READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGY INSTRUCTION:

A POSSIBLE MODEL

The contents of this teaching pack should be taken as guiding principles for teachers to create their own reading curriculum. It describes a personalised reading curriculum framework, unbound by prescribed reading libraries and pre-rendered schemes of work, which is instead responsive to learner interests and needs, who collaboratively learn to independently apply comprehension strategies. For full disclosure, the theory and practice described below reflects the author’s democratic pedagogy, underpinned by socio-constructivist theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and self-determination theories of motivation (Ryan, 2009).

It provides practical examples of how reading may be developed at both learner and teacher level. Elliott’s (1977) advice about improving practice is useful here: there is no structure proposed to be strictly adhered to, rather it is hoped that teachers use this information to gain insight and a sense of agency over their teaching.

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1 Some introductory notes

It is taken for granted that, as Pirrie (2012) points out, educational research, as literary scholarship, is subject to a multitude of possible readings. What follows are practical principles that while open to interpretation, carry the caveat (for learners and teachers) that interaction, strategy use and motivation must all adhere to the 3As of Affiliation, Agency and Autonomy to be truly successful and effective (McLean, 2009).

Duke, Pearson, Strachan and Billman (2011, p51) use the metaphor of a tour guide for teachers of reading strategies:

“…ensuring that students stay on course, pausing to make sure they appreciate the landscape of understanding, and encouraging the occasional diversion down an inviting and interesting cul-de-sac or byway”

The aim should be to develop a Reader. Readers self-regulate their reading so as to construct meaning from text. They make predictions about the content of text based on prior knowledge, ask themselves questions and look for answers in text, make inferences as reading proceeds, construct mental images consistent with the relationships mentioned in text, seek clarification when confused, and summarise (Hilden and Pressley, 2007). Readers should choose their text they read, though a genre may be shared across the classroom. This would allow for the development of a shared understanding of an expository topic or narrative structure. However, for novice strategy users, perhaps they could vote on selecting a single text.

Although evidence supports both individual and integrated strategy instruction (Stahl, 2004), getting the balance between the two so as not to create a dichotomy may be a challenge. Therefore, it may help to view use of the strategies as a mountain landscape, where strategies share multiple points of overlap at the foundation but peaks can nonetheless be easily identified. A list of strategies can be found at part 3 of this pack.

The contribution that the strategy makes on comprehension depends how the learners are asked to demonstrate their understanding (Andreassen and Bråten 2011). Thus, if a
scaffolding template is offered, it should complement the process of the strategy. Further, as a tool to aid formative assessment, it is important not to be burdensome method of record keeping (Antoniou and James, 2014).

With Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) guidance in mind (Education Scotland (ES) online i), Local Authorities and schools in Scotland each have their own approaches to the reading curriculum. Thus, any readers of this should take Priestley and Miller’s (2012) three pre-evaluative questions into consideration before continuing:

Practical ethics- Are the values promoted above congruent with your values?

Instrumentality- How easy is it to operationalise?

Risk- Have you analysed to costs and benefits?

2  A framework for innovation

First of all, the standards that this framework must adhere to. Given that external guidance will mutate as it makes its way through the education system, it is pointless to measure the success of this approach by how faithfully it is taken up (Priestley 2011). Instead Cuban (1998) and Priestley (2011) suggest innovation should be measured by the extent that it allows for re-invention and problem solving (adaptiveness), how sustainable the approach is (longevity) and the extent that the responses are genuine changes in practice (embeddedness). Use these three criteria to evaluate the framework’s implementation.

According to Kelly (1999), when developing a curriculum, it is necessary to acknowledge the particular planning model that underpins it; and in turn this raises an obligation to justify the choice of model and be explicit about underpinning ideology (Table 1):
Table 1: Innovation planning model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Value positions</td>
<td>Democratic, socio-constructivist, self-determination theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. a) Content</td>
<td>Reading comprehension through collaborative use of strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Materials</td>
<td>Authentic, meaningful texts with relevant prompts to scaffold strategy process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c) Method</td>
<td>Increase the challenge level of both the type of text and use of strategy, leading to transactional strategy use; apply the learning to a range of text structures and genres while seeking evidence of increasingly quality interaction and written responses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Training procedures</td>
<td>• Pre-evaluate (ethics, instrumentality, risk);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Read literature related to scaffolding and intrinsic motivation for reading;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborative planning for coherent implementation;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Peer observations by critical friends;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moderation of evidence of learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Contextual variables</td>
<td>Scottish Primary Schools facilitating learning according to the principles of Curriculum for Excellence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. List of hypotheses</td>
<td>1. Classroom interaction, strategy use and motivation are all interdependent variables;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. If just one of these components do not reflect the values above it will subvert the others;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. When all the components reflect the above values it will lead to improved comprehension and later achievement across learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Different contexts</td>
<td>Would not be as effective using behaviourist models of instruction; strategies can be adapted to narrative and expository texts; separate learning intentions may be useful for differentiation; libraries, fundraisers and donations may compensate for school availability; a lack of ‘buy-in’ or enthusiastic support would negatively impact learning; the approach does not rely on academically accredited intervention; parental support has the potential to make a massive positive impact.</td>
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As well as teaching strategies, comprehension should take place within a wider set of reading aims and approaches (Duke et al, 2011) (Table 2):

