

Comprehension and the Silent Reader

Table of Contents

Comprehension and the Silent Reader	1
1. Introduction.....	5
History of reading and prose style	5
Method	5
Background	5
Who was involved?	6
Why focus on comprehension?	6
Further links	7
2. What has changed about how People Read?.....	8
Modern texts assume silent readers.....	9
The birth of a narrative voice	9
Who is telling the story?.....	11
The all-seeing narrator.....	11
The shifting narrator	12
Page layout, fonts and punctuation.....	12
Page layout to support punctuation and meaning	12
Hearing and visualising the text: tracking the dialogue and the characters.....	13
Tracking voices in a performance text.....	13
Hearing the text to understand syntax	14
Visualising characters to track dialogue.....	15
Assigning accents and voices in order to track dialogue and characters.....	16
Changes in time and location	17
Tracking changes in time and location.....	18
Signalling setting changes clearly	18
The challenge of frequent time changes	20
Making inferences.....	21
Why silent readers must work harder to make inferences	21
Knowledge of gesture	22
Wrong inferences don't ruin enjoyment	23
Inferring characterisation	23
Reading as a general reader rather than oneself.....	24
Adopting the role of the 'general reader'	24
Understanding how a general reader must respond	25
3. Comprehension	25
What matters in comprehension?	25

Decoding is not the whole story	25
Retelling the story: a crucial first step for comprehension.....	26
Wider knowledge of the world helps comprehension	27
Book introductions: give information that helps comprehension .	28
Big ideas about comprehension	28
The reader's input matters (but this is a recent idea)	28
Celebrate and explore the different understandings	29
Readers like different things	31
Older readers may imagine characters differently, but not always	33
Readers think the plot may go in different directions.....	34
Making Reading Mean: A Comprehension Model to Support Flexible and Supportive Teaching.....	35
Vivienne Smith's model of comprehension	35
4. Literature circles and supporting resources	36
Literature circles	36
Literature circles: a complex view of comprehension.....	37
Planning and introducing literature circles.....	38
5. Links to Curriculum for Excellence	41
Capacities.....	41
Principles.....	41
6. Conclusion and Reflection on using Literature Circles	41
What is the Goldfish Bowl?	42
Parent newsletter (See below)	42
7. Literature circles.....	43
Reading for fun	43
What are literature circles?.....	43
Why is your child involved?.....	43
Did you know?	43
How can you help?	43
8. Pupil questionnaire	44
How children feel about reading	48
9. Supporting information.....	49
Reading engagement	49
What is it, and why does it matter?	49
What can educators do?	50
10. Further reading	52
Reading comprehension	52

What is it, and why does it matter?	52
What can educators do?	55
11. Further reading	56
12. Visual literacy	56
What is visual literacy?.....	56
What can educators do?	58
13. References.....	59
14. Acknowledgements	60

1. Introduction

History of reading and prose style

Dr Elspeth Jajdelska's work on the rise of silent reading in the 18th century has shown that writers who assume a silent reader, as almost all writers do in the present day, construct their texts differently from those who write for readers to speak the text aloud to themselves or an audience, as almost all writers did before the 18th century.

Elspeth Jajdelska's work explains in detail exactly which kinds of textual features are likely to be difficult for people (both now and in the past) who have learned the mechanics of reading but find it hard to follow texts written for silent readers. These findings arose in an academic field unconnected to educational studies and this knowledge exchange project was established to explore how the research can be made useful to teachers. The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Method

The literature circles developed by Sue Ellis, a researcher in literacy and education, were felt to be ideal for this purpose because they provided a motivating context in which pupils could share their understandings. Elspeth Jajdelska and Sue Ellis worked with teachers to choose texts for children that illustrated the comprehension challenges facing silent readers. Next, the teachers established literature circles. As the children talked about the books, the teachers noted examples of comprehension difficulties and aspects of the story that created confusion or needed clarifying. They met regularly with Elspeth and Sue to discuss them. A better understanding of the challenges of silent reading, can help teachers quickly recognise and respond to children's comprehension difficulties and so, in the final stage of the scheme, the teachers and researchers worked together to write up their experiences to share with others.

Background

This project was a knowledge exchange project that used historical research to understand some of the comprehension challenges that face young readers today. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Knowledge Exchange fund).

In the 17th century, books were expensive and few people owned them in large numbers. Because many people were unable to read, texts were written to be 'performed' by one reader to an audience. This is what 'learning to read' meant to someone like Isaac Newton as a child – learning to perform the text for others – and the texts were written with this in mind.

Economic and social changes in the 18th century meant that more people had access to books and more time to learn to read. There was also a change in attitude and, as reading for pleasure began to be encouraged instead of discouraged, people began to read silently, for themselves. In response to this, authors changed the way that texts were written to accommodate these 'silent readers'.

Understanding these changes, and recognising how they are manifest in modern books written for pupils in the 5–14 age group, can help teachers to understand some of the comprehension challenges these texts present.

The project examined texts written for the 5–14 age group. The teachers used the free discussion that takes place in 'literature circles', which had been previously researched by Sue Ellis and found to be a good mechanism for sharing and exploring understandings, as a key tool to elicit comprehension issues, but did not restrict themselves to this where other methods were more appropriate.

Who was involved?

Dr Elspeth Jajdelska and Sue Ellis from Strathclyde University worked with 10 teachers from East Ayrshire Council to explore some of the comprehension challenges that texts can pose for young readers. They used Elspeth Jajdelska's research on the history of reading to think about how texts changed as they began to be written for silent readers and how these changes can confuse modern readers.

Why focus on comprehension?

Reading comprehension is vital to the success and self-esteem of school pupils. A child who is not understanding a text will show poor concentration and poor application. The child is unlikely to enjoy reading or to want to read outside school. This matters because so much of a child's vocabulary and general knowledge development after the age of 7 is learnt through reading rather than spoken language.

When children don't understand what they read, they read less. This can have a serious impact on educational achievement across the curriculum. Avid readers have a wider vocabulary, better verbal reasoning and a wider understanding of the world; these elements give them an academic advantage in almost every curricular subject.

Much recent reading research has focused on phonics and the problems of decoding text. This is of course a crucial aspect of learning to read, but what these projects have shown is that proficient decoding does not automatically produce proficient comprehension. Research on the

history of reading and prose style can begin to explain why this is so. By showing what it is about how modern texts are written that makes comprehension difficult for some children, we gain an understanding of what else they have to learn beyond decoding. Knowing this can alert teachers to likely difficulties and encourage the sort of conversations about reading that can avert difficulties and promote the sort of understandings that lead to good comprehension.

This document will tell you about Elspeth's historical research and how it applies to teaching.

Further links

You can access a research report on literature circles in Scotland at: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/11/SRLitCir

2. What has changed about how People Read?

Around 1700 years ago, when the Romans still ruled the Mediterranean, a student from North Africa went to Milan to teach and study. His teacher in Milan had a very unusual gift: he could read silently. The student was St Augustine and he described the teacher in his *Confessions*:

We saw him thus reading to himself, and never otherwise; and having long sat silent (for who durst intrude on one so intent?) we were fain to depart, conjecturing that in the small interval which he obtained, free from the din of others' business, for the recruiting of his mind, he was loth to be taken off; and perchance he dreaded lest if the author he read should deliver anything obscurely, some attentive or perplexed hearer should desire him to expound it, or to discuss some of the harder questions; so that his time being thus spent, he could not turn over so many volumes as he desired; although the preserving of his voice (which a very little speaking would weaken) might be the truer reason for his reading to himself. But with what intent soever he did it, certainly in such a man it was good.

St Augustine watched St Ambrose in awe because he was unused to the idea of silent reading. For us, the surprise is that anyone thought silent reading was abnormal. What's even more surprising for us today is that readers like St Augustine, who thought of reading as a performance art with an audience, were still commonplace until comparatively recently.

Elsbeth Jajdelska was initially interested in silent reading as a historian of literature. However, as she learned about children reading in the 18th century, she began to draw on the work of educationalists. This showed that to become a fluent, silent reader, a child had to experience many years of reading a wide variety of texts for pleasure. This cost money and time and was therefore restricted to only a few people. Moreover, many people couldn't read, or could only read a few words. So texts were written so that one reader could 'perform' the text to others. This is what 'learning to read' involved before the 18th century – learning to perform the text – and writers wrote with this oral performance in mind, knowing that this is what the 'reader' would do.

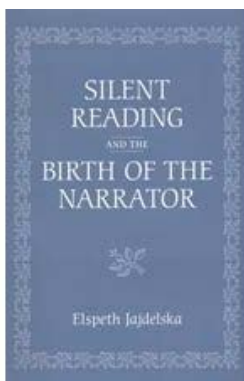
A surge in the consumer economy at the start of the 18th century changed this: middle class readers had higher disposable incomes and more leisure, and began to enjoy reading for pleasure. As a result, a much higher percentage of children learned to read silently. Once a substantial number of people could read fluently and silently, writers began to write for these 'silent readers', changing the way that they wrote and structured their texts.

Modern texts assume silent readers

We live in a world where writers now assume a silent reader and adult readers' knowledge of these assumptions helps them understand the texts they read. Much of what we recognise as the 'writer's craft' arises directly out of the shifts authors have made to accommodate the silent reader. Whether modern texts are read out loud or not, they have generally been written in a way that takes account of the techniques devised for silent readers.

Understanding the history of how silent reading came about, and how texts used to be written and read, can help everyone working with those learning to read to understand the difficulties on the journey to fluent silent reading. Recognising the features that help 'silent reading' in texts that are written for children can help teachers appreciate why readers in primary and early secondary school may be able to decode a text but not understand it.

The birth of a narrative voice



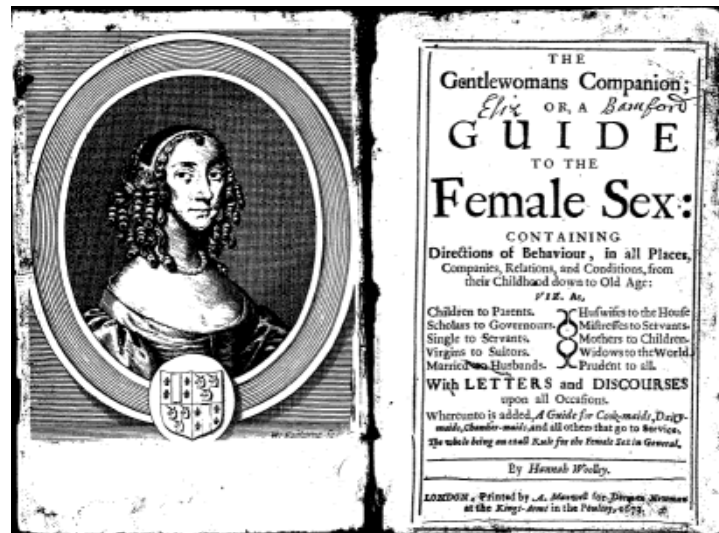
One big difference in texts that were written for silent readers is that the concept of a 'narrator' became much more common. In the 17th century, when texts were written to be performed aloud, the writer did not need to write in a way that assumed a narrator within the text itself – the narrator was going to be there in front of the audience, performing the text. With the era of silent reading, a replacement was needed for the performer – the narrator – and since the 18th century, texts have generally been constructed so that the readers must imagine this 'narrator' in order to make sense of the story. Readers who do not understand this will have difficulties in making sense of the story and in following movements in time and space.

