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The University of Nottingham

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Improving reading in Croatia and Slovenia: Effective Practices for Literacy Teaching

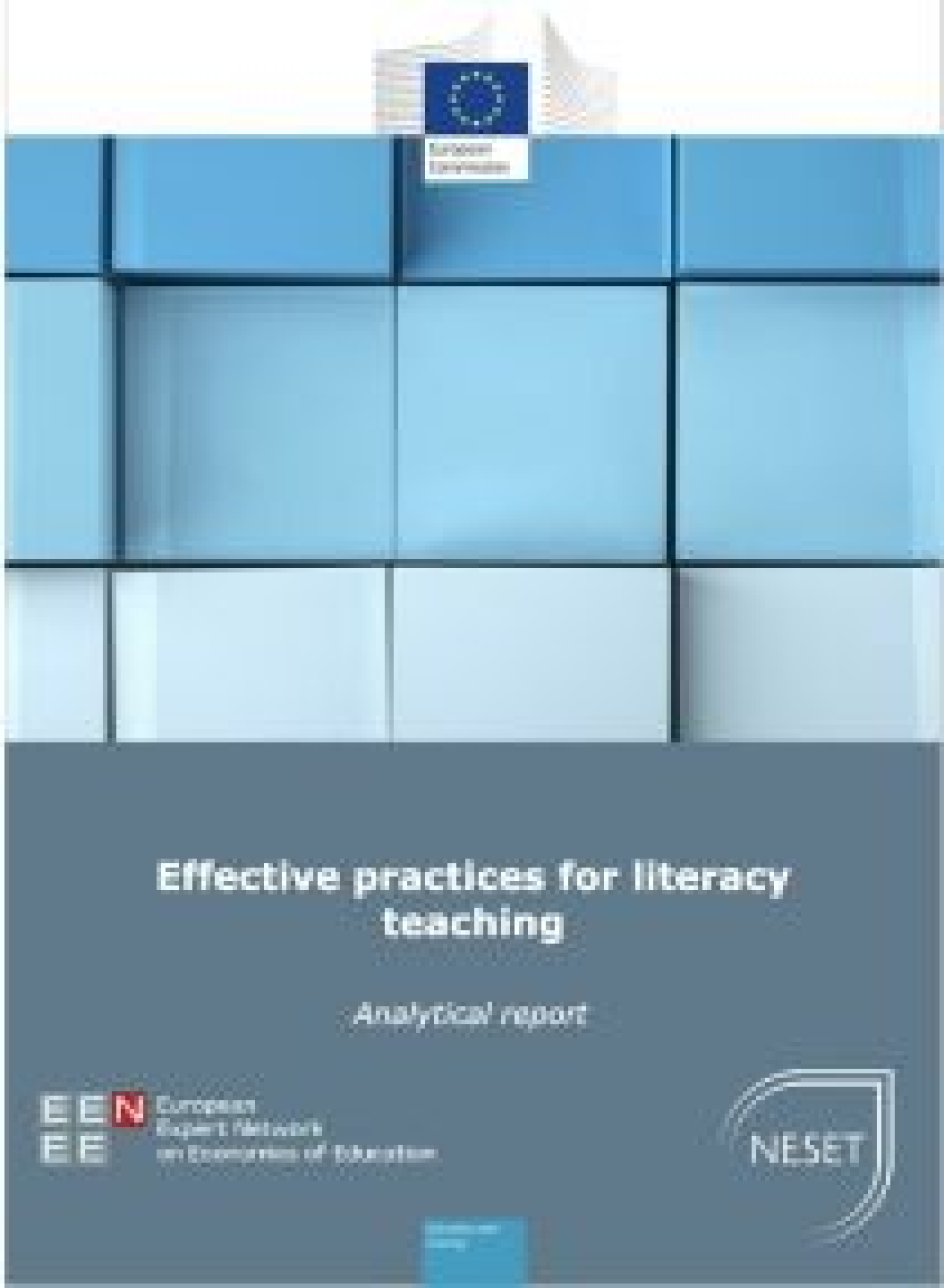


Colin Harrison

University of Nottingham, UK

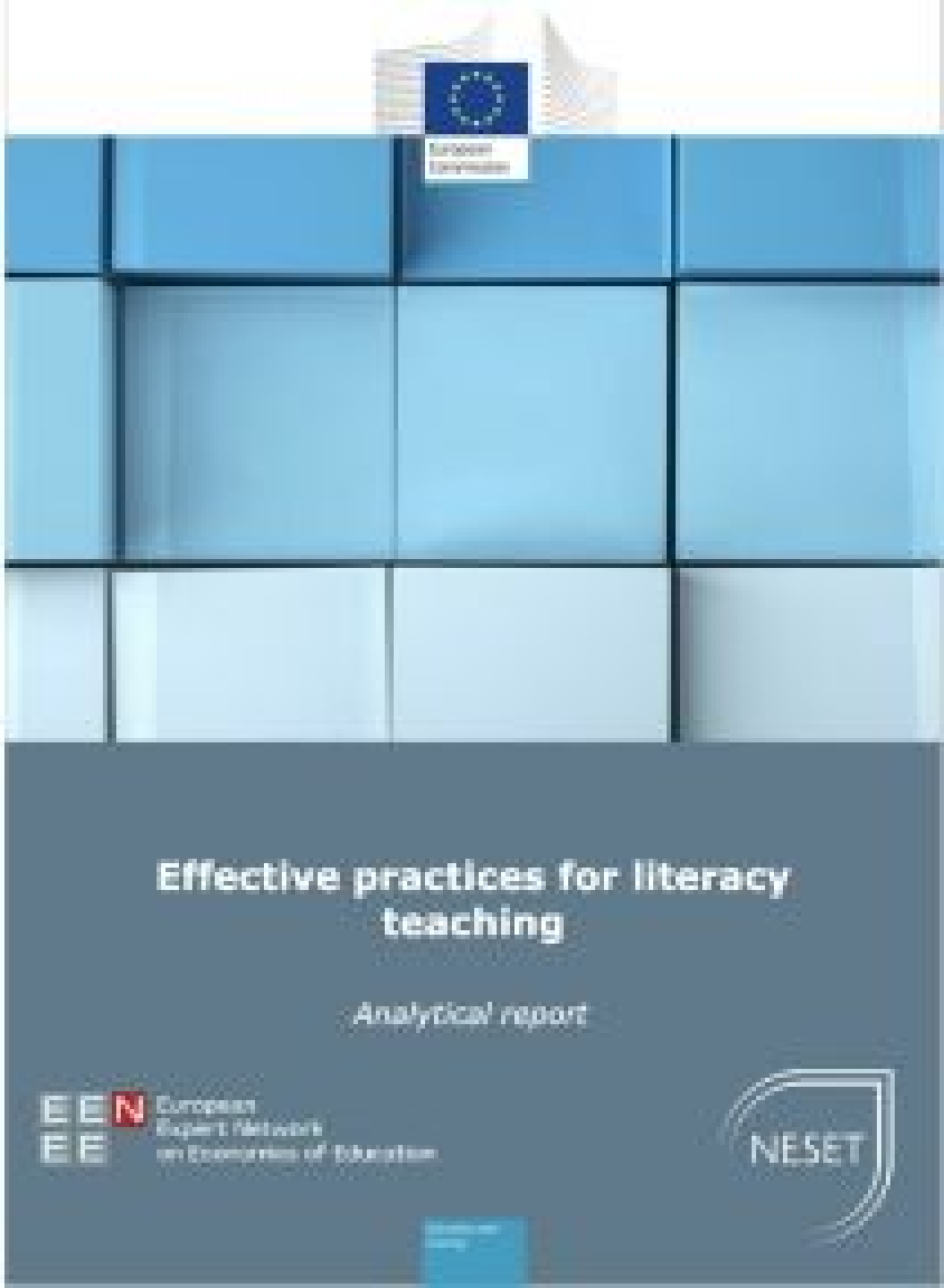
- 2024: the European Commission commissioned this report, following a Europe-wide drop in PISA 2022 scores
- Authors:

  Colin Harrison (UK)
  Greg Brooks † (UK)
  P. David Pearson † (USA)
  Sari Sulkunen (Finland)
  Renata Valtin (Germany)
- The report's remit called for 'a closer analysis of the ways in which **basic skills** are taught in EU countries' in order to begin to achieve the goal of getting all students to PISA 'Level 2' in basic skills by age 15.