**Table 2: Wider reading comprehension aims**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical approach</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
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<tr>
<td>Build disciplinary and world knowledge</td>
<td>Build knowledge by situating knowledge-building goals to enhance future textbase reading comprehension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide exposure to a volume and range of texts</td>
<td>Increase the volume of texts to which students have access to improves overall reading achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide motivating texts and contexts for reading</td>
<td>Highly correlated with reading recall and comprehension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teach strategies for comprehending</strong></td>
<td>Help readers use strategies for solving problems (both word recognition and comprehension), during reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach text structures</td>
<td>Create awareness that text genres have typical structures that can be exploited to aid understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage students in discussion</td>
<td>Quality discussion prompts higher order thinking, which in turn helps construct meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build vocabulary and language knowledge</td>
<td>Help readers understand what they are reading at textbase level, which in turn builds situational model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrate reading and writing</td>
<td>When complementary, they each reciprocate in helping to develop skills in both domains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe and assess</td>
<td>Recognise strengths and weaknesses to provide appropriate support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiate instruction</td>
<td>Offer appropriate support to provide opportunities for success, fostering self-esteem.</td>
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(Adapted from Figure 3.3 of Duke et al, 2011 ‘A Tool for Evaluating Your Fostering and Teaching of Reading Comprehension’).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Learning Intention (LI) &amp; Success Criteria (SC)</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Predict** | Relies on making connections to prior knowledge; a form of ‘thinking forward’ inference (McNamara, 2004). | LI: Use evidence to predict what might happen next.  
SC: Remember what you know about text;  
Guess what might happen next;  
Give reasons why based on what else you know to strengthen your theory. |
| **Clarify** | Involves identifying and defining obscure, ambiguous or challenging words or concepts (Spörer, Brunstein & Kieschke 2009). | LI: Make sense of new words to increase vocabulary and fluency.  
SC: Find new words and say them aloud;  
Use a strategy to try and make sense of it;  
Define meaning using a reliable source;  
Create a sentence using the word. |
| **Analyse** | Builds familiarity with the structure of expository and narrative texts (Duke et al, 2011). | LI: Make sense of new words to increase vocabulary and fluency.  
SC: Pick out devices used to describe an idea;  
Quote examples of structural ideas;  
Report feelings and thoughts based on the example. |
| **Visualise** | Use of graphic organisers by representing the text, for example creating pictures and charts (NRP 2000; Duke et al, 2011). | LI: Illustrate an idea based on a text.  
SC: Choose a part of the text;  
Find descriptive words;  
Pick a diagram and create illustration;  
Label and reference to describe details. |
| **Infer** | Elaboration inferences refer to use of prior world knowledge (making life links) to construct new meaning beyond the text (McNamara, 2004). | LI: Make inferences to find implied messages.  
SC: Interpret messages or themes about life from the text;  
Connect the clues that support your guess;  
Use the clues to relate to personal experiences. |
| **Summarise** | Select main information, delete trivial information, relate to or combine with supporting information, and stating or inventing the main idea (Spörer, Brunstein and Kieschke, 2009). | Paraphrase to summarise ideas in a text.  
Start, middle and end; (3 main parts covered)  
Take out details; (Words you can do without)  
Note key ideas; (Pick the most important details)  
Re-write in own words. (How would you say it?) |
| **Question** | Build on signal words (who, what, where, etc) or generic question stems (What is the main idea of_?) (McKeown & Beck, 2009). | LI: Create questions to test what you know.  
SC: Literal questions that are on the lines;  
Evaluative questions that are beyond the lines;  
Inferential questions that are between the lines. |
| **Evaluate** | Consider the author’s choices and the effect on the reader; Expository evaluation may consider its reliability (ES online iii). | LI: Use the 6 thinking hats to critically evaluate a text.  
SC: Organise report under 6 headings:  
White = Summarise facts;  
Red = Analyse feelings about the style (…etc.) |
| **Fluency** | Decoding and understanding at the textbase level; involves bridging inferences between clauses, sentences and paragraphs (McNamara, 2004). | LI: Give feedback on a peer’s fluency.  
SC: Find a success with an example;  
Offer a target with a reason. |

