

St Augustine's Catholic Primary School: The Teaching of Reading Comprehension

A Headteacher was asked recently on Twitter what his 'recovery curriculum' would look like. 'Easy', he said. 'Read, read, read and then read some more.'

Characteristics of Readers

Good readers are selective as they read. They use their background knowledge (schema) to create mental images, ask questions, make inferences. They read accurately and quickly and self-monitor.

Poor readers can't select and apply strategies to enhance their comprehension. They rarely prepare before reading. They can have decoding and fluency issues. They lack sufficient background knowledge and have trouble making connections with the text. They can be unaware of text organisation. After reading, they do not reflect on what they have just read, and don't always recognise what they don't understand.

Teaching Comprehension

In school, we aim to model the characteristics of good readers, to teach the 'skills of comprehension' – the strategies to allow a child to fully understand what they are reading. To be effective, comprehension strategy instruction must be explicit. The more explicit the comprehension strategy and self-regulatory instruction (eg self-correcting) is, the higher the likelihood that the learner will make significant gains in comprehension. Therefore, when we teach comprehension we are explicit in our teaching – clearly identifying the skills (or competencies), the text content and the question/answer types that the children face when reading, and the strategies we can use to teach them.

It's still not enough!

Reading comprehension is ultimately a test of knowledge, not of skills. Pupils' ability to demonstrate their comprehension depends on their ability to understand the meaning of what they read. This, in turn, is heavily dependent on the vocabulary and knowledge of the content *that they already possess*, not their ability to apply generic skills to an unseen text.

Imagine we all read a text on spontaneous combustion. There are some questions we could easily answer, based on identifying what type of answer a question might need or knowledge of syntax (where words are in a sentence). However, those of us with more background knowledge of spontaneous combustion would be better able to answer the questions. Therefore, background knowledge and vocabulary are key to reading for meaning.

The teaching of specific reading lessons obviously includes benefits such as reading different texts and therefore new vocabulary; practising skills; recognising question types and what the answers should look like. Once these issues are put to one side though, the ability of children to answer questions is dependent on the vocabulary and background/domain knowledge needed to comprehend the text.

So what should we do?

Enrich knowledge

Therefore, it is *equally important* to enable our children to acquire knowledge – of the world, of human nature. We can do this through sharing stories at every given moment; by encouraging children to read widely; giving them the opportunity to learn about 'stuff' through Topic and Science teaching; through reading newspapers and poring over the atlases; enrichment activities; adults sharing general knowledge and fascinating facts; setting background reading as homework; a minute to be an expert; watching CBBC Newsround; indoor play activities to encourage knowledge-building etc.

Read Class Stories

In terms of story, *we need to teach whole texts the most* so the children can acquire more complex vocabulary they wouldn't otherwise come across in their own reading: those sophisticated structures, complex sentences, poetic phrases and idiomatic language.

Children also gain better knowledge of characters and themes in an in-depth way that enables better inferences, compared to simply reading extracts which are divorced from the wider narrative. It's not always clear why characters act the way they do without the backstory. This means children are guessing when answering inference questions and is one of the reasons why they get answers wrong. Only a better understanding of the story and characters will lead to correct inferences being made in this instance. Our use of whole texts in Guided Reading provides this. As well as that, however, **daily time for class story** has been included in the timetables to maximise this benefit.

Reading aloud is probably the most important thing that teachers can do and needs to be a frequent and regular part of each school day. Reading aloud slows written language down and enables children to hear and take in tunes and patterns. It enables children to experience and enjoy stories that they might not otherwise meet. By reading well-chosen books aloud, teachers help classes to become communities of readers – ensuring that they can share in experiences of a wide repertoire of books they enjoy and get to know well. Reading aloud is most effective when routines are prioritised, established and planned for across the school. (CLPE 2020)

Vocabulary Building

Vocabulary Ninja every morning; encouraging 'word consciousness' – noticing words and multiple meanings and connections; using root word webs; indoor play activities involving dictionaries and thesauruses: first person to find... which definition fits... collect a wordbank for...crosswords, Boggle, Scrabble; including idioms, metaphors, sayings into everyday teacher talk; glossary and definitions for lessons; pre-reading of new vocabulary as reading homework etc.

