Chapter 2

Reading in context

Learning outcomes

Our practice in teaching children to read is heavily influenced by a comprehensive body of theoretical knowledge and research which has been discussed and debated for many years. Government policy also dictates, to a certain extent, the way in which reading should be taught within the classroom. This chapter reviews the historical perspectives, provides an overview of key research findings and explores the pedagogical approaches that determine effective teaching of reading comprehension within the statutory framework introduced in September 2014.

This chapter will allow you to achieve the following outcomes:

- develop an overview of the historical background on teaching reading;
- understand the theoretical perspectives that underpin the teaching of reading comprehension;
- develop an understanding of the pedagogies associated with the teaching of effective reading comprehension.

Teachers' Standards

Working through this chapter will help you meet the following standards:

1. Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils:

    - Establish a safe and stimulating environment for pupils, rooted in mutual respect.
    - Set goals that stretch and challenge pupils of all backgrounds, abilities and dispositions.

2. Promote good progress and outcomes by pupils:

    - Be aware of pupils' capabilities and their prior knowledge, and plan teaching to build on these.
    - Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn and how this impacts on teaching.

3. Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge:

- Have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s) and curriculum areas, foster and maintain pupils' interest in the subject, and address misunderstandings.
- Demonstrate a critical understanding of developments in the subject and curriculum areas, and promote the value of scholarship.
- Demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject.

Introduction

The only important thing in a book is the meaning that it has for you.

(W. Somerset Maugham)

Reading comprehension is at the heart of the reading process for it allows individuals to make sense of the text within their own experiences. This, in itself, is problematic for teachers in terms of assessing understanding because it is likely that each reader will have a slightly different interpretation of the text based on what they bring to the text themselves. Therefore, is it truly possible to define comprehension as deriving meaning from a text? Comprehension is an interactive process and is developed through active engagement with the text. It requires children to look closely at texts in order to derive meaning and to make decisions based on what has been stated or inferred. According to Guppy and Hughes (1999), comprehension takes the form of three levels, each of which necessitates attention by the reader.

- Reading the lines – the reader derives meaning from what is explicitly stated in the text.

- Reading between the lines – the reader has to infer meaning based on what the author implies.

- Reading beyond the lines – the reader evaluates the text based on the reactions and the feelings that the author has evoked.

By applying the above skills, children will be drawing meaning from the text and through discussion, dialogue and debate, these meanings can be re-shaped and re-contextualised so that readers not only make sense for themselves but can explain this to others. In this way, we are able to assess individuals' levels of comprehension. Throughout this chapter, we will draw upon the historical and theoretical background that has shaped the teaching of reading over the past four decades while addressing the requirements of the current statutory framework within which we teach. This will enable you, as the reader, to reflect upon current thinking and situate the teaching of reading within your own practice.

Activity

Consider the following extract from *Ulysses* by James Joyce:

Her antiquity in preceding and surviving succeeding tellurian generations: her nocturnal predominance: her satellitic dependence: her luminary reflection: her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning: the forced invariability of her aspect: her indeterminate response to inaffirmative interrogation: her potency over effluent and refluent waters: her power to enamour, to mortify, to invest with beauty, to render insane, to incite to and aid delinquency: the tranquil inscrutability of her visage: the terribility of her isolated dominant resplendent propinquity: her omens of tempest and of calm: the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence: the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence: her splendour, when visible: her attraction, when invisible.

(Joyce, 1922)

What meanings have you derived from the text? What do you think Joyce is describing? What strategies did you employ in order to make sense of this piece of text?

You may find it difficult, at first, to understand exactly what Joyce was writing about. Jot down your ideas and the strategies employed and then compare with a colleague. Do you have the same understanding? Are you able to clarify meaning through discussion? How did you re-shape your own ideas in light of what someone else said?

Strategies for making sense of the text may have included the following:

- Re-reading the text in order to gain a 'feel' for the writing.
- Attention to punctuation in order to understand syntax.
- Word association – terribility, antiquity.
- Prior knowledge of the moon and words most commonly associated with this.
- Morphological awareness – *how meaningful word parts, morphemes, are arranged to create words* (Templeton, 2012, p101)
- Knowledge of affixes – inaffirmative.
- Vocabulary – nocturnal, satellitic.
- Background knowledge that you have gained through life experience – would everyone make the connection between the moon and the effect it has upon the 'effluent and refluent' waters?

