

# Metacognition & Reading : focusing on 'Learning from complex texts'



## Why?

Whether it is screen based or paper based, pupils need to be able to use a range of text based information sources for independent study. Many pupils see reading as merely decoding words on a page and fail to consider how they actually learn from text based sources. Research studies show that by age 11 understanding text has less to do with decoding and rests much more on vocabulary and variability in pupil's higher order skills. Excellent readers use a multitude of complex metacognitive skills as they read which help them to make meaning from the text. Metacognitive skills can be taught, which increases pupil's ability to learn from complex texts and study independently.

The major intention in metacognitive reading is to teach pupils the knowledge they need to read independently, which includes being able to PLAN, REGULATE, MONITOR and DEBUG as they read. In addition, we want pupils to have the appropriate skills to share outcomes with others, such as write essays and reports, give presentations and debate in class. Pupils' metacognitive reading skills can be improved though:

- increasing pupil understanding of what metacognitive reading skills are and why they are important;
- reflection activities that encourage pupils to consider the thinking that takes place whilst reading,;
- direct, explicit teacher instruction of reading strategies;
- teacher modelling of the processes – what helps them to make sense of the text, what is the process they use;
- the use of 'think alouds' by the teacher and pupils to illustrate thought processes that take place during reading;
- systematic practice of reading (independently, in pairs, small groups and as a class);
- supporting pupils through the use of scaffolding and prompts in a bid to move them from supported to independent use of metacognitive reading strategies;
- and regular exposure to complex texts across the curriculum.



Pupils, at all ages, are on a reading skills continuum and need to become increasingly sophisticated in how they engage with texts, including developing the application of higher order thinking skills. Research studies covering secondary school phase, university students and adult readers all confirm the need to increase the reader's ability to learn from complex texts. Some pupils need help to slow down and consider the meaning of the text – they may consider themselves to be 'good readers' as they can read quickly and accurately, but they may fail to fully comprehend the meaning of the text, miss nuances and fail to engage in any high order thinking. "Where pupils do not question their understanding they are often poor at judging accurately the level of their understanding. We have all come across pupils who believe that because they have read something they have understood it, and yet, on questioning the pupil their lack of comprehension and recall become very evident." Ann L. Brown et al (1981)

## i'm not a teacher of reading – it's not relevant to me

Only a very small number of pupils need specialist support in basic reading skills and decoding by the time they reach secondary school. Many pupils, will however, need help in expanding their vocabulary, particularly subject specific terminology and academic language (such as explain, argue, illustrate). All teachers need to take this into account when pupils are using texts in their subject.

Often struggling readers are asked to read less than other pupils. This impacts on their practice and fluency, and by fluency we mean their ability to read for understanding, with flow and accuracy. It can also lead to pupils having very little stamina or persistence when they encounter difficult texts. The type of texts pupils need to use and how they interact with them are specific to subjects, e.g. a science text is different from a historical written source. Teachers should consider how they can help pupils to become expert readers in their subject. Explicit, discipline centred literacy instruction is very powerful. Who is better equipped to teach pupils how to read a scientific text and write scientifically than the science teacher?

**"I'm doing backflips in the classroom to get the content across without expecting them to read the textbook. I've stopped assigning reading. The text is almost always supplementary."**

Reading for understanding, Schoenback, Greenleaf and Murphy 2012

Many teachers have felt frustrated by pupils inability to engage in texts. This has often lead to 'teaching around the text'. To engage pupils in important ideas, teachers often find interesting and entertaining ways to deliver the information in the text, such as presentation, demonstration or activity. In this way, students remain dependent on someone to convey the curriculum content. If we want pupils to be independent we should not take away the requirement for pupils to regularly grapple with complex text and other sources. We must not 'do their thinking for them', somehow believing that it will be 'quicker' if we take on this heavy burden, as the price pupils pay in the long run is lack of progress. Perpetuating pupils' dependence on teachers denies them the opportunities – and successes – they can only gain through extensive, independent reading.

**"Because you can't rely on students to read, I feel like I am constantly summarising the history textbook so kids don't miss the main points. I wish I didn't have to assume that role as much, but I find I do."**

Reading for understanding, Schoenback, Greenleaf and Murphy 2012

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| All readers, including the teacher, are developing readers and everyone has the capacity to grow and improve their reading skills. There are a range of strategies good readers apply and everyone can develop these. | Reading is central to all elements of study, from reading and understanding the exam questions to reading for pleasure. Learning how to read like a historian, a scientist, an artist, etc., is important for academic success. | Consider the types of jobs in which reading is required. What type of reading skills will pupils need? E.g. reading descriptions and instructions, interpreting blue prints, summarising reports, interpreting graphs. | Pupils must put 'effort' into developing reading skills. They must identify their strengths and areas for development. They must engage in purposeful practice and evaluate the strategies they are using. Do pupils show a 'growth mindset' in becoming better readers? | Pupils need to understand that good readers persist in reading even when it is complex, slow, confusing or boring. Building stamina for reading longer texts and for longer periods of time is essential. Pupils need to learn how to 'grapple' with a text. | Developing metacognitive reading skills will increase the performance of all pupils, but has a disproportionate positive impact on disadvantaged pupils. In addition, with the increased demands of the national curriculum and examinations, good metacognitive skills will be essential for pupil success. |
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