These narrators are strange beings. Even first-person narrators are not located within the action at the time of narration, yet they must be close enough to the action to observe it. One of the most important skills a silent reader must acquire is to understand what a narrator is, and to recognise when he or she is speaking, and to whom.

This wasn't such a problem when texts were written to be performed or read aloud. The illustration and text extract (below) from the front page of a housekeeping guide published in the 1670s exemplify this. It is an odd compendium of advice and seems to be aimed at two conflicting audiences: the mistresses and the servants. The text shifts, addressing

each group in turn, which is potentially problematic. But if you conceive of the text as read aloud to an audience, it is possible to imagine a single speaker turning first to one (imagined) audience and then to the other:

To Scullery-Maids in great Houses



'There are several Rooms that you must keep sweet and clean, as the Kitchen, Pantry, Wash-house, &c.

That you also wash and scowre all the Plates and Dishes which are used in the Kitchen, also Kettles, Pots, Pans, Chamber-pots, with all other Iron, Brass and Pewter materials...

Thus Ladies, I have endeavoured to shew your Servant their duties in their respective places.'

(Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewomans Companion*, 1675)

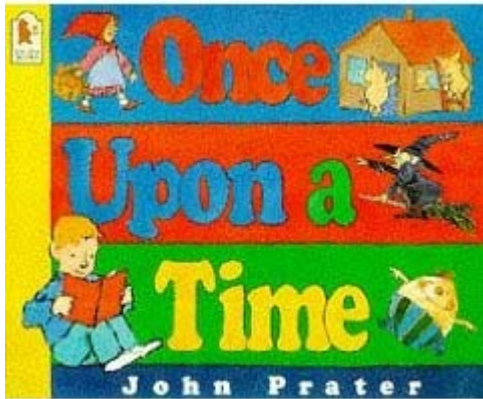
At the start of this extract, the text is clearly addressing maidservants and gives no warning before turning abruptly to their mistresses – 'Thus Ladies'. For the silent reader, this is potentially very disorienting. But the writer knew that the speaker who has prepared a performance of the text would simply turn from one group to another and that a narrator would not be necessary to signal the change.

Silent readers, therefore, need an extensive knowledge of the kinds of people narrators can be, what they know and what they are likely to do and say, if they are to compensate for the absence of a physical storyteller. How does this knowledge develop and what are the demands made by texts for different age groups?

Who is telling the story?

Once Upon a Time by John Prater

The idea of a 'narrator' is not a natural one. Inexperienced readers don't automatically 'hear' a narrator's voice emerge from a text. They



learn to do this through time and practice. A Primary 1 class reading John Prater's *Once Upon a Time* showed this clearly.

Once Upon a Time written by Vivian French and illustrated by John Prater (1993, Walker Books) is a story told in rhyme and pictures. It is narrated by a boy who lives in a house in the middle of countryside and the story takes place over a day, between the time of his father going to work and his father

returning home.

As the day goes by, the boy comments on the mundane events in his own home and series of events from well-known fairy tales happening outside, without seeming to realise where they are from or how extraordinary the stories actually are. Some of the fairy-tale events are put into words and some appear only in the pictures.

The teacher read the book aloud and showed the class the pictures at the same time. The teacher asked, 'Who's telling the story?'

Only a few children said 'the boy'. The rest of the answers involved other characters:

- 'Humpty Dumpty 'cos he's in the story.'
- 'The mum 'cos there was not much to do.'
- 'The bears.'
- 'The wolf 'cos he's talking to the girl.'
- 'You are!'

Asked about the boy, one child commented: 'He did nothing, just stayed and played', suggesting that the child couldn't see the relevance of a character who didn't act in the story.

The all-seeing narrator

Goodnight, Mister Tom by Michelle Magorian

Narrators have some qualities of real people – they seem to be observing from a fixed point in space and time. But these are not always points in space and time that any real person could inhabit.

In *Goodnight Mr Tom*, there is a moving description of the first meeting between Mr Tom and Willie. Willie is brought to Mr Tom's cottage

and the narrator gives a description of Tom through, presumably, an adult reader's eyes ('he was of average height') and then through Willie's eyes ('a towering giant'). The silent reader has to understand that the narrator is a bit like an adult reader in the way he or she sees the world, yet at the same time he can see inside the minds of characters like Willie.

The shifting narrator

Billy the Kid by Michael Morpurgo

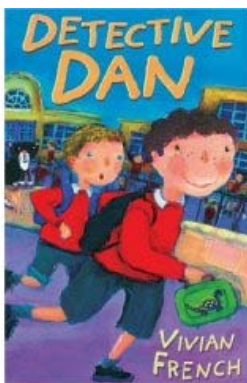
Billy the Kid by Michael Morpurgo switches between two different narrators, and the switches are marked by a change in font (from roman to *italic*). For the groups of reasonably experienced Primary 6 readers who studied this text, this was a successful technique – only one pupil in the group didn't immediately understand the nature of the switch.

Page layout, fonts and punctuation

The rules and conventions for page layout, fonts and punctuation have changed and stabilised since silent reading became the norm. For example, in the era of oral reading, the full stop was used much less frequently as it seemed too long a pause for a live performance and would have allowed people to interrupt (a full stop lasted four 'beats' according to some guides from the 17th century). Also, the act of speaking the words meant that performing readers automatically had to decide which words and phrases needed emphasis, but now italics have slowly acquired the job of marking emphasis for silent readers. Quotation marks and descriptive replacements for the word 'said' have also become common, taking over from the performer's use of different voices.

Page layout to support punctuation and meaning

Detective Dan by Vivian French



Modern books written for inexperienced readers often help the readers make sense of the text by reinforcing the sense of the text not just through punctuation but through the page layout. In many books for inexperienced readers, line breaks are designed so that each line contains a complete unit of meaning. *Detective Dan* by Vivian French is one text that does this.

However, this convention in *Detective Dan* caused problems for one group of readers. Their teacher explains:

'The children are encouraged to use the punctuation wrongly because the text is laid out so that each unit of meaning ends at the right-hand side of the page. However, on this page it doesn't do

that. The way this text was laid out, 'Did you see anything?' came at the end of a line and the next line read 'Billy whispered when Dan came back', which they assumed was the start of a new sentence. It meant they weren't sure who had said 'Did you see anything?'

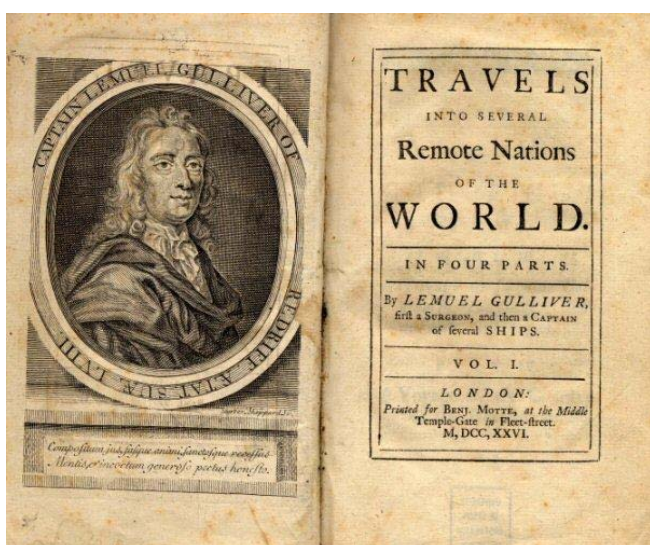
Hearing and visualising the text: tracking the dialogue and the characters

Children are introduced to books by hearing them read aloud and by looking at the pictures. As they start to read themselves, they start by reading aloud. Over a number of years they learn, through practice, to read silently. This great and still somewhat mysterious step requires them to produce internally at least some of the features of the speaking voice: the intonation and pitch (rising and falling); rhythm; pauses; emphasis. They need to be taught to 'hear' the text in their heads.

'Hearing' the text as a silent reader means that silent readers have to do a lot more work than those standing in the audience watching and listening to someone performing the text or than those listening to someone reading the text aloud. As they read, they need to create the voices of the different characters and the narrator. At the most basic level, doing this simply helps them to understand the grammar of the text. But at other levels of comprehension it helps critical tasks like differentiating between who is speaking at any given time, understanding the characterisation and understanding when the narrator or a character is speaking ironically. This is a comprehension skill for silent reading that needs to be actively coached.

Tracking voices in a performance text

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift



Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* was first published in 1726, and over the next 250 years it has proved a children's favourite. However, most children read this story in an adapted version. Swift himself had adults in mind when he wrote it, and he wrote at a time when silent reading was changing prose style but had not yet become the norm assumed by all writers.

This means that the book can be difficult for present-day silent readers. However, Swift's text quickly becomes easier if we imagine a gifted storyteller performing it:

He said, 'if it were possible there could be any country where *Yahoos* alone were endued with reason, they certainly must be the governing animal; because reason in time will always prevail against brutal strength. But, considering the frame of our bodies, and especially of mine, he thought no creature of equal bulk was so ill contrived for employing that reason in the common offices of life;' whereupon he desired to know whether those among whom I lived resembled me, or the *Yahoos* of his country?' I assured him, 'that I was as well shaped as most of my age; but the younger, and the females, were much more soft and tender, and the skins of the latter generally as white as milk.' He said, 'I differed indeed from other *Yahoos*, being much more cleanly, and not altogether so deformed; but, in point of real advantage, he thought I differed for the worse...'
(from Part IV, chapter 4)

In this passage, Gulliver is conversing with one of the talking horses. For the silent reader, it can be confusing. The horse is talking within quotation marks, but then moves to the third person, for example in 'he thought', while later the same character uses the 'I' of Gulliver in quotation marks. The punctuation here conflicts with the use of indirect speech. But read aloud, a storyteller can easily make it clear who is talking of whom, partly by using voice qualities for the horse, but also by alternately acting the horse's feelings and Gulliver's feelings.

Hearing the text to understand syntax

Count Karlstein by Philip Pullman

Reading aloud often makes both syntax and meaning clear. Silent readers must learn to 'hear' the voice of the author in their heads and to 'read' the punctuation so that they pause for the right length of time and use the right intonation. They continue to learn to do this long after they are regarded as fluent and competent readers. The following problem, which is taken from an issue raised during a Primary 6 literature circle discussion, provides an example of this continued learning in experienced readers.



Philip Pullman's *Count Karlstein* (Random House, 1998) is a comic horror tale told in multiple voices. One pupil reading this book with her literature circle had some trouble with two particular sentences of direct speech. The first sentence ended with 'I did so' and the second began with 'That would'. The pupil understood 'so that' to mean 'in order that' and couldn't make sense of the sentences. But when the teacher read it aloud, she understood immediately. The intonation and the pause between the two words immediately made the syntax clear.

