11 Enquiry from books and online texts

Learning from books is quite different from reading a novel. It can become much more effective and focused using some simple procedures. Unfortunately, these are not generally taught in schools. Summaries of some useful approaches are provided later in this section.

Reading for information is less linear than fiction. The reader may first gain a general impression from title and subheadings, perhaps an abstract or opening paragraph, also illustrations. Then skillful readers reflect on what they already know and their purpose in reading further. Then comes the more careful linear reading, perhaps of a particular section, which may be accompanied by noting or highlighting key words and ideas.

Above all, reading for information should be seen as an active process, rather than a passive or receptive one. The reader engages in an encounter or dialogue with the text, raising questions, standing back critically, weighing it up, selecting, transforming, comparing sources. Pauses between sections can be as important as time spent moving through the text.

Several factors commonly limit the development of pupils' reading skills:

i) the assumption that reading development is complete once pupils can read aloud fluently

ii) the assumption that it only belongs in the English lesson

iii) the tendency for the teacher to paraphrase or summarise, rather than giving pupils time to grapple with a text first – particularly if the class are perceived to have lower levels of literacy

iv) a failure to notice that that the texts used in different specialisms have their own characteristics which may need to be taught. (This is not just a case of specialist vocabulary; the syntax may differ, for example through use of the passive in science).

These problems particularly impact on less advanced readers and results in problems completing examinations, as in adult life.

Promoting active reading

Palincsar and Brown (1984) suggest that teachers can support struggling readers by what they called 'reciprocal teaching'. Pupils are taught four procedures, and eventually they prompt one another and ultimately themselves to use these:

- summarise sections of the text - to focus on the main ideas and check their understanding

- questioning – again, to focus on the key ideas

- clarifying – explaining potentially problematic sections, to check their current state of knowledge and understanding

- predicting – making inferences and suggestions, but justifying this by reference to what is explicit.

KWL grids

This approach was developed by Ogle (1989) in the USA. It consists of drawing three columns:

What do I *know*?

What do I *want* to find out?

What did I *learn*?

A variant is the KWFL grid, where F stands for Where will I *find* out?

EXIT

David Wray and Maureen Lewis expanded KWL into the EXIT model (Extending Interactions with Texts). It consists of the following steps:

1. Elicitation of previous knowledge. (What do I already know about this subject?)

2. Establishing purposes. (What do I need to find out?)

3. Locating information. (Where and how will I get this information?)

4. Adopting an appropriate strategy. (How should I use this source of information?)

5. Interacting with text. (What can I do to help me understand this better?)

6. Monitoring understanding. (What can I do if there are parts I do not understand?)

7. Making a record. (What should I make a note of?)

8. Evaluating information. (Should I believe it?)

9. Assisting memory. (How can I help myself remember the most important parts?)

10. Communicating information. (How should I let other people know about this?)

Comprehension questions

The most common classroom approach to reading for information is to use a list of 'comprehension questions' to check (or promote) understanding. However, it is important to avoid too many simple factual questions which lack cognitive challenge. More challenging questions which focus sharp attention on parts of the text include

- inferring or reading between the lines

- checking if there is sufficient evidence to support the author's conclusion

- looking into the possibility of biased representation

- examining how the writer's style helps communicate information or feelings, or persuade.

Visuals

A valuable alternative is to ask pupils to draw a diagram. This focuses readers on the meaning of the text as a whole. They can be used with an individual or a group of readers struggling with a text.

The information can be represented in terms of:

- time (e.g. a timeline or sequence, such as in a recipe or other instructions)

- space (to make sense of geographical information, where places mentioned are in relationship to one another)

- proportion (such as a pie chart)

- causal connections and relationships (e.g. a spider or a concept map).

Some approaches to critical reading

Information is now more easily accessible and exchangeable than ever before in history. Precisely for this reason, the ability to read critically – to weigh up the evidence, perceive and question the writer's view, evaluate sources of bias or unjustified persuasion or denigration, look at the ethics of a conclusion and the possible consequences of acting on it – is an essential skill for informed citizenship.

There are many approaches to critical reading, some of them dependent on techniques, others on readers thinking from their own stance and perspective. Sometimes it is important to notice that a particular group's perspectives and experience is privileged in a text, whereas another group's is omitted, distorted or marginalized. Different curriculum areas may present specific critical reading demands.

A school in New York developed this broad general framework for questioning texts, called The Promise, for engaging young people as active, critical and concerned learners. It can be applied to many different texts, including other media:

Viewpoint: From whose viewpoint are we hearing this? to whose speaking? Would this look different if she or he were in another place or time?

Evidence: How do we know what we know? What evidence will we accept? How credible will such evidence appear to others? What rules of evidence are appropriate to different tasks?

Connections and patterns: How are things connected together? Have we ever encountered this before? Is there a discernible pattern here? What came first? Is there a clear cause and efffect? What are the probable consequences that might follow from taking course x rather than course y? How probable? Is this a 'law' of causality, a probability, or a mere correlation?

Conjecture: What if things had been different? Suppose King George had been a very different personality? Suppose Napoleon or Martin Luther King or Hitler had not been born? Suppose Kennedy's assassin had missed? (Our fourth habit encompassed our belief that a well educated person saw alternatives, other possibilities, and assumed that choices mattered. They could make a difference. The future wasn't, perhaps, inevitable.)

And finally – who, after all, cares? Does it *matter*? And to whom? Is it of mere 'academic' interest, or might it lead to significant *changes* in the way we see the world and the world sees us? (from D Meier 1998:607-8)

Other techniques involve untangling the different positions and perspectives packed into a text. For example, hot-seating (see section 7 above) involves asking one student to assume a particular role, and based on the information in the text answer other students' questions about what they think and feel about the subject matter.

Another approach involves rewriting the information from a different perspective or value position.

Issues for observation, reflection and evaluation

A.   Are pupils encouraged to adopt a suitable strategy for a non-fiction text?

B.   Is attention sufficiently focused on struggling readers? (This may involve individual support, a modified version of the text, a clearer strategy or questions.)

C.   Is sufficient explanation given about the demands of a particular text, without overwhelming pupils with too much detail?

D.   Are pupils given time to grapple with the text, individually or in pairs?

E.   If comprehension questions are used, are they sufficiently challenging to result in a deeper or more critical reading?

F.   Do pupils have a repertoire of suitable strategies? Are these being taught?

G.   Are pupils encouraged to make a critical reading of appropriate texts? Are they able to do so?

H.   Do pupils use appropriate techniques for recording key information in recoverable forms, i.e. without copying out minor details?

I.   Are pupils able to draw on the information contained in texts for new purposes, e.g. to write the information for a different readership, to re-present it in a new context?