A fortnightly 'Word Play' session has been included in the KS2 Guided Reading timetable to support this.

When and where?

Direct teaching of comprehension strategies occurs when working with one group within Guided Reading sessions; within whole class reading lessons (Y2-6 twice a fortnight); English lessons, and in fact whenever we expect children to read for meaning.

Guided Reading Sessions

Within these sessions we continue the direct modelling of competencies, exploration of vocabulary, demonstration of strategies, and the independent application of these, with specific coverage of skills being dependent on group needs. Working with one group during GR sessions means we can focus on the gaps that groups have. We can also follow up the whole class teaching with smaller GR groups. Children use longer texts rather than short extracts – important in developing that in-depth understanding of the text.

Whole Class Reading Lessons

2x per fortnight

Whole class reading lessons can look like this:

1. **Book Talk** warm-up to demonstrate the thought processes of a good reader as they *wring meaning* out of a short text.
2. **Fluent reading** of main text **by adult** using **echo reading**. Vocabulary and knowledge check of words, phrases and concepts children would otherwise need external support with.
3. **Independent reading** of main text by children, with a focus. They are reading for meaning so text marking and summarising strategies is encouraged. The focus could be a specific question or task eg summarising each paragraph.
4. **Direct teaching** of identified focus – one aspect of Reading Competency, Text Content, Question Type or strategy eg skimming. Demonstration of making sense of questions, of how to find answers, reinforcing strategies, repeating, supporting children through an example.
5. **Independent work** – practising strategies, answering questions, explaining learning.
6. **Summary** of learning and links to opportunities to apply elsewhere.

What is Book Talk?

Book Talk happens when an adult models comprehension strategies to *wring out* meaning – modelling the act of expert reading. Each time we read we seek out a 'mental model' of the whole text. This can be called 'comprehension monitoring' – metacognition – monitoring of our own reading for errors.

Using a short text the adult reads and thinks out loud, asking and answering questions; skimming and scanning; slowing down; verbally summarising; rereading; noticing patterns; making links/connections to prior knowledge (to self, to knowledge of the world, to books/films); creating mind movies (visualising); inferring and predicting, revising predictions; text marking – all the while talking through their thinking aloud. Children can become involved by asking their own questions, paired talking, quick-writing on w/b, and by taking over the Book Talk themselves. We encourage more articulate talk by asking '*Can you explain that further? Why do you think that? What is the evidence for that? Who can add to that thought? Who would like to extend this thinking?*'

What is echo reading?

Echo reading is a rereading strategy designed to help children develop expressive, fluent **reading** which, in turn, supports their print knowledge. In echo reading, the teacher reads a short segment of text, a phrase, clause, sentence or paragraph, and the whole class **echo** it back. Adults model all the aspects of fluency: speed, accuracy and prosody.

Prosody, the defining feature of expressive reading, comprises the timing, phrasing, emphasis and intonation that speakers use to help convey aspects of meaning and to make their speech lively.

The Strategic Approach to Reading Instruction:

This involves splitting the teaching of reading comprehension into three distinct areas: **Reading Competencies**, **Text Content**, and **Question Types**, under the umbrella of reading strategies. When we know the different reading skills, we are better able to target questioning to both model and encourage comprehension. Symbols are useful in supporting children's identification and memory of such strategies, and make for easy non-verbal communication.

Reading Competencies:

Author Assessment (book review), Vocabulary, Inference, Prediction, Explanation, Retrieval, Summary, plus Navigating (identifying) Genres



(often referred to as VIPERS)

Text Content:

Setting, Text layout, Characters and their relationships and problems, Themes and key ideas, Interrogating Facts/Opinions; Impact of text on reader.



Question type:








multiple choice; matching; labelling; true/false; fact/opinion; sequencing events; find and copy; short response; open ended.

Reading strategies:








Skimming, scanning, rereading, asking and answering questions, making links, visualising etc




Direct teaching of comprehension

The tables below detail each Reading Competency for KS1 and KS2, the average percentage of questions for that competency in previous Sat papers, suggested strategies for direct teaching of the competency and example questions taken from Sat papers.

