

## Improving Foundational Literacy Skills – Handout

### Introduction

Sir Martyn Oliver, His Majesty's Chief Inspector in the UK said, "A child's first few years at school are vitally important to their future learning and development. We know that by providing children with an excellent early education, we can set them up with the tools they need to flourish throughout the later stage of their education."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strong-foundations-in-the-first-years-of-school/strong-foundations-in-the-first-years-of-school#main-findings>



Children can't progress in learning without mastering the basics first. Learning is cumulative, like walking up a flight of stairs. We take stairs one at a time because we can't jump from one storey of the house to another.

**RISE**

*"They are vital, indispensable skills needed for virtually any further education and to lead an empowered, self-determined life."*

<https://riseprogramme.org/blog/what-do-we-mean-foundational-skills.html>

### What are foundational literacy skills?

Foundational literacy skills are the skills enabling children to decode, understand and use language effectively.

The core components of foundational literacy skills are:

- **Oral language and communication** – understanding and using spoken language; listening and responding
- **Phonological and phonemic awareness** – recognising and manipulating sounds in spoken words
- **Phonics** – understanding how letters and groups of letters represent sounds and using this to decode and spell words
- **Print awareness** – understanding how print works
- **Fluency** – reading accurately, quickly, and with expression
- **Vocabulary** – knowing and understanding a wide range of words
- **Comprehension** – making meaning from what is read or heard

We can break these down into EYFS and KS1 focus areas:

**Our EYFS focus – 3-5 year olds have a focus on** Communication and Language and their Literacy ELGs. These goals include listening and responding to texts, retelling stories, holding a conversation, participating in discussions, offering explanations about events in stories, expressing their ideas using full sentences, using diagraphs in their spelling, reading simple sentences, forming recognisable letters, spelling by identifying sounds, and writing simple phrases.

**KS1 focus:** Early Reading (phonics), Writing (spelling, composition). Their goals focus on developing reading, writing and speaking and listening skills and developing a wider understanding of language.

Vocabulary and background knowledge run alongside so many literacy skills.

This infographic is taken from the RISE link above and is part of a larger handout, on the link above.



### Habits:

Habits accelerate learning.

We want to optimise students' thinking by filling their days with two kinds of habits:

1. Having a way of doing relatively unimportant things quickly and easily
2. Having a way of doing important things well and in a way that channels the greatest attention, awareness and reflection

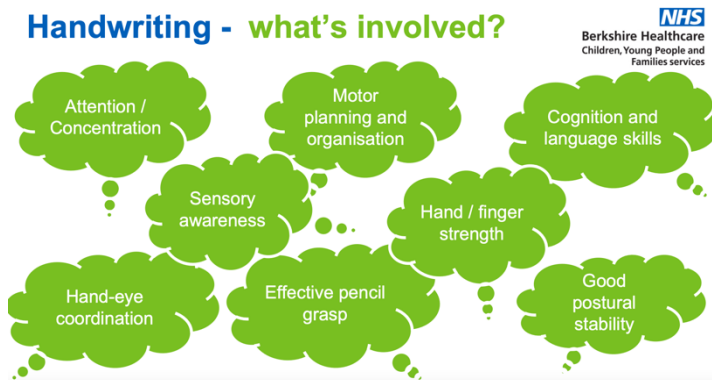
*Teach Like a Champion, Doug Lemov*

Doug Lemov, in his book, *Teach Like a Champion*, explains that working memory is both powerful and limited. Every task that you complete with minimal load on the working memory, allows you to use the remaining capacity for something more important. Fluency is vital – once a child is reading fluently, they can think deeply about the text and their ability to comprehend what they have read, increases.

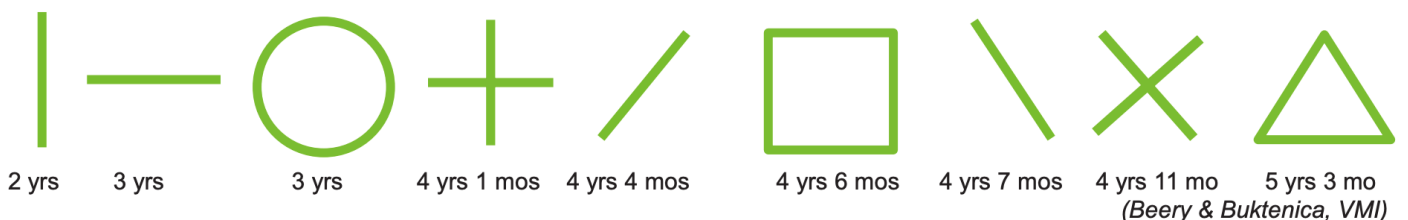
Every day activities in the classroom should be familiar, so that learners can complete tasks without cognitive overload through focusing on the mechanics of the task. If routines are embedded, then this frees up working memory for learning.

