

APPROACHES TO TEACHING INFERENCE IN A KEY STAGE 3 ENGLISH CLASSROOM

1 AIM

One of the first classes I observed during my training year, a mixed ability Year 7 English class, were in the middle of a short story scheme of work. One element that struck me during my time in the class was the students' responses to the texts. In their interpretations, analysis, predictions and evaluations they seem to struggle to pick up hints the writer had included in the stories, implicit information that seemed so obvious to me.

This became a running characteristic of the class, who I would go on to teach. After speaking with their experienced teacher, who also commented on their struggles in this area. I began to research and experiment with ways to develop their inference skills.

2 BACKGROUND

Inference is key skill any reader needs in order to be fluent. It is to go 'beyond explicit details to make sense of the text' (Oakhill 2015: 39).

It is vital because 'writers omit a good deal of what they mean [...] on the assumption that the reader has the relevant knowledge' to piece these things together (Willingham & Lovette 2014: para 4).

A reader, during the process of reading will combine the words on the page with their own inference in order to create a 'mental model' of the text's meaning (Oakhill 2015: 41).

Quigley defines this process as "a rich combination of background knowledge, word knowledge, genre knowledge and a knowledge of language – and doing – activating that knowledge, questioning it, recognising gaps in knowledge and cohering it into a comprehensive whole." (Quigley, 2020: 74-75)

Relying on the reader to bring knowledge can be an obstacle: 'inferencing depends, in large part, on the availability and accessibility of a relevant knowledge base' (Barnes, 1996: 216)

- Inferences can be defined into different categories:
- Local - making links between words, sentences or paragraphs
 - Global - making links across the whole text.
 - Coherence - links need to ensure text makes sense
 - Elaborative - enriching additions that add meaning
 - Predictive - look forward in text make predictions.
 - Evaluative - look back in a text and evaluate.
- (Quigley, 2020: 78-80)

3 CURRICULUM

Being able to decode implicit information from text, to examine and unpack how a uses writer inference seems a vital skill for all English students.

Key Stage 3
For English, KS3 National Curriculum states, pupils should be shown how to 'understand nuances in meaning', and students should be 'making inferences and referring to evidence in the text' (DfE, 2013:4).

Key Stage 4
GCSE English Literature, students are assessed on their ability to 'analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects', 'use textual references to support and illustrate interpretations' (AQA, 2014b: 15). While GCSE English Language GCSE, Paper 1 and Paper 2 require students to 'identify and interpret explicit and implicit information' from unseen fiction and non-fiction texts. (AQA, 2014a: 16).

4 RESEARCH

Teaching inference increased students' general comprehension, inferential comprehension and literal comprehension, for both skilled and less skilled readers (Elleman, 2017: 30).

Although Elleman's meta-study found inference is beneficial, the studies she examined did not isolate different techniques, so the report could not determine which techniques work better. (2017: 32)

Inference requires the reader to use their own background knowledge, but a study with manipulated background knowledge, showed it alone does not account for individual differences in ability to infer. (Barnes, 1996)

Inferential instruction is adjusting how students read, these strategies ensure students are 'comprehension monitoring', while reading, actively evaluating, updating mental model and checking understanding as they continue to read (Oakhill, 2015: 43 ; Quigley, 2020: 76).

One strategy to encourage inference is through targeted vocabulary teaching, or 'word consciousness', encouraging pupils to notice words and their multiple meanings and connections independently. (Quigley, 2020: 76).

Modelling, whereby the teacher talks the class through their thought process when inferring, helps student consider how they can approach a text and react to implicit information (Quigley, 2020: 76).

The teacher asking, and getting students to consider inference-demanding questions, get them to use inference skills as well as modelling questions they could ask themselves when reading (Oakhill, 2015: 42)

Another strategy suggested is use of diagrams, making the process of inference explicit (Oakhill, 2015: 51)

However Willingham & Lovette argue that that inference instruction seem to be quick to teach they also have an upper limit, while background knowledge perhaps is a more fruitful thing to concentrate. (2019 :para.14)

6 REFLECTION

Reflective Evaluation of Strategies using Brookfield's lenses (1995)

Autobiographical: Modelling and discussions seem to be the most fruitful, in terms of classroom discussion and responses. Students have responded well to the focus on this area, and some student now unprompted suggest what they have inferred from new texts.

Peer: I have guided reading resources, and Powerpoint with a range of inference demanding questions. From an informal feedback, the lesson which contained modelling was said to have induced most perceptive responses from the class

Students: Students seems to be looking at texts and language in a different ways, they have begun to give interpretations in class with more confidence and many have begun inferring in classrooms and in their written work so an improvement has been shown.

Academic: As the research suggests, teaching of inference strategies do indeed have benefits for students. The strategies of modelling, questioning, and word consciousness suggested by Oakhill (2015) and Quigley (2020) worked well. As did Elleman's meta-study (2017), suggestion of limiting the cognitive load with easier texts or short extracts seems to help students.

