

'Just reading': the impact of a faster pace of reading narratives on the comprehension of poorer adolescent readers in English classrooms

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Abstract

Poorer adolescent readers are often regarded by teachers as unable to read whole narratives and given short, simplified texts, yet are expected to analyse every part in a slow laborious read-through. This article reports on a mixed methods study in which 20 English teachers in the South of England changed their current practice to read two whole challenging novels at a faster pace than usual in 12 weeks with their average and poorer readers ages 12–13. Ten teachers received additional training in teaching comprehension. Students in both groups made 8.5 months' mean progress on standardised tests of reading comprehension, but the poorer readers made a surprising 16 months progress but with no difference made by the training programme. Simply reading challenging, complex novels aloud and at a fast pace in each lesson repositioned 'poorer readers' as 'good' readers, giving them a more engaged uninterrupted reading experience over a sustained period. However, the qualitative data showed that teachers with the additional training provided a more coherent faster read and better supported poorer readers by explicitly teaching inference, diagnosed students' 'sticking places' mid-text and created socially cohesive guided reading groups that further supported weaker readers and also stretched the average/good readers.

Key words: reading aloud, faster read, inference, poorer readers, comprehension

Introduction

Skilled readers read in an engaged, sustained manner, connecting plot, characters and themes in the satisfying construction of the whole text (Kintsch, 1988). In contrast, adolescent readers in secondary schools (11–16 years) in England typically experience texts as fragments, a few pages read each lesson stretched over many weeks, the reading interrupted by oral and written literary analysis where teachers assume that students have comprehended what they read (Westbrook, 2013).

Across Europe, 20% of 15-year-olds have significant difficulties in 'reading literacy', a disproportionate number

of whom come from disadvantaged groups (EACEA, 2011). In England, 31% of 16-year-olds in 2015 failed to achieve A–C* pass grades in their English General Certificate of Secondary Education examination, yet at 11 years, in primary school, only 11% of the same cohort failed to attain the expected Level 4 in the Standard Assessment Tests. A new English curriculum for 11- to 14-year-olds requiring in-depth study of two challenging novels each year ostensibly promises more coherent reading experiences for poorer adolescent readers, with only a general requirement to include pre- and post-1914 literature, two Shakespeare plays and "seminal world literature" (DfES, 2014). However, 25 years of increasingly prescribed curricula requiring the teaching and testing of literary analysis on short extracts have left teachers deskilled and untheorised in the teaching of comprehension of whole texts. Ironically, while they are given 19 pages of "technical grammatical terms" as an aid in the new curriculum, there is no guidance on the teaching of inference, plot or structure (DfEE, 1998, 2001; DfES, 2014). Moreover, the high stakes examinations taken by 16-year-olds continue to test skills of literary analysis against a long history of a two-tiered entry level that provides simpler texts for students in the 'Foundation' tier and caps the level of attainment they can reach (AQA, 2016).

The main premise of the mixed methods study reported here, drawn from the authors' research on comprehension (e.g. Oakhill et al., 2015; Sutherland, 2015; Westbrook, 2013), was that a faster than 'normal practice' read of challenging whole texts and explicit teaching of comprehension can benefit poorer adolescent readers. The first research question sought to find out if students' comprehension levels increased under such a premise:

1. Is there a measurable impact on adolescent students' reading comprehension of an intervention based on two elements:
 - a fast read of challenging texts (FR: both groups) and
 - teachers having a theorised knowledge of reading and associated pedagogy (FR + T group)

The second question, the focus of this paper, sought to find out *how* and *why* students' comprehension increased, asking:

2. Which pedagogic approaches and teacher knowledge are associated with gains in students' reading development?

The study was conducted in spring 2015 with 20 teachers and 365 students in Year 8 (12–13 years) in 10 schools in the South of England. All 20 classes read two whole challenging novels consecutively over 12 weeks as part of their formal English lessons, not as volitional independent reading (Merga, 2013). Ten teachers, one from each school pair, received additional theorised pedagogic training (FR + T). Standardised test results showed that students in both groups increased their comprehension but, somewhat to the surprise of the research team, poorer readers made significantly more progress than their better or average + peers. Equally surprising was that there was no direct effect of the training programme: however, the qualitative data showed that students in the FR + T classes experienced a faster, more engaged and coherent reading of the two texts. This paper analyses why poorer readers did so well and identifies aspects of the teacher training that appeared to add to their progress (see Sutherland et al., 2018, for the full statistical report).

