

Working with learners who are reading at entry-level

This resource for educators was developed by the National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults in 2010. It contains 4 modules:

- Module 1: Identifying strengths and learning needs
- Module 2: Vocabulary
- Module 3: Comprehension
- Module 4: The Reading Programme

Module 3: Comprehension

Reading is all about making meaning from text. This module covers:

- the comprehension strategies to focus on with learners at this level
- how to teach comprehension strategies.

Module 3 has 2 sections:

1. Section A: The four comprehension strategies to focus on in your teaching
2. Section B: Teaching these strategies using authentic texts

Section A: The four comprehension strategies to focus on in your teaching

1. Introduction

- As we've discussed in the earlier modules, reading involves decoding (both accurately and fluently), vocabulary and comprehension.
- Adult learners who are having difficulty reading usually have problems with decoding or comprehension or both. Module 1 covered the knowledge and skills needed for decoding. This module focuses on strengthening learners' comprehension.
- In this section we look at the main comprehension strategies to focus on when working with adults at entry level.

2. Issues for adults at entry level

- Good readers have a repertoire of comprehension strategies that they use to get meaning from text. They monitor their understanding, and use "fix-up" strategies when their comprehension breaks down.
- Adults having difficulty comprehending a text will typically fit one of the three broad profiles that we've discussed in the earlier modules.
- [Watch this video](#) to view Dr Sue Dymock describing the three main reasons why learners have difficulty comprehending a text.

3. Assessing reading comprehension at this level

- Let's look more closely at that group of learners who can decode, but don't seem to understand what they reading. [Watch Sue Dymock](#) talking about this group of learners.
- If a learner is having difficulty understanding a text, it is useful to find out if they are having the same difficulty when the text is spoken.
- Guidelines for assessing learners' listening comprehension are provided on pages 29 and 30 in the Starting Points Assessment Guide. Choose an appropriate text, and use the questions suggested in Appendix A12. Click here to download [Starting Points Assessment Guide](#)

4. What skilled readers do

“Those who wish to teach reading well need to understand just what good reading is.”

Michael Pressley (2006) *Reading Instruction that Works*

- Good readers are active: They’re continually activating background knowledge, making links to what they know, asking and answering questions, re-reading, and pausing to reflect.
- Much of this is conscious and happens before, during and after reading.

5. Comprehension strategies

Although researchers describe comprehension strategies in slightly different ways, there is general agreement about the kinds of comprehension strategies readers use.

The Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy use the following. You can read about these on pages 26-28 in [Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy: Background Information](#).

- Activating prior knowledge
- Forming and testing hypotheses
- Identifying main ideas
- Making use of text structure knowledge
- Summarising
- Drawing inferences
- Visualising
- Asking questions of the text and seeking answers

6. Which strategies to focus on with learners at this level

- At this level, it’s important to keep things simple, as there’s so much for learners to think about as they read. Focus your explicit instruction on these key strategies:
 - activating background knowledge
 - asking and answering questions
 - analysing text structure
 - summarising

- [View the video of Sue](#) outlining these four strategies. We will then look at each of these strategies in turn.

7. Activating prior knowledge

- All readers can understand the texts they read more easily if they know something about the subject matter. As we read, we constantly make connections between the text and our prior knowledge. You'll know from your own experience that you have to work a lot harder to read texts about content that is unfamiliar to you.
- Learners reading at entry-level need to deliberately activate their background knowledge. They should learn to use this strategy before they read a text, as well as while they are reading.
- If learners are reading a text about unfamiliar content, then they need even more support to make connections to things they already know. They need to build enough knowledge prior to reading to be able to make sense of the text as they read.

8. Answering and asking questions

- Good readers continuously ask and answer questions about the text as they read. They usually do this spontaneously – as if they are “talking to themselves” as they read. This strategy not only helps readers to comprehend a text, but also supports their particular purpose for reading a text, for example to find out how to do something.
- At entry level, learners will need support to develop and use question-asking and question-answering as a strategy to help them understand text. As you'll see in the next section, the most effective way to explicitly teach this strategy is through modelling using a shared reading approach.