*List based upon the NRP’s (2000) findings, along with prominence in the literature and popular reading programs, as well as CfE guidance.*
4 Implementation

A number of researchers agree that learning multiple integrated strategies should be a collaborative activity (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Reutzel, Smith and Fawson, 2005). Under the socio-constructivist paradigm, these strategies are most effectively developed by collaboratively constructing meaning (Bråten and Anmarkrud, 2013). Duke et al (2011) goes on to add that the interrelated approaches listed above should be implemented within a gradual release of responsibility model, akin to van de Pol, Volman and Beishuizen’s (2010) view of scaffolding. Duke et al (2011) elaborate further, emphasising the importance of guided practice and collaboration as intermediaries between teacher modelling and independent use by the learner. It is worth adding that even modelling should be thought of in relation to motivation; for example caricaturing the strategies to be learned could add extrinsic interest to children’s learning (Andreassen and Bråten, 2011).

As a guide, the level of challenge should increase with reading experience and proficiency as thus: the use of video reduces cognitive load from decoding words to focus on strategy acquisition, which can be initially applied to a whole class text before leading to individually read texts; these strategies may initially be modelled until reaching a point of integrating multiple strategies, which in turn may be introduced by way of multi-modal texts. Choosing when to increase the level of challenge is a matter for the teacher’s professional judgement; however, it is strongly recommended that each learner has the chance to choose their own text and apply a strategy as independently as possible before the end of each school year. Recall that a teacher supporting a learner’s ZPD is focused on their ‘growing edge’ (Tappan, 1998, p30), or as Vygotsky (1978, p251) put it, the ‘tomorrow of the child’s learning’. Furthermore, it is assumed that textbase decoding fluency is constantly being developed, therefore it is valuable to find specific time to support the learners to give peer feedback on expression and fluency.
In terms of types and genres of text and level of challenge, this again is a matter of teacher judgement, responding to available resources and the learners’ reading experience. It may be that some learners are reading a familiar genre individually (for example a narrative by a loved author) and are introduced to an unfamiliar text (for example an expository about a historical event) via a multi-modal source. Poetry may be a useful transition between video and novels, before applying strategies to expository texts.

Ultimately, the goal is for strategy mastery: from knowing that there are strategies that support understanding to synthesising multiple integrated strategies in a fluent (Pressley, 2002). Taking CfE progression frameworks as a guide (ES, online), a possible running order for the introduction of strategies may be involve: starting with simple evaluation, discussing preferences; then making big predictions about their overall impressions of a text; trying to make sense of new concepts; looking at the structure and grammar. After a degree of proficiency, teachers may then introduce: visualising key concepts; making inferences about main messages; creating literal and evaluative questions; and summarising recently read sections. After this, learners may be ready to start to integrate the strategies more, a more critical evaluation may be a way towards this. For experienced readers beginning to show strategy proficiency and integration, predictions may be reviewed; phrases (rather than individual words) may be clarified; more complex texts analysed and used as criteria for writing; graphic organisers are chosen independently; inference is based on a micro level, connecting specific events to personal experiences;
inferential questioning develops; summaries are paraphrased and written in consideration of a specific reader.

In terms of evidence of learning, the ability to share ideas could be taken as a benchmark. At this point, exploratory talk should be actively encouraged, where learners ask peers for more information and justify their thoughts (Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Fernández and Wegerif, 2006). The learner’s ability to find evidence to support claims is vital in evaluating their understanding of the text content and use of strategy. Listening and talking about the text and strategy use may lead to noting their ideas on the text (or a photocopy of it). Activities to demonstrate strategy could then be developed, for example performing sections or completing a template sheet. For competent readers and writers, extended written responses could be encouraged, for example writing a critical analysis of the author’s characterisation.

The learning experience may be structured as such: first reading the text individually to refresh memories and catch up with peers; having an initial discussion about the text in relation strategy use; responding to other people’s ideas; and carrying out a task to support strategy use and demonstrate learning. For additional challenge and application, learners could explicitly apply their reading strategies to peer writing. For example one child’s report’s title could be used by others to predict what it will be about, testing its efficacy.
5 Words of caution

The literature suggests that none of the approaches above are easy: research has shown experienced teachers having difficulties with reading strategy instruction (Palincsar and Schutz, 2011) and related formative assessment strategies (Antoniou & James, 2014). Further, it may well be that the above approach involves teaching that is different from how the teachers themselves were taught, although this is arguably a prerequisite for preparing learners for the modern world (Jones & Dexter, 2014).