Silent readers must be accomplished to be able to reproduce the pauses, rhythms and pitches of speech to avoid mistakes like this; decoding the words is not enough. In the past, before silent reading became common, a mistake like this would have been sorted out by the process of preparing the text for memorisation, with guidance from a master on where the voice should pause, rise and fall. Present-day adults who can read fluently, however, are often unaware of their own accomplishments. This can make it hard to spot the problematic aspects for learners.

Visualising characters to track dialogue

Wet World by Felice Arena and Phil Kettle



We found many examples of both experienced and inexperienced readers having problems in identifying which character is speaking in longer passages of dialogue.

Wet World by Felice Arena and Phil Kettle (Rising Stars, 2004) is a title in the 'Boys Rule' and 'Girls Rock' series. The books are written for inexperienced readers. They are short

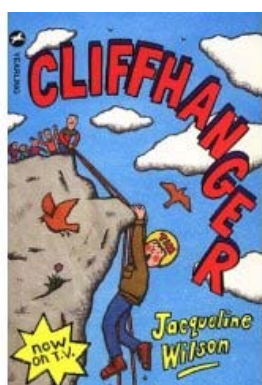
texts and focus on activities like skateboarding and surfing and are largely written in play-text form for two characters, with brief narrative passages.

The book was chosen by a group of very inexperienced readers receiving literacy support in Primary 6 and 7. In this case, having a clearer visualisation actually helped the readers differentiate between the two voices more clearly. The teacher reported:

'There was confusion between characters. Listening to them talk, it was clear they had no real visualisation of who said what. I asked them to produce a character profile. Each reader had to produce a poster about one character and then present it to the others. Having a picture – a visual image – as well as short written descriptions enabled them to compare and contrast the two characters and keep them quite separate in their minds – crucial for comprehension.'

Assigning accents and voices in order to track dialogue and characters

Cliffhanger by Jacqueline Wilson



Experienced readers in the middle and upper primary stages told the researchers that, even when they were reading silently, they often need to give characters different accents to help them keep track of who is speaking.

Jacqueline Wilson's *Cliffhanger* (Corgi, 1995) is a comic story of a boy reluctantly going on an adventure holiday for the summer. The story moves quickly and has strong characterisation, but teachers on the project

still identified possible problem areas in the dialogue.

'I like the sound of this adventure holiday for children,' said Dad, pointing to the advert in the paper. 'Abseiling, canoeing, archery, mountain biking.'

'Sounds a bit dangerous to me,' said Mum.

I didn't say anything. I went on watching telly.

'How about it Tim?' said Dad 'What about an adventure holiday, eh?'

'You can not be serious! Tim's much too young,' said Mum.

I still didn't say anything. I went on watching telly.' (page 7)

In this opening passage, three characters are established – the timid child, ambitious father and over-protective mother – and it is quite clear who is speaking. But elsewhere the speakers of dialogue are not indicated and are harder to identify.

'I know!'

'But it's OK. You can't fall. You're safe, I promise.'

'I don't feel safe, I feel sick.'

'Well you can get yourself down in a couple of ticks. All you have to do is grab hold of the rope.'

'HOW???????' (page 46)

A clear understanding of the characterisation and a clear visual image of the scene underpin the reader's ability to keep track of the conversation, helping the reader make better judgements about who is most likely to be speaking. One teacher used the following general activities to help readers develop their understanding of the characters – what they look like, what they sound like, what sorts of things they say and do – and ability to visualise the scene:

- Create a large picture of the main characters for each group, along with a supply of speech bubbles. Each group is assigned a character and must fill speech bubbles with things the character might say. The bubbles are displayed around the pictures and shared with the class.
- Use highlighters to identify pieces of dialogue which help to explain characters' personality.
- Act out the scene.
- Draw the scene with speech bubbles.
- Create a similar exercise with a list of adverbs to go with 'said' which help to establish character type.

One word of warning about visualisation: we know a great deal less about what happens in our minds when we read than we would wish. But it seems that not all effective readers visualise to the same extent and the detail of faces is rarely visualised by anyone. Some readers may visualise what they read much more intensely than others. Self-awareness is an important part of learning to be an effective reader and encouraging children to be aware of their visualisations, and to see how they relate to their understanding of the story as well as to the visualisations of others, can help them become even more effective readers.

Changes in time and location

When a text is performed aloud to an audience, it is not hard to follow the story as it changes times or location. The performer can use gesture, move their body to indicate a shift in time or place and, of course, observe the audience to check that they are following the story. The silent reader loses this support and following the shifts in setting or time can be a difficult comprehension element in silent reading.

Tracking changes in time and location

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe



Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was first published in 1719, a period of transition to silent reading. Although the novel has been a perennial classic, most present-day children encounter the text in modified versions.

The original text presents some problems with following moves in time and place:

'I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of *York*, of a good Family, tho' not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of *Bremen*, who settled first at

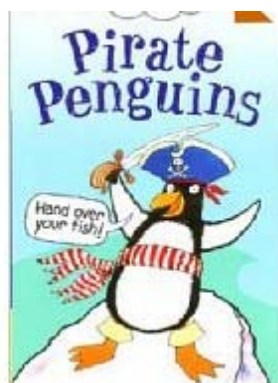
Hull.'

Present-day readers are often confused by the moves in time and space described in this short sentence: from York in 1632 to Bremen some decades earlier and Hull at some point between the first two times. Defoe, an accomplished and successful writer, wrote in such a seemingly confusing way because he assumed his novel would be read aloud by a live storyteller using gesture, among other tools. Research has shown that we use gesture unconsciously whenever we describe narrative movements of to/from or in/out. An experienced storyteller would not find it hard to use gesture and the shared space with the audience to clarify the moves between York, Bremen and Hull and three different time-periods in which they occurred.

The texts written for the silent readers of today have to compensate for the absence of this kind of storytelling prompt. Through wide experience, readers recognise the markers for shifts in time and place that are so crucial to comprehension.

Signalling setting changes clearly

Pirate Penguins by Frank Rodgers



How do young readers learn to recognise shifts in time or place? Writers for younger children know that they need to make any moves in time and place very clear if they are to help their readers to follow the plot.

In *Pirate Penguins* (Puffin, 2006) the pirate penguins have nothing to eat. The fish have disappeared from the sea and

they suspect that a gang of scary, sharp-toothed cats is responsible. They follow the cats to see what they are doing and whether they can return the fish to the sea.

The author, Frank Rodgers, is careful to help the less experienced readers for whom this story is written. He consistently signals each change of setting twice:

'Shaking his head in disappointment he clambered back aboard the *Frozen Kipper*. But as they sailed away Spott called out again from the crow's nest.'

Here the move from one ship to another is signalled first by 'clambered back aboard' and again by 'as they sailed away'.

'The *Frozen Kipper* reached Octopus Island that night under a bright, full, yellow moon.'

Here the move from day to night is signalled first by 'that night' and then again by the 'yellow moon'.

One 3-year-old child followed this story successfully when it was read aloud to him until a section where the central characters divide into two groups and pursue stories in parallel. This was the only passage where a shift in place (for one of the two groups of characters) is signalled only once and the child got confused. This suggests that the strategy of double signals is an important one for young readers.

The challenge of frequent time changes

Private Peaceful by Michael Morpurgo



Michael Morpurgo's *Private Peaceful* (Collins, 2003) is the story of a WWI soldier, told with hindsight and in the first person. The narrator is Private Peaceful, whose story recalls events from childhood, continuing right up to the night on which the story is told and events the next day.

The context and settings change frequently. Most of the changes are over relatively short periods of time, such as minutes and hours. The narrator uses various methods to indicate context change. For example, there is a paragraph break here, a change in tense from present to past, and a change of focus from the narrator's feelings and thoughts to a more objective description of events. He also uses time phrases such as 'after a while'.

Many of the clues are quite subtle and easily missed. If the story was being told live you would 'act out' the present tense context, emphasising the fact this is happening to you as it happens to the listener. During the past tense parts, there would be a calmer recollection of events that have passed and often gestures or the storyteller would move to a different part of the stage to indicate that these events happened in the past.

Three teachers developed activities to help readers with changing contexts using this text:

- finding time phrases in a text and highlighting them/writing them down
- finding words that indicate a different tense
- rewriting a given context in a different tense to see how that changes the story, then discussing why the author wrote this section in this tense.

Making inferences

Read this short narrative sentence:

‘When he entered the room, she turned white.’

What do you know about her feelings for ‘he’ (whoever he may be)? Perhaps you think she’s afraid of this person, or perhaps shocked that he is here, or alive?

Whatever your conclusion, you have drawn an inference about her emotional state from the fact that she has turned white. This may seem too obvious to mention, but many readers have problems with inferences of this kind.

Why silent readers must work harder to make inferences



This is a scene from the early 19th century (you can see the woman on the right in the sort of dress Jane Austen wore). It shows a ballad seller advertising his wares by performing to a street audience that includes servants, gentry, and other passers-by – a very mixed audience in terms of social

class.

The ballad may have been one such as this:

A most excellent Ballad of an Old Man and his Wife,
Who in their want and misery fought to their Children for succour, by
whom they were disdain'd, and scornfully sent them away succourless, and
Gods vengeance shewed on them for the same. *Tune of, Priscilla.*

Unto the door with trembling Joynts
when this old couple came,
The woman with a shaking hand,
the old man blind and lame:
Full mannerly they knockt,
fearing for to offend,
At last their Son frowningly came,
unto them in the end.

You can see how this sort of performance made it easier to form inferences, and how much extra work silent readers have to do. A silent reader has to infer that the son is frowning because he knows who is at

the door (and not, for example, because of something happening inside the house). But the ballad performer in the picture can make it quite clear that the frowning commences when the son sees who's behind the door by simply using gesture to show the first encounter between son and parents. For silent readers to make correct inferences, they need some kind of re-enactment of the scene in their head if they are to understand the relationships between characters and to compensate for the ballad singer's performance.

Knowledge of gesture

Readers who performed stories also used the language of gesture to help their audience make correct inferences about the information they were being given.



This picture is taken from a book published in 1643 called *Chirologia*. It explains to readers the conventional language of gesture. Some of these conventions are still with us, like the one for applause or the one, for approval:

Understanding these conventions helped the audience follow a text being performed aloud. For example, if the audience heard these words:

'Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye.' (Milton)



with this gesture of condemnation:



they could make a clear decision that the speaker was not using irony, but was sincere in his bold claim.

What this illustrates is that inference was a challenging and potentially ambiguous aspect of comprehension even when writers had the advantage of texts being read aloud and performed; how much more challenging is inference for those who are reading silently? Silent readers do need to bring quite complex and special skills and knowledge to the text. It is not surprising that even experienced readers miss inferences or make mistaken inferences, or that less experienced readers do so quite frequently. In teaching comprehension, it is vital to create space to discuss the inferences that silent readers make, and not to panic or feel that the reading experience is wasted just because learners get it wrong. It is particularly important that readers who have difficulty with inference continue to be given complex texts and are given plenty of opportunity to talk about the inferences they have made, and compare them with those made by others.