Literature review

For over 30 years reading, researchers have found that motivated students are more likely to read and hence over time encounter a greater volume of words in successive consumption of texts. This 'Matthew effect' acts through a reciprocal causality between reading frequency, volume and reading skill, producing higher academic attainment in 'good' readers; in turn, such readers are more likely to read independently at home and be placed in 'higher-ability' sets at school (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Fletcher et al., 2012; Stanovich, 1986). Conversely, poorer readers who typically come from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and placed in 'low-ability' sets taught by the least well-qualified teachers are more likely to practise discrete reading skills on extracts or simplified readers (Allen, 2015; Dunne and Gazeley, 2008).

There is scant literature, however, on the model of fast 'reading aloud' for adolescents undertaken for this project. Duncan (2015) points out that, historically, reading aloud was the dominant form in adult literacy and is still practised widely today for learning, preaching, remembering and understanding, as Brice Heath (1983, 2012) found in her seminal studies of socially situated reading practices amongst different communities in the southern states of America. Fletcher et al. (2012, p. 14), in a study of effective reading teachers in New Zealand elementary schools,

found that a "particularly successful strategy" was teachers' daily expressive reading aloud to the whole class. Kuhn et al. (2010) argue that fluency or automaticity of oral reading improves four skills of speed, effortlessness, autonomy and lack of conscious awareness, all strongly supporting comprehension. More effortless recognition of words and phrases, efficiently stored and retrieved in long-term memory, creates greater cognitive capacity for comprehension (Cain et al., 2001). Significantly, in listening to and following a text read aloud by a more capable reader, who provides scaffolding, a less fluent reader can experience autonomy and fluency and bypass frustrating 'sticking points' at phonemic, semantic or word level to focus on comprehension (Kuhn et al., 2010; Wood et al., 1976).

A skilful teacher not only reads aloud with engaging and fluent prosody but also checks basic comprehension through recap or question generation (Kucer, 2010). Such interactive strategies are seen in studies of effective teachers of reading (Topping and Ferguson, 2005) and emerge from a secure, theorised knowledge base (Moats, 2009; Risko et al., 2008; Shulman, 1987). Additionally, reading a text aloud creates a community of readers, who produce their own situated reading practices in the classroom over time (Brown et al., 1989; Sutherland, 2015).

What text is read matters: McGeown et al., 2016 found that involvement in a text and text challenge are both significant predictors of reading fiction rather than non-narrative texts, producing in turn more reading engagement (defined as time spent reading). Cognitive processing is enriched through engagement with narratives with their inherent emotional and empathetic attraction, and vocabulary acquisition increases as unfamiliar words are embedded within meaningful text (Gardner, 2004; Mol and Bus, 2011). Proficient readers can recall the main elements in a retelling of a first chapter, but some need support in understanding flashbacks and dual narrators (Kucer, 2010). Other research shows that young adolescents are capable of following two or multiple storylines and can construct an interpretive understanding of character traits and actions (Genereux and Mckeough, 2007; Philpot, 2005).

Reading is, importantly, a psycholinguistic process in which inference-making is fundamental to comprehension. Cohesive inferences connect local ideas within a sentence or a paragraph, while global coherence inferences support understanding of the text as a whole, incorporating relevant general knowledge (Cain et al., 2001). Skilled readers make more accurate inferences than unskilled readers, drawing on relevant background knowledge and, by reading more widely, they have a broader general knowledge (Cain et al., 2001; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). More complex global coherence takes place as the readers continually update their knowledge of plot, character and theme across several chapters and develop increasingly

integrative mental models of the narrative (Grasser et al., 1994; Philpot, 2005; Zwaan, 1998). The inferentially rich situation model is a coherent and meaningful, global representation of the completed text (Kintsch, 1988).

