

# How does the use of a core text in reading lessons impact children's progress in literacy?

Southwold Primary School, KS1 Phase

## Abstract

The focus of this study was to explore how the use of the literacy core text in reading lessons would impact children's progress in literacy. It was designed to examine how this would affect the children's outcomes and their participation and engagement in lessons. All teachers involved in the study stated that it positively impacted literacy lessons and enabled many children to write more confidently. Lower attaining children were able to gain a better understanding of the story and familiar language used in writing. At the same time, it extended the higher ability children to write in the author's style.

A key finding from the study was the impact direct teaching of vocabulary had in familiarising children with language and improving accuracy in writing. Through book samples, anonymous questionnaires and teacher interviews, there is sufficient evidence to support careful selection of literacy core text ensured more rapid progress in precision writing while also developing children's confidence in its use.

## Introduction

Southwold Primary is a larger than average primary school located in Hackney. The school was recently rated Ofsted outstanding, with most children making above national average progress. It is an ethnically diverse school where the percentage of EAL children is much higher than the national average. Saracho (2017) states: *"young children whose culture and language differ from the ones in the school encounter functional language difficulties, such as differences in using language to communicate for various purposes"*, therefore, ensuring that children at Southwold have the most effective literacy provision is of the utmost importance.

Literacy is an essential skill for life that lays the foundations for all learning. The link between reading and writing has always been evident. K12 Reader (2021) states that: *"Research has found that when children read extensively, they become better writers"*. They also explain how, when children read different genres, they develop various language skills they can use in their own writing, (2021).

At Southwold, literacy is taught daily, and lessons are based on a core text incorporating all aspects of literacy. The use of this core text is integral to the planning and teaching of each lesson. Cordern (2000) states that *"one way of helping children to develop their own narrative writing, is to raise their awareness of the models of literary texts that surround them"*, highlighting the importance of immersing children within the core text to enable them to become more capable writers.

In addition to literacy, reading is also taught discretely on a daily basis. The main reading programme used at Southwold is Destination Reader. This approach to reading, which incorporates a structure of talk and vocabulary, was introduced in 2016, and there has been noted improvement in children's reading skills as a result. The Hackney council website states: *"by developing a deeper understanding of what's being read, Destination Reader actively engenders a love of reading which will endure throughout your children's lives"*, (2021). This links directly to one of the school's main aims, which is to foster a love of books and learning.

The first part of the reading lesson is a 10-minute teaching input in which Destination Reader stems are used to explore a text, (see appendix 1). During this session, children are given the opportunity to learn new vocabulary with a vocabulary slide, (see appendix 2). The teacher then models thinking aloud, and the children have the opportunity to practise using the taught skill with a partner. This shared reading and discussion is an integral part of the lesson and enables children to discuss the book in-depth and explore the text from multiple angles.

Plinger and Wood (2012) note that *"previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of shared reading (SR) and dialogic reading (DR) on young children's language and literacy development"*. Given the importance of

shared reading, it emphasises the significance of this study which aims to explore how to make these reading sessions more beneficial. While reflecting on our current practice, we discussed the importance of the core text in our literacy lessons and considered how the one-hour slot for literacy was often not enough time to read and discuss the book as in-depth as we would like.

In Key Stage 2, the destination reader text will often link to core text in literacy. However, in Key Stage 1 this was not typically linked. Therefore, exploring how using the literacy core text at the beginning of the input of the reading lesson would affect the children's achievement in literacy lessons is a next step to develop greater precision. Moreover, to investigate if it supported the children's writing outcomes and helped the children engage more in this area of their learning would enhance the analysis of cross literacy discipline outcomes.

All four classes in Key Stage 1 were involved in the study, but to investigate more thoroughly, three children from each class were selected as a focus group to analyse their progress. Class teachers were also interviewed to give first-hand opinions on how the study has impacted literacy lessons. Potential limitations for the research were the choice of books. Certain books would lend themselves to reading better than others. In addition, some shorter books, often studied in KS1 literacy, may not be long enough or have enough language to be used effectively in the reading session. Teachers were required to consider this carefully when planning their reading sessions.

