

The Importance of Background Knowledge for Reading Comprehension

Recent shifts in the National Curriculum and end of key stage assessments have led to a lift in expectations for pupils at all stages of their school career. Pupils are challenged by heritage texts, robust non-fiction and complex poetry and, for the most part, are enthused and engaged by their experiences within the classroom. However, there are some pupils that can be left behind by this rising tide and a key question for all teachers is how we ensure that we are providing them with scaffolds and support that they need, whilst still maintaining high expectations for all.

Our first clue in deciphering the route to success lies in with the thinker whose work guided the construction of the new National Curriculum: E.D Hirsch. Hirsch, who is also the architect behind the Common Core Curriculum in the USA, is a strong proponent of the importance of cultural literacy and argues that without a secure knowledge of the world our ability to read and understand texts is drastically reduced.

'Reading, writing and all communication depend on taken-for-granted background knowledge that is not directly expressed in what is written. Therefore, in order to teach children how to understand what is written, we must teach them that taken-for-granted background knowledge'.
E. D Hirsch (2006 p. 122)

The problem here is that often it is difficult to tell how much background knowledge an individual student has, or how much access they are given to wider life experiences outside of school. The amount of cultural literacy that each student possesses will differ widely and even those who seem generally knowledgeable may have gaps that will prevent them from accessing certain types of text successfully. The issues that small gaps or misunderstandings can cause are evident even in Key Stage 4. One GCSE examiner's report identified that it was just such a misconception – a lack of understanding of the word 'glacier' - that led to many candidates assuming that glaciers '*were some sort of tribe, presumably advancing from somewhere in the north*' and therefore failing to be able to answer any of the subsequent questions on the text accurately (detailed further in Daisy Christodoulou's -Seven Myths of Education).

Context and Vocabulary

A starting point for teaching that will fill any gaps in background knowledge is to go 'crazy on context' and enthuse and engage pupils with the history, stories, articles and visual imagery that surround the text that they will be studying before they start to read. A study of Macbeth needs to be understood as a play, a text in performance, before the script will make sense on the page. Byron's Romantic poetry is far more interesting when prefaced with gossipy tales of his salacious love life. Even a context that seems obvious to us as teachers, such as a book set in London, or the taste of a pumpkin, cannot be assumed to be common knowledge for all. Taking additional time to discuss, exemplify or even experience these contexts will make all pupils far more successful readers of unfamiliar texts.

A problem that often runs parallel to low cultural literacy is a lack of vocabulary. A wide vocabulary is essential for deciphering the meaning of more complex nineteenth century texts, and this can be something that students lack. One method of making lexically dense texts more accessible is to identify vocabulary that may be problematic and engage with it before reading the text. This can be as simple as sharing a blank glossary and asking students to guess the meanings of words, or encouraging groups to collaborate and share definitions. Giving pupils multiple opportunities to engage with the trickier vocabulary also makes it more likely that they will become comfortable enough to attempt to use it in their own writing.

Modelling the Reading Process

Finally, as expert and fluent readers it is easy for teachers to gloss over the effort that goes into reading. We are so adept at the processes that sit behind our comprehension of the text that the strategies that we use become invisible. In order to help pupils who struggle to read access the meanings of a text we need to make these strategies verbal and 'think-aloud' our route to comprehension. This can be done through teacher modelling and annotations of text, shared reading or guided reading. One method that particularly encourages verbalisation of comprehension processes is reciprocal reading where pupils each take a different role and decipher a text together.

This can encourage more independent talk-based investigation of texts that would be too challenging for pupils to attempt alone – see the prompts below for an example of Year 7 reciprocal reading of quotations from Macbeth .

Reciprocal Reading Strategies – Macbeth Act 1 Scene 7	
<p>Questioner Why she saying this? What does this mean? How would this make Macbeth feel?</p>	<p>Predictor I think this word will make Macbeth feel ...way I think she says to make him ... Next, I think she will try to ...</p>
<p>Clarifier I think that ... This word shows that .. The meaning of this could be ...</p>	<p>Summarizer Overall Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth ... In general she makes him feel The audience think that she is acharacter because</p>

For this task each pupil took a different role and took turns to speak their understanding of a particular quotation to the other members of the group. Using this strategy also avoided a lesson heavy on teacher explanation and encouraged pupils to engage with the text from the start.

Overall, comprehension is a complex activity and it is at this point, the point of understanding, that we need to intervene if we are to make challenging texts accessible for all pupils regardless of their entry point or record of prior attainment. The potential rewards of accessing such rich texts are huge, and hopefully finding ways to overcome the initial difficulties that some pupils initially experience will enable them to overcome barriers to success.