## The mechanics of handwriting

### Handwriting - what's involved?



### Pre-writing shapes:



Images taken from: <https://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/media/109515023/handwriting-universal-training-oct-23.pdf>

Pre-writing foundational skills can be developed through gross motor activities such as climbing, running, physical education activities. Fine motor skills can be developed through threading beads, picking up small objects, sorting small objects etc.

### The five Ps of handwriting are:

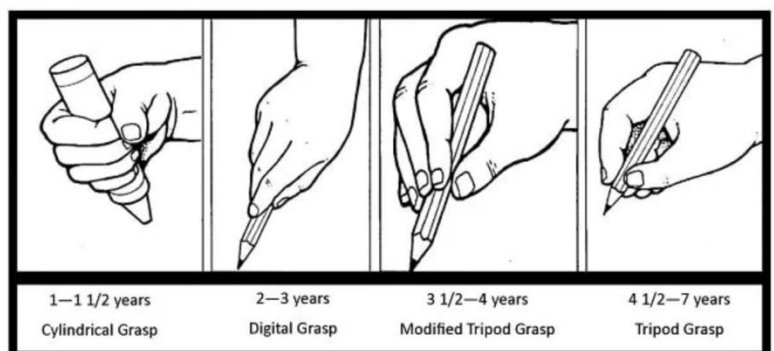
Posture – Make sure the child has a solid surface on which to write.

Pencil grasp – See image to the right

Paper position – make sure they aren't stretched

Pressure – Too heavy will cause fatigue, too light will be hard to read

Placement and letter formation – keep a consistent approach to letter formation



Pencil grip image taken from: <https://theotstore.com.au/blogs/occupational-therapy-articles/let-s-talk-pencil-grip-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important?srsId=AfmBOopQNMPMvRqS02d3x1CZDURiMBpaegJD6HMSuZCMipTun36YRoli>

Handwriting is an important skill to learn but if there are barriers to learners meeting their potential due to recording their learning through hand-written methods, then alternative recording methods should be sought.

## Pre-phonics

- Listening walks – what sounds can you hear outside?
- Discovering sounds outside - what happens when you tap on different objects?
- Match sounds to objects and animals
- Describing animals, then making their noises
- Listening out for rhyming words in stories – fill in the blanks
- Singing songs

## Phonological Awareness and Phonics

### Daily, structured phonics teaching (systematic synthetic phonics)

This involves teaching letter–sound correspondences in a clear sequence, which is separated into phases. This builds from simple to complex. It involves repeated, consistent practice through short, focused daily lessons of about 10–20 minutes increasing with age.

- Review of the previously learnt sounds on a rolling basis.
- Introduce the new grapheme and the sound that it makes. Follow a My Turn, Together, Your turn.
- Model aural blending/segmenting of the new grapheme within simple words that contain previously learnt graphemes. Again, follow a My Turn, Together, Your turn process.
- Practise reading and spelling with that sound. Model the segmenting and blending. Look at the sentence that contains the new grapheme. Look for common exception words together. How do we tackle our new words by segmenting and blending?
- Model spelling new words, using sound buttons to support this. Then hide the word so that children can have a go independently.
- Cumulative review of previously taught phonemes – application in a sentence through dictation. Again, model how to complete this, as the repetition and formation of habits will take away the cognitive load on the class and allow them to focus on the learning. Ensure that corrections are made.

### Multi-sensory activities (songs, movement, visual cues)

Multi-sensory activities engage different parts of the brain and helps children who learn best through movement, sound, or visuals. They can make instruction memorable and enjoyable.

These activities can include air writing or sensory trays for letter formation, visual cues and pictures to anchor sound recognition. For example, “soap that goat” for the oa grapheme. If your classroom set-up allows for continuous provision opportunities, there could be activities set up to encourage this.

