

Pupil literacy? The plot thickens

Learning to read may end at primary but for the best results it needs to be ongoing, Helen Ward discovers

HOW MUCH time do you spend teaching reading to children who can already read? As education priorities go it may seem very low down on a very long "to do" list, but in the US there is a move to extend high-level reading instruction into secondary schools.

While teaching children how to read is a key task for teachers dealing with four-, five- and six-year-olds, once pupils have moved from *The Cat in the Hat* to *The Wind in the Willows*, the focus in class shifts from learning to read to reading to learn.

But the Alliance for Excellent Education, a US campaign group with the motto "every child a graduate", argues that while secondary teachers need not provide basic reading instruction, subject teachers should be teaching the literacy

skills that are essential to master their speciality.

"A foundation doesn't make a house," argue Rafael Heller and Cynthia L. Greenleaf in the Alliance's report *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas*, "and basic skills don't make for high-level competence. Without ongoing literacy instruction, students who are behind in reading when they enter the middle grades likely will never catch up. And those who do read and write at grade level can easily become 14- or 18-year-olds who struggle to understand their textbooks."

Their report points out that while more help is now being given to adolescents who are obviously struggling with literacy, it still leaves them short of the higher level of literacy needed to succeed in post-18 education.

Generic comprehension strategies, such as



reviewing the vocabulary in the text before reading, making notes and summarising at the end, can take a student only so far. If students are expected to produce high-quality work, teachers should help them to become competent at reading difficult texts in their field. Yet the authors say that teachers' expertise in their subject areas can be a curse as well as a blessing, as they can assume that things are as obvious to everyone else as they are to themselves.

The authors conclude: "Literacy makes it possible for students to master the disciplines and because each discipline has its own kinds of literacy, the next step for those working to improve adolescent literacy instruction must be to integrate the teaching of reading and writing more fully into the academic content areas."

The common core standards, which have been adopted in 45 US states, set out what reading skills are required not just for English lessons but across history and social studies, sciences and technical subjects. Students aged 11 to 14, for example, are expected to show that they can distinguish between facts, display reasoned judgement based on research findings and speculate about a piece of text. Reading at this level is not just about the words, it's about discovering meaning – but is that so different in primary?

The simple view

In England, the most widespread model of how we read is the "simple view of reading" identified by Philip Gough and William Tunmer in 1986 and included in the 2006 review of the teaching of early reading by Jim Rose. The model shows two aspects – decoding and comprehension – and is depicted as a cross with comprehension on one axis and decoding on the other. The review recommended that high quality systematic synthetic phonics be taught discretely and as the prime approach in learning to decode. It led the Labour government to make phonics mandatory. The emphasis on phonics has since been stepped up by the coalition government, which introduced a phonics test at the end of Year 1.

But the Rose review was about more than phonics: it pointed out that while the simple view set out separate dimensions of reading, both were essential. It stated: "Teachers also need to be brought up to date with research into reading comprehension. As reading comprehension has now been shown to depend crucially on language comprehension, teachers also need to have good knowledge and understanding of oral language development, and of ways to foster language comprehension."

Greg Brooks, professor emeritus of education at the University of Sheffield, is about to publish the fourth edition of *What Works for Pupils with Literacy Difficulties*.

For the 1998 and 2002 editions, he had found comprehension skills to be the most under-researched area of all aspects of reading, but by

DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND



From *Children's Problems in Text Comprehension: an experimental investigation* by Nicola Yuill and Jane Oakhill (Cambridge University Press, 1991). (Dots show hesitation, words in brackets show help given by tester.)

"Lianne: John and Ann were fishing. Sunday – no – Frid- Saturday (suddenly) suddenly they heard a ... (splash). A ... (woodman) woodman had fallen into the ... log (lake) lake. He could not swim for he was ... (hurt) hurt. The children tr- tried to pull him out (ashore) ashore. He was too hurt (heavy) heavy. Then John and ... John had the (held) held – no, hang on – John held the man's hand (head) head against (above) above water – doesn't make sense, above water, oh yeah it does – and Ann ran for help.

"Natalie: John and Ann were fishing. Suddenly they heard a splash. A woodman has found (fallen) into the lake. He could not swim for he was hurt. The children tried to pull him a...

shore. He was too heavy. Then John heard (held) the man's head above the water and Ann ran for help.

"Lianne made 10 errors and, based on this test, her reading age was six months below her age. Natalie made two errors and had a reading age one month above her age.