Wrong inferences don't ruin enjoyment

Billy the Kid by Michael Morpurgo

Michael Morpurgo's *Billy the Kid* (Chrysalis, 2000) is the story of Billy, a pre-war Chelsea football star who loses his career when he enlists to fight in WW2. He ends up an old man, alcoholic and homeless, living in the garden shed of a boy who develops his own football skills under Billy's influence.

This book was the literature circle choice of a group of Primary 6 pupils. All the children enjoyed the book and none of them felt that they had had any significant problems understanding the story. Yet when asked who Billy was, many of the children answered confidently, 'He's the boy's grandfather'. In addition, few children had understood that Billy had a problem with alcohol.

How did these children draw these wrong inferences and overlook others that were important? Did they rely on their knowledge of the world and conclude that old men who live with the family and help with children are grandfathers? Did they draw on their knowledge of other texts, look at the cover and conclude that men with white beards are grandfathers? Were they so focused on the boy's point of view that they failed to notice Billy's experience?

Making wrong inferences here did not stop the children enjoying the story or understanding many other aspects of the boy's relationship with Billy. Should this be described as a comprehension problem? To what extent is this the sort of comprehension issue that arises during adults' reading experiences?

Inferring characterisation

Hit the Ball Duck by Jez Alborough

Hit the Ball Duck is one of a series of books featuring a boisterous Duck by Jez Alborough (Harper Collins, 2005). A Primary 1 class was put into groups, given the picture book and were asked to say what was happening in one of the pictures towards the middle of the story.

The responses showed that these children still attribute a very wide range of emotions and motivations to the characters:

'Two ducks are going to play baseball.'

'Goat is throwing up the ball to start baseball'

'Sheep's in the middle. The goat is going to throw the ball to Duck, Duck will hit it and sheep will catch it.'

'They are worried – they think the ball is going to hit Sheep.'

'Sheep is worried about the jaggy things.'

'They're going a wee run over the bridge.'

'Goat's got an angry face 'cos ball's in the tree. Frog's smiling 'cos he likes the ball in the tree then they can't play bat and ball.'

An important part of making inferences in narrative requires a thorough knowledge of human emotions and human motivations. Age and experience play an important part in this. One teacher of children in Primary 6 and 7 pointed out: 'The children in this school have problems making inferences about why people behave the way they do. I think some of these children don't have many stable influences in their lives and find it hard to understand the motivations of people in stories who are more predictable.'

Reading as a general reader rather than oneself

Adopting the role of the 'general reader'

Samuel Pepys



Another important shift in understanding between the texts written in the 17th century and those written for today is the idea that writers write not for a specific person, but a general reader, who often brings a knowledge base and values to the text that are subtly different from the reader's own.

Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, was an enthusiastic reader and buyer of books. Yet he lived in an era where the art of reading still tended to mean reading aloud, and he did so himself frequently. He also required his wife and servants to read to him, and at least once he even read aloud in solitude.

Nowadays we often analyse literary texts in terms of the 'implied reader', assuming that the author can't have any particular individual in mind. For Pepys, the idea of an 'ideal', 'implied' or 'imagined reader' didn't exist. For him, because texts were written to be performed or read aloud, they were directed at particular people or audiences (even though others, such as Pepys himself, might buy or hear the text too). Pepys says of one book, 'In some places he speaks well but generally is but a sorry man' because he speaks above his station to his audience of gentlemen. For Pepys, the text is a script for a performance by a particular person to a particular audience. The script is good or bad only insofar as it is suitable for that particular writer to have written for that particular audience. It is not good or bad in itself – there is no general reader.

One of the difficulties a young learner faces today is learning to take on the role of a general reader. They must pretend to be someone of the kind imagined by the author – often a person with slightly different kinds of knowledge, different beliefs and even different values. This is another example of a skill that fluent adult readers forget they have ever acquired.

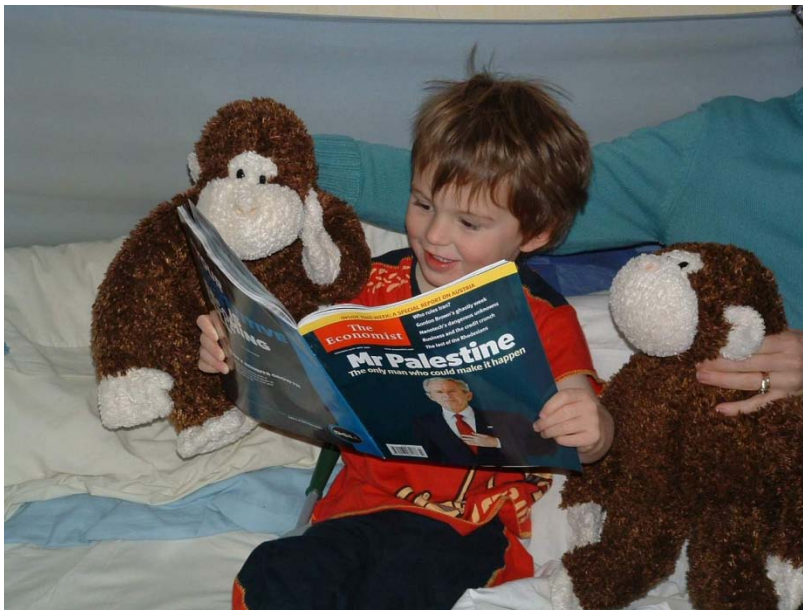
Understanding how a general reader must respond

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo William

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo William (Caldecott Honor) features a pigeon whose only dream is to drive a bus. When a bus driver leaves the bus temporarily, he gives the general readers just one instruction: 'Remember: Don't let the pigeon drive the bus!' The pigeon tries to persuade the reader to let him drive the bus by using the whole range of persuasive devices familiar to young children and their parents: logical argument, flattery, emotional blackmail, tantrums and bribery.

One teacher found her inexperienced readers loved this book and understood what the author required of them as general readers, but popped out of role and became specific readers when the pigeon used bribery. As soon as the pigeon said 'I'll give you £5', many in the class said 'Yes, Okay. We'll take the money.'

3. Comprehension



What matters in comprehension?

This pre-school child looked at his mother's copy of *The Economist* for some time.

- He was interested in it; he was 'reading' it to his toys.
- He was not a prodigy, but it did have meaning for him.
- He enjoyed it.
- What can this tell us about reading comprehension?

Decoding is not the whole story

It can be difficult in a busy classroom to always notice what children are understanding when they read. Teachers on this knowledge exchange project found that they could either assume too much or too little:

'I would never have placed mixed ability readers in the literature circle groups if it had not been suggested. However, in doing so I discovered that some children I thought of as 'less able' readers had a really good understanding and made valuable contributions to the discussions. Some of the ones I regarded as 'able readers' did not have as good an understanding. My judgements about their reading ability were based on their fluency, not their understanding.'

Primary 3 teacher

Retelling the story: a crucial first step for comprehension



Wet World by Felice Arena and Phil Kettle (Rising Stars, 2004) is a title in the 'Boys Rule' and 'Girls Rock' series. These short texts are aimed at inexperienced readers and focus on activities like skateboarding and surfing and are largely written in play text form for two characters, with brief narrative passages.

A group chose this book for their literature circle. They enjoyed the book a

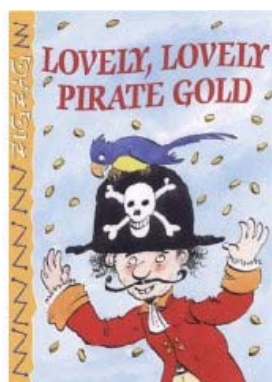
great deal. The teacher said:

'All the children were eager to read aloud. They could link the phrase 'I am the greatest' with Mohammed Ali and discuss in great detail the game 'Stone, paper, scissors'. However, the children left out many of the main ideas when they retold the chapter they had just read. They tended to remember the beginning and the end of each chapter but not the middle, and they had problems with the sequencing of events. This spoke volumes about how they were thinking as they read – what they were noticing. They were also reluctant to re-read and to fill in some of the gaps. I firmly believe these children need more practice in retelling the story, and that would help their reading. I found it useful to organise the literature circles so they started by summarising to one another what had happened so far.'

Paraphrasing is a skill that has been discouraged in some contexts; in highly experienced adult readers it is seen as an unnecessary distraction from genuine literary analysis. But for school readers, even for those who do not have any comprehension problems, it can be a big help to retell the story to one another.

Wider knowledge of the world helps comprehension

Lovely, Lovely Pirate Gold by Scoular Anderson



Lovely, Lovely Pirate Gold by Scoular Anderson (Evans Publishing) tells the story of a pirate captain who looks in his chest for his socks and vest but, instead, finds a treasure map and, with his crew, decides to look for the hidden treasure.

The teacher here gave her Primary 1 class a copy of the book and asked them just to look through the pictures. For the front cover

(above) they produced a wide range of possible texts, including 'Help, there's a parrot on my hat!'

But many of the pupils correctly identified this as a pirate story, referring to stereotypical pirate speech, or the fact that pirates look for treasure, or that they sail:

'Ho, ho! Come on, pirates!'

'Ha! Ha! Ha! I've found the gold!'

'What's the treasure doing?'

'I'm going to sail in the water today.'

In looking at the pictures, they drew on their knowledge of pirate texts:

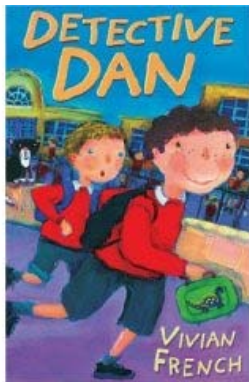
'...The Captain pointed the finger where to go. He pointed where they should build, where they should dig up the treasure, except something happened...'

'...'Crew, crew, I've found the map and it's got some islands on it.' ...The Captain jumped and jumped and took his hat off and jumped on his hat and he pulled his hair before he ran off...'

What these readers have brought to the text is a knowledge of other, similar, stories: of the kinds of things that happen in them, and the kinds of characters they contain. Talking through the pictures reminded children of what they knew and allowed them to share knowledge with others who knew less about pirates.

Book introductions: give information that helps comprehension

Detective Dan by Vivian French



Discussing the cover and pictures quickly becomes boring if this is the only strategy to promote comprehension that teachers use. Sometimes a clear book introduction, which 'lines up' the children to notice important details or themes, can be effective in prompting them to think for themselves and make sense of the story.

Detective Dan by Vivian French (A&C Black, 2004) is about a boy whose lunchbox, containing sardine sandwiches, keeps going missing. The culprit turns out to be a cat who's attracted by the fishy smell.

A Primary 3 teacher used this book with her class and was surprised to find some children struggling with the story. On enquiry, their problem was that:

- a. they didn't know what sardines were, and
- b. they didn't know that cats like fish.

'On reflection it would have been advisable to have given the children a clue at the beginning to help them engage better with the text: 'As you read the story I want you to think about what Dan's sandwiches are made from because this is important.'