Research design

This interdisciplinary, mixed-methods study used a volunteer sample comprising a range of 10 schools in urban and rural contexts in South East England, some located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Students in the FR and FR + T groups were matched for reading ability, with some parallel mixed-ability and low-ability classes across both groups with the spread of professional experience and level of teacher qualifications roughly equal across groups. Two suitable texts were chosen by teacher pairs across both groups, who swapped over texts at the midpoint of the intervention. The FR + T teachers received a 1.5 day training on cognitive reading processes (the ‘Theory’ part) and pedagogic strategies including reading the text aloud in class at a fast pace, inference-making, guided group reading and the use of graphic organisers. Having a comparison group who received no additional training gave us insight into “normal English teacher practices” and insured against a Hawthorne effect as both groups were similarly pressurised by the external scrutiny of the generic intervention of the ‘faster read’. The FR group received the same training at the end of the project.

Standardised comprehension tests (McCarty and Crumpler, 2014) were administered to all students in week 1 and week 12 by the research team. An hour long, these ‘Hodder Access’ tests assessed vocabulary knowledge, literal comprehension, inference and analysis in very short mostly non-fiction texts. Fifty-one children were excluded from the analyses because they did not complete both test sessions so the final data set comprised 182 students (FR + T group) and 183 (FR group). To assess students’ comprehension of longer texts, two pre- and post-project 50 minute short story tests designed by the team were also administered. These assessed students’ ability to infer at local level and across the narrative at global level in two science fiction stories comparable in their length, theme and structural complexity.

The data from 343 students were included: 165 in the FR + T group and 178 in the FR group, with 73 students excluded. Reading scores were entered into a mixed analysis of variance with one between-subjects variable: group (FR and FR + T) and one within-subjects variable: time (before/after the interventions).

Two written lesson observations with each teacher, one near the beginning of the 12 weeks, the second towards the end, were followed by 30 minute recorded interviews carried out by the authors to check fidelity

to both interventions. The 80 transcribed observations and interviews were uploaded onto NVivo software for data analysis. In the first stage, predetermined codes relating to the research questions and hypothetical model of reading were used, with further codes added as a result of a more detailed analysis. At the second stage, data were reduced through constant comparison between the two groups. Quotations from this rich qualitative data set were selected that best illustrated the overall finding or issue thrown up by that code.

Ethical approval was granted by the authors’ institution, and ethical considerations adhered to via information sheets and signed consent forms for teachers promising anonymity, confidentiality for themselves, their students and schools and the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms are therefore used for both teachers and students. Students were verbally informed of the research by both their teacher and a researcher and took information sheets with acknowledgement slips home to parents/carers with an ‘opt-out’ clause should they decline to want their child involved. No parent took up this option, and no teacher withdrew.

Findings

Quantitative data analyses

Both groups improved their comprehension scores over the 12 weeks, time being the main effect (time, $F(1, 363) = 43.95, P < .001$), but statistically, the additional teacher training made no measureable impact, and there was no interaction between the two variables of time and training. However, poorer readers in both groups (students whose reading age was 12 months or more behind their chronological age) made an average of 16 months progress in the standardised tests compared to the average + readers in *both* groups who progressed at the average of 9 months – and this was statistically significant as seen in Table 1 (reading level, $F(1, 361) = 545.75, P < .001$). The results from the short story test replicated those from the Hodder tests in that scores from both groups improved overall over time. However, average + readers in the FR + T group made more progress than the average + readers in the FR group. The poorer readers, though, in the FR + T group, did not improve any more than those in the FR group, as seen in Table 2.

These results were unexpected: we had hypothesised that while all groups would benefit from the faster read of two challenging texts “back to back,” it would be the additional theorised teacher training with its specific reading pedagogies that would make the real difference. Hence, we looked closely at the qualitative data to comprehend how and why the poorer readers in particular had improved to such a significant extent.

Table 1: Hodder Access test results

FR or FR + T group	Average/Poorer reader	Standardised test time	Reading age mean (in months)	Standard error
FR + T	Average + reader	1	177.059	2.250
		2	180.490	2.924
	Poorer reader	1	111.300	2.541
		2	128.088	3.302
FR	Average + reader	1	175.950	2.261
		2	177.851	2.939
	Poorer reader	1	112.817	2.510
		2	128.280	3.262

FR, a fast read of challenging texts; FR + T, teachers having a theorised knowledge of reading and associated pedagogy.