## Research Process

The study was facilitated by the phase leader and involved a total of five class teachers and four classes. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the research was carried out over one half term. During this half term, all lower-phase classes used the literacy core text in their daily reading lessons. For some books, for example, *Claude in the City*, by Alex T Smith, the one book was used solely. However, when studying a more well-known book linked to a traditional tale, such as 'Hansel and Gretel', different versions of the story were used. Similarly, when it came to non-fiction writing, different versions of the same type of text were used. For example, when writing an explanation text on butterflies, various non-fiction texts on butterflies were used.

The evidence was gathered at the start and the end of the process. We ensured that the children selected were of different abilities, gender, and ethnic backgrounds to make sure the study was a true reflection on the school demographic. A sample of children's writing from the end of the literacy unit was taken from the previous term before the study. Further samples were taken throughout the study to compare.

Both year groups completed a narrative and a non-fiction unit during the research time frame, so a sample of both genres could be taken. For the fiction texts, the samples were analysed to see if children could write more confidently and had a secure understanding of the storyline. We also monitored the written work to see if the children could write in the author's style or use some keywords or phrases from the text. For the non-fiction texts, the samples were analysed to see if exploring the topic in reading improved their knowledge of the report's subject so, in turn, they were able to write more confidently. Additionally, it was examined to see if they were able to use more technical vocabulary accurately. It is generally accepted that children should make progress over time regardless of the study, this should be taken into consideration when examining findings.

As the study was to assess the impact on children's writing and their competency in the literacy lesson, it was essential to get an overall picture. To enable this class teachers and children involved in the study were interviewed. The interview questions, (see appendix 3), allowed the study to take on different perspectives and not be solely based on the data gathered. The class teachers involved in the study were also given an anonymous questionnaire to establish an overall view of how effective the study was, (see appendix 4).

To carry out this research project effectively, we had to ensure that not only were the literacy core texts always used in the reading lesson but that the 10-minute input was taught effectively. To do this, class teachers had to be confident in delivering the sessions. At the very beginning of the study, in our weekly phase meetings, teachers were reminded of the expectations of the input. For the first two weeks of the study, teachers were provided with the teaching slides, ensuring the teachers were completely clear on expectations. Additionally, to ensure consistency and to see first-hand the impact of the reading lessons, observations in each class took place throughout the research process to ensure the quality of the teaching input was consistent across all classes.

## Findings

It was evident from when the project first started that it positively impacted the children's literacy lessons. In addition, the teachers involved in the study all gave positive feedback from the outset. It is apparent that from looking at the samples of the children's outcomes and feedback from the teacher interviews that children of all abilities benefited from the study.

Firstly, the teacher questionnaire, (see appendix 3), clearly demonstrated that teachers believed the study improved children's engagement in literacy lessons and their writing outcomes. Figure 1 below shows the table of results: all 5 teachers in the study rated each question above a 4, with 4 out of 5 teachers rating 'How did it improve children's writing outcomes?' a 5. The results clearly indicate that overall teachers feel that this study had a positive impact on children's learning.

Rating	Number of teachers (5 teachers involved in the study)				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. How useful did you find using the literacy core text in reading? <b>(1 being not useful)</b>	0	0	0	2	3
2. How did it improve children's engagement in literacy lesson? <b>(1 being not at all)</b>	0	0	0	2	3
3. How did it improve children's writing outcomes? <b>(1 being not at all)</b>	0	0	0	1	4

Fig. 1 Teacher survey

## Narrative

In KS1, the core text gave the children a foundation block on which to base their own story. The children explore the text by looking at the setting, the character and the plot. They then changed an element of the story, for example, the character or the setting. The complexity of the parts which are changed depends on the year group and ability of the child. The children needed have a solid understanding of the core text to base their own stories on it. Therefore, for the lower ability children, some of the limitations to narrative writing were evident in the level of secure understanding of the storyline, which impact innovation in their own version. The teachers noted that this study enabled the lower attaining pupils to have a more secure understanding of the text. They were able to re-tell the story and grasped the main storyline, which they were often not previously able to do. Repetition of the story and language is vital for the lower attaining children and why this approach gave the children a much better understanding of the basis of the story.

