STAFF ROOM POSTER

Two Streams, One Reader

Skilled reading runs two processes at once. Knowing which stream has failed tells you what to teach.

DECODE

Bottom-up: print to meaning

Letters to sounds to words to sentences. If this stream is slow, everything above it starves.

In class: A reader who labours over 'photosynthesis' has no capacity left to wonder what it means.

PREDICT

Top-down: knowledge to meaning

Prior knowledge, vocabulary and context shaping what the print is taken to mean.

In class: A cricket fan reads 'the bowler appealed' instantly; a novice decodes it perfectly and understands nothing.

SKILLED

Both, simultaneously

Fluent readers run both streams and switch reliance as the text demands. Teaching serves whichever stream is the bottleneck.

In class: Same text, two failures: one child cannot read the words, another reads them all and recalls nothing. Different lessons needed.

WORDS

Vocabulary is the bridge

Word knowledge feeds BOTH streams: it speeds recognition and carries meaning.

In class: Pre-teaching three key words pays into decoding and comprehension at once.

Fix the Right Failure

Match the intervention to the breakdown. Two cards per stream.

Words will not come (bottom-up)

Break the word into parts, blend, check against the sentence. Fluency grows from accurate practice, not guessing.

Say: "Cover the word. Reveal it chunk by chunk: pho-to-syn-the-sis."

Reading is slow and effortful (bottom-up)

Re-reading a short passage until smooth builds the automaticity that frees attention for meaning.

Say: "Read this paragraph three times. Third time, make it sound like talking."

Words fine, meaning gone (top-down)

Activate what they know before reading; predict, then read to confirm.

Say: "Before we read: what do you already know about rivers? What might this text tell us?"

Lost mid-text (top-down)

Stop, summarise the last solid point, question forward.

Say: "What has happened so far in one sentence? What must come next for that to make sense?"

CLASSROOM POSTER

Before, During, After

A whole-class reading routine that feeds both streams every time.

Before: load the knowledge

Surface prior knowledge, pre-teach two or three load-bearing words, set a prediction.

In class: Today's word is erosion. Say it, clap it, use it. Now: what might erode a coastline?

During: keep both streams live

Pause at planned points: decode the hard word together, then summarise the meaning so far.

In class: Stop. That word is 'sediment'. Sed-i-ment. Now, in one sentence, what is the river doing with it?

After: make the meaning stick

Summarise, question, connect to what was known before. The text becomes knowledge for next time's top-down stream.

In class: Two things this text adds to what we knew about rivers. They go in the book; they come back in Friday's retrieval.

TEACHER CHECKLIST

Diagnosing a Struggling Reader

Ten minutes with one reader. Find the failing stream before choosing the intervention.

Test the bottom-up stream

- [ ] Can they read a short passage aloud with 95%+ word accuracy?
- [ ] Is the reading fluent enough to sound like speech, or word-by-word?
- [ ] Do they self-correct when a misread word breaks the sentence?

Test the top-down stream

- [ ] Read the passage TO them: can they answer the same questions now?
- [ ] Do they know the key vocabulary out of context?
- [ ] Can they connect the text to anything they already know?

Match the response

- [ ] Accurate but word-by-word: fluency practice, not more comprehension sheets.
- [ ] Fluent but no recall: knowledge, vocabulary and strategy instruction.
- [ ] Fails both: decoding intervention first; comprehension rides on it.
- [ ] Strong both, weak on tests: the gap is the question format, teach that explicitly.

CPD BRIEFING: STAFF ROOM COPY

Reading Processing: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What the models agree on, where they have been updated, and what it means for the timetable.

Both streams are non-negotiable

Decoding and language comprehension are each necessary and neither sufficient. A school cannot choose between phonics and knowledge; weak either way caps reading.

The simple view has grown up

Current evidence shows the two components overlap, with vocabulary feeding both, and adds active self-regulatory processes. The practical reading: teach words, knowledge AND strategies, not one camp's favourite.

Strategy instruction earns its slot

Taught briefly and practised on real texts, comprehension strategies (predict, clarify, question, summarise) improved outcomes in randomised comparisons.

The honest caveat

Processing models describe correlations and mechanisms, not curricula: no trial has tested 'top-down vs bottom-up teaching' as such. Diagnose the individual reader rather than importing a side in the reading wars.

Evidence base

Duke, N.K. and Cartwright, K.B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading. Reading Research Quarterly.
Tunmer, W.E. and Chapman, J.W. (2012). The simple view of reading redux. Journal of Learning Disabilities.
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Spörer, N., Brunstein, J.C. and Kieschke, U. (2009). Improving students' reading comprehension skills: effects of strategy instruction and reciprocal teaching. Learning and Instruction.