Reading to Learn in English Language Arts

The following scenario illustrates an English teacher using the process of Reading to Learn to support comprehension of a sophisticated piece of literature.

How Writers Build Suspense

In Mrs. Sullivan's 8th grade English class, the students are reading part of the short story "Night Drive" by Will F. Jenkins. This story is a suspenseful thriller about revenge. Mrs. Sullivan has divided the text into four parts. The students are beginning to read the second part as class begins. In this part of the story, the female protagonist realizes she might have a serial killer in her car.

At the beginning of class, Mrs. Sullivan speaks to the students. "As you know, we need to warm up before we start reading. So let's review our purpose for today." She scans the room and looks at a quiet boy in the middle of the room. "Johnny, remind us why we are reading "Night Drive"."

Johnny pauses for a moment and says, "We are looking for examples of how the author builds suspense."

Mrs. Sullivan smiles. "Excellent. Tell me a little more. Why will this be useful?"

Johnny thinks for a moment. "Because you want us to use some of the same strategies in the stories we are writing."

Mrs. Sullivan nods her head in approval. "Well done Johnny." Looking at the class she says, "Yesterday we identified ways the author starts to build suspense. What were some of the strategies Jenkins uses?" Once again, Mrs. Sullivan scans the room. Many hands are raised, but she calls on an attentive student in the back of the room. "Jessica."

Jessica opens a notebook on her desk. She considers it for a moment and then responds. "We identified four strategies: descriptions of nervousness, eerie details, details that don't fit or seem out of place, and references to a past mystery."

Mrs. Sullivan looks pleased. Walking towards the front of the room she says, "That was a very complete answer, Jessica. Thank you." She points to a prompt written on the white board. "Please open your writer's notebooks. You have five minutes to respond to the following prompts: Describe what you anticipate will happen in the next section of the story. Also, predict

what strategies you think Jenkins will use to build suspense. He will use some of the strategies you have already noticed. He will also show you some new ones. What do you think these will be?" When she is finished, Mrs. Sullivan looks at the clock on the wall. "You have five minutes. Go." She pauses for a second. "Remember, use all of the time to write!"

As the students write, Mrs. Sullivan walks around the room. She frequently stops to read what a student is writing and whisper feedback or encouragement in his or her ear. After the five minutes are over, Mrs. Sullivan asks a few students to read what they wrote. She then asks them to take out their stories and to divide into their reading pairs.

Once the students are with their partners, Mrs. Sullivan explains the reading task. "Today you will be doing what you did yesterday. You will underline sentences or passages in the second section of the story. You will also code the text. However, yesterday you put an 'S' in the margins to indicate a passage that builds suspense. Today I want you to be more specific. I have created a legend based on yesterday's observations. As you see, I would like you to put an 'FN' next to lines that indicate feelings of nervousness. For eerie or scary details put an 'ED' in the margins. If you think Jenkins is referring to a past mystery, write 'PM'. And, write 'ODD' for details that seem odd or out of place. You can still put an 'S' for suspense if you think Jenkins is using a strategy we have not described or coded yet." She looks at the room. "Any questions?" The students look like they are ready to begin reading. "Okay, you may begin. You have twenty minutes to finish reading and coding Section Two."

As the students read softly in pairs, Mrs. Sullivan walks around the room occasionally chatting with students. The students in each group take turns reading. Each pair also stops every few minutes to discuss and code passages that build suspense. When the twenty minutes are over, most of the students are finished. A few pairs are still reading. Mrs. Sullivan tells the students who have finished to record the author's new strategies in their notebooks.

When all of the students have finished reading and coding the text, Mrs. Sullivan asks them to describe the new strategies Jenkins uses to build suspense. She lists these on the white board. After doing this, she asks the students to turn in their notebooks so she can review their work and give feedback. She then gives them fifteen minutes to work on the mysteries they are writing. She reminds them to use strategies for building suspense. Once again, as the students work, Mrs. Sullivan walks around the room holding mini conferences with students.

Just before the bell rings, Mrs. Sullivan returns to the front of the room. She points to the homework assignment on the board. "Before you leave, make sure you have tonight's homework assignment written down. Make sure to go on the classroom website to complete the entry ticket for tomorrow. Please let me know how 'coding the text' is helping you understand what Jenkins is doing to engage or hook the reader. The ticket will also ask you to explain which strategies you are including in your own stories. As always, just be thoughtful." As the bell rings, she yells above the din, "Have a good day! See you all tomorrow. Excellent work today!