KS1 Reading Competencies linked to content domains (1a-e)		
Average % in KS1 tests 2018-2019	How to teach (most commonly used strategies)	Example questions from KS1 Sats
Text organisation (stylistic) 	Talk in role as the writer, explaining why the text is organised in such a way. Give children opportunities to match labels and parts of text.	Why is this word in bold? Why do we use sections or paragraphs in our writing? What does the front cover tell us? Why do we use headings / sub-headings? Can you explain what the picture / diagram tells us?
Vocabulary 1a 13.75% 	Identify unfamiliar word/phrase. Use a dictionary and consider context to choose correct definition. Test situation: read around the word and read on to see if the context can support meaning. Consider root word and associated meaning. Consider if the word/phrase has been read previously in another text and relate meaning. Make a suggestion and replace the word with it, see if it fits within the context. Collect wordbanks. Expand knowledge of synonyms.	What does the word . . . mean in this sentence? Find and copy/write one word/two words which tells/shows you . . . ? Which word in the text describes . . . ? Which word means the same as . . . ?
Inference 1d  22.5%	Combining information in the text with schema (experience, own knowledge of events, human nature etc). Make links to self/the world/books and films. Model using language: this word suggests, hints at, is evidence for; what do you think, how can you tell. Talk about hidden meanings, about the author wanting us to work out characters' feelings through their actions, facial expressions, what they say.	How do you know that . . . was excited? (link to what character says) Why was . . . feeling worried? Why did . . . say/do . . . ? Why did . . . happen? How did . . . feel when . . . ? True/false questions in a table – finding evidence across a text. Molly didn't understand. This means that Molly was . . . (words with tick boxes) What did Mum describe as <i>sparkling fireworks</i> ? Why did cowboys become friends with each other? Why did horses have to be strong?
Prediction 1e 0% 	Model making predictions based on information in the text so far, linking what you know to texts previously read or human nature. Always ask for justification based on the text.	What do you think will happen next? Who do you think could save them? Which of these do you think the child is likely to say at the end of the outing? (tick boxes)
Explanation 1b 	Model explaining events and highlighting the text that helps you know this. Train children to use sentence stems. Retrieval – know that the answer will be in the text. Identify the question word and reinforce expected answers eg How many is an amount; who is a name, a person; how is a manner of doing something; where is a place; when is a time; why is a reason for an event etc; what could be a place, a thing, an event; which is identifying a particular thing. Train children to consider what the answer should look like before searching for it. Identify key words in question – scan for key word or synonym. Paraphrase wording in question for answer.	What do/does do? What happened when . . . ? Why was . . . ? Where did . . . ? What did . . . ? Which . . . ? Who . . . ? Where . . . ? When . . . ? Write <u>one</u> item that cowboys used for working with animals. (Basic retrieval questions – some may involve joining/ticking boxes/true or false tables/drawing lines).
Retrieval 1b  61%		
Summarise (through Sequence of events) 1c  2.5%	Model identifying key events, text mark. Remember what has been read – notes, diagrams, doodles. What happened first, next, last. Reorder mixed-up events by comparing with text. Reorder instructions.	Number the sentences below from numbers 1-4/1-5 to show the order they happen in the story. Draw three lines to show where . . .

KS2 Reading Competencies linked to content domains 2a-h)