Table 2: Story comprehension

FR + T/FR	Average/Poor reader	Time	Mean	Standard error
FR + T	Average reader	1	20.779	.880
		2	22.953	.745
	Poor reader	1	12.101	.918
		2	14.759	.777
FR	Average reader	1	20.980	.820
		2	20.283	.694
	Poor reader	1	11.633	.918
		2	15.456	.777

FR, a fast read of challenging texts; FR + T, teachers having a theorised knowledge of reading and associated pedagogy.

Qualitative data analyses

Reading the text in the class. Teachers selected texts in their pairs according to our criteria for challenge and complexity, such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne, 2006) or *Now is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011), sometimes purchasing new texts but also shaped by what was available in the English Department stock cupboard. In two schools, a degree of inflexibility meant that texts had already been allocated over the year, so that one pair used a short story anthology and another a *Frankenstein* playscript as second texts following a novel. However, selection often simply meant drawing on texts generally reserved for higher ability groups. Significantly, such challenging texts were initially perceived by several teachers as 'too difficult' for their poorer readers, even before they had attempted teaching them:

"Normally I would think this book [Now is the Time for Running] is a top set year 9 book so it will be interesting to see if I've been doing them [poorer readers] an injustice by assuming that certain books go with certain sets" (Chloe FR + T).

"This [Bog Child] is just on the cusp of being quite challenging for some of the lower end ... It's not my choice" (Lucy FR).

From the outset, the more difficult texts shifted teachers' constructions of student ability, raising their expectations. Similarly, before the intervention, teachers saw reading a text as arduous and dull: "it's an on-going battle" (Lucy FR). It could take up to 12 weeks to read a novel, "*shoehorning writing activities*" (Penny FR + T) into each lesson so stop-starting the reading and stretching the text out over a whole term. Yet teachers were aware of students' desire to read the narrative without interruptions:

"In my experience they hate reading for five minutes and then doing a diary entry for 40 minutes, they hate it; they just want to know the next bit of the story" (Jane FR).

Enforced to complete each text in 4–5 weeks, a fast pace of reading with few interruptions was observed in most classrooms, faster than normal, according to the teachers. FR + T teachers in particular read extensively each lesson from 20 up to 40 minutes and often read the text aloud themselves, adding engaging prosody and gesture and scanning the class to ensure students were comprehending. Only at points of visible confusion or 'sticking points' (Kuhn et al., 2010) did FR + T teachers briefly pause the reading, as Helen (FR + T) said: "I have to say 'stop, you look like you have switched off' and they say 'we don't get it'." In that pause, FR + T teachers asked questions such as "where did you stop understanding?" or "what's just happened?" to ensure basic comprehension of the plot or character development. After this "in-the-moment-of-reading" instruction, teachers returned their students to the point they had left off, ensuring continual textual engagement and text memory: "They've remembered the text well because we've read so much and never been taken away from the text for a long time" (Laura FR + T). Three FR teachers also developed effortless, autonomous reading with their students as in the following observation:

“Continuous, fast-paced reading for half the lesson (22 mins of 50 min lesson) with high level of pupil engagement with reading. Teacher reads, quite expressively, pausing every so often to define words or ask about inference” (Liam FR).

However, pace, fluency and engagement broke down if the teacher interrupted too often, as was more frequent with FR teachers. One teacher, Jane, stopped reading the novel *Once* aloud after every page to ask prepared questions of her group of poor readers, frustrating their desire to just follow the narrative:

Teacher: “We have 5 minutes left, we will read.”

Boy 1: “Can we go onto the next page?”

Boy 2: “He will go away if he sees a Nazi he will hide from them”

Boy 2: “He will change his ideas and he will lie”

Girl 1: “Can we speed read so we finish the book?”