The bad news:
'Basic skills' are no longer basic

- The PISA, definition of 'basic proficiency' (PISA Level 2) does not focus solely on word recognition and sentence comprehension.
- The PISA Level 2 assessment areas include:
  - identifying main ideas
  - drawing inferences
  - bringing together information from different sources
  - reflecting on the author's purpose
  - evaluating evidence
  - drawing inferences
  - judging relevance and trustworthiness
  - motivation
  - metacognition
  - world knowledge
  - critical digital literacy skills



The good news:

1. ‘Basic skills’ are no longer basic

- The PISA, definition of ‘basic proficiency’ (PISA Level 2) does not focus solely on word recognition and sentence comprehension.

2. Many poor readers are good at talking, and talking helps develop reading

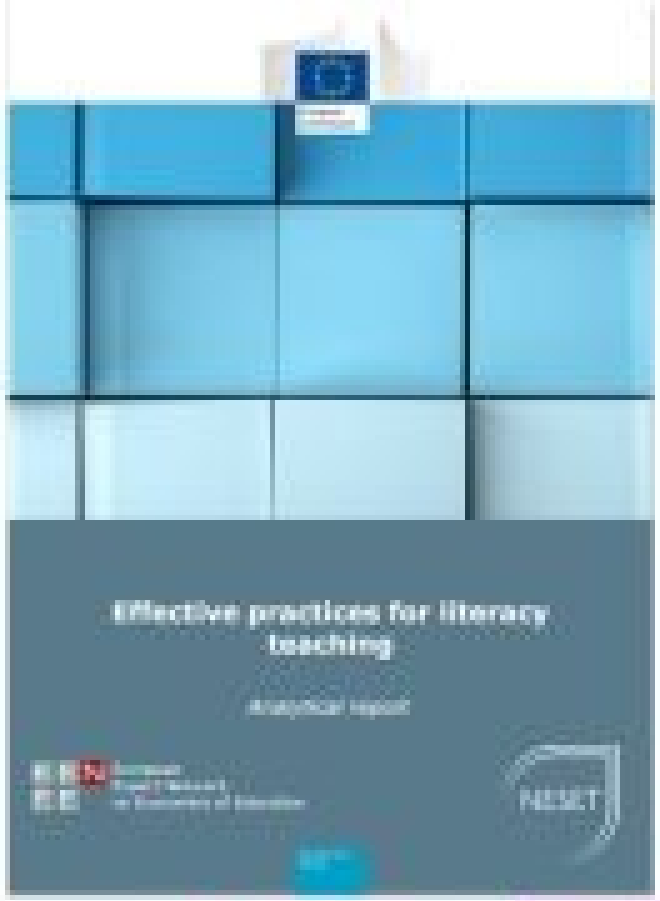
- Encouraging **interactive talk** about texts is perhaps one of the most important and least emphasised aspects of literacy development, from birth up to higher education level, and our 'Good Practice' examples supported this.