5 STRATEGIES

Explicitly discussing how writers use inference. Explained explicitly what inference is, discussed how they may use same skills in everyday life, and suggesting they need to be 'reading detectives'. To cement this knowledge, used retrieval and got student so complete an 'inference' Kahoot quiz.

Inference demanding questions
Students were given what Oakley defines as 'inference demanding questions'. Student had to work out answer and explain how they got to that answer. Considering cognitive load students were given a short extract.

Guided Reading
Students were given guided reading sheets questions went from general comprehension, comprehensive inference, elaborative inferences to evaluative inference. An attempt to improve students 'comprehension monitoring' while reading.

Modelling
Modelled how I would focus on one word to infer writer's meaning and talked through the questions I would ask myself while reading.

'Word Consciousness'
Working from Quigley's idea of word consciousness, I introduced the concept of connotations to encourage students to focus on specific words on a text and consider its multiple meaning. When students wrote their own speeches they attempted to bring these ideas into the words they chose.

Class discussion on one quotation
This is a quotation from an article we had read as a class. Students first thought of its possible meanings themselves, then as a class talked through possible meaning with target cold calling questioning and bouncing the question around the room.

7 CONCLUSION

Academic research and my experience in the classrooms suggests inference instruction can be beneficial, Thus I will continue to develop strategies and use them in the classroom, especially modelling, questioning, and word consciousness.

Part of responsibilities of a teacher is to model how to read in their subject area, as discussed by Quigley (2020: 11) for English this includes using full range of inference, so will model these idea to encourage 'comprehension monitoring'

I do not feel my teaching experience has been long enough to test whether these skills are quick to learn for all students, as suggested by Willingham and Lovette (2014), or in the long term it is beneficial to focus more on teaching background knowledge. However I am also aware that inference, and other skills in English are depended on students having good background knowledge, so that will continue to be part of my practice as well as monitoring whether inference instruction remains beneficial to students.

What is **not** a proper inference for this picture?

10

- The person was wearing a hat
- The person has been outside
- The person didn't use sun cream
- The person has a bandage on their toe

To infer meaning from **textual** writing

What can we infer from this section about Oliver Twist's situation?

Other 'facts' and its connotations suggest the writer of this story might be these people: all the boys get up with hunger, the one boy tried to starve to his death, that when he had another bowl of gruel, he was afraid he might come right back to see the key was locked next time. He had a full, hungry eyes, and they made the beloved him.

How do the boys think the master will react to the request for more gruel?

In Other 'Tale' lucky to be one selected to get for more?

Write down your answers and quote to support your points.

The Wayward Prince

How does Jackie Kay present ideas about identity in Old Tongue?

"My own vowels started to stretch like bones"

What does it say about identity?

Learn the words do any have specific connotations? Which method has the best effect?

Learning objective: To write a speech that uses rhetoric effectively

For your Progress Check you will write a speech that causes weary British troops fighting abroad.

Which one of these words do you think is the most effective way to address the soldiers in a speech like this?

Fighters Men Warriors

Why?

continents fill his head space and inspire his creativity

What can we infer inspires Agard's writing

Bibliography
AQA (2014a) GCSE English Language: Specification. Manchester : AQA [Online] [URL: https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-9700-S2-2015-PDF] [Accessed 22 May 2021]
AQA (2014b) GCSE English Literature: Specification. Manchester : AQA [Online] [URL: https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-9702-S2-2015-PDF] [Accessed 22 May 2021]
Barnes, A., Gernsbacher, M. & McKeown, J. (1996) The Effects of Knowledge Availability and Knowledge Accessibility on Sentence and Paragraph Comprehension. Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 61, 216-241
Brookfield, S. (1995) Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
Department of Education (2013) English programmes of study, key stages 1, national curriculum in England. London : Department of Education [Online] [URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/244213/ENGLISH.pdf_national_curriculum_-_english.pdf] [Accessed 22 May 2021]
Elleman, A. M. (2017) Examining the Impact of Inference Instruction on the Literal and Inferential Comprehension of Skilled and Less Skilled Readers: A Meta-Analytic Review. Journal of Educational Psychology, 109(6), 761-781
Oakhill, J., Cain, K. & Elbro, C. (2015) Inferences: going beyond explicit details to make sense of a text. Understanding and Teaching Reading Comprehension. London: Routledge, 38-53
Quigley, A. (2020) Create the Reading Cafe. London: Routledge
Willingham, D. T. & Lovette, G. (2014) Can Reading Comprehension Be Taught? Teachers College Record Online. URL: http://www.desevilwhillingham.com/uploads/5/0/0/7/5007232/willinghamlovette_2014_online_reading_comprehension_research.pdf [Accessed 22 May 2021]