Nelson Comprehension

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Comprehension is an active process that involves a variety of strategies and behaviours. When learners comprehend, they interpret, integrate, critique, infer, analyse, connect and evaluate ideas in texts. It is a complex, higher level skill that can place great demands on primary pupils. Effective learners use a variety of comprehension strategies simultaneously, and know how to deliberately apply specific strategies to aid their comprehension.

One resource that I’ve used and re-used to help pupils develop on this path is Nelson Skills. From its 90s starting point of a modest-but-highly-effective pupil and teacher book, it’s now a sophisticated resource that acts like a Swiss army knife for the literacy classroom. What’s more, Nelson Comprehension has been given a massive overhaul to meet the higher standards of the 2014 national curriculum, and includes pupil books, revision books, resources and assessment books, and teaching support too.

Every pupil book contains 10 units, with each made up of two sets of texts and questions at Key Stage 1, and three sets at KS2. Units cover every type of text, including fiction, poetry, playscripts, instructions and biography, with plenty of built-in practice, repetition and assessment.

Nelson Comprehension has been designed to help children unpack text, starting with the simple and moving onto more complex, higher-order thinking skills. The questions are colour-coded, from understanding the text at a literal level, which are coloured orange, to those that demand inferential comprehension, prediction and personal experience, which are green. This means you can strategically pinpoint specific comprehension skills according to each child’s skill set.

This resource has been written so that any set of text and questions in its books can be used for whole-class teaching, group work or individual work, all by following an approach called Teach Talk Write. Here, the first text is taught, then you work through the questions together and model comprehension skills. The second text becomes the focus of discussion, with groups answering questions. Then children answer questions on the third text individually with written responses.

The Pupil Books are excellently structured, and feature well-chosen texts from top authors as well as colourful illustrations and photographs. The colour-coding helps children see what skills they are practising and supports their understanding that comprehension operates on many different levels. Each book comes with a one-page guide on how to use it, which is very handy. But the page is tucked away at the back when it might have been better placed at the beginning with some modelled answers – so just make sure you draw pupils’ attention to this page first. The books provide a welcome degree of challenge to meet the higher standards expected of children, and there’s plenty here to improve their analytical, creative and practical intelligence.

The excellent Teacher’s Book provides a quick-reference spread from the Pupil Book, and thought-provoking notes and pointers for following the Teach Talk Write approach. You will also find resources and assessment book links, ideas for going deeper and extending understanding and answers.

The Resources and Assessment Books include differentiated photocopiable resource sheets for every text in the Pupil Books, a support sheet for more literal comprehension practice and an extension sheet for higher-order thinking. These sheets are admirably fit for purpose with opportunities for shorter and longer writing tasks. End of year tests are also provided, something every teacher will find invaluable as these have been written to a very high standard. There is also a useful Revision Book that contains three end-of-Key-Stage example test papers, enabling you to support children for their Year 6 reading test.

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Verdict: Feeling HOT

Nelson Comprehension is an easy-to-use, meticulous programme with clear progression, and it’s curriculum-proof for children aged 5-11. It makes planning straightforward, and when followed regularly will enhance children’s key comprehension skills, especially their HOT skills. My only wish was that the materials were digitally accessible or available on a DVD-ROM.

With prices for these resources well within the reach of any school budget, I’d be putting in an order now if I were the literacy coordinator. Nelson Comprehension is an ambitious programme that you’ll stick with for years, helping you to furnish children’s brains with truly Sherlockian powers of reasoning and deduction.