- The project sponsors asked for '**a closer analysis of the ways in which basic skills are taught in EU countries**' ,
- But we argued successfully that if a child's vocabulary at age 3 is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension at age 16, **our report needed to include recommendations relating to children's literacy-related learning before they begin school**
- We also applied our analysis of the 'basic skills' needed for literacy development not only to **primary schooling**, but also to
- **secondary schooling**, and also
- **adult education and the workplace**







20 'good practice' examples:



Four 'Factsheets' for non-specialists

Main report: 65,000 words:
Including 20 Recommendations for policymakers









Key findings

1. **Post-COVID Learning Loss**: The pandemic caused significant learning loss in literacy across Europe, **disproportionately affecting students from poorer homes**. International reading scores have been declining for over a decade.
2. **Early Literacy Development**: **Literacy development begins at birth**, with parental engagement in activities like storytelling, singing, and shared reading playing a crucial role.
3. **Importance of ECEC**: High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is vital for **reducing social inequality** and enhancing literacy outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children. Publicly funded ECEC programs are recommended for all EU Member States.
4. **Balanced Literacy Instruction**: Effective literacy teaching combines phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, emphasizing a balanced approach that **integrates teaching decoding with reading for meaning** and **enjoyment**.
5. **Declining Interest in Reading**: Reading for pleasure among children has decreased significantly, impacting vocabulary development, comprehension, and socio-emotional learning. Schools need to foster a **culture of reading** to reverse this trend.



Key findings

6. **Digital Literacy Challenges**: Students often struggle with critical digital literacy, including evaluating online information and navigating multimedia texts. **Collaborative learning** and structured teaching of **digital literacy skills** are essential.

7. **Supporting Struggling Readers**: Early intervention is crucial for struggling readers, with personalized learning plans, small-group instruction, and strategies like **paired reading and peer tutoring** showing positive outcomes.

8. **Disciplinary Literacy**: Literacy development must extend across all subjects in secondary education, with teachers integrating subject-specific reading, writing, and **comprehension strategies** into their teaching.

9. **Vocational and Adult Literacy**: Vocational education should include literacy skills tailored to specific professions, while adult literacy programs are essential for **lifelong learning and societal benefits**, including improved family outcomes.

10. **Cost-Effectiveness of Literacy Programs**: Investments in ECEC, early interventions, and digital tools are **highly cost-effective**, yielding long-term benefits in literacy, social equity, and economic growth.



Key takeaway messages:

TALK is crucial from birth

TALK is crucial in interacting with stories

TALK AND SMALL-GROUP TALK develops comprehension and vocabulary

TALK in RECIPROCAL TEACHING can massively impact reading engagement, motivation and learning



How to use the EPLT Report

20 'good practice' examples:





EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR LITERACY TEACHING

Box 16. Good practice example: PACT – Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text

This 20-week initiative comprised five components:

- Comprehension canopy: the teacher introduces a new topic using a brief video clip to activate background knowledge and an overarching high-level comprehension question that will be answered and revisited during the unit; for example, "How did the colonial regions develop differently?".
- Essential words: five key words are introduced, together with paired and whole-class discussion activities; these activities will be revisited at various times later.
- Knowledge acquisition through text reading: three times a week, teachers lead students through a critical reading routine that lasts approximately 15 minutes and requires students to read informational text related to the topic. Teachers share a video clip or a map to set up the context for the content to be read. Students read the text as a whole class with the teacher, in pairs, in small groups, or independently. In addition, students address a variety of content- and inference-based questions related to the canopy question verbally and in writing throughout the reading.
- Team-based learning (TBL) comprehension check: working in a team of two, the students answer a comprehension quiz comprising 10 items (five questions on vocabulary and five on concepts or key ideas). This is done first alone, then in their pair (in some versions of PACT, each pair then compares answers with another pair before the teacher gives out the answers). The focus is on close reading and high-quality reasoning to support evidence or knowledge claims. Teacher provides the answers and then fills in knowledge gaps.
- TBL knowledge application: at the end of every unit, students in groups of four prepare and deliver their answer to a difficult question (and the reasoning behind it) to the whole class (for example, "What might have happened to prevent the Revolutionary War?"). The teacher helps the students to integrate their presentations into an answer to the canopy question.

Source: Vaughn et al. (2017).

Each of the components contained reading, comprehension and small group work, but clearly the team-based learning components also developed self-efficacy as well as close reading, metacognition and discussion. A great deal of preparation is involved in setting

How to use the EPLT Report

20 'good practice' examples:



EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR LITERACY TEACHING

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- Fact Sheet 1



ENESET

Effective practices for literacy teaching in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Why is early literacy so important?



