

Metacognition: Think Aloud (an approach to understanding a text)

Holly Bristow, Guiseley School, 28th June 2016

This case study outlines a series of metacognitive lessons on how to approach understanding of longer texts. The lessons focus on developing pupils' ability to predict, visualise, connect, question, clarify and evaluate. The lessons were delivered to a year 9 mixed ability class in German. All pupils learn both German and French up until the end of Year 9.

As of September 2016, pupils will be assessed equally in all four skills in modern foreign languages; listening, reading, speaking and writing. Comprehension exams will be more challenging and pupils are not allowed access to dictionaries in the final exam and must therefore develop strategies to 'cope' with longer texts at GCSE level. As Year 9 will be the first year group to undertake the new style GCSE, I decided to target this particular cohort.

In modern foreign languages pupils can often be reluctant to persevere with challenging texts, often relying upon the teacher or a dictionary to give them the answer. When dealing with longer texts, pupils often focus on the words/phrases they do not know and tend to 'give up' easily. This 'think aloud' lesson is designed to give pupils ideas as to how they might overcome these challenges, develop resilience and start to tackle more complex texts, across a range of topics. I wanted to encourage pupils to trial a range of methods and deliver this in a logical, structured way, which pupils could then replicate for themselves in future lessons.

Lesson 1 : Teacher think aloud

In the first lesson I displayed the text I would be using (scanned from a textbook and projected on the white board). I then worked my way through my PowerPoint which had my 'thoughts' displayed on it in a logical manner, so that pupils could see and hear my comments. This is the sequence of my thoughts:

1 Lies die Ausschnitte. Was bedeuten die fett gedruckten Wörter?

Ich wohne ein bisschen außerhalb der Stadt auf einem Bauernhof. Es ist aber nicht weit bis zum nächsten Dorf, so man Lebensmittel kaufen kann. Dort gibt es eine Bäckerei, eine Metzgerei, eine Apotheke und eine Post. Glücklicherweise haben wir guten Anschluss ans Internet, also kann ich online shoppen. Im Allgemeinen genieße ich das ruhige Leben und die Landschaft ist sehr schön. Ich wohne schon immer hier, seit meiner Geburt, also ist das für mich total normal. Marie

In dieser Großstadt wohne ich seit einemhalb Jahren mit meinem Vater und meiner Schwester. Wir haben eine kleine Wohnung direkt in der Stadtmitt. Für mich ist der größte Vorteil, dass ich überall zu Fuß hinkomme: in die Fußgängerzone mit den großen Kaufhäusern, aber auch zum Fußballplatz. Es gibt hier in der Nähe auch ein Kino als auch tolle Sportanlagen. Es gibt aber auch Nachteile: Es ist oft laut, es gibt viel Verkehr und Staub, es wird manchmal gefährlich und es liegt viel Müll herum. Maximilian

Ich wohne seit dem Frühling in einem großen Vorort. Wenn wir ins Stadtzentrum gehen, fahren wir mit der Straßenbahn. Wir sind früher in einer Kleinstadt gewohnt. Im Großen und Ganzen hatte ich viele Leute kennengelernt. Es gab weder Freibad noch Schwimmbad, aber das war mir egal. Ich hoffe, in Zukunft wieder in einer Kleinstadt zu wohnen. In einer Kleinstadt leben, wo ich mich nie langweilen werde. Es wird dort viele Geschäfte geben. Na ja, wenn ich reich werde, werde ich nach München ziehen. Lea

einhalb Jahre = one and a half
ziehen = to move
unruhig = noisy

Ok, so I'm predicting from the image that this text has got something to do with town/where I live and judging by the people's faces, maybe opinions.

I'm wondering if I can quickly find any of those 'town' words we learnt last lesson in the text...

Bäckerei, Metzgerei, Apotheke, Post! I definitely recognise these. Phew! I'm pretty sure we learnt 'Ich wohne' for 'I live' too....

Predict

- 1) "I am predicting from the images that the text has got something to do with town/where I live and judging by the people's faces, maybe opinions. I wonder if 'Meine Stadt' means 'my town'..."

Recall known vocabulary

- 2) "I'm wondering if I can quickly find any of those 'places in town' words we learnt last lesson in the text..."
- 3) "'Bäckerei, Metzgerei, Apotheke, Post!' I definitely recognise these. Phew! I'm pretty sure we learnt 'Ich wohne' for 'I live' too..."

Visualise

- 4) "Right, so based on all that 'town' vocab in there, I reckon it's a text about where people live / what there is in their town."

Connect

- 5) "I'm starting to think of the other places in town words that we had last lesson, where our crazy teacher showed us that clip on YouTube."
- 6) "I predict that I might find 'es gibt' or 'wir haben' in the text because all the places in town phrases started like that."

Drift off.... Then come back!

"Hmm.. I wonder what's on TV tonight. I mustn't forget to buy a birthday card for Jules...". Refocus myself on the text. *(Many teachers do not acknowledge the challenge of staying focused on a long or challenging piece of text. Pupils need to become increasingly aware of when they have lost focus and develop strategies for refocusing).*

Dealing with questions

- 7) (Looking specifically at paragraphs 3 and 4) "I'm confused by a couple of phrases. I'm trying to figure out what the 'es wird... geben' and 'es gab' bits are."
- 8) "I just thought of 'es gibt', which my teacher always says is the equivalent of 'il y a' in French. Could they be linked to that? Hold that thought..."
- 9) "I'm seeing a lot of words I don't recognise here... but I can also see some I do know: opinion words (besser/egal/altmodisch/ruhig)."