The more senses involved, the stronger the learning pathway becomes.

### Segmenting and blending games

Sound buttons are useful during the teaching of phonics so that children can see the graphemes corresponding to the phonemes, and also during games, so that these become fluent.

goat

You can also ask children to sort real words and nonsense words, using their knowledge of phonics, or segmenting using cards or blocks.

By combining daily structured phonics teaching with rich multisensory activities and purposeful segmenting and blending games, we can significantly improve children's early literacy skills. These approaches build confidence, accuracy, and enthusiasm for reading.

When practicing handwriting and letter formation, this should be done as a separate activity, but used as a method to support the teaching of phonics, strengthening the graphemes taught in the lesson.

### **Developing Vocabulary and Oral Language**

Oral language is the basis for literacy. Vocabulary size strongly predicts later reading ability and overall attainment so an early, rich exposure to language helps close the disadvantage gap. The more words children understand and use, the more effectively they can think, communicate, and make sense of new learning.

Children need a wide vocabulary to access curriculum content. Oral language underpins comprehension, inference, and expressive communication. A limited vocabulary can lead to frustration, poor engagement, and barriers in reading and writing. Research shows explicit vocabulary teaching and structured talk significantly boost progress.

For those children whose language is limited, have these as your notice and focus children. Aim to engage in high quality conversation each day with them, modelling correct grammatical conventions and correcting them if required.

**Every interaction is an intervention.**

### **Dialogic reading and storytelling**

Reading aloud exposes children to complex sentence structures and vocabulary they wouldn't encounter in everyday conversation. Hearing rich, expressive language allows children to naturally internalise new words.

Read stories on multiple occasions to focus on different aspects. For example, the first time pause to explain unfamiliar words to the children, and discuss possible synonyms. Ask the children to predict what happens next and explain why. After reading it over a few sessions, ask the children retell the story, using target vocabulary, or act out the story.

### **Rich talk in everyday routines**

Children learn vocabulary best through meaningful use.

Structure opportunities for talking carefully, as it builds confidence and expressive language. By providing structured talking opportunities within routines, it takes away the working memory load and becomes a habit. This could be through carefully placed talk partners, having sentence stems to complete verbally,

modelling how to answer open ended questions, setting up tasks that require short oral presentations, and including drama and role play within the lessons.

We must create a language-rich environment where children use new words actively and purposefully.

### Explicit teaching of Tier 2 words

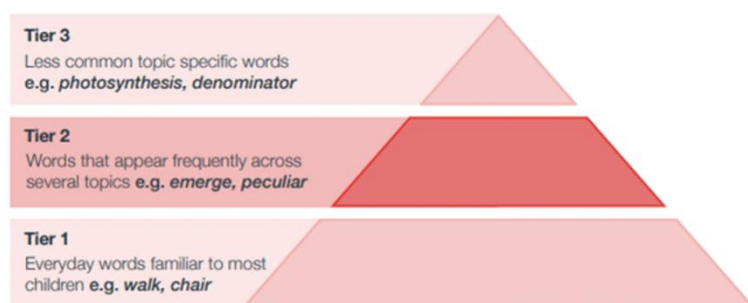


Image taken from: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-blog-through-the-keyhole-part-2-the-importance-of-background-knowledge>

Teach Tier 2 words before commencing a new book or topic. Which are the key words that you would like the class to know. For example, in science, do they know what the word *describe* means? How about the word *predict*? Provide child friendly definitions for them, so that they have the clear understanding of these new words and revisit them frequently.

If the children are repeatedly exposed to new vocabulary, then it will move from their working memory into long-term memory, thus reducing cognitive load when applying these words in context, increasing accessibility. It also supports comprehension and fluency.

Developing vocabulary and oral language requires explicit teaching, structured talk, and consistent exposure to rich texts and language. When these approaches work together, children gain the confidence, language skills, and conceptual knowledge needed to thrive across the curriculum.

### Early Comprehension and Fluency

Why does it matter? If children can decode but not understand, they cannot access the curriculum. If they understand but cannot read fluently, they struggle to keep up. We need both, taught together.

