your classroom community so you are digging into words and being word learners.

Anna: Yeah, and there's probably so many ways you could gamify that, right? You could have it on your wall and students get a token or something if they take one of the words and use it in a way that makes sense during the day. Sometimes you just need that encouragement to remember that it's there, and then you can use it too, but it's easy to forget about them.

Another idea that I've seen is where you have an index card box, and every time you teach a new word you write it on the front, and maybe on the back you record a couple quick things that you can do with it. Then maybe every day you pull out three cards and review them. That's a way to drag it out through the year because it's so easy to forget

those.

Lori: For sure, yeah.

Anna: Thank you, anything from Anita Archer we'll take. That's a great procedure.

We're going to close it out with your top ways to improve reading comprehension. That's a really big topic, but we'll just pick a few.

Lori: Yeah, we're just going to close it out with that very easy topic! Bring it on home.

Melissa: Well, I'll start with my answer that doesn't focus on comprehension, it focuses on fluency. Again, I am blurring the lines of our chapters because fluency assessments are one of the best predictors of comprehension, and that's for a reason. It's because if students are not yet reading fluently, so if they're not reading accurately or if they're reading very slowly, if they have no expression, then they don't have that cognitive space to make sense of what they're reading.

That's really important because I think sometimes we try and push on and say, "Okay, that's fine. So they're reading slowly, but we're in fourth grade, we're in fifth grade, and we have to push on to comprehension." But if they're just using all of their attention to decode the words still, it's going to be a constant battle.

This is when you get students who, if they're listening to you, if they hear you read aloud or another fluent reader read aloud, then they get it. They comprehend it, and you're like, "Oh, well, they can comprehend." But when they read independently, they struggle.

So you really do want to work on building students' fluency to improve comprehension. I know that seems silly to bring it back to fluency, but I do think that's an important point to make.

Anna: Yes, agreed.

Lori: Yeah, and I'll chime in. I know this is kind of off script, Melissa, but that partner reading paragraph shrinking protocol could be a really great use there where you're reading with a partner, and you're having a stronger reader and a not as strong reader read together. The stronger partner starts and reads for five minutes, then the not as strong reader reads for five minutes. They reread what the partner has already read, so we now have heard the same plot of text about twice in our partner pair. Then the stronger reader picks up where the not as strong reader left off and continues on. Then every paragraph they stop and talk about what the paragraph is mostly about, give a ten-word summary of the paragraph, and then the not as strong reader picks up where that person left off and does the same thing. That could just be a really easy tool as a way to bridge that phonics to fluency to comprehension gap.

Anything you want to say about that, Melissa?

Anna: I love that one. I've watched Lindsay's presentations on it, and I did that one in a classroom with a bunch of second graders, and it's amazing how quickly they figure it out. They may not come up with the same summary that you would, but what are they doing? They're reading it, they're going back to it, they're thinking about it.

It's super cool because you can do it from... I think Lindsay even did it with her end-of-the-year first graders, but you can do it from second grade through high school, I mean even through adults. It's so, so good even for people who don't need to build fluency, but that picking out what's important is so important. It gets harder if the text is harder, so as they get older it grows with them, right? I love that one.

Are there any other go-tos that you'd recommend?

Lori: Well, I think that there's a lot to think about as we plan for systematic comprehension instruction. We have five tips, I'm the queen of five tips today, five tips to make it more manageable.

First of all, start comprehension instruction early and use complex texts. Don't shy away from those texts. Give them to students. They need those opportunities to hear complex language, to hear complex language structures and sentences, and to build knowledge on topics.

Melissa: And, Lori, would that be read-alouds in the younger grades?

Lori: Yes, read-alouds in the younger grades. Thank you, Melissa. Yes.

The second tip is to consider why students are reading a text. Make the purpose and the task clear to them, which I know when we are short on time... With me too, that's the first thing that-

Anna: "Let's just go."

Lori: Yeah, even when I'm with my own kid, that's the first thing that goes.

Don't cut the purpose or the task. Make it very clear, "This is why we are doing this," and as Melissa was sharing with the fluency stuff, give them the markers of where they need to be and help them see that. Knowledge is so powerful to kiddos.

Tip three, build background knowledge and vocabulary. We want breadth and depth, so include a variety of text types and lots of different experiences where students are learning about a wide range of topics and then going deep into particular topics.