One of the Year 2 children taken as a sample, was a child with specific learning needs who often lacked confidence. The child is a reluctant writer who depends on adult support to scaffold learning access. The first example (fig. 2) is a sample before the study in March where he was not able to write independently without a scaffold.



Fig. 2. Writing before study

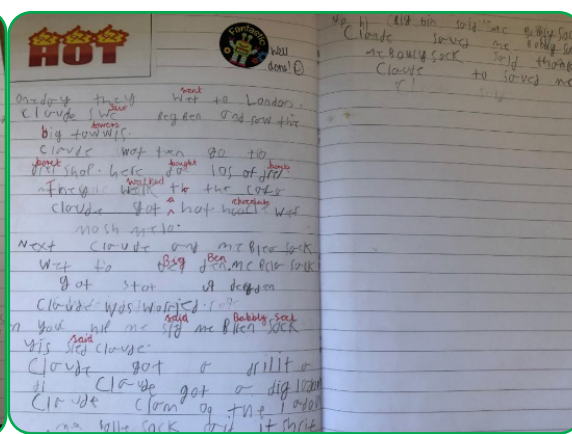


Fig. 3. Writing after study

Fig. 3 is an example of the same child's work during the research process. It is clear that he has made significant improvement and that the extra time and focus on the core text in reading has supported this. In addition, the teacher also observed there was a noticeable difference in the child's confidence to write and his willingness to take part in literacy lessons as he had a better understanding, so he felt more comfortable sharing ideas.

Additionally, teachers noted in their interviews that the lower attaining children were more willing to participate in class discussions, with a more secure understanding of the character and the stories the children felt more confident to share. One teacher stated, "It really enabled the lower attaining children to be more involved with the lesson as they had a much stronger understanding of the story, so they were able to answer questions and be more involved with the group discussions."

It was not only the lower attaining and SEND children who benefited. When analysing the samples of the greater depth children it was also evident that the study had extended their learning. In exploring the text in-depth and giving the children time to discuss, they are more aware of the authors' style and how the book is written. In the example below it is evident the child has written in the style of the author.