Consider the implications that this may have for your own classroom practice when teaching reading comprehension.

The reading wars

Best practice in teaching children to read has long been a bone of contention, not only in the UK, but throughout the world; the 'reading wars' have raged long and hard during this time. The publication in America in 1955 of Rudolph Flesch's

book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, attacked the 'whole word' theorists and suggested a return to an emphasis on phonetic knowledge in order to address falling literacy standards in American schools. This polarised debate as to how best to teach reading continues to dominate current thinking in the UK, particularly as the teaching of phonics is a statutory requirement of the National Curriculum for English. The place of phonics in teaching children to read as opposed to teaching children to make meaning of texts is at the heart of this debate, although it is widely recognised that the majority of educators agree that a balanced approach is most effective (Levy, 2011). Indeed, Rose recognised that although phonics is essential in learning to read, it is *not the whole picture, of what it takes to become a fluent reader* (Rose, 2006, p16).

The historical context

Forty years ago, the Bullock Report (DES, 1975) concluded that there was *no one method, medium, approach, device, or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read* (DES, 1975, p77). This far-reaching report was in response to perceived declines in literacy levels in schools. It addressed the teaching of all aspects of English in schools and made a series of recommendations for improving practice, although it did little to dispel the controversy surrounding the methods by which reading was taught. However, within the key recommendations, it recognised the importance of schools developing a comprehensive and systematic approach to reading in order to secure reading competence. Together with a more rigorous approach to training pre-service and existing teachers in the teaching of reading, reading was afforded a renewed rigour in terms of methods and pedagogical approaches.

The Cox Report (DES, 1989), which formed the basis of the 1988 National Curriculum for English, reiterated this view of teaching reading by stating that *teachers should recognise that reading is a complex but unitary process and not a set of discrete skills which can be taught separately in turn and, ultimately, bolted together* (DES, 1989, p21). It advocated teaching reading for meaning alongside decoding and recognised the reader as an 'active participant' in the process. Although the National Curriculum of 1988 has been criticised in terms of its prescriptive content, once again, reading was highlighted as having a pivotal role in driving up standards of literacy.

The Searchlights Model gained credence with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching (DfEE, 1998), which consisted of a number of reading strategies that combined top-down and bottom-up approaches that children could employ to read a text. The Searchlights Model advocated an approach whereby children were encouraged to apply a range of strategies or 'cues' simultaneously. By drawing upon a diverse range of strategies, readers would not have to rely upon one but use as many of these strategies as required in order to make sense of the text (see Figure 2.1). The model itself had no basis in educational research (Stuart, 2005) but attempted to align the different approaches to teaching reading.
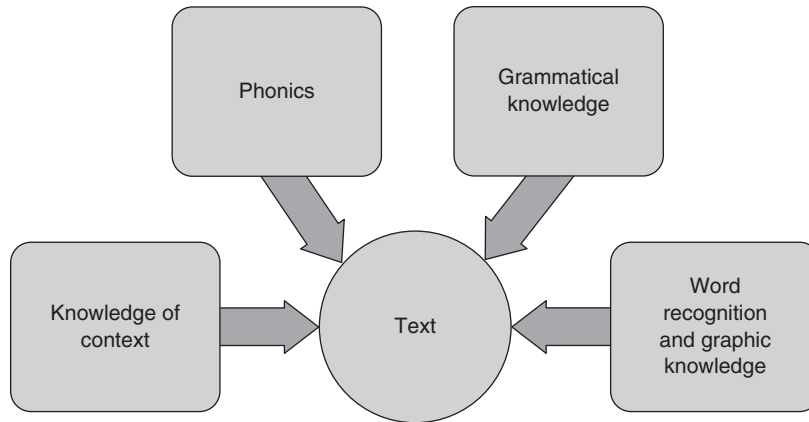
Figure 2.1   Searchlights Model

This model had its fair share of critics, most notably OFSTED, which stated:

> *the 'searchlights' model proposed in the framework has not been effective enough in terms of illustrating where the intensity of the 'searchlights' should fall at the different stages of learning to read. While the full range of strategies is used by fluent readers, beginning readers need to learn how to decode effortlessly, using their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending sounds together.*