Big ideas about comprehension

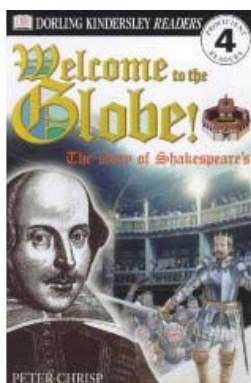
The reader's input matters (but this is a recent idea)

Rehearsing Shakespeare

When reading meant reading in order to learn the story and perform or tell it to others, the audience had a much more communal experience of the text, a bit like the audience at the theatre today. Silent reading is usually a private experience, and becoming aware of other readers' experiences and how they are different from or similar to one's own can be a big help in driving readers' understandings of comprehension.

The idea that different readers might construct different understandings is comparatively new. In the world before fluent silent reading became the norm, there was little room for individual interpretation of texts. Most people assumed only one interpretation was possible. Shakespeare's actors were taught that there was only one way to read a text. The theatre historian Tiffany Stern has shown that actors in Shakespeare's time did not really have group rehearsals. Instead they had tuition from a master, usually the playwright, in exactly how to pronounce

the text – where to raise the voice, where to gesture, where to pause. The same seems to have been true for boys in grammar schools learning non-dramatic texts.

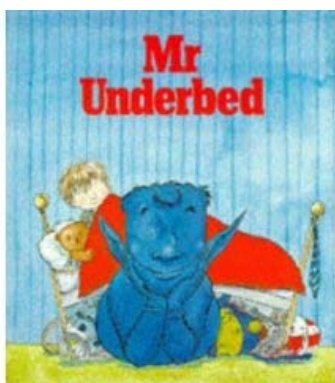


The researchers in this project used Vivienne Smith's work on Making Reading Mean to model the interaction that modern readers have between the text and their own individual experiences and knowledge. They used this because it is a dynamic model, one that highlights the patterns of thinking and responding that are productive and those that are less productive. You can read more about her model at the end of the comprehension

section.

Celebrate and explore the different understandings

Mr Underbed by Chris Riddell



For some children, comprehension lessons in school can feel rather like a Shakespearean theatre rehearsal. They believe that there is one 'correct' interpretation – held by the teacher – and that the lesson is about how far their own interpretations fall short of this. One of the challenges children face as silent readers is reassurance that even if they experience the text differently from someone else, that doesn't necessarily mean they haven't

understood it. Structuring comprehension lessons so that they are clearly about sharing and exploring different interpretations rather than coming to understand one 'ideal' interpretation can help silent readers to understand the reading task.

Mr Underbed by Chris Riddell (Andersen Press, 1997) is the story of a boy who is troubled by a series of monsters who want to sleep in his bed.

The children heard the story and were asked to draw their impressions of Mr Underbed. The result was a very wide range of drawings, two of which are shown below.

Mr. Underbed



Mr. Underbed



What's interesting is that despite the wide range of representations, all of them featured some fantastic, non-human feature, such as horns, despite the fact that the text does not suggest that Mr Underbed himself is a monster.

The children have decided from the nature of the story itself that he is a monster, but within the category 'monster' have felt free to go down different visual avenues.

How far are these children having the same experience of the text, and how far are they having different experiences of the text? What does this mean for how comprehension is taught in schools? What does it mean for children's understanding of their role as a reader?

Readers like different things

Will There be Polar Bears? by Julia Jarman

Different readers can have different experiences of the same text. They might visualise the characters differently, or be interested in different bits of the narrative.

Will There be Polar Bears? by Julia Jarman (Mammoth, 1993) tells the story of Sam, who is sad to go away for Christmas to his aunt's, especially because he had mistakenly believed she lived at the north pole, and now knows she doesn't.

Children in Primary 1 were asked to draw which character they liked best and explain why they liked that character.

The 14 children came up with seven different answers, including Santa and 'the dog'. The reasons given were equally varied:

'Mum – because she took Sam away for Christmas.'

'Aunt Addie – because she taught the children to skate.'

'Aunt Addie – because she's very clever.'

'The dog – because it was staying still for Sam.'

'Sam – because he's a boy.'

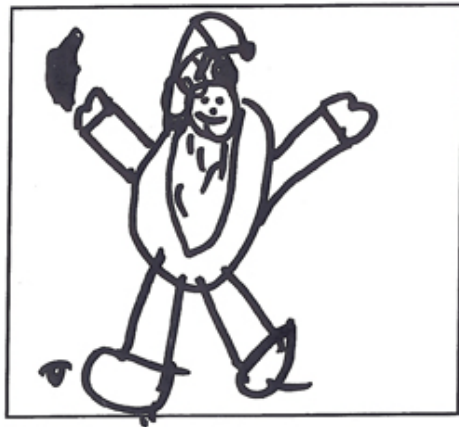
'Santa – because he gave out presents.'

'The polar bear – because they are furry.'

Will There Be Polar Bears?

Julia Jarman

Which character did you like best?



Santa

Why?

because he gave the

children presents and hung

skates on the tree

Children do not necessarily know that others react to texts differently until they talk about them. One advantage of this type of activity as a preparation for literature circles is that it allows them to learn about other views of the text without assuming that everyone reacts in the same way, or feeling that their own view is necessarily 'wrong'.

Older readers may imagine characters differently, but not always

Survival by Chris Ryan



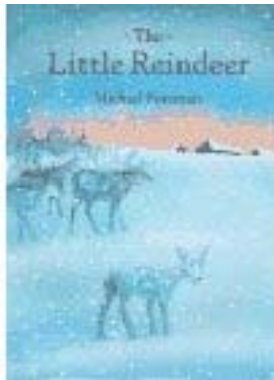
Survival is a novel by Chris Ryan. Five teenagers are marooned on a desert island in Indonesia. They face komodo dragons, sharks and modern-day pirates and can only survive if they bond as a team. One teacher asked her group of secondary pupils to draw pictures of one of the characters:

'They were given prior warning so that they could select textual clues, but they were also told to consider what the character looked like in their heads. All the groups had to draw the same character but nobody was allowed to confer during the drawing stage. One group had decided to draw Heather from the novel *Survival*. One pupil had drawn the character in a luminous sporty outfit with blonde hair, whereas another pupil had drawn her in a long black dress, with dark hair, wearing heavy makeup. The first pupil stated that Heather was a stereotypical surfer in her mind because the novel was set on a beach. However, the second pupil argued that Heather was more goth-like because she had a dark side to her personality. I had assumed that all of the drawings would be very similar; however, I discovered that two pupils who were reading the same novel had created two very different Heathers in their mind.'

Interestingly, when the same pupils drew another character, who was not described in the text in any more detail, they draw far more similar pictures, drawing on a few highly stereotypical features (glasses and a baseball cap).

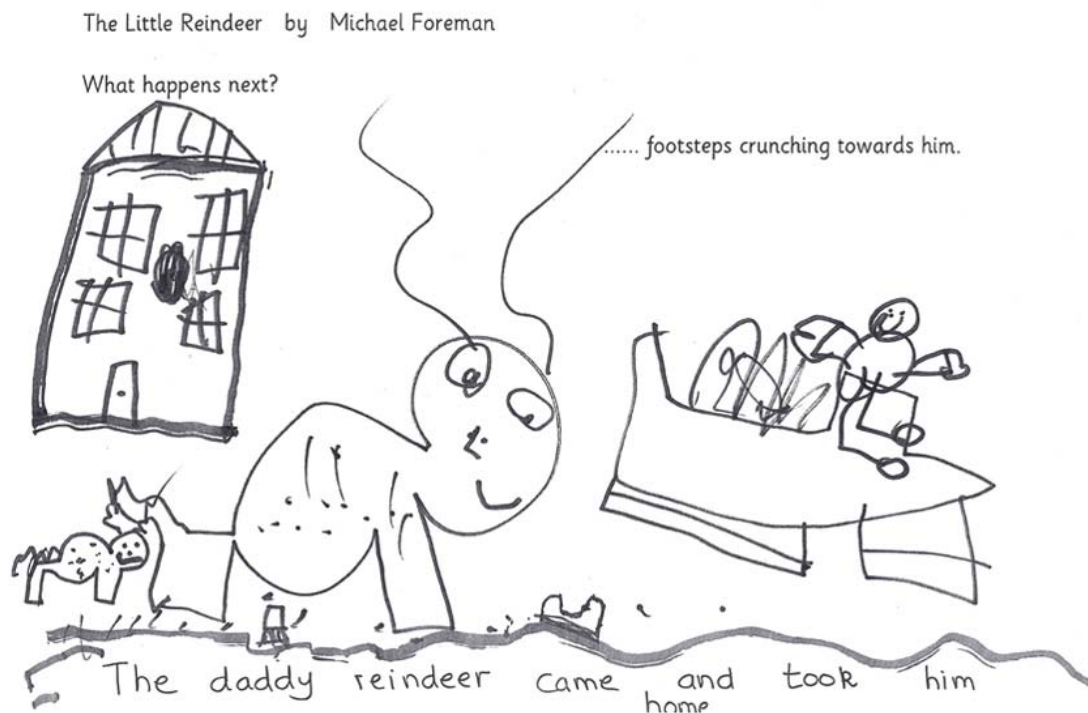
Readers think the plot may go in different directions

The Little Reindeer by Michael Foreman



Michael Foreman's *The Little Reindeer* (Andersen Press, 1996) tells the story of a reindeer who is gift-wrapped by accident and given as a present to a little boy. The Primary 1 teacher who was reading this to her class stopped at a strategic point and asked the children to draw what happened next and add some text. There was a wide range of alternatives, for example: 'The daddy reindeer came and took him home'; 'the reindeer goes into a factory and sees them making toys'; 'a bad man comes and takes the reindeer away'.

These three continuations suggest radically different possibilities for the story at this point. The fact that these young readers know that plots can go in different directions is an important cornerstone for comprehension and engagement in the story. Keeping this engagement as the pupils get older is crucial.



Making Reading Mean: A Comprehension Model to Support Flexible and Supportive Teaching

Vivienne Smith suggests that good comprehension is 'a habit of mind' that begins to be established when children first look at picture books and develops as they start to read longer chapter books and novels.

Young children begin to establish their reading habits during their earliest reading experiences. This is why it is so important that they read good quality picture books, books that afford complex language and invite complex and varied responses. The storyline and the way that the book is written need to offer range and depth.

If children are always offered simplified, 'pared down' books, books that can only be read in one way and only demand one sort of response, they cannot learn that good readers respond in a range of ways, they cannot learn that it is important to share the way that they respond or listen to others' responses and they cannot become familiar with what a reader must do and the ways that writers use language to help the silent reader understand.

Vivienne Smith's model of comprehension

Vivienne Smith's model of comprehension shows how a reader's interpretation of the text needs to be enriched by the links they see with other texts, with their knowledge of the experiences of others and things other people have told them and with their own personal experiences and knowledge. Some readers learn to use these different 'layers of response' in a balanced way, returning to the information in the text they are reading to see how the other layers enrich, challenge or change their understanding. Other readers develop bad habits in terms of how they use their knowledge to respond to the text – they go off at tangents, they restrict themselves to particular types of experience, or they think about the text in isolation, rarely bringing any other knowledge to inform their response as readers.