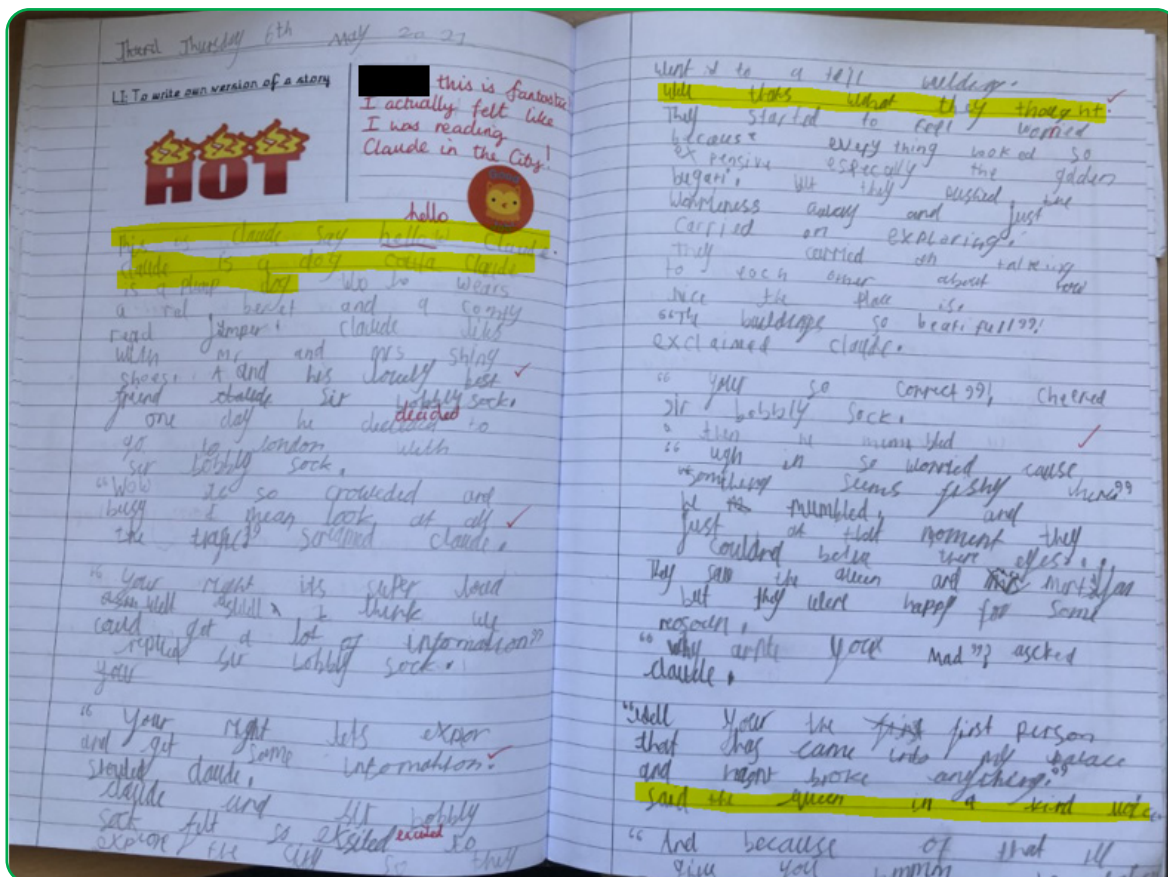


Fig. 4 Hot write outcome showing use of author style



Furthermore, when examining the samples from the focus children, it was clear that having more knowledge of the story enabled some children to develop more stamina for writing. For reference, in Year 2 and the last term of Year 1, children write a cold write at the beginning of the unit and a hot write at the end. This an independent piece of writing that teachers use as an assessment tool. Fig. 5 below shows a child's 'Hot Write' from before the study and then an example from the research time frame.

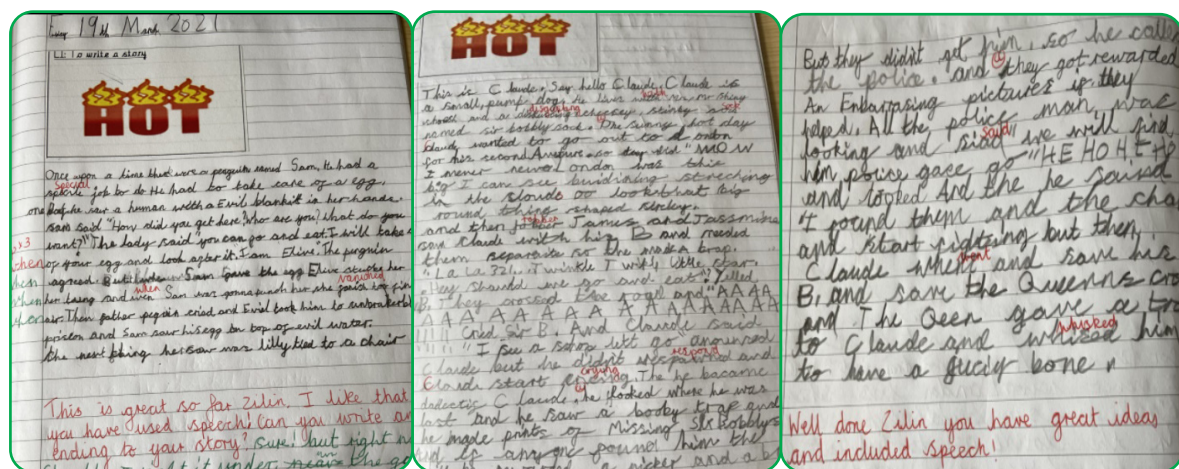


Fig. 5. A child's 'Hot Write' from before the study and then an example from the research time frame

Having a more in-depth grasp of the text also led to the children being more able to innovate the story and put their ideas into their writing. For example, the making links stems allow children to make connections with other books/ TV shows or their life experiences, allowing more scope for the children to innovate the story. Through the discussions, children can draw on their wider knowledge and link this to their own stories. See appendix 5 for teaching slide for making links.