<div align="right">(OFSTED, 2002, para 58)</div>

Once again, the National Literacy Strategy was condemned as having failed our children in teaching them to read effectively. This led to a subsequent turnaround in government policy and an independent report into the teaching of early reading was commissioned, led by Sir Jim Rose. Rose (2006) concluded that synthetic phonics should be the prime approach in teaching early reading based on evidence from the Clackmannanshire study (Johnston and Watson, 2005). However, it should be noted at this point that while word recognition for children in this study had increased significantly, the reading comprehension test reported an average gain of 3.5 months above chronological age, which has since led to much speculation as to the effectiveness of phonics 'fast and first' in teaching children to *read* (Ellis, 2007; Wyse and Styles, 2007). As authors of a book on reading comprehension, this is a significant factor in examining how word recognition and language comprehension should form part of an interrelated process if we are to successfully teach reading.

The Simple View of Reading

The Rose Review (Rose, 2006) drew upon a conceptual model developed 20 years earlier, known as the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986), which consists of two key components: word recognition and language comprehension (see Figure 2.2). Both have to be demonstrated in order to be a successful reader.
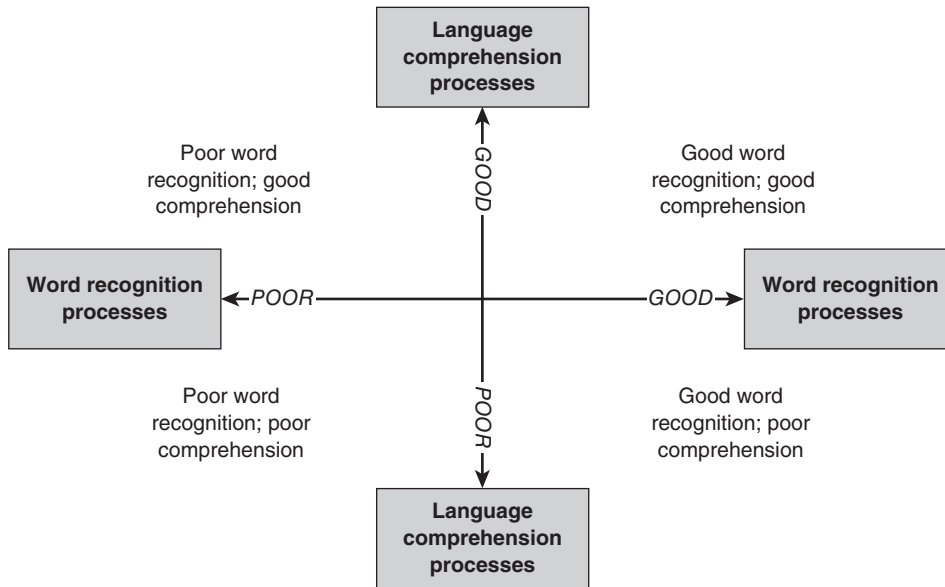
Figure 2.2 Simple View of Reading model

According to this model, learning to read involves recognising written words and understanding what these mean. While the decoding element is time limited, language comprehension is a lifelong process and children will continue to build upon this throughout their time in school and beyond. Both sets of processes are necessary if children are to become successful readers; however, neither is sufficient in itself. If a child is able to decode words correctly but has difficulty understanding the text, they will require further support in this area and vice versa.

Activity

Consider the following case study.

Emma was in Year 3. She was a confident and articulate child who enjoyed listening to stories and was able to make predictions, summarise the story and discuss character and plot in detail. However, when asked to read, she was hesitant and found it difficult to blend phonemes in order to decode successfully. Furthermore, when spelling words phonetically, she often omitted the vowels – 'bucket' was represented as 'bkt and 'sand' as 'snd'. Eventually, Emma was diagnosed as having a slight hearing impairment which had impacted upon her acquisition of phonetic knowledge as she had been unable to hear certain phonemes clearly. Evidently, Emma had good language comprehension but poor word recognition and a variety of intervention strategies were put in place to address her needs.

Think of a child that reads to you. Do they sit in one of the quadrants in Figure 2.2 above?

If so, consider next steps – how might you support this child in terms of their reading?

So, what now?

