

Language comprehension

A balanced approach comprising of teaching both phonics and comprehension should be taken when teaching pupils to read. For pupils to understand words and sentences that they have decoded, they need to have good comprehension, but how can you support this development as a teacher?

Comprehension strategies

Prior knowledge and understanding key vocabulary are essential for pupils' comprehension. However, they are not the only factors that are important. Pupils need to be able to monitor their understanding of a text as they read, ensuring they remain focused while processing the text.

There are some specific strategies that Early Years, Primary and Secondary pupils can be taught to monitor their comprehension and overcome potential barriers (EEF, 2020). These strategies are (EEF, 2019):

Activating prior knowledge

Pupils think about what they already know about a topic, from reading or other experiences, and try to make links. This helps pupils to infer and elaborate, fill in missing or incomplete information, and use existing mental structures to support recall.

- If reading Cosmic - a story where a boy finds himself in space - pupils might consider what they already know about space.
- If reading a text about Henry VIII, pupils might consider what they already know about life in Tudor times.

Prediction

Pupils predict what might happen as a text is read. This causes them to pay close attention to the text, which means they can closely monitor their own comprehension.

- If reading Chinwe - a fairy-tale - pupils could predict what might happen to the character based on what they already know from the story, as well as what they know from similar stories.
- If reading about migration in the UK, pupils might predict the impact of international migration on English seaside towns.

Inference

Pupils infer the meaning of pictures or sentences from their context, and the meaning of words from spelling patterns.

- If reading a poem about World War Two, pupils might infer what different similes or metaphors are describing.
- If reading Tuesday - a picture book - pupils might infer why the frogs are looking up to the sky.

Questioning

Pupils generate their own questions about a text in order to check their comprehension.

- If reading Oliver Twist, pupils might generate five key questions they hope to answer in the next chapter.
- If reading about an artist, pupils might generate five key questions they hope the text will answer.

Clarifying

Pupils identify areas of uncertainty, which may be individual words or phrases, and seek information to clarify meaning.

- Pupils might come across words they don't know the meaning of and seek to find this out.
- If pupils are reading non-fiction, they might check that they understand any images or graphs that are presented alongside the text.

Summarising

Pupils succinctly describe the meaning of sections of the text. This causes pupils to focus on the key content, which in turn supports comprehension monitoring.

- After reading Little Red Riding Hood, pupils might tell their partner the key events that happened. A teacher might scaffold this using picture prompts.
- After reading a text on photosynthesis, pupils might write a summary of this process.

Teaching comprehension strategies

It is important that pupils are explicitly taught these strategies. Detailed explanations and high-quality modelling, such as 'Think Aloud', should be used to teach pupils how to apply each strategy when reading. This helps to make the implicit strategies of a good reader explicit to pupils, providing them with techniques they can apply independently.

Before pupils are expected to apply these strategies independently, they must be given multiple opportunities to try out each one during guided practice, with a partner, or in a small group. Their independent use of these strategies should be built up gradually, until they are able to apply multiple strategies at once. The level of independence that pupils are expected to achieve when using these comprehension strategies will depend on the phase you are teaching, as well as any specific barriers to learning for a child.

Subject specific comprehension strategies

The six strategies outlined can be used on both fiction and non-fiction texts. However, the subject does matter, especially in secondary school. Therefore, it is important that the model is adapted to suit the content you are teaching.

For example, the questions that pupils generate in English literature might be related to character development or the mood generated by the author. Whereas in P.E, the questions might be focused around physiological changes that happen to the body during exercise.

You might also include additional subject specific reading strategies. For example, in a history lesson, you might ask pupils to identify the source of the information they are reading or make notes on the context of when it was reported, such as the political climate.

Supporting reading in your subject is vital, and therefore, it will form part of the focus of your next training seminar.