Early fluency frees up space for mental understanding – returning to reducing cognitive load again – the working memory is freed up to focus on the task in hand. Comprehension is not automatic – it needs to be taught. Together, along with the strategies that we have already discussed, it supports vocabulary growth, writing quality and wider academic success. Confident readers are more motivated to read, thus accelerating progress.

### Shared reading and guided reading strategies

Shared reading: A whole class or cohort are looking at a text together. Initially, the teacher must read the text, with the children following a copy (if possible). The teacher models pace, expression and decoding skills. By allowing the children to have an understanding of what is happening in the story, removes some of the cognitive load.

When confident, the children can join in with any repetition or reading parts aloud. This allows children to enjoy texts, practice listening skills and exposes them to a rich vocabulary and story structure. Can the cohort retell or role play the story after they have heard it? Can they draw a story board about what has happened?

Guided reading: Focuses more on the skills of comprehension and can be completed in small groups or as a whole class. If it is completed as a whole class activity, plan the seating carefully to maximise engagement. Guided reading sessions can focus on particular areas of comprehension, using the same text for each one. Focus on decoding initially for the early readers, then look at reading skills such as predicting and inferring. Immediate feedback allows children to apply strategies independently and allows positive habits to be formed.

Both shared and guided reading give children supported opportunities to practise new skills while hearing high-quality reading modelled consistently.

### Re-reading familiar texts to build confidence

Repetition is such a powerful tool. It builds confidence—children feel successful with texts they know. It increases accuracy and automaticity—reducing cognitive load and improves expression and phrasing, - which are key components of fluency. It also allows children to focus on meaning rather than decoding.

Familiarity leads to fluency, and fluency opens the door to comprehension.

### Modelling thinking aloud

Thinking aloud shows the hidden processes good readers use automatically. It teaches children how to approach a text, not just what the text says. It can teach the children really positive habits in their reading skills. Again, returning to sentence stems, if this is modelled by the teacher, then the children pick up these good habits.

When predicting, you may say “I think this might happen next because...” and then complete the question. When investigating vocabulary, you may ask “Why has the author chosen this word?” Model the next part of the answer, I think they have chosen this word because.... And insist that the children use this.

Model the skill of clarifying meaning: “This part doesn’t make sense to me—I’m going to re-read it.” Model what to do if it still doesn’t make sense, or clarify where the error has been made.

Verbalise making connections: “This reminds me of... because...” Can you link it to other stories?

Model inferencing: “He looks worried because...”

Thinking aloud turns comprehension from an invisible skill into something concrete and learnable.

Early comprehension and fluency develop most effectively when children experience high-quality modelling, structured reading opportunities, and repeated practice. Shared and guided reading, re-reading familiar texts, and explicit thinking-aloud strategies help children become confident, fluent readers who can fully understand and enjoy what they read.

### **Spotting early indicators of difficulty**

Early identification prevents small gaps becoming long-term barriers. The earlier support is given, the better children progress. Try to move around the classroom to monitor each child. Have notice and focus children who are monitored if you are concerned that they are not keeping up. You can assess through phonics assessments and informal observations.

### **Targeted small-group interventions**

Strong interventions can be characterised by small groups sessions, which are daily or frequent short interventions if the context allows. Set clear objectives based on the assessment outcomes that have highlighted these children.

Repetition and over learning builds automaticity.

These interventions ensure children receive exactly the support they need, at the right time, to keep up with the pace of whole-class teaching.



## Questions and Answers:

1. How does a teacher help a learner that tells you he / she hates reading or spelling words?

Start by digging a little deeper into the reasons why. It could be that there are gaps in their learning that make it difficult. It could be their confidence or past negative experiences. Is there a barrier to reading and spelling, such as dyslexic traits?

If possible, use books that cover topics of interest for the child and offer puzzles and games linked to the reading or spelling activities to make it as fun as possible.

Present the tasks in small chunks and celebrate small successes to develop intrinsic motivation. Reinforce effort rather than accuracy.

Consider whether multi-sensory approaches may support the learner as well, such as using letter cards or blocks for spelling.

Model enjoyment of reading and spelling, including correcting mistakes.

2. As a teacher, how can you easily identify those learners who are dyslexic?

This link is for the British Dyslexia Association, and takes you to different possible signs of dyslexia, depending on age. There is a wealth of information on this site as well, should you require further information.