Taking into account the Simple View of Reading, the National Curriculum for English (DfE, 2013) separates reading into two areas: word reading and comprehension and sets out the age-related requirements for each within the statutory framework. Both appear to have equal weighting and one without the other will not secure success. The National Curriculum recognises *that it is essential that teaching focuses on developing pupils' competence in both dimensions; different kinds of teaching are needed for each* (DfE, 2013, p4) if children are to become fluent and informed readers as they make the transition to secondary school. There are many excellent textbooks for teachers that explore phonics in terms of subject knowledge and classroom practice; therefore, we make no apologies that this book explores the teaching of comprehension skills. As you explore the chapters on effective lessons, you will be able to draw upon best practice that has been informed by research and policy which will allow you to ensure children fulfil their potential as lifelong readers.

Classroom approaches to teaching reading

Shared reading

The shared reading model as a means of teacher and children reading together was developed by Holdaway (1979). It is an interactive process whereby children join in with the text as it is read by the teacher, typically from a 'big book' or an enlarged text visible on the interactive whiteboard. This provides an ideal opportunity for the teacher to explicitly teach reading strategies through effective modelling. The teacher is able to support children to become critical readers and reflect upon authorial intent so as to develop a deeper understanding of the text. In this way, we are encouraging children to engage in purposeful reading and become reflective, independent readers. There are many benefits to this approach.

- Children are able to access texts that they may not necessarily be able to read independently, thus allowing them to demonstrate comprehension skills on a different level.

- Children will have opportunities to contribute to the activity through reading with the teacher or contributing to the discussion that follows.

- It meets the individual needs of all readers, as those that find the text challenging can be supported through the process by the shared aspect of the activity.

- Focuses on reading skills.

- Increases vocabulary.

- Addresses reading comprehension.

- Allows children access to more complex texts.

If employed appropriately, shared reading provides an ideal opportunity for focused interactions between teacher and learner through the use of tailored questioning and effective modelling. Through careful management of this whole-class strategy, assessment of children's understanding of a text can take place. Consider how you would ensure that all children are active participants in this activity so that valuable learning takes place.

Guided reading

Guided reading is the perfect activity to engage children in constructive discussions about what they are reading through focused questions and tailored interventions. It encourages children to develop as active and independent readers, extending opportunities provided by shared reading.

Originally developed in New Zealand as a means of teaching groups of early readers (Simpson, 1966), guided reading was considered a successful strategy because it encouraged individuals to read for meaning and engage in thoughtful, reflective conversations with others; a key pedagogy explored in many of the chapters in this book.

Table 2.1   Guided reading session in five parts

	Supporting adult	Children
Book introduction or recap	Share the focus of the session and ensure all children are aware of the learning objective. Ask questions to activate prior knowledge. What do the children know already? Are they familiar with the subject content? What experiences have they had that they might bring to the text? Are they aware of other stories by the same author?	This allows children time to discuss the book and reflect upon the content. They are able to formulate questions and make links to prior experience and knowledge. They may be able to clarify unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts.
Strategy check	Remind children of the repertoire of strategies they can use for making sense of the text. Observe spelling patterns and make links to phonics to ensure successful decoding. Explore any unfamiliar words in terms of meaning.	Employ word recognition skills in order to decode unfamiliar words. Have the confidence to tackle challenging words.
Independent reading	Pose a question that the children will be able to discuss, having accessed the first few pages. Observe and 'listen in' as children read quietly to themselves, intervening at the point of need. Praise children for the use of specific strategies.	Children read independently and quietly at their own pace. The question posed by the teacher ensures that each child will be engaged in purposeful reading.
Return to the text	Revisit and review the questions posed at the start. Ask for contributions from each member of the group and facilitate an informed discussion using open-ended questions. Assess understanding.	This allows each group member to contribute to a facilitated discussion in order to articulate their views and deepen their understanding of the text. Children are able to respond, justifying their opinions and evaluating the overall impact of the text.
Next steps	This may take place outside of the guided reading session. Activities are provided to ensure children interact purposefully with the text.	Children are engaged in text-related activities designed to extend and further understand the text.

In today's classrooms, guided reading is teacher-led, with a clear focus, and usually takes place with groups of six to eight children of similar reading ability. All children have a copy of the same text, which is usually pitched at a level slightly above the children's ability to ensure that reading instruction takes place. It is a time for teaching reading; not listening to individuals decode several pages!

The session is usually divided into five parts outlined in Table 2.1.