During the teacher interviews one teacher commented that the inferring stems, (see appendix 1), gave the children the opportunity to analyse how the characters were feeling at different parts of the story. Having this knowledge supported the children to be able to write in the role of the character and in some instances include more detail in their writing.

As previously stated, the vocabulary slide is a crucial part of the reading lesson. Although the children are exposed to words that may be unfamiliar to them, having seen these words in the context of the story, the children then find it easier to use them in their writing. The teachers observed that children were more likely to use words from the text in their writing than before. For example, it was noted that 12 out of a class of 23, Year 2 children used the word 'gasped' in the correct context after it appeared on more than one occasion in the glossary side. It was also discovered that the glossary gave the children a greater range of vocabulary which they could transfer and use in literacy lessons. It was noted children were also more likely to use words orally when having discussions in talk partners during the lesson input then prior to the study.

At the time of this study, the Year 1 classes were studying traditional tales. Class teachers stated in the interview that they found this study particularly useful for lower attaining, EAL and SEN children. One teacher said, "By re-reading the story numerous times throughout the week the children were able to orally retell the story much better than previously. This supported the children's spoken English which then transferred into their written work."

Another teacher involved in the study also discussed how when planning a unit on 'Traditional Tales' it can often be assumed that children are familiar with the traditional stories taught or any fairy tales in general. However, we often find that this is not the case. Therefore, being exposed to the same traditional story in reading, they become more familiar with the stories. Additionally, exploring different versions of the same story allows the children to develop more of an understanding of a 'traditional tale'.

Similarly, a teacher suggested that it was very useful for EAL children to become acquainted with familiar story language such as 'once upon a time.' By reading and exploring the same familiar language repeatedly, the children are more able to use it in their writing.

Overall, for fiction writing this study encouraged the children to use the higher-level vocabulary in their writing, supported SEN and EAL with the confidence to retell the story and inspired the higher ability children to write in the author's style.

## Non-fiction

In non-fiction writing, children's lack of knowledge of the report's content can often hold them back. This is particularly apparent for the lower ability who can find it difficult to retain information. However, reading the non-fiction texts about the same subject enabled the children to develop more knowledge on the content of their writing. Teachers noted that children were able to use the technical vocabulary more in writing outcomes and had a much better understanding of the topic, which supported their ability to write about it. The vocabulary slide previously referred to helped with this as it gave the children a better knowledge of the language. The higher ability children were able to magpie and not only use the technical vocabulary but were able to use phrases taken from some of the texts. For example, one of the children from the sample used the phrase "Those little critters have a serious appetite." See example in fig. 7 below.