Average % in KS2 tests 2016-2019	How to teach (most commonly used strategies)	Example questions from KS2 Sats
<p>Author Assessment Evaluating, reviewing text 2h 1.5%</p> 	<p>Model how to structure a review – intro, main, conclusion. Focus on two or three aspects to comment on (plot, characters, theme, ending, setting etc) and finish with a summary. Expect justification for opinions and reference to text. Provide sentence starters eg <i>I particularly enjoyed this part because...</i> Provide appropriate Book Talk Bonus Words (see right) and model how to use them. As children get older they should be comparing texts.</p>	
<p>Text organisation (stylistic) 2f 1%</p> 	<p>Model recognising layout and reasons for it eg how photographs, graphs and tables are used to break up information. Give children opportunities to match labels and parts of text.</p>	<p>Matching information eg headings and summaries of content. Give an example of use of humour eg pun and explain why it has been used.</p>
<p>Vocabulary 2a 18% 2g 3%</p> 	<p>Identify unfamiliar word/phrase. Use a dictionary and consider context to choose correct definition. Test situation: read around the word and read on to see if the context can support meaning. Consider root word and associated meaning. Consider if the word/phrase has been read previously in another text and relate meaning. Make a suggestion and replace the word with it, see if it fits within the context. Expand knowledge of synonyms.</p>	<p>Find and copy one word meaning X Which word most closely matches the meaning of the word X What does the word X suggest about X Give the meaning of the word X in this sentence Match a word with its synonym.</p>
<p>Inference 2d 4.0%</p> 	<p>Combining information in the text with schema (experience, own knowledge of events, human nature etc). Asking questions whilst reading about characters' actions and motivation. Why? Use of modals eg might, may, would. Link to own experience/knowledge, to knowledge of the world and to books/films. Regularly give children scenarios and encourage them to make assumptions ie practise inference eg The character arrives home and slams the door upon arrival. The assumption is that the actions show a negative emotion such as anger. Impression of a character – answer usually involves a personal quality.</p>	<p>How can you tell that...? What impressions of... do you get? Who do you think...? Why do you think...? Why did X happen? How do you know that...? What evidence is there that...? Why does... do...? What is Joe thinking? Tick statements to show fact/opinion.</p>
<p>Prediction 2e 1.5%</p> 	<p>Use schema (own experience) of human nature, links made to self/books and films/knowledge of the world to generate suggestions. Reinforce modal verbs/adverbs in sentence starters eg maybe, might, possibly, potentially. Model justifying predictions and giving reasons, use sentence starters children can then use eg 'I think that... because'. 'I imagine that this will happen. I think this because...' Children must use an aspect of text content within their justification.</p>	<p>Very few test q's. Best done in GR. Do you think... will change her behaviour? Justify your answer using evidence from the text.</p>
<p>Explanation 2f 1%</p> 	<p>Identify key words in question which point to a place in the text or a character etc. Use words in question to start answer. PEE – point, evidence, explain – model different formats eg 2 points with evidence. Model ensuring the points are not similar (common error). Check that explanation fits the question. Work from an answer backwards.</p>	<p>Expanded retrieval or inference questions requiring a longer answer.</p>

<p>Retrieval 2b 31.5%</p> 	<p>Knowing that the answer will be in the text. Identify the question word and reinforce expected answers eg How many is an amount; who is a name, a person; how is a manner of doing something; where is a place; when is a time; why is a reason for an event etc; what could be a place, a thing, an event; which is identifying a particular thing. Train children to consider what the answer should look like before searching for it.</p> <p>Identify key words in question – scan for key word or synonym. Paraphrase wording in question for answer.</p>	<p>Order and sequence events or number facts. Who? What? Where? When? At what time..? Which? How? How often? How many? True/False. Matching statements. Numbering order of events. Complete table of information.</p>
<p>Summary 2c 3%</p> 	<p>Identify key events, text mark. 'Strain' facts – what can we do without? Remember what has been read – notes, diagrams, doodles. Model summarising after each section/para – a topic sentence and 3 b/p. 6-word summary. Use of sentence starters in discussion. Takes the form of sequencing in tests (which is retrieval). Identify events in text, highlight and then order. 'Zoom out' of the text to draw conclusions in general terms.</p>	<p>Number the events to show in which order they appear in the text. Which of the following would be the most suitable summary of the whole text? Which of these most accurately reflects the theme of the text?</p>
<p>Impact on reader 2g</p> 	<p>Model discussing the impact a text has had on you (sorrow, anger, satisfaction, amusement etc) and refer back to text to explain why, often making links to self. Encourage children to respond to text in a similar way. Give sentence starts eg / <i>felt... because the story reminded me of the time when...</i></p>	<p>How effective is the text? What is the author's intended impact on you? Did they succeed?</p>