It is also worth remembering that ‘no single instructional approach will ever teach all children to read’ (Duffy and Hoffman, 1999). Thus, what is proposed above is not a finished product and never will be due to ever evolving responses to learner needs. Indeed, strategy instruction has received some heavy criticism by researchers, often due to attempts at rigid implementation (Duke et al, 2011). Duke et al (2011) are more critical, however, of the accountability context that many teachers face, which usually results in the strategy instruction becoming the object of assessment. This may be due to a tension between the type informal, critical, developmental learning that Stenhouse (1975) advocated and the political desire to assess objectively via high-stakes examinations (Priestley and Humes, 2010). Fortunately, in Scottish Primaries at least, accountability measures usually centre on a school’s ability to promote learners’ Four Capacities, as outlined by CfE policy (ES online, ii), which is supported by the above approach.

6 A model for staff development

Once pre-evaluated according to practical ethics, instrumentality and risk, curriculum leaders should also consider how to build upon teachers’ existing knowledge and expertise (Baumfield, 2007), not unlike theories of reading development. Further, substantial time spent on development may be wasted if it conflicts with teachers’ value bases (Andreassen and Bråten, 2011). Additionally, Jones & Dexter (2014) found that informal collaborations and independent work may be more fruitful than formal development seminars. With this in mind, Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman and Yoon (2001) present some considerations for promoting professional development:
a) The form of the activity:

A reform type, such as a study group or network, in contrast to a traditional type, such as a workshop or conference. The former may involve modelling, coaching, observation, and follow-up sessions to analyse and critique practices, which has been shown to be more effective, particularly in individual change efforts.

(b) The duration of the activity:

This includes both the total number of contact hours and the span of time over which the activity takes place. The most effective approaches are sustained over the long term, providing ongoing support for teachers throughout the year and from year to year.

(c) The degree of collective participation:

For example, groups of teachers from the same school, department, or grade-level, as opposed to the participation of individual teachers from many schools. Effective approaches include creating opportunities for teachers to ask questions, collaborate with peers, and explore new ideas and current practices.

(d) The content focus:

Successful professional development is also content focused, linking learner, the curriculum, and their teachers.

Thus, it would be advisable to avoid too many formal, predetermined development sessions that are constrained to a specific time and place (Jones & Dexter, 2014).

### 7 Journal club

A final recommendation, based on reading comprehension and professional development principles, is the establishment of a Journal Club. This is a model of a Professional Learning Community (PLC), where structured time for sharing and collaboration is facilitated. Journal Club is based on the idea that effective professional development takes place when teachers are actively engaged in meaningful discussion about planning and practice (Garet et al, 2001). Journal Club also inspired by Fang’s (2013) study into effective professional discussion of educational literature.
Each teacher would take it in turn to choose an area of interest that they would read a journal on and summarise at a brief presentation to colleagues (Fang, 2013). Alternatively, a theme for the year may be chosen in advance to form coherence and build upon prior learning. Otherwise, elements of a proposed innovation (such as the above reading curriculum) could be scrutinised. They would be expected to have applied this knowledge to their practice and then report back on their reflections during the presentation. It would take place roughly once a month for the academic year. It would also involve leading discussion and offering colleagues the chance to replicate the innovation in their own class and planning time to implement it. The follow up seminar would then begin by reviewing learners’ work and giving feedback on the innovation. Fang (2013) suggests that teachers could create a small packet of information on a particular child of concern, to increase focus on the learning process. Then the next teacher presents their area of interest and findings before inviting peers to try it, and so on. It is hoped that as teachers share their passions and seek support, peers reciprocate.

By responding to teachers’ needs and goals within their regular work day at a familiar setting, this reform type of development is more likely than traditional models to be successful and sustained (Garet et al, 2001). Although initially based in one school, successful implementation may lead to Journal Clubs spanning a cluster of schools. This may increase the likelihood of finding teachers who face similar problems and encourage the belief that solutions are possible. Indeed, Fang (2013) noted that as teachers focused on struggling learners, they began to adopt a positive perspective of what the child could do, as well as a historical view of what the child has learned and needs. This seems congruent with Vygotsky’s notion of ZPD (1978). The development would go some way in addressing professional standards for Scottish Teachers (GTCS, 2012).

For some teachers, the Journal Club could serve as a springboard to help teachers engage further with the research process (Jones & Dexter, 2014). Teachers would also then have the opportunity to create informal Communities Of Practice to further explore personal interests (Jones & Dexter, 2014).
8 Reference list


Reading comprehension strategy instruction

Education Scotland (online ii) *Reading Comprehension in Curriculum for Excellence*. Available at

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/assessment/sslн/resources/literacyreadingnew/readingcomprehension.asp (last accessed 15.08.15).


Reading comprehension strategy instruction