Brain development: By developing language skills early, children also develop thinking skills and information processing abilities that will be essential later in life.



Social development: Early language development helps children express their needs and manage emotions and communication, leading to better social interactions.



Academic success: Children with strong early language skills tend to perform better in reading, writing, and overall academic achievement later on.



Reducing inequality: Early preschool language development opportunities can help bridge the gap for children from low-income families.



Benefits for bilingual and multilingual children: Quality ECEC (preschool) programmes can promote dual language acquisition (the home language and the language of instruction).

What has research shown to be the best way to promote early literacy?



- **Read aloud every day:** Children love stories, and reading aloud to them helps them build vocabulary.
- **Talk about stories:** Learning is much deeper when children talk about stories.
- **Create a print-rich environment:** Surround children with books, posters, labels in a service, and encourage them to engage with these.
- **Encourage 'pretend' writing:** Encourage scribbling, writing and drawing, helping children to see connections between speech and writing.
- **Support parents and caregivers:** Encourage parents to support literacy development through talk, sharing stories, songs, poems and rhymes.

From birth!



★ **SUPPORT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS:** Encourage parents to support literacy development through talk, sharing stories, songs, poems and rhymes.

Phonological awareness:
A vital ability that develops from birth



Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!

Phonological awareness development:

- Simple music; beats, tones
- Repetition of sounds
- Hearing separate syllables
- Awareness of rhymes

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Songs, nursery rhymes, poems: culture, figurative language…
Develop language and imagination

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Effective practices for literacy teaching in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

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- Talk about books: Learning is much deeper when children talk about stories.
- Create a print-rich environment: Surround children with books, posters, labels and notices, and encourage them to engage with these.
- Encourage "writing" activities: Encourage scribbling, writing and drawing. Helping children to see connections between speech and writing.
- Support parents and caregivers: Encourage parents to support literacy development through talk, sharing stories, songs, poems and rhymes.

Screen time lowers brain development

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends (per day):

For children 0-3	For children aged 3-4
No screen time	Until screen time to 60 minutes
Focus on storytelling and reading	Prioritize shared reading

Screen time lowers brain development

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends (per day):

For children 0-3	For children aged 3-4
No screen time	Limit screen time to 60 minutes
Focus on storytelling and reading	*Prioritise shared reading*



World Health Organisation: NO screen time for children 0-3
NO MORE THAN 60 mins per day for children 3-4

- **Children learn grammar, vocabulary and communication through INTERACTION: SOCIAL INTERACTION, ENGAGEMENT, QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND PLAY**
- **INFANTS DO NOT LEARN from looking passively at a screen**

Why does Finland do so well in literacy development?

Teachers are highly trained:

- Early childhood educators need a **bachelor's degree** in education
- Elementary school and secondary school teachers need a **master's degree**, typically taking 5-6 years, including digital skills and research literacy. Only 7% of applicants are accepted. Classes are generally small, and free from testing and government control.

The education of children begins at birth:

At birth, ALL infants' parents (no matter their country of origin) receive a large **free Baby Box** (to be used as a crib) containing clothes, snowsuit, hat, disposable nappies, socks, mittens, toilet kit, picture book, teething toy.

At age 9-12 months, infants are offered heavily **subsidized day care**, which lasts up to the start of school, at age 7. Pre-school is compulsory for all 6-year-olds. The emphasis is on educational play, language development (including Romani), cooperation, friendship, cultural diversity, and expressing and regulating emotions. The curriculum includes arts, science, stories, music, and physical education.

Special needs education is important and well-funded in Finland, with an emphasis on inclusion within normal school settings wherever possible



- Fact Sheet 2




ENESET
Effective practices for literacy teaching
in primary school

Effective practices for literacy teaching in primary school

The key question: How should we teach reading?