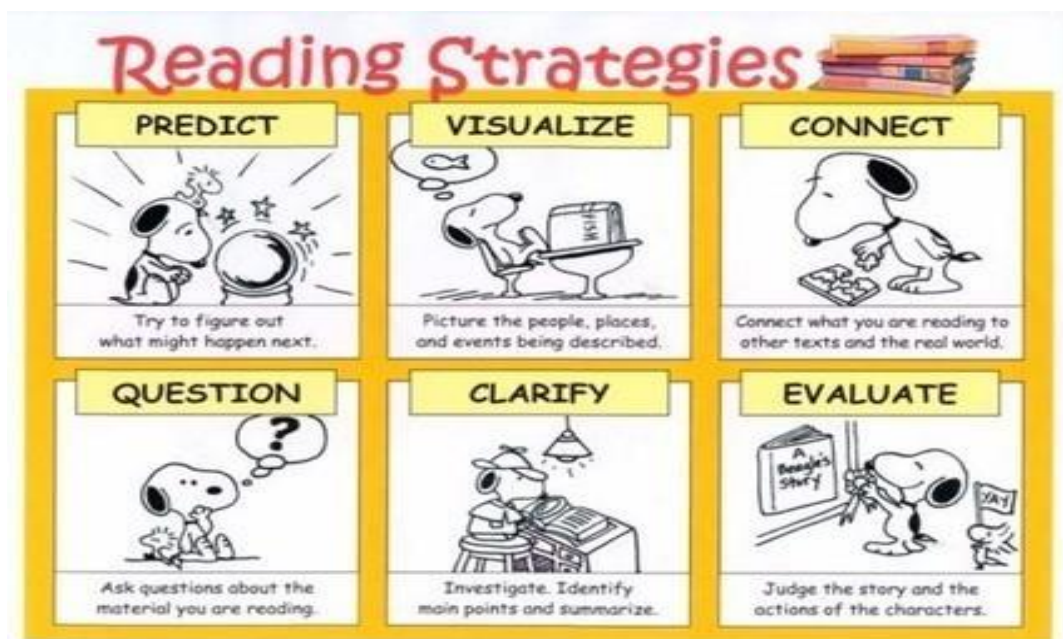
Clarify

- 10) "I'm confused about 'Im Großen und Ganzen' and 'ziehen' and what the heck is 'Kulturangebot'?! (Why are German words always so long?!)"
- 11) "Ah hang on... is that one of those compound thingy-s that Miss always goes on about? 'Kultur' is definitely a cognate so it must be 'culture- something'... that might do for now."
- 12) "'ziehen' doesn't have a capital letter so it can't be a noun and it ends in 'en' so it's likely to be a verb of some sort, maybe the infinitive."
- 13) (paragraph 4) "I recognise the 1st part 'historische Stadt' – it's a cognate! And 'keine' is the 'special K' we learnt in Year 7 when we said we don't have any pets so it must be something negative..."
- 14) "I can see 'in Zukunft', which I know means 'in the future' so that bit must be in the future tense. I wonder if there are any other tenses in this...hmm, I best re-read it and look for

other tenses. I think I'll use my highlighters to make it easier to see the different tenses, it might be important."

Evaluate

- 15) "Now I'm reading the text through again, I'm realising there are lots of things I can understand."
- 16) "What could I do next time we get a really long scary text to read?"
- 17) "I just learned quite a few words. I'm asking myself which ones I could use in my own work?"
- 18) "Did I work out what 'es wird...geben' and 'es gab..' meant? Do I need to ask someone to check?"



At the end of the 'think aloud' session, I gave pupils the thought bubbles I had used as prompts (cut out and put in envelopes) and asked them to put them into a logical order, considering what they might 'think about' first when approaching a new text, and stick them in their exercise books.



Lesson 2 : Pupils working in pairs

In the second lesson, pupils were given a longer text (on a topic we had done previously but not in great detail) and asked to work in pairs and refer to their thought bubbles to create a 'think aloud' that they then had to present to the class. They were given the choice whether or not they wanted to vocalise their thoughts or just write them down for me to go through with the class. Although some pupils were still keen to point out every word they didn't know and needed me to sit down with them and work on it with them with a little more guidance, **the majority of pupils were able to vocalise their thought process and demonstrate their understanding of the text and more importantly, how to approach the text**, using the thought bubbles as sentence openers.

Lesson 3 : Working individually

In the third lesson, pupils were given a new text, along with comprehension questions. Their final task was to put everything they had learned into practice by answering the questions individually. Pupils were told to use the strategies we had been working on as part of their approach to the task, however I know that without the thought bubbles in front of them, some pupils just reverted back to looking straight at the question and trying to find the answer, before giving up if they didn't 'understand' it. **I therefore noted that pupils need more practice at this style of approaching a task in order to fully embed the thinking skills.**

Key Learning Points

- Pupils need to be explicitly taught new skills and then be given ample opportunities to embed these before using them in an assessment.
- The text that you model the 'think aloud' with needs to be accessible to both higher and lower ability pupils, without it being too hard or too difficult for either group. This can be tricky and may take some time to find. I suggest using texts from a GCSE textbook. You can always mix and match a foundation and a higher.
- In future it is planned that this approach will be taught explicitly as part of 'comprehension skills' starting in Year 7 and embedded throughout the years by using the same approach in both languages, across different topics.
- Consistency within your department is key.

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http://www.ictwand.com/metacognition/Resources/Leadership/classroom_characteristics.pdf

