

Advancing on the higher order front

by Maureen Lewis and David Wray

If we had the power to banish any terms from the vocabulary of the Department for Education, classrooms and staffrooms, our hit list would certainly include the phrases "advanced reading skills" and "higher-order reading skills".

Our Nuffield-funded research and curriculum development project into extending literacy in the primary school (the Exeter Extending Literacy Project, or EXEL) has focused on children's interactions with non-fiction text. As our understanding of this has evolved over the past two years, we now regard the aforementioned terms as positively misleading.

Consider the meanings embedded in such terms. "Advanced" and "higher order" both seem to imply that these are skills which come into play only when a certain basic level of literacy has been reached, or only if one is clever. The conclusion is that the task of introducing children to those more difficult and demanding skills can be left until a later age, either chronological or reading.

Furthermore, in focusing upon "skills", the terms suggest that abilities such as those involved in the use of indexes, skimming, scanning, and note-taking can be taught in isolation and then applied to situations where they are needed. Thus we get the plethora of published materials which claim to teach "study skills" or "reference skills", and which generally consist of worksheets given to children as activities in their own right and devoid of any meaningful context.

Such terms also oversimplify the complex processes involved in understanding informational text. The idea that all that is needed to use information text effectively is the combined application of the range of behaviours usually listed under the heading "advanced reading skills" is deceptively persuasive but, unfortunately, incorrect.

We would argue strongly that the processes involved in purposeful information-seeking, the understanding of non-fiction texts and any subsequent recording and reworking of the information found are the same, whether one is five, 10, 15 or 50. What varies is the level of experience and expertise. Our work has shown quite clearly that, given a purposeful context, supportive materials and access to a range of strategies, children at key stage 1 or 2, those with literacy difficulties — indeed, all primary pupils — can and should be engaging in "advanced reading skills". The notion of a purposeful context, which involves children using research strategies because they

need to rather than as decontextualised exercises, is absolutely crucial here.

We have developed a model to describe the processes children go through in their interactions with non-fiction texts consisting of the following stages: Elicitation of previous knowledge; establishing purposes; locating information; adopting an appropriate strategy; interacting with text; monitoring understanding; making a record; evaluating information; assisting memory; communicating information.

We have also developed teaching strategies and materials that support this model. Notice how the skills usually included under "advanced reading skills" are only a small part of interacting effectively with non-fiction texts.

The model could be summarised as a three-stage process of "before the eyes meet the page, while the eyes are on the page, and after the eyes leave the page" and each of these is important if children are truly to learn from information texts and not merely read and copy, with little understanding. The model is not, however, linear. Different tasks will involve different routes through the stages, and some stages may be gone through several times in any "information event".

During the EXEL project, we have been privileged to work with children and teachers throughout the country and the major effect of this experience on us has been to lift our expectations immensely. To move children on from passive copying from reference books, to see six-year-olds confidently using indexes, scanning and skimming in order to find specific details of plants for their hanging baskets, to hear seven-year-olds critically comparing historical documents, to have children writing discussion papers on aspects of life in Ancient Greece based on information gathered from a variety of sources — these go far beyond "advanced reading skills" into what we like to think of as "young researchers at work".

And why "young researchers"? Because researchers, hopefully, have a purpose, a critical stance, and a desire to disseminate their findings as well as the information-handling skills to enable them to undertake their task.

So can we please ban the term "advanced reading skills"? It is totally inadequate for such a vital area of children's experience.

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