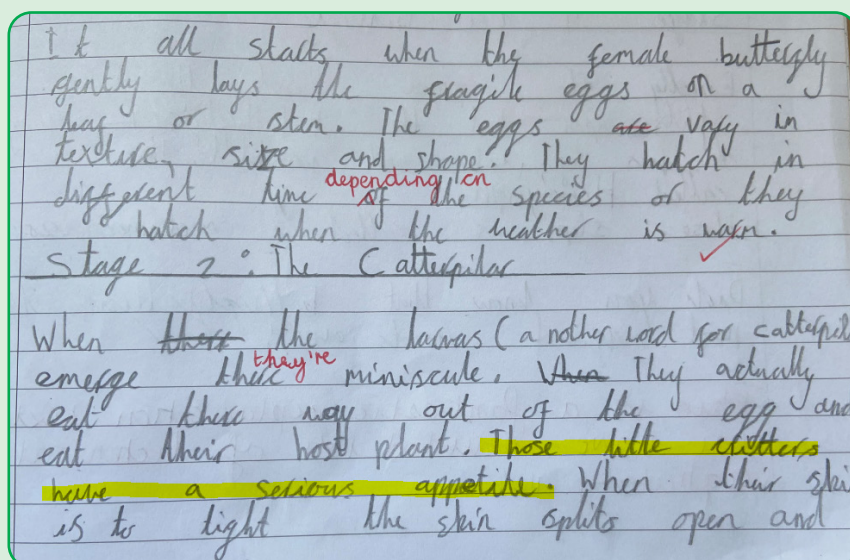


Fig. 7. Sample showing improvement in vocabulary accuracy

When looking at the difference in the children's non-fiction hot and cold writes it is evident that linking the reading sessions to the literacy sessions has enabled the children to write more substantial outcomes. By facilitating the children to discuss the text with their partner and then hear all the ideas that are shared in the class discussion, it will support their understanding and help them to retain the information.

One example of this was the evidence of a low attaining child with special educational needs. Prior to the study he needed a lot of scaffolds and support in his non-fiction writing for his hot write and it was a challenge for him to write a few sentences. See fig. 8. It is then evident that during the study the child was more able to write more independently and confidently (fig. 9).

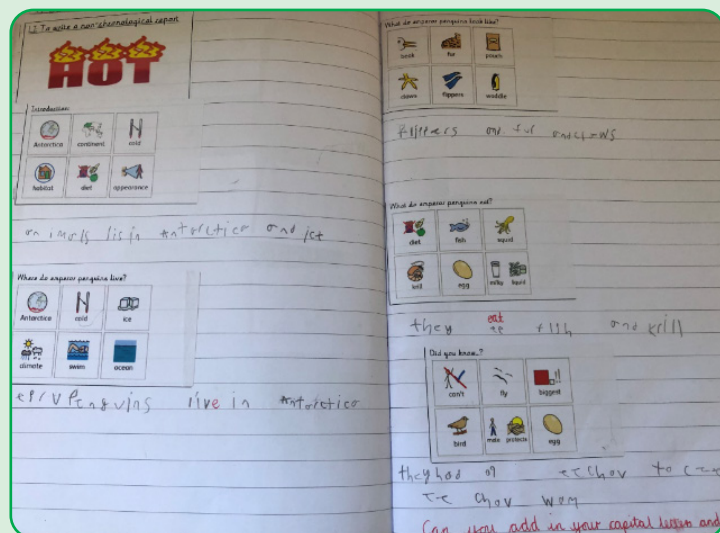


Fig. 8. Lower ability sample writing from before study

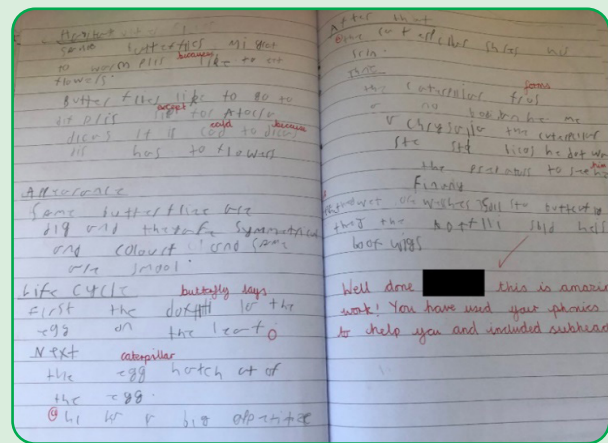
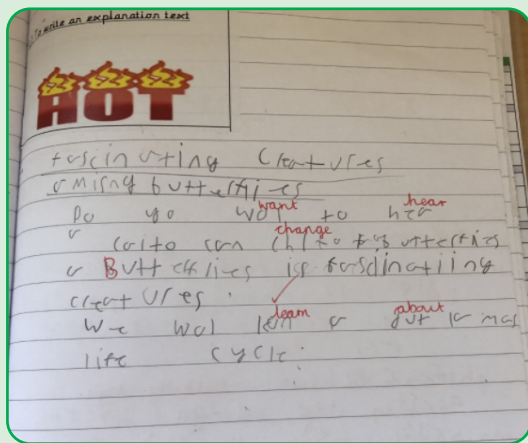


