

Teaching comprehension through reading and responding to film

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This Minibook sets out to support teachers in planning and teaching reading comprehension. It draws specifically on the potential of short narrative films as an important resource to teach children comprehension strategies which are transferable between different modes of text (including visual, written and multimodal). It highlights a pedagogy which favours small group learning, emphasising the importance of talk and response, with children encouraged to develop their own lines of thinking and interpretation. A key to comprehension is inference, which happens on many levels as readers draw on their existing knowledge of the world, their own experiences, and different texts to make sense of texts that they are reading. There are several useful strategies that can be taught to children to help them to make effective inferences and engage meaningfully with texts. Understanding these strategies can help teachers to plan and assess reading more effectively as they listen closely to children's responses.

We have all met children who struggle to comprehend print text at deeper levels. It seems that for some early fluent readers, so much effort is required for them to decode words that they have little cognitive processing energy left for comprehension beyond the literal. However, children come to school armed with vast experiences of other narrative forms of text (Bazalgette, 2010; Levy, 2011; Parry, 2013). As children are often familiar with film narratives, they may have developed an understanding of how these texts work and can decode at a 'technical' level more efficiently, allowing more cognitive resource to be directed to inference, response and engagement. As a result, it is possible to work with quite complex or ambiguous film narratives. These can challenge, excite and motivate young readers who are able to fully engage in discussions, drawing on their experiences of popular culture to approach unfamiliar films (Parry, 2014).

This Minibook draws on research that has demonstrated how effective it can be to engage children in discussions around filmic texts. It starts by unpacking what is meant by 'comprehension', then moves on to examine the affordance of moving image and talk in the teaching of reading. Resource suggestions are given, but this is not intended as a pre-packaged

programme, rather, some inspiration for the development of teaching practice to embed moving image media in the reading curriculum.

Many of the activities in the book come from a Film Talk project. This was a ten-week intervention designed to support children who were struggling to make deeper connections to written text, often skimming through books, 'barking' at print (Tennent, 2015: 131–132). The project aimed to support some of these children by giving them an extra comprehension lift, using short films as a springboard for teaching comprehension strategies which could then also be transferred to written narrative (following the findings of van den Broek, 2001 and Kendeou *et al.*, 2008). The Film Talk sessions took the place of guided reading sessions.

Chapter 2

How do we make meaning from narrative texts?

Reading is a complex action. We make meaning from narrative text using a set of resources that help us to decode at a technical level, and then semantically join small parts of the text into longer coherent structures. Holding these pieces, we create a mental image of meaning, which we gradually reframe as we hypothesise and predict what will happen next. The resources that we bring to this activity are our knowledge, experiences, values and preferences and these help us to infer and create our own interpretations. Often these are related to our experience of other texts. If we talk together to explore each other's ideas and responses, then our understandings are challenged, extended and enriched.

If, in reading this description of the activity of 'reading', you have assumed by 'decoding' I was talking about word recognition, and at the semantic level I was referring to phrases, clauses and sentences, then the mental model that you created when you saw the word 'reading' was influenced by a traditional view of reading as involving words. However, you are reading a Minibook whose title suggests that comprehension can be taught through 'reading' film, so you might already have been alerted to the possibility that a broader definition was intended. If you re-read the first couple of sentences but this time assume I am talking about film, then 'decoding at a technical level' can be seen to mean identifying images on a screen, being aware of lighting, sound and image. 'Semantically joining small parts of the text into longer coherent structures', can mean connecting camera shots into 'scenes', and ultimately a complete film. 'Text' then takes on a broader meaning than just describing written words, as it can incorporate visual, verbal and multimodal forms.

Why might this be a useful perspective? Whilst the technical codes are different (Whitney, 2010), there are many narrative features that transcend the mode of text and we draw on the same strategies to make meaning from them (Marsh & Millard, 2000). To comprehend texts more fully, we predict what is going to happen, we ask questions of the text to explore

meanings, we empathise with characters and imagine ourselves in the story, and we make connections to situations we know, or other stories that we have encountered. These are the same, whether we are reading a film, or reading a book, we just use different ‘clues’ to support our mental image of meaning. Although much attention in recent years has focused on the teaching of early reading through a prioritisation of phonics, it can be argued that the goal of reading is meaning-making, with Smith (1988) defining reading as being *purposeful, selective, anticipatory* and based on *comprehension*. The National Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013) is informed by the ‘simple view of reading’ (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) which neatly divides reading into two parts, described as ‘word reading’ and ‘comprehension’. This simplistic notion does little to acknowledge the socio-cultural nature of reading; that is, that each reading event is individual and unique, informed by the reader’s prior experiences, in addition to the context of the activity and the text itself (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). However, the National Curriculum Programme of Study for English (DfE, 2013) does recognise that children learning to read need to be taught the skills of comprehension alongside word recognition skills. It also suggests that children should engage in discussion about ‘books’. What is missing, though, is any reference to text sources other than traditional written forms, and it is up to the reader of the document to assume that these are encompassed.

Comprehension strategies

Effective readers of text use a range of strategies to support their understanding. Palincsar (2003) describes these as ‘planful approaches’ (p.100) that help readers to ‘self-monitor’ and track their reading. These strategies enable readers to draw on their prior knowledge to make connections to the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Dole *et al.*, 1991). The connections might be personal, or specific to the topic of the text, and they might involve drawing on experiences of other texts or genres. The importance for readers is that they recognise what is useful about the knowledge that they have and can use it to generate both literal and more elaborative inferences. Tennent (2015: 113) argues that ‘interrogative inferences’ are those that deepen understanding and add detail to mental representations of texts. They can be drawn from within the text or from making connections to prior knowledge. For example, in the following short story we can use interrogative inferences to make meaning:

Billy blew out the candles on his cake, and cut a large slice. 'That's too much for me!' smiled Tim.

We can infer that in the story, Tim is either expecting to be offered the slice of cake, or another similarly sized one, but would like a small piece. We relate 'cake', 'slice' and 'too large' together from within the text. Additionally, however, we use our prior knowledge of the world (and maybe our own experiences) to infer that maybe this is Billy's birthday (because of the candles which feature on birthday cakes). Maybe Tim is watching his weight, or perhaps does not like cake.

In their seminal work on reciprocal reading groups, Palincsar and Brown (1984) identified clarifying (or self-monitoring), questioning, summarising (determining importance) and predicting (or hypothesising) as key strategies to teach children to support their comprehension development. Other authors have added to this list to include making connections, visualising, re-reading and looking back, and empathising with characters (Dole *et al.*, 1991; Pressley, 2006; Block & Duffy, 2008; Maine & Waller, 2011). In addition, Chambers (2011) highlights the importance of readers exploring their preferences, identifying what they like and dislike. The National Curriculum for England has drawn on these strategies, and scattered through the document are references to inferring, predicting, summarising, question asking, checking for meaning and making links to what is known (DfE, 2013). In Chapter 3, these strategies are considered in detail.

Using other forms of narrative

In a study conducted with Y1 and Y6 children (Maine, 2015), the language that children used to discuss visual texts was analysed. In pairs, children talked together about the meanings of pictures, short films and picture-books, prompted only to ask questions and discuss meanings. Without any teacher intervention in the paired discussion, there was found to be little difference in the language that the children used to engage in thinking around text between those at the beginning and those at the end of their primary school education. Exploring the visual texts, the Y1 children were highly creative in their interpretations, and could justify and account for the meaning that they had made as they talked together with their peers. Their language regularly featured tentative and hypothetical language, such as 'It might be', 'possibly', 'maybe' and they were able to back up their ideas using 'because' or 'so'. The Y1 children created elaborate stories