Primary
National Strategy

Understanding Reading Comprehension: 3

Further strategies to develop reading comprehension

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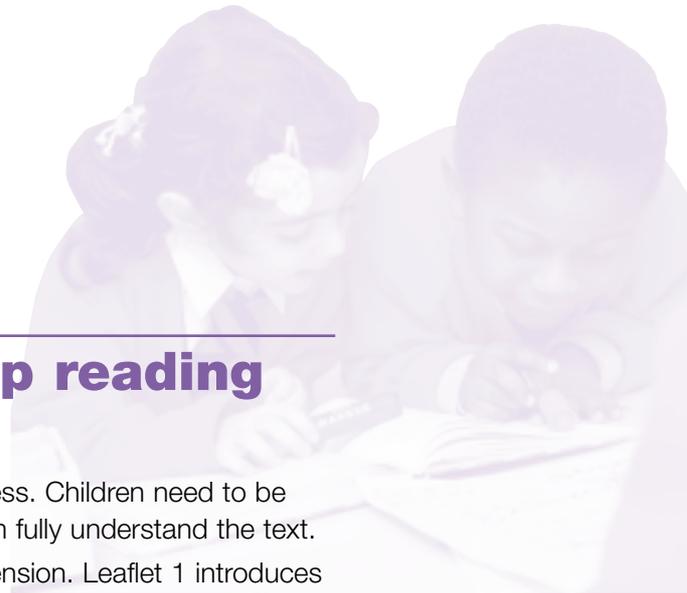creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

SureStart

Further strategies to develop reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is an essential part of the reading process. Children need to be taught a range of reading comprehension strategies to help them fully understand the text.

This is the third of a set of three leaflets about reading comprehension. Leaflet 1 introduces evidence from research and gives a sequence for teaching. Leaflets 2 and 3 give practical suggestions for teachers to use in their own classrooms. This leaflet has information on semantic strategies, interpretive strategies and monitoring understanding.

Semantic strategies

Clarifying the meaning of words and phrases in the text enhances comprehension. Children who can decode fast and accurately are free to think about the meaning of what they read. Where children struggle to work out words, and frequently misread them, these difficulties can get in the way of understanding.

Children have regular phonics/word level teaching as part of the literacy hour and learn how to apply this knowledge in shared and guided reading. Work on semantic strategies can be done before, during and after reading a text.

Previewing vocabulary

Before a shared or guided reading session, identify unfamiliar words or phrases in the text.

Provide a list of words relating to the book or topic and discuss the meanings of the words before reading.

Building banks of new words

In shared reading, demonstrate how to make a note of any new words or words where the meaning is unclear. Involve the children in suggesting ways to work out the meaning, for example root, morphology and so on, and note the meanings once they are understood.

In guided reading, support children to do the same as they read independently, making a note of words to check in a vocabulary journal or on sticky notes. The group then discusses the meanings of words and makes notes. They could add a visual cue to remind them of the meaning.

Word tracker and oral thesaurus

Focus on a particular group of words or phrases, for example words to do with appearance. During shared reading demonstrate how to track and list these words. Discuss the list and suggest alternatives, considering whether or not a different word would change the meaning of the text.

Challenge children to track other groups of words as part of guided reading sessions.

Making dictionaries and glossaries

Identify words whose meanings are unclear and demonstrate how to track these words in the text as part of a shared reading session. These could be technical words, dialect words, slang and so on. Investigate the meaning of the words and model how to put together a dictionary or glossary for that text.

Provide opportunities for children to make dictionaries or glossaries in the same way for guided reading texts or texts used in other areas of the curriculum.

Interpretive strategies

Children need to be taught strategies that will enhance their critical understanding and inform their reflections on what they have read.

These practical ideas will help you to plan opportunities for children to structure their responses to texts they have read. They can be used with children from the earliest stages of learning to read. The ideas can be modelled in shared reading for children to use subsequently, with support, as part of guided reading sessions. As they become familiar techniques children use them during independent reading sessions.

Character development

These strategies will help children to make explicit their response to and knowledge of a character. They can be used with a range of texts from picture books to longer children's novels. The strategies involve:

- imagining how a character might feel;
- identifying with a character;
- charting the development on a character over time (in a longer text).

Feeling graph or map: show how emotions develop throughout the story.

Journal entries: record the reader's response, or written in role as the character reflecting on events in the story.

TV interviews: compile a list of questions to ask the character in an interview. This can lead on to hot seating so that the interview is conducted with the character.

Drawing characters: surround the drawing with phrases from the text that relate to that character.

Thought bubbles: write a thought bubble for a character at a key moment in the text when they are not actually speaking.

Relationship map: record the relationship between different characters using evidence from the text.

Relationship grid: list each character along the top and down the side. Each cell represents a relationship to be explored.