"Then after reading the passage the text was removed and the children were asked questions about what they had just read. Despite her halting pronunciation Lianne gives an acceptable answer for all but one question. Natalie's fluency is deceptive: although she remembers some details of the story – what the children were doing and why they could not pull the man out – her other answers are either failures to remember or confused confabulations mixed with repetitions of fragments of the wording. Her comprehension age is 16 months below her chronological age. Lianne's is just above average for her age."

The ultimate aim of reading is comprehension

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2007 there had been a proliferation of research and he concluded: "From the evidence now available it can definitely be deduced that children's comprehension skills can be boosted by suitable teaching."

One of the programmes highlighted in a study for *What Works* is inference training, a short intervention aimed at key stage 2 and 3 pupils, which was developed by Tony Whatmuff, Every Child a Reader teacher leader for Leicester City, based on the work of Professor Jane Oakhill and Dr Nicola Yuill of the University of Sussex.

Whatmuff says: "Weak comprehenders and strong comprehenders are reading in different ways. Weak comprehenders are focusing on decoding: they are not activating their background knowledge, not building the gist of a piece, not making inferences.

"We need great phonics teaching, but children also need to be able to make meaning as they are reading. They need to be aware of errors in their decoding. The ultimate aim of reading is comprehension."

The inference training intervention developed in Leicester consists of 40-minute sessions, twice a week over eight weeks. Children are taught in groups of four. There are five aims: boosting vocabulary, activating background knowledge, making inferences, integrating and building meaning and promoting enjoyment of reading. During the intervention children make about 12 months of progress in comprehension.

Teachers choose from 45 texts and the sessions are structured as conversations that include a number of activities. Children circle words they are unsure of and a phrase or word is elaborated on, for example if Billy "howls" it could indicate that Billy is 3 to 5 years old. Other activities include writing a headline that encapsulates the key parts of the story and drawing a picture.

Weak comprehenders

"Because teachers are good comprehenders they don't think about how to do it," Whatmuff says. "They haven't got the sensitivity to the barriers that some pupils face. This training builds up sensitivity to the type of difficulties pupils can have.

"Weak comprehenders don't know they have a problem. If your vision is blurry but you've always had short sight, then you think what you see is normal. Because weak comprehenders have never really got the full message, they don't realise they are missing things. All they understand is that they don't enjoy reading books and therefore they read less. Once they've done this course, reading becomes exciting for them. A lot of students have said that before they did it they never got pictures in their head when they were reading. It's a short intervention, but it seems to be enough to recalibrate the way they read."

The programme is due to go nationwide, with training days planned in London and Manchester this spring.



Catherine Stretton, head of Marriott Primary in Leicester, has introduced the intervention but also uses the techniques across Years 5 and 6, with books such as *Private Peaceful* and *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo. She says: "It has changed children's approach to reading. A lot of inference training is about stopping when you can't read for meaning and having strategies for finding out what words mean. Our children a long time ago would realise they didn't know a word but wouldn't stop or think they should find out. But now the children have the skills to work out those hard questions and infer what people are meaning or what the author is trying to portray."

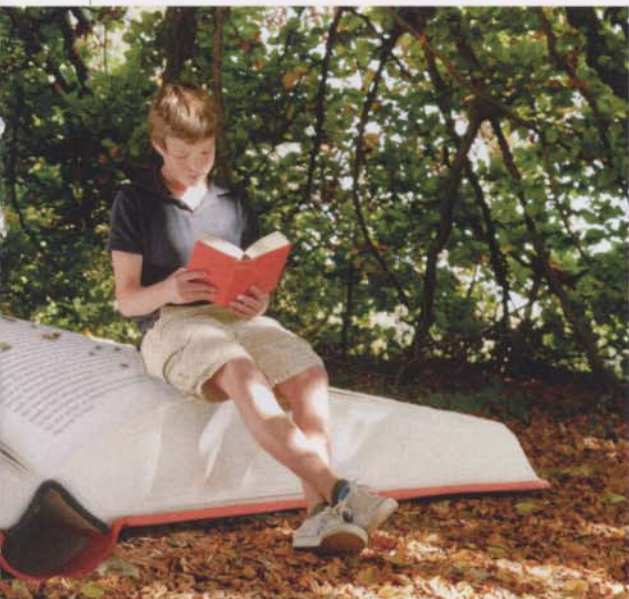
Reading comprehension is already part of the national curriculum and remains in the proposed new primary curriculum for 2014. The draft calls for children in Years 3 and 4 to be taught to understand what they read by drawing inferences, predicting what might happen, recalling and summarising, and discussing words and phrases that capture their imagination.