Thus, the model describes how to help readers to think more deeply about the books they are reading by thinking about how they relate different types of experiences to the text.

For more information about her model, read Vivienne Smith's book, *Making Reading Mean*, published by the UK Literacy Association (UKLA). It can be ordered online from UKLA at:

www.ukla.org/site/publications/view/making_reading_mean/



4. Literature circles and supporting resources

Literature circles

Literature circles involve a group of children discussing what they find interesting and worth talking about in a novel. In a literature circle, the children choose the book they will read. They read at home but decide as a group how many pages to read each week, and they bring their questions and responses to drive the group discussion. Literature circles are therefore rather like the 'book groups' to which many adults belong. The teacher can facilitate discussion, but the children, rather than the teachers' questions or a worksheet, must drive the group discussion.

Literature circles represent a considerable shift in power and agency in the classroom. They allow pupils to exercise some choice over what they read, what they talk about and over the time and place that the reading takes place. This encourages children to be motivated and open to new ideas and thinking (successful learners), to think about how literature relates to their own lives, values and beliefs (confident learners), and to develop respect for others' opinions and experiences (responsible citizens). All this can produce the attitudes necessary to become effective contributors.

In the language curriculum, teachers use literature circles for different reasons.

- Sometimes they want to improve children's engagement in reading by making it a social activity, with plenty of choice and a regular opportunity for discussion.
- Sometimes they want to provide regular prompts for sustained, engaged reading in comfortable surroundings.

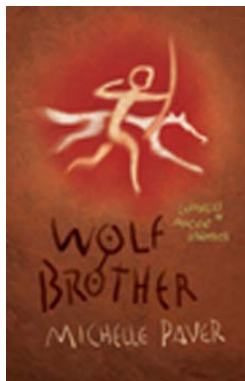
- Sometimes they want to improve comprehension by getting pupils to share and explore their understandings.
- Sometimes they want children to practise engaging in literary criticism.
- Sometimes they want to develop talking and listening in groups.

Sue Ellis's research indicates that teachers need to be clear about why they want to use literature circles and which of the big ideas listed above are most important for their class. Teachers also need to be clear about how they will organise and manage the class for literature circles. Different classes will need different sorts of support. You can read some of the advice generated from a pilot project on introducing literature circles in the project report on the Scottish Government website at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/11/SRLitCir

Patricia Gilhooley, one of the East Ayrshire project teachers, talks about her experiences of using literature circles in a six-minute podcast called 'CfE in EAC 05 - Literature Circles' available on the libsyn website at www.libsyn.com/directory/on/tag/ayrshire.

Literature circles: a complex view of comprehension

Wolf Brother by Michelle Paver



Literature circles offer the potential for children to become truly engaged readers; they choose their own book, set their own targets and can choose a time and place to read that is comfortable and enjoyable for them. This is important because some research shows that children whose main reading opportunities are in school are limited as readers because they choose texts that are short and less challenging, suitable for the shorter 'slots of time' that the school curriculum affords.

Michelle Paver's *Wolf Brother* (Orion, 2004) was the book chosen by one Primary 6 literature circle. The teacher was delighted by the pupils' enthusiasm in discussion and their apparent grasp of the story. So she was taken aback when it emerged in a literature circle conversation towards the end of the book that, despite enjoying the book, many of the group had simply failed to notice the existence of Renn, who is quite a major character.

Does this omission mean that the children are poor comprehenders? Does it mean that they need to go back and have the story re-explained by a teacher? Or could it suggest that truly engaged readers are good at extracting what they need to understand the story and free to concentrate on the bits and the characters that they really like?

As one teacher said of his Primary 4 literature circles, 'Children's comprehension involved more uncertainties and questions than right/wrong answers. The literature circle discussions allowed them to

voice these in a way they would not have done had I been there driving the discussion. It made them *feel* like readers. My class is delighted to think that they've already read more books than someone like Isaac Newton probably had at their age.' – *Primary 6 teacher*

Planning and introducing literature circles

One of the teachers on this project gave the following account of how she planned and introduced literature circles to her class.

'I became involved in the study into how literature circles can help raise awareness of the writer's craft and strengthen comprehension after attending an in-service course. I saw them as a vehicle to promote reading as an enjoyable social-type activity and not something seen by pupils as a chore or only an activity carried out in school.

As educators it is a challenge for us to change attitudes to reading so that when pupils become older and carers no longer feel there is a need to 'hear' reading at home pupils will be motivated enough to read on their own, thus reinforcing skills being taught in school. Could literature circles help us face this challenge?

I began by discussing with my class why we need to be able to read and conducting a rough survey which explored their attitude to reading and their reading habits.

The discussion was very positive with all pupils in agreement that life would be very difficult if one could not read to a reasonable standard. The results of the survey, however, shocked me. More than 50% never read for pleasure at home and of that number many could not remember ever receiving a book as a gift.

Establishing circles

I decided to set up three circles. I made the decision not to have mixed ability groups for two main reasons.

- First, due to time constraints I did not have time to re-establish groupings where pupils felt safe and comfortable enough to contribute freely to discussion.
- Second, I had different aims for each group. For the more able readers my aim was to transfer skills from formal reading lessons to less formal forum of a literature circle. For less able readers my aim was for them to open a book, read it and hopefully enjoy the experience.

Choosing books

Each group was given a choice of three books and time to:

- discuss the title, the cover and their knowledge of the author

- read and discuss the blurb
- read and discuss the first few pages
- choose, by common agreement or by a secret ballot, which book their group would read and discuss as a literature circle.

Negotiations

Pupils were then encouraged to negotiate and come to an agreement about the number of pages to be read before the next session of literature circles. They needed some practice to get this right.

Discussions and focusing the activities

Because this was a new way of working, I structured and focused their preparation for the literature circle discussion, although I was careful to choose activities that allowed the group to identify questions and drive the discussion. Each week I set a focus using various activities where text had to be read and referred to in order to justify choices or decisions.

These are some of the activities:

- Early on, pupils were asked to make notes, as a group, of their predictions about the main character; who it was going to be and why, justifying their choice. This would be referred to at a later date.
- Allowing discussion about favourite TV characters and reasons for likes and dislikes. Then with the aid of prompt sheet pupils were encouraged to have similar discussions about characters met in the book up to that point. Pupils could also be encouraged to relate characters to those they have met in real life.
- Post-it notes. I supplied each pupil with several notes so they could note down their thoughts during reading, about their questions, their responses, their favourite, least favourite or most surprising bits of the story, noting the page and perhaps a short quote to help justify their choice during discussion.
- Post-it notes were also used to focus on character traits, things people say, thoughts about the setting etc. The aim was for pupils to use the text to justify their choices and be able to refer to specific parts easily.
- Character sketches – pupils were each given an instruction sheet and an envelope. Instructions guide pupils to, secretly, draw their favourite character from the story using evidence from the text to draw an accurate picture. They must then place picture into envelope and return it to school before the next literature circle Session. These drawings – and the similarities and differences between them – were then used for group discussion.
- I used the Goldfish Bowl technique to aid those groups who find it difficult to participate fully in discussions. This is when members of struggling groups each stand behind members of a group where

successful discussion is taking place. They have to focus on particular people and are encouraged to observe what is going well and what these people are doing to make it successful. They share their observations with the group. Then they return to their own group and incorporate these things into their own discussion. At a later stage, the roles can be reversed; the group who were observed become the observers.

Celebration

Once they had finished reading the book, the group could choose how to share their thoughts with the class by:

- reading aloud their favourite part of the story (They were given time to prepare for this)
 - designing a new book cover
 - dramatising their favourite part of the story for the class
 - writing a book review for other readers and putting it on the Amazon website.
-

5. Links to Curriculum for Excellence

Capacities

Literature circles link well to Curriculum for Excellence. Pupils are within the safe environment of a familiar peer group where the boundaries are usually already established and the four capacities for learning can be further developed.

RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS – pupils participate in a democratic process and must abide by the decision. They also have an opportunity to negotiate targets and timescales while taking into account the needs of others.

EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTORS – pupils must participate fully in discussions and adopt various roles within the group.

CONFIDENT INDIVIDUALS – pupils are encouraged to justify choices and also to participate in presentations.

SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS – pupils must transfer skills they have already learned so that they can participate fully in activities.

Principles

CHALLENGE – working with friends encourages high aspirations and, even when the group has chosen a reading target that is quite challenging, the social aspects of the group encourage less experienced readers to sustain their efforts.

DEPTH – the discussion encourages different types of thinking. Pupils get to see how others interpret the text and frequently emerge with a better, more rounded understanding themselves.

COHERENCE – the literature circles encourage pupils to think about how reading and books relate to their lives, and to use the skills and strategies they have been taught in talking and listening lessons, the time management and organisation skills they have been taught in enterprise and the empathy they have learnt from citizenship lessons.

RELEVANCE – the pupils see the activity as having an integral and social purpose. They take it seriously and see the value in relation to their lives.

6. Conclusion and Reflection on using Literature Circles

Literature circles were great fun to do with this particular class. Although there were several reluctant readers there was no one who had not achieved at least level B. The social element and the element of choice in agreeing the number of pages to be read by the group was a great incentive for those who would not normally have bothered to do the reading required. Trying to persuade these reluctant readers to complete the extra thinking tasks in preparation for the group discussion was still an issue but perhaps I lost sight of my aim for them, which was to simply get them enthusiastic about reading the book.

It was hard to encourage discussion within the group of most reluctant readers but with direction they did participate in activities. They found the discussion hard and I suspect that maybe they had had less experience of this in the past, or of thinking about books in the way that I was asking them to.

Perhaps I should have aimed for less intensive discussion to begin with. The more able readers participated well and had some very focused discussion.

Literature circles are by no means a 'cure all' but I feel it is another tool to promote reading for enjoyment as well as a way of allowing pupils to further develop reading networks amongst themselves and any reading will develop their skills. The pupils in my class rose to the challenge and the evidence from their learning logs demonstrates that they enjoyed being challenged, felt achievement and had learnt quite a lot about the reading process:

- 'What I need help with is trying not to read past the page for literature circles.'
- 'What surprised me most was literature circles because only two people drew the same character.'
- 'What surprised me most was literature circles because I didn't think I would be able to read 90 pages.'

I would use literature circles in my class again but perhaps not with so many groups running at the same time because I did not feel I was able to support every circle effectively. We live and learn.

What is the Goldfish Bowl?

The 'Goldfish Bowl' technique is a way to help children recognise productive and less productive behaviours when talking in a group. One group of children sit in a circle and discuss a question or text.

Other children stand behind each member of the discussion group, holding a clipboard. As the group discuss, the observers watch their chosen person. Their task is to focus on just one person in the group and listen to how well this person contributes to the discussion. They must find examples of skilful and less skilful discussion behaviours and note them on the clipboard.

After the discussion, they 'feed back' their observations to individuals and, if appropriate, to the group. The focus during the discussion has to be on the impact of different behaviours and on alternative ways of contributing that might have been more productive.

Parent newsletter (See below)

At the beginning of the literature circle, the teacher distributed a newsletter which had the following aims:

- To explain the purpose and benefits of a literature circle approach

- To provide handy hints for helping with reading at home.