Tip four, teach text structures and reading strategies. We want students to use those to access the complex texts. We also want to think about a combination of strategies, what combination would work best together for this text? Not because students need to practice it in isolation, but because the text demands it and we need those strategies in order to access it.

A recent study came out that a strong combination would be, for example, main idea, text structure, and retelling. They really help students understand what they're reading. Of course, that depends on the text that they're reading, so keep that in mind too.

Tip five, engage students in text through volume of reading. That means reading a lot, as well as reading deep volume on specific topics, as well as discussion opportunities and writing opportunities. So going all the way through the cycles of learning through talking, and then writing, and being able to deeply understand and comprehend through those venues.

Anna: I like what you said about how you choose what to teach because the text demands it. I think that's something that I used to get wrong, which was, "Well, this week, we're teaching predicting, so let's find the text that supports it."

Lori: And that is actually way harder to do. It is way harder.

Anna: It is, actually! Because where are you going to find those texts from? You would have to Google it.

Lori: Yeah, and just to be like, "Hey, this is a really good book that we are reading in our curriculum," or that is on grade level, and then apply the strategy that works. It's so much easier!

Anna: I was just recently reading a book to a group of kindergartners. Have you ever read "Henry's Awful Mistake"? It's an old book from my childhood.

Lori: Oh, my gosh. I love that book from my childhood too!

Anna: I just love that story. Melissa, have you not seen it?

Melissa: No.

Anna: Well, you've got to get it! It's a classic book.

Lori: I'm pretty sure I have it in the basement, Melissa. I'll send you a picture.

Anna: Kids still love it, and you can still buy it on Amazon. It's about a duck, and an ant comes in his house while he's getting his house ready for his friend, Clara. So he wants his house to look pretty, but he sees the ant and think's that the ant's got to go. He tries to hit it with a pan, then he misses and he hits... The ant goes into the wall, so he breaks the wall, then he breaks the pipe and the house floods-

Lori: Water is everywhere, yeah.

Anna: Oh, yeah. It's such a tragic story, but kids really like it. The kids loved it. As I was reading it and preparing, I was like, "Oh, you know what? This book has cause and effect on every other page." I wasn't really thinking about that in advance, but when I realized that, it made perfect sense to then every couple pages give them a prompt, "On this page, Henry hit the pipe. Work with your partner to find the effect." It just made sense. Again, that's more practice in the teacher. The more experience you have, the more you'll be able to pick things out. But, yeah, that was fun.

Melissa: I think that's an important point, and what I just want to hit home is that it's so hard not to think of comprehension as that list of skills or something that you can just check off the boxes and say, "We did this, we did that." It is so messy, and it makes it hard to teach comprehension because every student is bringing their own knowledge, their own vocabulary, every text is unique in its own way, it has its own structure, it has its own vocabulary, it has its own knowledge. So it is messy, but I think it makes it beautiful to teach comprehension, but it does make it harder.

Lori: Yeah.

Anna: Yeah. You want to pick strong texts, and then you also want to be aware of, "What can I teach them that they're going to be able to use when they read other texts, and what tools can I give them?" For instance, stopping and summarizing, they can do that when they're doing something hard. It's thinking how can I equip them, but also always keeping in mind that the text in front of us is important. We chose it for a reason, so let's get as much as we can out of it.

Lori: Yeah.

Anna: Well, we could have talked much, much longer, but people need to get the book. When this episode comes out, the book will be out in just a couple of days. I highly recommend it!

Lori: June 11th.

Anna: June 11th! Okay, so give us the name one more time.

Lori: All right, it is "The Literacy 50: A Q&A Handbook for Teachers - Real-World Answers to Questions About Reading That Keep You Up at Night."

Anna: That is such a great title. All right, well I'm really excited to get it in my hands. I got to see an advanced copy, but I'm excited to get the real book. Thank you so much for sharing it with everyone, I know that they're going to find it super useful, and it's a great book to share with teachers who are just getting started with the science of reading too.

Lori: Yeah, thank you.

Melissa: Thank you for having us!

Lori: We can't wait to interview you, Anna, on YOUR new book soon. We'll be in touch soon.

Anna: We will. We'll get that set up. Thanks, ladies!

Melissa: Thank you.

Anna: You can find the show notes for this episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode172. Talk to you next time!