

Four Moves of a Strategic Reader

Display during reading lessons. Model one move at a time with a real text before asking learners to try it in pairs.

Predict

Before reading, look at the title, headings and pictures. Say what you think the text will tell you, and what makes you think so.

In class: I think this text will explain how rivers flood, because the title mentions rising water.

Clarify

When a word or sentence stops making sense, slow down. Re-read it, read on for clues, or break the word into parts.

In class: Erosion is new to me. The sentence says the bank wears away, so erosion must mean wearing away.

Question

Ask a question a teacher might ask about this paragraph. Start with who, what, where, when, why or how.

In class: Why does the river move faster on the outside of the bend?

Summarise

Say the most important idea in one or two of your own sentences. Leave out the small details.

In class: This section explains the three main causes of flooding.

Build a Sentence, Colour by Colour

The Colourful Semantics colour code. Start with WHO and WHAT DOING, then grow the sentence one colour at a time: The girl / is reading / a book / in the library.

WHO

Who?

The person or thing the sentence is about. Point to the orange card and ask: who is doing something?

Example: The girl... / Our teacher... / The hungry fox...

DOING

What doing?

The action word. Ask: what is the who doing? Act the verb out if learners are stuck.

Example: ...is reading / ...whispered / ...is hunting

WHAT

What?

The thing the action happens to. Ask: what is being read, eaten, built or found?

Example: ...a book / ...a secret / ...a rabbit

WHERE

Where?

The place it happens. Ask: where is it happening? Add this colour once the first three are secure.

Example: ...in the library / ...behind the shed / ...across the frozen field

Reading Prompt Cards

Learners keep one card on the desk during independent reading and use the prompt when they hit trouble.

Stuck on a word?

Break it into parts. Read the sentence before and after. Try a word that would make sense in the gap.

Say: "What would make sense here?"

Lost the thread?

Stop. Go back to the last sentence that made sense and re-read from there, more slowly.

Say: "Where did it stop making sense?"

Finished a section?

Cover the text. Say the main idea in your own words, in one sentence.

Say: "What was that mostly about?"

Before you turn the page

Guess what comes next and why. Check your guess as you read on.

Say: "What do I expect to happen next?"

Vocabulary Teaching That Sticks

Built from the review evidence: words are learned through active processing and repeated meaningful encounters, not by copying definitions.

Choosing words

- Pick five or fewer high-value words per text: useful across subjects, not just rare.
- Check the word genuinely matters for understanding this text.
- Plan a learner-friendly explanation in everyday language, not a dictionary definition.

First teaching

- Say the word, show it written, and give your friendly explanation with an example from life.
- Ask every learner to do something with the word straight away: choose, sort, act, or answer.
- Contrast it with what it is not: a drizzle is not a downpour.

Making it stick

- Return to the word across the week in different texts and subjects.
- Ask learners to notice and monitor: stop me when a word does not make sense.
- Display taught words and tick each time the class meets one again.

Literacy Strategies: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What the research behind this toolkit says, including where the evidence is still developing.

● Teach the four reader moves explicitly

Predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarising, modelled aloud and practised in small groups, improved comprehension in classroom trials and a 28-study systematic review.

● Vocabulary needs active processing

Teaching word meanings helps learners understand texts containing those words. Copying definitions does little; choosing, sorting and using words does more.

● Be honest about transfer

Direct word teaching reliably helps with taught words, but evidence that it lifts general comprehension is limited. Pair word teaching with wide reading.

● Colourful Semantics: promising, still growing

School-based studies report better sentence structure and longer utterances. Standardised measures show mixed results, so track your own learners' writing closely.

Evidence base

Spörer, N., Brunstein, J.C. and Kieschke, U. (2009). Improving students' reading comprehension skills: Effects of strategy instruction and reciprocal teaching. *Learning and Instruction*.

Mafarja, N. et al. (2023). Using of reciprocal teaching to enhance academic achievement: A systematic literature review. *Heliyon*.

Wright, T.S. and Cervetti, G.N. (2017). A systematic review of the research on vocabulary instruction that impacts text comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*.

Atwell, K. (2024). Using colourful semantic approaches as a group intervention within primary schools to improve language development. *Educational Psychology in Scotland*.

Bryan, A. (1997). Colourful Semantics: Thematic role therapy. In *Language Disorders in Children and Adults*.