Boy 1: “Can we just read and not do any questions? Can we read the other books, ‘Now and Then?’” (Jane FR)

Teachers from both groups varied how the text was read using a CD/audiobook, library lessons or silent reading and homework, but the general pattern was for the entire text to be read aloud in class. In small classes, students formed one reading circle, the teacher often reading to avoid students’ fears of reading aloud: *“If you ask each to read they worry so much that when it is their turn to read they just don’t listen at all” (Helen FR + T)*. Alternatively, all 21 students in Paula’s class sat around one table in a relaxed manner taking turns to read but with the focus firmly on clarifying the plot:

“We’d stop whenever someone would say or have their hand up and say ‘I don’t get that bit, why did they do that?’ or I’d stop someone reading and say ‘what’s going on there?’ ” (Paula FR).

Anna, teaching a mixed ability class, relinquished control and allowed students to read at their own pace in the class, library and at home but made pedagogic use of their different reading speeds, circumventing any frustration by the faster readers:

“Those who have got ahead, I asked them to go away and present a one minute drama on everything that has happened so far so we had a quick summary” (Anna FR + T).

However, all FT + T teachers – but no FR teachers – shifted much of the reading onto stable mixed-ability or reading-ability groups as the additional training had suggested where students read aloud to their peers, freed from public performance, with noticeable engagement and participation. In contrast, several FR teachers insisted on a ‘round-robin’ class reading with random students being asked to read a paragraph aloud in turn. Fear of mispronunciation and public opprobrium slowed students down and their soft voices, facing the front, made it difficult for poorer readers to

follow the text. Reading aloud in this context supported neither fluency nor comprehension, being merely “barking at text” at the level of decoding:

Boy 1: “Where are we?”

Teacher: “Zak, can you read now?”

Zak reads a paragraph aloud.

Teacher: “Well read, Zak.”

Zak: “I didn’t understand what I was reading” (James FR).

These different approaches to reading impacted on text completion. FR + T teachers completed one text within 3 or 4 weeks, leaving ample time for discussion and writing about the text and all easily completed both texts in the allotted time. Seven of the FR teachers also completed both novels, but three FR teachers failed to do so because of the slower, interrupted reading. One of the FR teachers resorted to using film and YouTube clips to finish the second text, another had to complete the text way after the project’s deadline, recognising that this *“was not ideal” (Imogen FR + T)*, while a third did not even attempt to read the second novel, justifying this as

“if I wanted to just read it and not develop their reading skills, then I could get it done in 5 weeks, but it is just not possible to read – you know even if they were top set readers – to be able to really grapple with those, you know, crucial ideas in the book enough ... they need to be able to have the depth as well and you can’t – you have to have both of them in equal measure. You can’t sacrifice one for the other” (Lucy FR + T).

The notion that ‘just reading’ is not *teaching* reading, whereas analysing every part of a text equates to developing reading skills is strongly articulated here, as is the notion that “top set readers” do not need to develop their comprehension. Yet this analysis slowed the reading considerably to the detriment of volume of text read, as only the one novel was read over 12 weeks.

Motivation and engagement

The faster read impacted on the behaviour, motivation and engagement of poorer readers and characterised in FR + T classes by students rushing into their English lessons in excited anticipation:

“Harrison came in the other day and said ‘I can’t wait to read today, I’m so excited’ and for a child like him, that’s huge” (Laura FR + T).

Such engagement was also observed in several FR classes with poorer readers as in Liam’s class above and Ella’s:

“High level of engagement in entire lesson, with high proportion of spontaneous pupil questions as they interact with the book, showing strong personal response” (Ella FR + T).

Teachers commented on the sheer volume of words read by poorer readers, many of whom had never read a whole text in school:

"We have four lessons a week, so they're spending three hours a week reading, which is probably 100% more than they would be doing otherwise!" (Penny FR + T).

Positioning reading as the core, rather than marginal, activity of the classroom increased the amount of reading practice that all students experienced on a weekly basis, which is significant when opportunities for independent reading at school were erratic or extra-curricular and where students went for weeks without doing any continuous reading at all.

Comprehension strategies

The additional teacher training was most visible in the FR + T group's use of strategies. Teachers' detailed recaps instantly recalled the previous section, easing students into the next text chunk (Zwaan, 1998) and supported students who had been absent to catch up with the basic plot – and as the incomplete test results confirm, there were several schools where absenteeism was common. Recaps turned into predictions, sharpening students' anticipation of the text informed by strong, textual understanding (Gadamer, 1975). FR + T teachers also linked smaller paragraphs overtly to larger sections of text to encourage greater global coherence:

"I thought they did really well with the phrases and then sort of expanding it out to a whole page and starting to try to work out what they could now gain and then moving on to the whole book" (Clem FR + T).