- Aim for a **balanced** literacy instruction. Teach both decoding and comprehension from the first day of school.
- Use a **variety of sources** that include **songs, stories, poems,** and interactive discussions to develop vocabulary, imagination, and cognitive skills.

The basics: phonics, fluency, writing and fun!

- Teach **phonological awareness** (noticing and working with the sounds in spoken language), phonics, and blending skills systematically. Using methods that gradually move children from copying the teacher to being autonomous experts: ("I do, we do, you do").
- **Promote fluency** through repeated reading, guided oral reading, and activities like paired reading or reading aloud together. Audiobooks and text-to-speech tools can also support fluency.
- **Teach writing alongside reading**. The skills are interconnected and reinforce each other.



Effective practices for literacy teaching in primary school

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sounds → letters and letter groups

Effective practices for literacy teaching in primary school



How to promote literacy?

Especially for children who missed out on early language skill development:

- **Make language development fun!** with visual aids, posters, pictures, displays, songs, and storytelling.
- **Encourage expressive activities:** non-verbal communication, acting out, pointing, nodding, drawing.
- **Build on children's cultural and linguistic background:** incorporate diverse home languages and cultures; invite family members to share stories or participate in classroom activities.

Scaffold language support

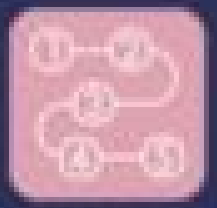
Use gestures and body language



Use simple words; repeat key words



Give one step at a time



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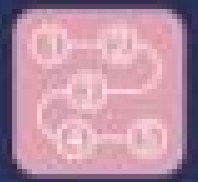
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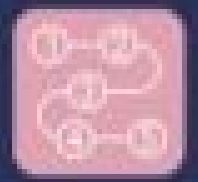
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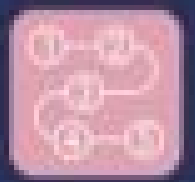
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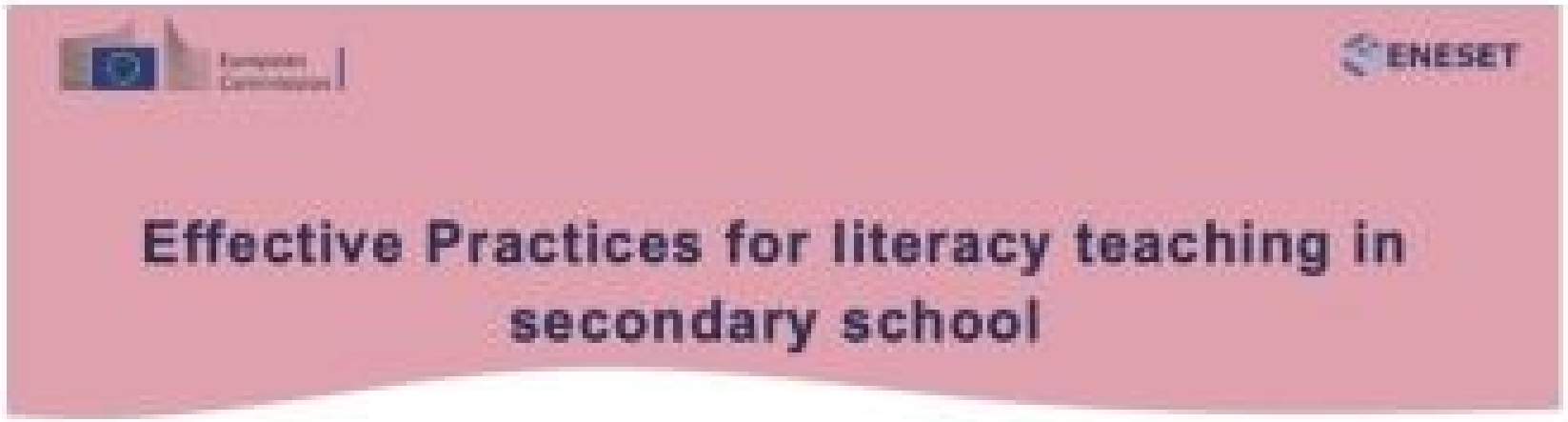
Use simple words; repeat key words