7. Literature circles

Reading for fun

Dear Parent

Your child's class is going to try a new type of reading experience this term – 'Literature Circles'. It will run alongside the reading scheme.

What are literature circles?

A literature circle is a bit like a book group. Groups of four to six children meet in class, usually once a week, to discuss a book they are all reading. The groups are often mixed ability, based on a particular book rather than reading attainment. The children are involved in choosing which book they will read and they each have a copy so they can do the reading at home. During meetings, the children follow their own discussion (rather than relying on the teacher or on worksheet questions). An important job at the end of each meeting is to decide how much they will all read before the next meeting.

Why is your child involved?

We want your child to enjoy reading in different ways and to increase the number of books they read. We also want to improve the children's ability to talk about their reading and improve their understanding.

Did you know?

Before the 18th century books were written to be 'told' aloud because books were expensive. When silent reading came in, readers needed help to follow the story without a storyteller, so style and punctuation changed. 'Narrators' appeared in stories, as well as more punctuation. These changes make it a real accomplishment to be a young reader, because today's children need skills which were rare in earlier centuries. We hope literature circles can help them to be successful readers.

How can you help?

You can help your child by:

- **encouraging** your child to read to the designated page (but no further – the rest of the group gets irritated if one person *knows* what happens next before they do!). If your child finds the reading a bit of a struggle, feel free to help by doing the reading with them. Take it in turns to read until you get to the designated page.
- **finding time** to have a relaxed conversation about the book if your child wants this. (Note: this must be a conversation, not an interrogation!). Some children like to just talk about the book with

the other literature circle members, others like to discuss it with all and sundry. Your child might chat about:

- how characters or events in the story may be similar to their own experiences or to real-life people
- how the story in this book is similar to stories in other books
- which characters they like; which they don't; which parts they particularly enjoy; which they don't; what could happen; what could have happened differently
- **discussing** with your child what you enjoy reading, and *how* you read. Everyone reads differently. When you read, do you imagine accents and voices? Do you visualise characters, the action or settings as if it was a film? Do you imagine a narrator's voice or viewpoint? Perhaps you re-read parts that don't make sense, or draw quick diagrams to help you remember how characters relate to each other? Do you skip bits? Do you ever lose yourself in a story, becoming so gripped that you can't put it down?

You can also help...

...if you notice any of the following, as we would be very interested to hear about them. Just jot a quick note to the class teacher:

- observations about your child's reaction to literature circles
- examples of your child understanding the story in a new or different way
- examples of your child having difficulty with the story
- changes in your child's reading habits at home
- reading habits at home.

8. Pupil questionnaire

The following resource (Literature Circles) is for pupil use and has a dual function. The first sheet can be used as a self-assessment tool and the last two pages can be used to assess children's attitudes towards reading. This questionnaire could be used at the beginning and end of the literature circle.

Literature Circles

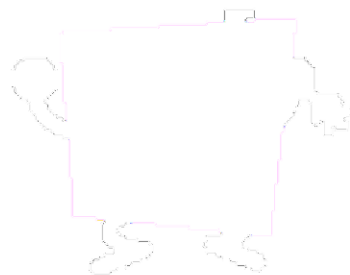
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Reached agreed target				
Sticky notes completed				
Written this week's response				
Participated in discussion				
Handed in reading response book				

Name : _____

Text: _____

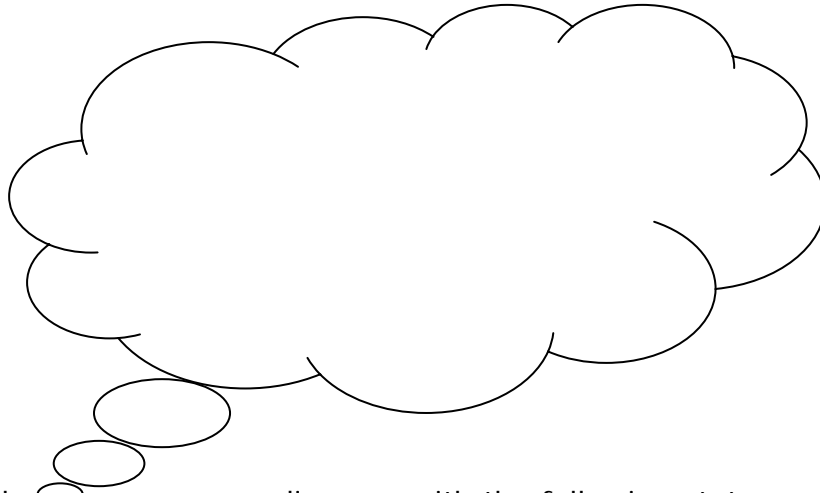
Group:

Presentation Task : _____



Reading Engagement Questions

1. When the teacher says 'It is group reading time' how do you feel?
Write your feelings in the thought bubble below.



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Circle your response:

2. I am a very disappointed if I am given a book as a present

True Untrue I have never received a book
as a present

3. I read for pleasure regularly at home

True Sometimes true Untrue

4. I regularly read comics, magazines or newspapers

True Sometimes true Untrue

5. Because reading is fun, I wouldn't want to give it up

True Sometimes true Untrue

6. When I read I can get totally absorbed

True Sometimes true Untrue

7. I often feel bored when reading

True Sometimes true Untrue

8. How many books (not including school books) have you read in the
past two weeks?

None 1 book 2 books

How children feel about reading

Some of the teachers in our scheme prepared for literature circles with a questionnaire about reading.

Here's what some of the children wrote, and some teachers' comments.

<p>When the teacher says 'It is group reading time' what do you feel?'</p> <p>'OH OH! I think I might not read it right. I'm bored.'</p> <p>'Oh no I forgot to do my reading last night the teacher might find me out. I don't like reading in front of people'</p> <p>'Imaginative relaxed excited I like reading What happens next?'</p> <p>'I am shy when I read in a group. Bored'</p> <p>'good let someone go first. Make me go last'</p>	<p>'The results of the questionnaire more or less confirmed my thoughts already. Most children said they were either bored or nervous at group reading time; 6/6 said they often felt bored when reading. However the children were excited about coming together as a special group. They saw this as a special treat.'</p> <p>(Network support teacher working with Primary 6 and Primary 7.)</p>
<p>I am very disappointed if I am given a book as a present</p> <p>Pupils were asked to tick 'true', 'sometimes true', 'untrue' and 'I have never had a book as a present' in response to this statement.</p>	<p>'I began by discussing with my class why we need to be able to read The discussion was very positive. The results of the survey however shocked me. A very high percentage could not remember ever receiving a book as a gift.'</p> <p>Primary 6 teacher</p>

9. Supporting information

Reading engagement

'Being more enthusiastic about reading and a frequent reader was more of an advantage on its own than having well-educated parents in good jobs. ... Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change'

(Reading for Change: Results from PISA 2000, OECD, 2002)

'To be at home in a literate society is a feeling as well as a fact.'

(Margaret Meek)

What is it, and why does it matter?

'Engaged readers are readers who want to read, have good access to books and other reading materials and spend time reading. Reading engagement matters because avid readers outperform those who are just as clever but read less widely. They have a wider general knowledge, a better vocabulary, better verbal reasoning skills and a better understanding of the world beyond their experience. Educators who promote reading engagement are giving their learners a huge educational advantage across the whole curriculum.' (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998)

Reading engagement also matters because it can 'close' the attainment gap associated with socio-economic status and helps make schooling more equal. In the PISA 2000 study, the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils was narrower for highly engaged readers. Also, readers from the bottom socio-economic group who were highly engaged out-performed medium-engaged readers from wealthier homes.

Young people who make a good start in reading are more likely to become engaged readers. Stanovich showed that they tend to be given more praise and more opportunities to read, quickly becoming practised, skilled and confident. This encourages them to seek out further reading opportunities, getting more experience and becoming ever more skilful. Young people who do not make a secure start to reading often get less praise and are given less reading to do. In consequence, they feel less successful, get less practice and make slower progress. As they become aware of their relatively poor reading performance, they avoid reading, get even less practice and the attainment gap between the best and worst readers widens. The 2006 PIRLS study of reading achievement of 9- and 10-year-olds in 40 countries indicates that Scotland has the third widest gap between high and low achievers.

This makes a strong case for effective early reading instruction and for educators attending to the social and emotional context of learning to read. It highlights the importance of providing lots of 'ways in', lots of positive experiences and as much practice as is necessary on texts that

children want to read. We need to explore what is appropriate for those who find reading hardest and adapt both the provision and teaching interactions to ensure that every reader remains enthusiastic and confident. How children feel about their reading ability matters and those who find it hardest need most encouragement.

The PIRLS study also shows that it is not only struggling readers who are reluctant to read for pleasure and enjoyment. Scottish pupils in 2006 were significantly less enthusiastic about reading (and less confident about reading) than in 2001. Other studies have shown that, once pupils have the skills to read, their lack of reading engagement is not seen as a problem (Ofsted, 2004) and teachers' knowledge of children's books, authors and poets needs to be regularly updated (Grainger, Goodwin et al, 2007). The PISA study shows that given a strong school reading ethos (driven by the young people as much as by the adults), good quality of book provision and frequent opportunities for library visits (more than once a week), young people are much more likely to become avid readers.

Like anything else, attitudes to reading are influenced by children's aspirations and by the social dynamics in the class. Educators need to be proactive in 'selling' a positive image of reading to children and young people, and be prepared to question what they see. For example, research by Gemma Moss (2007) shows that boys' observed preference for non-fiction is less about the content matter and more about their desire to preserve social status. In a world where every fiction book signals their competence as a reader by the size of print and number of pictures, non-fiction allows boys – even boys who struggle with reading – to look and talk like readers, without having read more than a few sentences.

What can educators do?

- Gemma Moss suggests that educators need to think about their young people in terms of those who: 'Can Read and Do Read', 'Can Read but Don't Read' and 'Can't yet Read and Don't Read' and then design curriculum interventions to support each group. Her data indicates that this is what highly successful schools do, although they may not think of it in exactly these terms. Less successful schools focus all their effort and attention on the 'Can't and Don't' group.
- Classroom practices and curriculum organisation can promote (or prevent) reading engagement. Guthrie and Humenick's meta-analysis of experimental studies indicates that the curriculum needs to be built around *all* the following elements if children and young people are to become engaged:
 - **Choice:** Everyone needs opportunities to choose books to read for enjoyment. In practice, many low-attaining children never choose their own reading material. Guthrie suggests offering lots of 'mini-choices' during teaching: 'How many

pages of your reading book could you read before next time?'; 'Who would like to read first?'; 'Choose which task you would like to do first and which second'; 'Choose which of these three follow-up worksheets you would like to do.'