Speculation: ask questions that focus attention on actions and motives, such as *Why did …? What if …?*

Character emotions register: create a five-point scale of emotions for the possible range of reactions at certain specific points in the story, for example *'mildly irritated'* to *'incandescent with rage'.* Rate the characters on this scale justifying decisions with implicit and explicit evidence from the text.

Identifying themes or information

These ideas can be modelled by the teacher as part of shared reading sessions before the children work more independently.

The author's chair: A child takes on the role of the author. Other children ask them questions about the book and the 'author' responds, explaining and justifying what 'they' have written.

Diagrams: Identify specific information within the text and then present it in the form of a diagram, grid or flow chart.

Cartoons and story boards: Draw a strip cartoon or story board that identifies four or five main points from a story or information text.

Highlighting: Identify and highlight specific words or phrases within the text that link together to build a picture of a character, mood or setting.

Blurb: Write a blurb for the book that summarises the story or theme and will persuade people to read it, for example by using rhetorical questions or quotes.

Fact and opinion: Focus on a particular subject, incident or character within the text. Identify facts and opinion and consider how they are woven together.
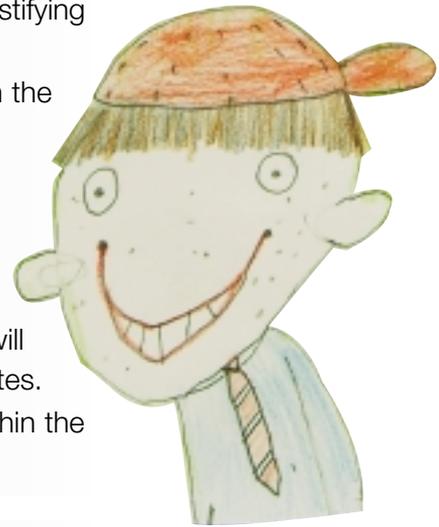
Reading for multiple meanings

These strategies will help children to understand that readers can respond to texts in different ways and that it is possible to make meaning from the text in more than one way.

Character ranking: List all the characters from a story and then rank them according to different criteria, for example most powerful to least powerful, kindest to meanest. Discuss the differences between the rankings and ask whether different criteria give different insights.

The roles we play: Draw an outline of a character. Children then record all the different roles they play in the story, for example daughter, friend.

Illustrations: Identify and discuss any differences or additional information to be found between the text and illustrations.

Text or pictures: Give the text only or pictures only from a multi-layered picture book and ask children to tell the story or read the prose story before reading the complete book. Discuss any changes in their perceptions and responses after they had seen the complete book.

Minor characters: Select a key scene from a story. Retell the scene from the point of view of a minor character within it. How does this change the reader's perception of events?

Villains: Discuss children's responses to the villain in a particular story. Challenge them to justify the villain's actions. Are there any changes in their response after this? Do they have more sympathy with the villain?

Problem solving: Stop at the point where a character faces a problem or dilemma. List alternative suggestions from the group. Consider the consequences of each suggestion. Arrive at a group decision or prediction before moving on.

Looking for or challenging a consistent point of view

Genre exchange: Ask children to transpose something from the genre they have just read into another written genre.

Story comparison charts: Read several versions of the same story, for example a traditional tale such as Cinderella. Devise a comparative chart to note the similarities and differences between different versions.

Criteria rating: Assess certain scenes from a story at a crucial point and rate them according to criteria such as mostly likely to happen/least likely to happen, mostly likely to be true/least likely to be true.

Relating texts to personal experiences

What would I do?: Stop at key points in a story and ask children to imagine what they would have done themselves. Would they make the same decisions as the main character?

The best bit...: Ask children to chose the funniest, scariest, or most interesting moment from a story or information book and justify their choice. Children could compare their individual responses with a shared group reading text.

Response journals: Children keep a personal record of their thoughts as they are reading, recording questions that occur to them as well as their response to particular characters or key events. When reading longer books the journal can be used to record their changing responses.

Comparisons: Relate to other books by the same author or on the same topic, read by the group or individual. Discuss similarities or differences.

Helping children to monitor their own understanding

Fluent and experienced readers have the ability to check continually that they have understood what they are reading. When they are unsure of something they use an appropriate strategy to clarify their understanding. Children need to learn these skills as they develop as readers.