Fig. 9. Lower ability comparable outcome after the study

## Impact and Conclusion








It was evident that this study had a positive impact on the children's literacy outcomes and also on their participation in literacy lessons. All teachers involved in the study agreed that the children were able to talk more confidently about the book which in turn aided their ability to write. It was agreed by all teachers that although all children involved benefited from this study it was indeed the lower ability children who gained the most. By being exposed to more story language and having a more secure understanding of the content of their writing these children were able to become more confident writers.

Although the study was a success there are some things that should be taken into account going forward. The main purpose of the reading lesson is to teach children reading skills. Each reading stem teaches a skill, and every book does not lend itself well to every stem. We have to be ensuring that the books we are selecting have enough material to effectively cover each stem. Therefore, although the evidence is clear that the children's learning benefited from the reinforcement of the literacy core text in reading there should be balance of using the literacy core text and also selecting vocabulary rich texts which supports the teaching of reading.

To conclude, this study has had a positive impact and it is something that, with consideration, would be beneficial for lower phase to keep in place as standard practice.


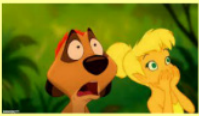




## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Destination Reader Stems

<b>Predicting</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ I wonder if...</li> <li>❖ I predict that...</li> <li>❖ I think that...</li> <li>❖ I bet that...</li> <li>❖ The next part will be about...</li> </ul>	<b>Inferring</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The word * tells me...</li> <li>❖ The part * tells me...</li> <li>❖ This makes me think that...</li> <li>❖ I think this character...</li> <li>❖ I think the setting is...</li> </ul>
<b>Asking Questions</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Who...</li> <li>❖ What...</li> <li>❖ When...</li> <li>❖ Where...</li> <li>❖ Why...</li> </ul>	<b>Making Connections</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ I know about this because...</li> <li>❖ I've been to/ seen...</li> <li>❖ I think this book is a * book...</li> <li>❖ This reminds me of...</li> <li>❖ The character is similar to...</li> </ul>
<b>Summarising</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The key idea is...</li> <li>❖ This part is about...</li> <li>❖ The main theme is...</li> <li>❖ The most important ideas are...</li> </ul>	<b>Clarifying</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ I think that means...</li> <li>❖ I don't understand...</li> <li>❖ What does * mean?</li> <li>❖ I didn't understand...</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluating</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The word/phrase * works well because...</li> <li>❖ I like the way that the author uses...</li> <li>❖ I think it would have read better if...</li> </ul>	

## Appendix 2 Vocabulary slide

Glossary:

exploded	gasped	cried
		
		

## Appendix 3 Interview questions for class teachers involved.

1. How did you think the study effected children's engagement in reading lessons?
2. How do you think the study effected children's engagement in literacy lessons?
3. Do you think reading the core text has affected children's ability to take part in literacy lesson?
4. Do you think the study has had a positive impact on children's ability to retell the story?
5. How did it help with the non-fiction writing?

## Appendix 4 Action Research Questionnaire

**Action Research Questionnaire**

1. How useful did you find using the literacy text in reading? ( 1 being not useful)

1   2   3   4   5

2. How did it improve children's engagement in literacy lessons? ( 1 being not at all)

1   2   3   4   5

3. How did it improve children's writing outcomes? ( 1 being not at all)

1   2   3   4   5

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Any other comments



## Appendix 5 Modelling slide

Claude had never been to the City before. He couldn't believe how tall all the buildings were. They stretched right up into the air and some of them disappeared into the clouds.

Sir Bobbysock was glad that it wasn't him who had to clean the windows.

The city was big and bright and very, very busy. There was so much to do!

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**Making Connections**

**Texts to self**

I know about this because

I've been to / seen

This reminds me of \* because

This is similar to \* because

This character is similar to \* because

Link aloud.. This reminds me when I go into the city in London because there are lots of really tall buildings.

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