- **Teaching for strategies, within a coherent curriculum:** Teaching must focus on reading strategies and on using them in many contexts. Lesson introductions that explain why the reading strategy is useful and interesting, how it links to previous work, and why it is an important thing to learn or practise right now are most effective. Lesson conclusions that ask 'Where else do you think you could use this?' or 'When next will this be useful?' encourage children to transfer their learning.
- **Making learning social and collaborative:** Teaching that requires young people to work together, to talk about each other's work, or to use the outcomes of each other's work produces engagement. Truly effective lessons require more than groupwork or paired activities; they incorporate a genuine purpose for the task, one that the young people themselves see as important. Reading about a topic to give a presentation to another class/group or reading to discuss the information, give an opinion, decide which of two accounts is more plausible or how two texts agree and differ can all become intrinsically purposeful with the right context.
- **Ensuring a supply of interesting texts:** Teachers can assume they know what books children and young people will need and enjoy. Particularly with a new class, it is important to ask, and to keep on asking throughout the year. Teachers in a South Lanarkshire secondary school use the weekly ERIC time to chat to individuals about their book. They make personal recommendations of books and link classmates with similar reading tastes. The young people set themselves a reading target of how much they will read before the next week's session and record whether they were successful. Lucy Calkins recommends asking children and young people questions such as: 'How will I know that you are really involved in what you are reading?' and a school librarian always asks young people which books they have hated; this gives her more useful information than asking which books they have liked. A school involved the children in recommending books for the library – book recommendations were collected throughout the year and the list was used to inform the book buying policy.
- Finally, a primary school in Renfrewshire asked young people to recommend new books for the library. A plate at the front of each

new book read: 'If you enjoyed reading this book, thank (name of child), who chose it for our library. If you didn't enjoy reading this book, tell us.'

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Reading comprehension

'Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.'
(Gadamer)

What is it, and why does it matter?

Comprehension is one of the most difficult and under-researched areas of reading. We don't have a developmental model of how children's reading comprehension skills develop. We know that everyone brings their

individual expectations and experiences to a text, which means that no two readers can understand a text in exactly the same way.

We also know that written comprehension exercises test comprehension, but don't actually teach it; if readers struggle to answer questions about a text, simply doing more exercises and questions won't help. Instead, educators need to explain what good comprehenders actually think about and do when they read, giving readers opportunities to talk about their different understandings. Extended responses rather than short written exercises need to form the bulk of the comprehension curriculum. To talk or write at length, readers need to encounter books that are engaging and make them think, they need books that are *worth* understanding. Comprehension habits are established early, so the youngest children need access to quality picture books.

Research by Kate Nation shows that fluent readers can have poor comprehension, which may not be recognised. Everyone assumes that, because they read so quickly and fluently, their understanding is equally good. Often poor concentration goes hand in hand with poor comprehension, and educators need to notice this and respond accordingly. (Of course poor concentration may also mean that the text is simply not interesting to the child, an idea that should also be considered.) The work of psychologists such as Kate Cain, Kate Nation and Jane Oakhill tells us that good reading comprehension fundamentally depends on good listening comprehension and because children get help from cues such as gestures, intonation and tone of voice in conversations, sometimes nobody realises how poor their listening comprehension actually is.

Psychology research also suggests that good readers use various comprehension strategies, but not necessarily at the same time. Also, readers can 'compensate' for poor skills in some areas by being better in others. Educators should explicitly introduce the full range of strategies but not expect every reader to use them in the same way, or at the same time. Individuals will vary, and different contexts may require different strategies. Some common strategies are:

- 1 Visualising– 'If I imagine this as a scene/character in a film, what do I see? What details have I added that aren't explicitly mentioned in the text?' 'Can I visualise this information as a diagram, or a process, and if so, what is that like?'
- 2 Hearing the text – 'What accents would different characters have? What would this sound like if it was read aloud?'
- 3 Speculating – 'What could happen? Why might this character behave like this?' 'How does this apply to my own life experience?'
- 4 Predicting – 'What do I think is going to happen? Why is this most

- likely?'
- 5 Questioning – 'Does this seem likely? Do these characters/events/facts ring true?'
 - 6 Imagining alternatives – 'At what point(s) could this story have gone a different way?'
 - 7 Holding thoughts as you read on – 'Why am I being told this now?' 'How well does all this information fit together?'
 - 8 Linking to real-life experiences – 'Do these characters/situations/facts ring true to my experience? Would I have reacted in the same way?'
 - 9 Summarising – 'What important information do I know so far? What don't I know yet? What do I need to know?'

In her book *Making Reading Mean*, Vivienne Smith argues that to infer, to make a personal response or to comment critically on a text, readers must shift between different knowledge domains: knowledge of the text and of other texts, knowledge of their own experiences and knowledge of the wider world. Good, critical readers move between these layers of knowledge, returning regularly to the central core – the ideas and events in the text they are reading. Poor readers may get 'stuck' in the ideas of the core text and not use their outside knowledge at all, or they may be diverted by a single idea or event into another knowledge domain and never return to the core text, which does not prompt a deeper understanding. Vivienne Smith's research identifies common but ineffective behaviour patterns and shows that these are found in readers of all ages, from nursery children to adult readers. For her, reading is a 'habit of mind' and she shows how educators must coach readers to develop good habits, using conversations that nudge a reader to draw on all knowledge domains to illuminate the text. It is a given that for such interactions to occur, readers must find the text interesting and worth understanding. This may be a key issue for Scottish education: *The Portrait of Current Practice for English* (HMIE 2008) comments that there is 'scope... to enjoy more challenging texts'.

We also know that successful adult readers *monitor* their comprehension; they think about whether their reading makes sense and what the main ideas are. If they don't understand, they will often re-read or stop and think. Children are more tolerant of not understanding and are less likely than an adult to notice when crucial information is missing or when a text contradicts itself.

What can educators do?

- 1 One school targeted children with poor concentration for additional teaching that focused on building comprehension. It didn't improve the concentration of all children, but it did work with some.
- 2 One research project taught children and young people to ask themselves: 'Is the answer in the book or is the answer in my head?'. It helped them think about how to work out the answer to comprehension questions.
- 3 An East Ayrshire teacher explained to her class that readers always imagine characters, places and events differently and no book is ever understood in exactly the same way by all its readers. She challenged reading partners to identify some similarities and differences in how they had imagined the main characters of the book they had just read and was stunned by the conversations this simple task produced. Instead of thinking about comprehension as a 'right or wrong/all or nothing', young readers began to share and explain interpretations.
- 4 A Glasgow teacher asked her pupils to cut out faces from magazines or newspapers to show what they thought the different characters in the story actually looked like. Pupils were amazed at the differences.
- 5 A good starting point to gauge comprehension is to ask the reader to retell the story or text and explain what it is about. Different responses can generate questions that can lead to a deeper exploration and understanding of the text. This works as well in the nursery as in S6.
- 6 Asking too many questions in the middle of reading a text can interrupt the main flow of ideas, making it harder, rather than easier to understand. Lucy Calkins uses book introductions to identify one key theme before reading. Afterwards, she asks children to explain how the theme related to the text and encouraged them to discuss it using the full range of knowledge domains identified by Vivienne Smith.
- 7 Reciprocal teaching can help readers understand and practise particular reading strategies. The educator models summarising, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. Readers join in, elaborating on the educators' contributions and gradually taking more responsibility until they do it unaided in reading pairs whilst the

educator gives evaluative feedback.

11. Further reading

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12. Visual literacy

'When opportunities are provided to privilege visual and verbal skills, instead of concentrating on reading and writing, many children can fly intellectually.'

(Morag Styles and Evelyn Arizpe)

What is visual literacy?

The textual world we inhabit is becoming increasingly pictorial. Compare any broadsheet newspaper of today with an edition from 30

years ago and you will notice the differences. Words are less tightly packed and there are fewer of them. Headlines are bigger and bolder. There are pictures – not just photographs – in colour and in quantity to look at. Some sort of image accompanies nearly every story.

This change is not exclusive to the print media. Watch a weather forecast on television tonight. Notice how animated clouds scurry across the landscape from the west and unload their rain in appropriate places. Not so very long ago, a forecaster stood beside a static map and pointed to symbols. In those days we *listened* to what he or she said. Now we *watch*. Words are still there, sometimes delivered by voiceover, rather than an identifiable person, but their status is diminished. They accompany the graphics rather than tell the story.

You might think these are two instances of society 'dumbing down', and becoming less literate than before. A number of influential thinkers (Gunter Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, Margaret Mackey, Gemma Moss) would disagree. They all stress that these visual and multimodal texts present new challenges to the reader, and need to be examined and analysed just as much as the printed word. How do we 'read' the words and images in our books and newspapers and on our screens? How do we move from one mode to the other and how do we make sense of texts where there are few words to direct our thinking? (Margaret Mackey) How are we influenced by the choice of one particular picture to accompany a story in preference to another? And does the way an image has been put together affect the way we understand it? (Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen). Gemma Moss reminds us that modern texts, (including children's information texts) are increasingly products of designers rather than writers. If we want to position children in Scotland as active makers of meaning, who investigate, interrogate and analyse text, we need to consider how we can teach children to see beyond the design and assess the worth of what is presented to them. This is the stuff of visual literacy.

New texts and new ways of reading texts mean that educators need to rethink what children and young people need to learn about visual literacy, and how. Morag Styles and Evelyn Arizpe describe a project that shows exactly how insightful young children can be as readers and producers of pictures. Their study shows that 4–11-year-olds could read the colours, borders, body language, framing devices, covers, endpapers, visual metaphors and visual jokes of pictures. This knowledge needs to be acknowledged and developed by educators.

Jane Doonan suggests that it is profitable to work with older children and help them develop a language for talking about pictures. She provides a useful glossary of technical terms such as 'bleed', 'hatching' and 'motif'

and suggests that knowing these terms helps children and young people recognise and consider the effects of artists' techniques.

David Buckingham talks about televisual and filmic texts and stresses the importance of getting children to make films as well as analysing them if they are to really understand how they work. The points he makes may well be true of all aspects of visual literacy.

What can educators do?

- 1 A teacher in a Primary 1/2 class put serious thought into how she could seriously build on the fact that most 5 years olds come to school familiar with and interested in pictures in books, comics and TV. She reviewed the quality of picture books in the library and provided children with rich, pictorial texts of many sorts. She encouraged the children to look closely and talk about what they could see. She wanted the children to understand the books, but also to see them as objects that had been designed. She asked questions such as: why has the artist made it look like this?
- 2 A Primary 7 teacher decided to teach some technical design terms to help his young people notice design decisions, understand how they impact on the reader, and to help them think about how text and pictures work together. He used picture books by sophisticated author-illustrators such as Anthony Browne, David Macaulay and Emily Gravett, who produce texts that challenge older children to question assumptions about how texts are made and how stories are told, what readers do and the role of illustration in this process.
- 3 A secondary school teacher addressed visual literacy as part of media studies. Young people were encouraged to look at film and filmic techniques such as shot length and camera angle. They investigated how images were composed and sequenced and how sound and/or music added to the effect of the piece. This led to the young people experimenting with film-making themselves.

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Front cover image of *Welcome to the Globe* by Peter Chrisp, Dorling Kindersley, 2000, ISBN 978-0789466402

© DK Readers Level 4: *Welcome to the Globe – The story of Shakespeare’s Theatre* by Peter Chrisp, Dorling Kindersley, 2000

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