<https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexia/about-dyslexia/signs-of-dyslexia>

3. Do you recommend teaching sounds or letters first? I have experienced a challenge where they are taught letters at home and at school, they learn sounds first. So, this becomes a bit confusing for my young learners.

Children need to recognise and hear the sounds in spoken words before they can match those sounds to written symbols - phonics. By teaching in this order, it allows children to decode new words by segmenting into sounds when reading, and blend the sounds when spelling.

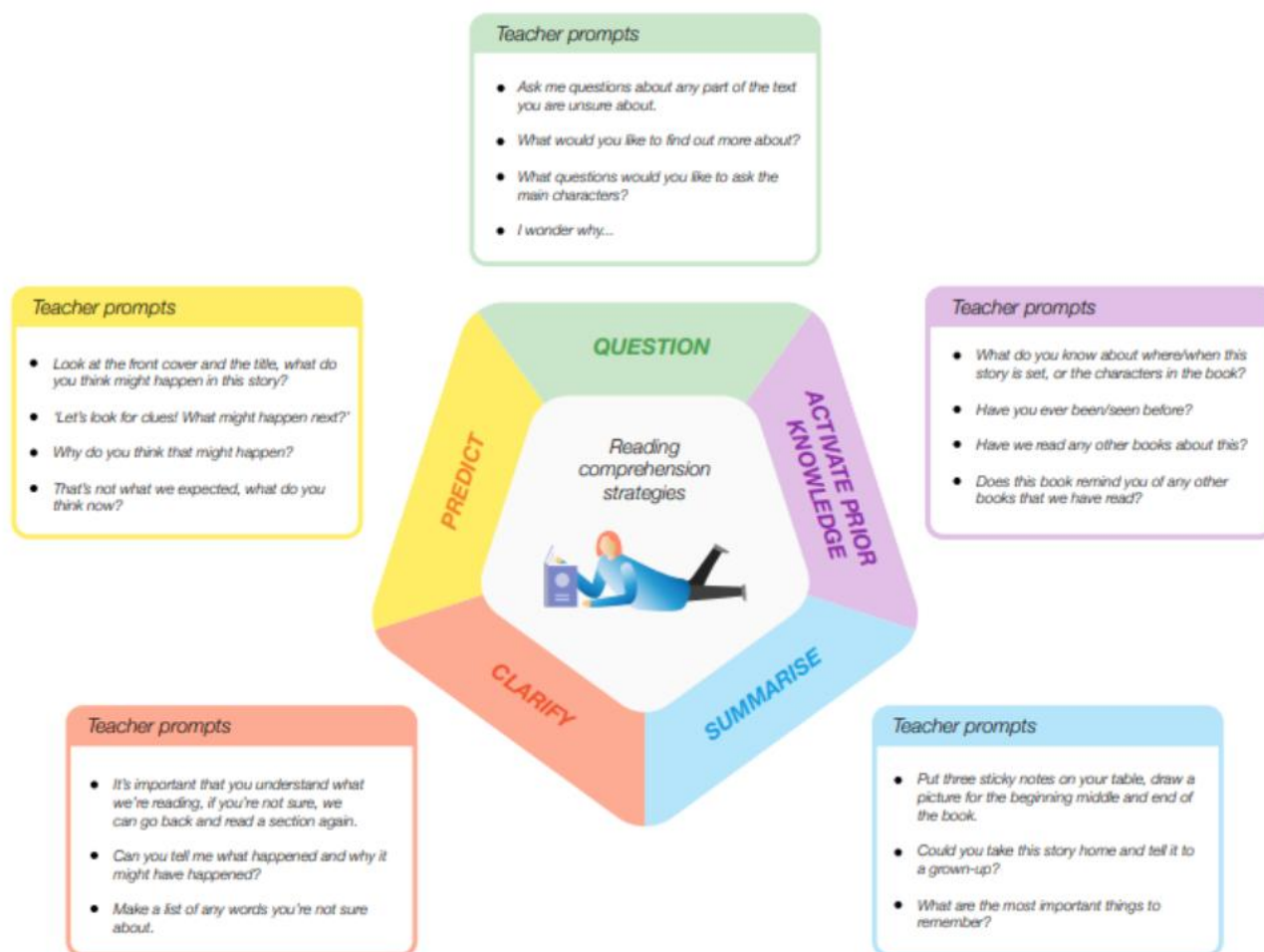
This is supported by validated phonics schemes in the UK.