Guided reading is a powerful tool for assessment, allowing you, as the teacher, time to ask and respond to questions. From observations made during this time, you will be able to tailor subsequent sessions to meet the needs of individual readers and provide appropriate challenge and support through choice of text, use of questioning and implementation of guided activities to extend thinking. However, it is important to remember that all children learn in different ways and at different rates; therefore, continuous assessment will often necessitate moves within and between groups for some children. It is this flexibility of approach that is crucial to ensure that children move on in their learning, for as OFSTED point out in their report, *Reading by Six*, *teachers must exercise professional judgements about organising teaching groups to provide optimum conditions for learning* (OFSTED, 2010, p38). By ensuring fluid groups for guided reading, teaching can be closely matched to children's learning to ensure a level of challenge for all.

Book circles and book talk

Book circles can build effectively upon guided reading sessions and provide opportunities for groups of children to share and discuss their reading with an adult as they are more heavily focused on developing comprehension. Careful planning and organisation will ensure that all participants have opportunities to engage in a rich discussion that actively enhances their understanding of the text. Aidan Chambers explores this through his 'Tell Me' framework (Chambers, 2011), whereby children are encouraged to enter into conversations about the books they are reading. The use of 'tell me' instead of a more interrogative approach consisting of 'why?' and 'how do you know?' allows for the session to follow a child-led approach rather than a teacher-directed question and answer session. Some of the most successful book circles in school involve children sitting together at snack time, gossiping about the books they have read.

However, to ensure book circles are purposeful and effectively engage learners, it is important that the facilitating adult *guides* and *supports* the discussion. Posing thought-provoking questions that allow children to bring their own experiences, knowledge and values to the text will inevitably lead to greater comprehension. The expectation that children will build upon each other's contributions, co-constructing meaning through negotiation and justification of opinions, should underpin these discussions.

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Individual reading

The practice of individual reading in the classroom has declined somewhat as guided reading has replaced it as the main vehicle through which children are heard to read. According to some (Browne, 2009), individual reading was seen to be ineffective as it was a rushed process relying on over-correction rather than the development of reading comprehension skills. However, if we think of these times as reading conferences in which a child and an adult have the opportunity to engage in one-to-one conversations about their individual reading book, we are more likely to acknowledge the benefits. The extent to which the adult scaffolds the learning is dictated by the individual learner, therefore providing a personalised approach to the teaching of reading. The teacher can attend to any misconceptions at the point of need and respond to misunderstandings by encouraging the reader to draw upon their repertoire of reading strategies. It is an ideal time to develop understanding of a text through high-quality discussion and allows both formative and summative assessment to take place. The place of individual reading (or reading conferences) necessitates careful organisation of resources and staff to ensure meaningful learning takes place and next steps are clearly identified for each child. This is not always easy in a busy classroom; therefore, it is imperative that you consider the implications of this in your own classroom and draw upon the views and opinions of others to ensure its success.

A final thought

As teachers, we seek to ensure that our children are fully equipped with the necessary tools to access a wide variety of texts. This chapter is concerned with the best way in which to teach reading comprehension while satisfying the requirements of the National Curriculum. We believe that reading is possibly the most important skill of all, empowering learners to embrace all aspects of the curriculum. The development of readers who are enthusiastic, motivated and knowledgeable about texts is at the heart of this book, and in the following chapters we have outlined some of the ways in which you can encourage your children to develop the lifelong reading habit.

Learning outcomes review

The best way to teach children to read has been greatly debated over the years and by now you should have a more comprehensive overview of how research has informed current teaching methods, allowing you to reflect upon how this may impact upon your own classroom practice. You will have a greater understanding of how to teach elements of reading comprehension through the implementation of successful teaching strategies that encourage and promote purposeful book talk.

Further reading

Chambers, A (2011) *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk.* Stroud: Thimble Press.

Together with his website, **www.aidanchambers.co.uk/index.htm**, this book offers an excellent framework which can be adapted and implemented in the classroom to develop 'book talk', which can, in turn, promote informative discussions and encourage dialogic talk.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008) *Effective Teaching of Inference Skills for Reading: Literature Review*. Nottingham, DCSF.

This document presents an evidence-based rationale for teaching inference and deduction skills.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) *Guided Reading: Supporting Transition from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2.* Nottingham: DfES.

This document, although out of print, can be accessed via **www.teachfind.com/national-strategies/ guided-reading-supporting-transition-key-stage-1-key-stage-2**. It provides a complete overview for teaching guided reading with advice for school leaders and class teachers.

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