FR teachers, on the other hand, gave shorter recaps or none, moving directly into the reading, assuming students' adequate recall. They maintained a narrow focus on the analysis of paragraphs, remaining at the level of cohesive inference, 'prodding' students to analyse at a decontextualised level: *"I wanted just to feed them quotes"* (Liam FR).

Knowledge-based inferences were supported by FR + T teachers explicitly teaching and integrating context, for example, the history of WW2, or the political situation in Zimbabwe and South Africa:

Maisie: *"Why did the Zimbabweans go to South Africa?"*

Teacher: *"Why do you think?"*

Maisie: *"But why didn't they spread out across different countries?"*

Jay: *"Because it's one of the nearest places and it's similar to Zimbabwe ... and they [Deo and Innocent] might want to see their Dad."* (Chloe FR + T).

Here, background knowledge supported understanding of plot and allowed the teacher to resume a rapid

read because the potential sticking point of not knowing enough relevant contextual knowledge had been deftly solved by other students. FR teachers more often taught context as a decontextualised fact file, so that sometimes students did not know which World War Morpurgo's (2003) *Private Peaceful* was set in, or whether texts were representing fact or fiction, as with these students reading McEwan's *The Daydreamer*:

"(Boy quietly to his friend): Hang on, is Margaret Thatcher a real person? (confused)" (Lucy FR).

Such confusion positions the text as distant and irrelevant, resulting in disengagement with the sticking point unresolved, and so, the reading stops.

Moving through the text more quickly with the sticking points smoothed out also supported global coherence of the text, increasing pace and engagement, as articulated by Helen:

"And then we get into it much quicker because once we've hit that half way point of the book, as they have with The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, they wanted to read it, they like it a lot [...] they are not used to looking at the whole and not fully understanding it until they've pieced it together" (Helen FR + T).

To visually represent the developing 'whole' text, FR + T teachers used graphic organisers such as event wheels, timelines and family trees, activities very different from simply 'lifting quotes' that some FR teachers used. The most effective use of graphic organisers involved students referring closely to the text in groups, for example, sequencing images representing key events. In reconstructing the plot together, students had to synthesise evidence across the text, consolidating the situation model. In the FR classes, the rare group work was based on smaller text sections, discussion only distantly related to the text itself.

Reading two novels back to back

Significantly, reading two novels consecutively made the greatest impact on seven of the 10 FR teachers who enjoyed the licence to "just teach reading" over a whole term:

"It's very liberating for me. I've never in 27 years of teaching just read two texts back-to-back" (Ella FR).

Higher teacher expectations of poorer readers were confirmed in teaching a second text with reading strategies consolidated, particularly valuable for poorer readers: *"If you throw big things at them they can get on with it. ... this has made them stronger at this"* (Liam FR). These expectations altered practice, even without the additional training: *"I didn't for a minute expect that*

they would keep up. ... I think we just have to keep on doing it" (Jane FR).

Even so, the pressure to leave a constant paper trail of evidence weighed heavily. Only two FR teachers felt able to relinquish extensive written work over the intervention:

"It's very tricky because if Ofsted [national Inspectorate of Schools] came in and saw us reading for forty minutes, what would they think of that lesson? But that's what [students] want to do" (Jane FR).

However, many FR + T teachers found that students' writing levels had improved following 3 to 4 weeks of 'just reading' the whole text, convincing them that "things don't have to be written down and learning can be shown by just reading a few chapters of a book" (Penny FR + T).