4. For teachers who already use phonics and basic decoding strategies, how can they move learners from simply "reading words" to truly understanding the meaning of the text and engaging with it?

Thinking aloud is a really useful tool in demonstrating how to develop comprehension skills. The picture below, gives some useful prompts of questions to develop comprehension skills, with the link to the article below. Initially, the teacher can "wonder aloud", whilst answering their own question, to model what they are doing. These can then be offered as questions to the class.

These skills can be applied to any text, not just literacy texts.

**Figure 6: Reading comprehension with prompts to support practice**



<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-blog-reading-comprehension-simple-and-brilliantly-complex>

This link also provides a wealth of research into improving literacy:

[https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1?fbclid=IwY2xjawOSIEVleHRuA2FlbQlXMAbicmlkETB1Z1luall4YTFpV0d5TzIsc3J0YwZhchBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHldK8eIXbWXP5cZKb-tttAcfeKnQgl-REonoihREgndtGH8tyDJ6LXhrhrlu\\_aem\\_9VYzbbTaKfzGIOWCCtBljg](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1?fbclid=IwY2xjawOSIEVleHRuA2FlbQlXMAbicmlkETB1Z1luall4YTFpV0d5TzIsc3J0YwZhchBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHldK8eIXbWXP5cZKb-tttAcfeKnQgl-REonoihREgndtGH8tyDJ6LXhrhrlu_aem_9VYzbbTaKfzGIOWCCtBljg)

5. In many classrooms here, we have large class sizes and limited reading resources, which can make it challenging to build strong comprehension and fluency skills. What practical strategies can teachers use to support learners who struggle to understand passages or read confidently, even when working with minimal materials?

- Use shared reading to model reading aloud with expression. Make sure that difficult words are explained. Link to phonics by writing on the board. Are there some unusual graphemes that have been used?

- Focus on vocabulary, to develop a rich and varied word bank. Explain them in simple language, and ask children to use the vocabulary in a sentence.
- Think aloud, modelling the comprehension strategies. Write a sentence on the board for everyone to see, and ask comprehension questions about this. For example, for inference you could work on a simple sentence such as, *he put up his umbrella*. What does this tell us? It could be raining, or the character would like some shade. What happens if we add in, *he grumpily put up his umbrella*. What can this tell us about the character? What happens to the atmosphere if we exchange the word *grumpily* for *cheerfully*? This then opens up lots of conversations about adverbs, synonyms and antonyms, inference, prediction and so on.
- If resources and timetables allow, have passages from the text with questions about this section on the wall for the children to access in a carousel activity. The questions can be scaffolded for different levels.
- A carousel of activities can also help if you have got a few copies of the text. This then allows children to read the text independently or in pairs.

6. What resources would you recommend to help teachers strengthen comprehension and literacy?

This link provides a wealth of research into improving literacy. The recommendations poster is a really useful summary of ideas.

[https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1?fbclid=IwY2xjawOSIEVleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETB1Z1luall4YTFpV0d5Tzlsc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHldK8eIXbWXP5cZKb-tttAcfeKnQgl-REonoihREgndtGH8tyDJ6LXhrhrlu\\_aem\\_9VYzbbTaKfzGIOWCCtBljg](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1?fbclid=IwY2xjawOSIEVleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETB1Z1luall4YTFpV0d5Tzlsc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHldK8eIXbWXP5cZKb-tttAcfeKnQgl-REonoihREgndtGH8tyDJ6LXhrhrlu_aem_9VYzbbTaKfzGIOWCCtBljg)

<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resources> has got lots of free resources, including comprehension resources. There are some paid for resources, but the majority are free.

7. Are there flowcharts, step-by step guides, or structured frameworks that teachers – especially those in resource-limited settings – can use to plan lessons and track learner progress effectively?

The above tes website has got some free downloads for phonics, from phase 2 – 5 if you search “*phonics assessment sheets*”. These would be useful in identifying children with gaps in their learning, and to provide targeted interventions. There are also some phonics plans on this website, detailing how they are taught. Unfortunately, many of the validated schemes in the UK require a subscription to access all of the resources.