9. Analysing text structure

- Recognising and understanding the structure of a connected or continuous text helps readers to understand it. [Watch the video of Sue Dymock](#) explaining more about this strategy.
- At this level, select connected texts within a narrow range of text structures (such as stories or simple instructional texts), so that learners can develop their knowledge of the typical structures these texts use and use this knowledge to support their comprehension.

- Note: As well as using these connected texts, you'll also use non-continuous texts such as diagrams or forms and gradually building learners' knowledge about how to read these.

10. Summarising

- Readers use the comprehension strategy of summarising to identify the main points or events of a story or article. Summarising these "in their own words" helps readers to make links between these ideas or events within the text, as well as to use texts for specific purposes.
- [Watch the video of Sue Dymock](#) talking about summarising.
- Note: there are some texts where summarising is not appropriate because the text already comprises the main points, with no supporting detail (for example the lists on pages 7 and 17 in [Collections 6](#)).

11. Next step for learning

When learners have got increasing control over these first four comprehension strategies, we suggest that you focus on the strategy of visualising or creating mental images. This strategy helps readers to make connections with the text. As well as supporting comprehension, visualising helps readers to remember the text.

12. Developing and using comprehension strategies

- Readers use comprehension strategies in different combinations as they read. The key idea is that good readers deliberately select which strategies will serve their particular purpose for reading as well as help them meet the challenges of specific texts.
- However, each strategy needs to be taught explicitly, which means focusing on them one at a time, and showing learners how they are used to support comprehension.
- In the next section we will describe this more fully.

Section B: Teaching these strategies using authentic texts

1. Introduction

- Good readers use a range of comprehension strategies. In Section A we suggested that you focus on four key strategies when you're working with learners at entry level or starting points.
- In this section we will look at effective ways to teach these strategies.
- We will be using "Fili's Fall" from Collections 6.

[Click here to go to the page where you can download a PDF of Collections 6 and the audio file of Fili's Fall.](#)

2. Teaching comprehension strategies

- Comprehension strategies should be explicitly taught and practised. Educators should deliberately model these strategies as they read texts with learners. Encourage learners to notice what you're doing before they practise using each strategy. Learners should do this using the same text you have read together, often re-reading it several times, before applying the strategy to a different text.
- Explicit, focused instruction should take place in three phases as you engage with the text.
 - before reading
 - during reading
 - after reading

3. Before reading

Select a text that is appropriate both in terms of its complexity and the opportunities it provides for instruction. Make sure you're really familiar with it. We're going to use 'Fili's Fall'.

Watch the video of Sue Dymock explaining what to do with learners before reading the text with them: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5g8tzT6KM8>

4. During reading

- Read the text together using a shared reading approach, where the educator takes the lead. In this first read through, focus on just one comprehension strategy.
- In the video, Sue Dymock describes how she works with learners to develop the strategy of analysing text structure:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7hdDO6Mgtg>
- During the second read through of “Fili’s Fall”, you could focus on activating learner’s background knowledge relating to some key ideas. By brainstorming their knowledge learners could develop a concept map like this one.
- View the video of Sue Dymock describing how she would use a concept map to activate learner’s knowledge of key ideas:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1ruKi2uRCE>

5. After reading

- When you’ve finished reading the text together it’s an opportunity to reflect on learning. Being able to talk about what they have learned helps learners take control of their learning. This awareness is fundamental to their developing independence as readers.
- View the video of Sue Dymock discussing how to encourage learners to transfer their learning:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F35pVzYFXXU>

6. Provide opportunities for practice

- Learners need plenty of opportunity to practise. They can do this with the same text – increasing their confidence as they become more familiar with the text. If possible, encourage learners to use the audio to support their reading.
- Learners should also have opportunities to apply what they have learnt to a different text. If you’ve been focussing on analysing text structure then this text should have the same text structure, for example sequence.
- View the video of Sue explaining how she does this:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1ZmuOlwwBA>

7. Next steps

- In this module we have looked at comprehension strategies and suggested some ways to teach these.
- In Module 4 we'll provide some suggestions for designing a reading programme that provides opportunities for intensive, focused teaching and plenty of practice.