Teacher modelling

Show children how fluent readers monitor their understanding and use strategies to clarify their understanding:

- Explain your thinking as you use semantic strategies for an unfamiliar word, for example *This is similar to a word I know …*, *It has the same root as …*, *I recognise this word ending …*, *It usually means …*

- Speculate about the plot, theme or an aspect of character using tentative language, for instance *I wonder whether she did that because …*, *Perhaps that information was included so that …*, *Maybe the author will return to that theme later …*

- Challenge the author if you think something is wrong, for example *I don't agree with that because I know ...*, *I would like to check that ...*
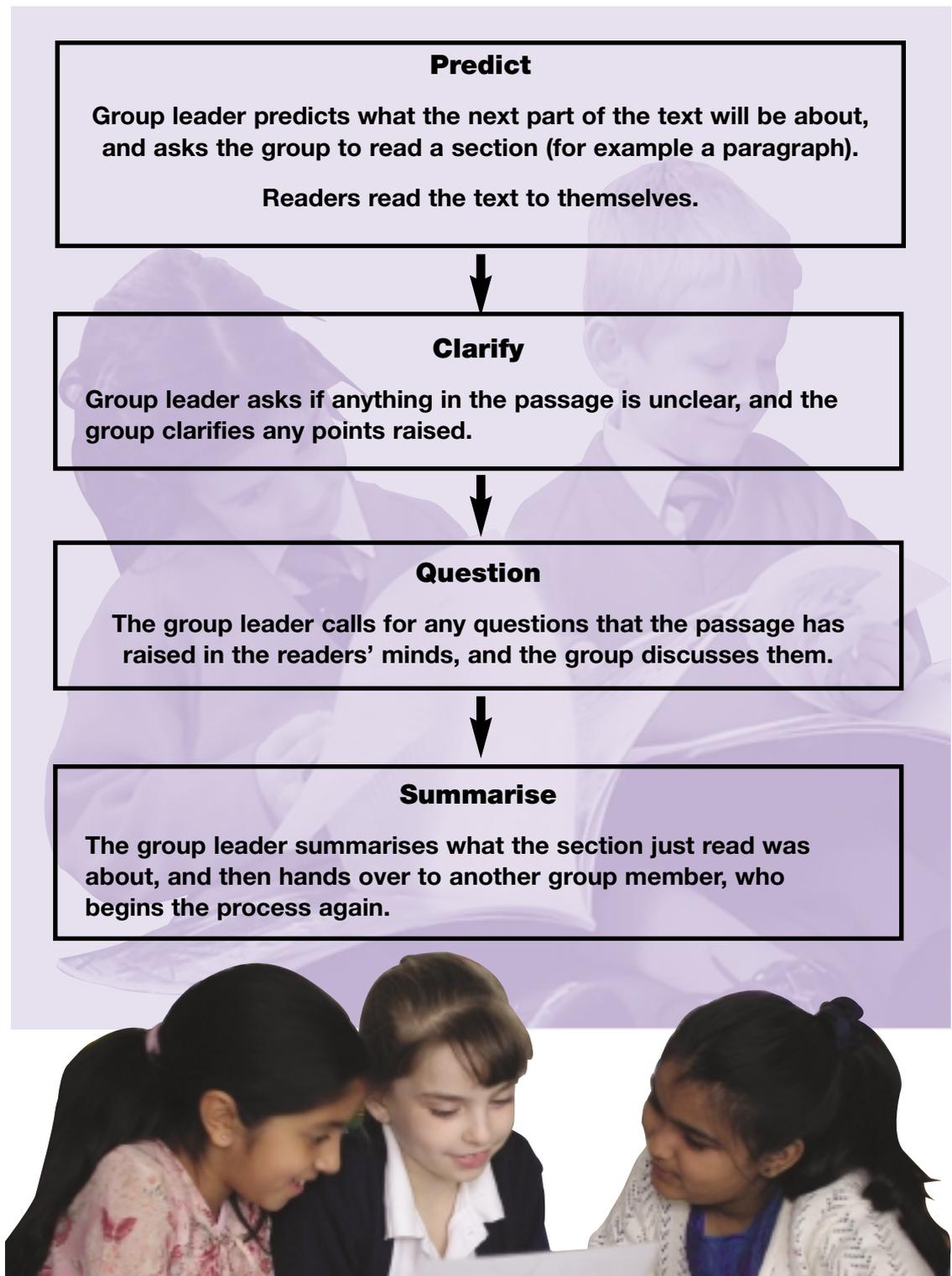
Questioning

Plan to ask probing questions that require children to consider how they know some information from a text and to encourage metacognitive reflection, for example *Can you explain …? Why do you think that …? How do you know …?*

- Invite children to elaborate, for example *Tell us more about …*

- Support children in making alternative responses based on their own reading, for example *Is there any evidence to support a different point of view?*

Reciprocal teaching

This process trains children to monitor their own understanding and can be used in guided reading sessions. The teacher models the process initially and then the children in turn take on the role of group leader as they work more independently.

Predict

Group leader predicts what the next part of the text will be about, and asks the group to read a section (for example a paragraph).

Readers read the text to themselves.

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Clarify

Group leader asks if anything in the passage is unclear, and the group clarifies any points raised.

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Question

The group leader calls for any questions that the passage has raised in the readers' minds, and the group discusses them.

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Summarise

The group leader summarises what the section just read was about, and then hands over to another group member, who begins the process again.

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