Discussion

So why did poorer readers improve to a substantially greater extent over time than the average + readers in both groups? The selected narratives had sophisticated themes, unfamiliar settings, complex structures and empathetic narrators that intellectually and affectively engaged students (Genereux and Mckeough, 2007; Mcgeown et al., 2016; Philpot, 2005): good texts teach readers how to read (Meek, 1991). These texts challenged teachers' assumptions of students' cognitive capacities and meant that teachers' questions and tasks in turn were more cognitively demanding. The faster pace where most of the text was read aloud in class with deft questioning supported poorer readers to read effortlessly over longer chunks without getting stuck, their energies directed towards comprehension (Cain et al., 2001; Kuhn et al., 2010). With more of the text quickly covered, students were more likely to develop the satisfying situation model (Kintsch, 1988). As a result of understanding 'what happened', engagement increased, and reading became enjoyable rather than arduous for students and teachers. Indeed, for some FR teachers, their practice to some extent came to resemble that of their FR + T peers, throwing aside pressures to stop to analyse or write, and 'just read', and hence may well account for the lack of significant difference between the two groups of teachers. Several strategies used by both groups also directly supported comprehension: questioning, discussion, clarifying and developing meaning, teaching cohesive inference and contextual knowledge. Seventeen of the 20 teachers felt joy in teaching two texts back to back, consolidating reading strategies and accumulating text memory for students whose only experience of narrative is in the English classroom (Kuhn et al., 2010; Meek, 1991).

Put simply, students read far more in those 12 weeks than they had ever done before, and the faster read of

two whole novels in effect provided a catch-up programme for poorer readers from both groups in the English classroom with their peers, not marginalised in a remedial programme (Baye et al., 2016). In these contexts, poorer readers were repositioned as good readers, heightening teachers' expectations of their reading capacity. This reversed the usual effects whereby good readers benefit the most from interventions with additional resources or teacher development (Stanovich, 1986). Even so, average + readers did better in the FR + T classes in the short story test but not to the detriment of their less able peers.

However, the poorer readers had a long way to go to catch up with their average + peers, remaining at a mean of 51 months behind in their chronological reading age in both groups. Experience of 'just reading' was needed during their first year of secondary school, if not at primary school. The FR + T strategies need to be embedded in teachers' practices over a longer time to make more of an impact, but this study has shown that the model tested has the potential to better support poorer readers to rapidly catch up and average + readers to be stretched. Specifically, FR + T teachers remediated students' sticking points through using the full range of comprehension strategies at the point of need in a more active 'reading aloud'; graphic organisers supported students to understand the whole text, and seating students sociably in groups created inclusive communities of engaged and motivated readers (Oakhill et al., 2015; Sutherland, 2015). This was direct instruction in the context of a faster read of whole texts, integrated with cooperative learning, professional development and a flexible pedagogy, all four categories seen as effective in meta-analyses of secondary reading programmes (Baye et al., 2016).

Conversely, practices observed in the FR classes provide insight into why poorer readers remain poor: the stilted 'round-robin' reading that three FR teachers persisted with gave fragmented access to the text, unnecessary interruptions and faux-analytical questions. None of these FR teachers – with one exception, Ella – explicitly taught the range of reading strategies. In this context, reading remained a chore and readers were more likely to be perceived by their teachers as 'poor', unable to analyse texts because they did not comprehend them, a downward spiral resulting in reduction of volume of text read.

Conclusions

Myths rooted in a Leavisite 'literary analysis' approach have left their impact on English teaching in England, enshrined by successive policy since the National Literacy Strategy when 'literature' was replaced by 'literacy' (Stobart and Stoll, 2005). These myths state that: poorer readers need simpler texts; reading aloud by students equates to their comprehension; every part of a text

has to be analysed; comprehension leads to inference; and teachers have to be in control of the reading. Our intervention pushed the majority of FR and FR + T teachers to invert those myths by reading longer sections of complex texts more quickly, teaching different forms of inference and letting groups read to themselves.

However, the persistence of these myths was visible in several FR teachers' practices despite our intervention. Texts read slowly become distant, distended and disrupted, and reading is experienced as an indigestible product. By contrast, in a faster read, the text becomes coherent, reading experienced as a collaboratively constructed, active and engaged process. The new English curriculum for 11- to 14-year-olds potentially encourages reading as process if teachers dare to 'just read'. With ability setting too often conflated with socio-economic background and hence social class in England, a faster read forced teachers in our study to reconstruct their expectations for whole groups of students, with potentially profound consequences for their academic futures (Allen, 2015; Dunne and Gazeley, 2008). Future research on a larger national scale will extend these findings.

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