But a report from the European Commission's education information network Eurydice on reading literacy, *Teaching Reading in Europe*, published last year, says reading comprehension is being neglected and that encouraging pupils to read for pleasure – which is closely linked to reading attainment – depends upon it.

"Reading for pleasure is not enough – an awareness of effective reading comprehension strategies is also essential," the Eurydice report states. "Therefore, when boys enjoy reading, read diverse material and adopt reading comprehension strategies, they can attain a higher level of performance in reading than girls.

"Similarly, disadvantaged students who read a diverse range of texts and employ effective reading strategies tend to perform well in reading."

In the US, teaching reading comprehension was one of the National Reading Panel's recommendations in its 2000 report *Teaching Children*



to Read. But some suspect it has not received the same amount of attention as decoding.

In the US the NRP report led to the \$1 billion-a-year Reading First grant programme, which distributed funds to schools for training and resources in five key areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. But an evaluation in 2008 for the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance found that while there had been a positive impact on decoding skill, there was no impact on comprehension.

In their 2006 report *Reading Next*, Catherine E. Snow, Henry Lee Shattuck professor of education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Gina Biancarosa, assistant professor of educational methodology at the University of Oregon's College of Education, say educators must ensure adequate ongoing literacy development which includes teaching comprehension skills to adolescents and pre-adolescents.

They state: "It is clear that getting third graders to read at grade level is an important and challenging task...But many excellent third-grade readers will falter or fail in later grade academic tasks if the teaching of reading is neglected in the middle and secondary grades."

Fostering motivation

They also point out that motivation becomes an issue among older pupils – explaining why even some skilled readers and writers do not progress in secondary schools. Professor Snow and Dr Biancarosa suggest that students should be given some choice – perhaps built-in independent reading time, common in primaries but often dropped for older children.

Motivation has been an issue in England, even at primary level. The 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls) caused concern when it revealed not only that achievement scores had fallen but that pupils in England

had less positive attitudes to reading than many other countries.

The latest Pirls report, published in November 2012, revealed that attitudes are now improving, with just 9 per cent of pupils saying they "strongly agreed" that reading was boring – down from 15 per cent in 2006. And achievement has risen, too. England rose from 15th place to 11th in reading achievement overall, and over the same period the US rose from 10th to 6th.

The survey also assesses four different comprehension skills. In England, scores on reading comprehension were significantly higher in 2011 than 2006. In England and internationally, the average achievement of pupils who began learning a range of reading skills earlier was higher than the average achievement of those who were introduced to the skills later.

Professor Dominic Wyse of the Institute of Education, University of London, and co-author of *The Early Literacy Handbook*, says that one of the difficulties in highlighting the importance of reading comprehension is that it has been seen as something that is done after phonics.

He says: "It is absolutely true to say that vocabulary and reading skills grow through more and more reading but that is not saying that all teachers need to do, once children can decode, is expose them to books. It is a perfectly good idea to develop comprehension and to plan activities in different subject areas – history, science or geography – to encourage comprehension."

But you don't need to wait to talk to children about comprehension skills: predicting what is going to happen in a story, summarising and inference can all be done before phonics teaching begins. "Children engage with text, with their names and the names of objects, before they go to school," Wyse says. "They are exposed to sentences, paragraphs, books. I believe literacy should be taught basically by the context approach. It begins with whole texts, and you use the experiences the child has had to connect the narrative with their lives."

Reading comprehension is attracting interest from researchers and politicians. Research shows that it can improve children's literacy skills if such skills are supported into lower secondary. Comprehension skills can also be taught early and some aspects, such as vocabulary, can begin even before reading starts.

What Works author Brooks says: "A broad vocabulary is a key indicator, in fact a predictor, of comprehension. There are highly imaginative preschool programmes for ages 3 to 6 and that will have an immediate pay-off in early learning of reading and spelling.

"The idea that Jim Rose was trying to get out in 2006 – that reading is built on a richness of spoken language – was lost sight of almost at once. What is additional to phonics should be the use of lots of imaginative language, which should have an emphasis on the fun of reading."

RECIPROCAL TEACHING

Reciprocal teaching is a method designed for pupils who typically score in the bottom third of standardised reading measures.

The teacher models four critical strategies:

- **Questioning:** pose questions based on a portion of text the group has read, either aloud or silently.
- **Clarifying:** resolve confusions about words, phrases or concepts, drawing on the text when possible.
- **Predicting:** suggest what will happen next in the text.
- **Summarising:** sum up the content, identifying the gist of what has been read and discussed.

Source: Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002 cited in *Reading Next* report

Further reading

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