Give one step at a time



- Fact Sheet 3


ENESET
Effective Practices for literacy teaching in secondary school

Effective Practices for literacy teaching in secondary school

Continuing to build skills in literacy all through secondary schooling: every teacher has a role to play

- **LITERACY IS ESSENTIAL** for every school subject, and secondary teachers are experts in helping their students deal with subject-specific language and specialist vocabulary.
- **DISCIPLINARY LITERACY** prepares to teach students how to read, write, and think like experts in specific fields, incorporating subject-specific vocabulary, text structures, and reasoning practices into lessons.







Comprehension skills are still developing in secondary school

Talk and group work have been shown to help further develop these skills.

- Encourage students to **actively engage with complex texts** by connecting prior knowledge, identifying key ideas, and evaluating arguments.
- Use **structured talk and collaborative discussions** to deepen understanding and critical thinking.
- **Teach comprehension strategies explicitly**, such as predicting, questioning, summarising, and making inferences.

Use methods like reciprocal teaching, where students take turns leading discussions about texts. Reading and student talk is more effective for learning than reading and teacher talk.

Teaching writing is also part of teaching your subject

- Effective teachers combine reading and writing instruction to reinforce both skills. Posters, presentations, essays, PowerPoints, diaries, stories and blogs can be part of the creative output of students in any subject.
- It is helpful for students if the teacher breaks down complex writing tasks into manageable steps: planning, drafting, revising, and evaluating. **Collaborative writing activities can enhance engagement.**
- Many students are already using **AI tools** for writing assignments, and teachers should promote discussions on how AI tools can support rather than replace writing skills.

Effective Practices for literacy teaching in secondary school

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Key takeaway messages:

TALK in RECIPROCAL TEACHING can massively impact reading engagement, motivation and learning

RECIPROCAL TEACHING

- **In groups of 4**
- **Upper primary to University level**
- **Mixed ability is fine**
- **Only works if everyone understands their role**
- **Take turns in each role**
- **Make simpler role cards if needed**

Reciprocal teaching

Teacher chooses text; teacher models and students practice roles

Roles:

Predicting: what might happen next? Write it down

Questioning: ask a question about the text, and write it down

Clarifying: highlight/ look up difficult words or confusing sections

Summarising: What were the main ideas in this text?

Students switch roles and read another short text



Reciprocal teaching is great- But for many teachers, DARTS activities might be a better way in.....

Reciprocal Teaching Role Cards

Note - Once everyone understands their role, everyone takes a turn in each role

MANAGER
- Q- what is our question? Can we clarify or simplify?
- E- is everyone playing their part?
- A- have we got a good answer yet?

PASSAGE ICON
- R- is this text relevant? Useful?
- T- is this text truthful?
- E- Where is the evidence for the truth?

SKIMMER ICON
- Where is the key information? (highlight/underline/point)
- Where else might we look? Books? Online? Indexes?
- Key search words/phrases or questions?

MEANING MAKER
- V- vocabulary: Does everyone understand any difficult words?
- L- local: Do we all understand this text at the local (paragraph) level?
- G- global: How does this change our understanding?



DARTS

Directed **A**ctivities **R**elated to **T**exts (**exploratory talk in groups**, prior to asking students for full comprehension)

Examples (in groups):
- Shuffled sentences (chemistry)
- Diagram labelling (physics)
- Text marking (underline key ideas, put a wavy line under bits you don't understand (eg poetry)
- Predict what will come next in a story (or any text)
- Gap-filling (cloze)

https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/great-ideas/darts/

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/managing-resources/articles/interacting-texts-directed-activities

https://secondary.fkssolutions.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/03/DARTs-words-extra-T-s.pdf

BUT

- No change will occur without targeted Professional development

- Teachers learn best from other teachers, not from professors

- However, all the activities recommended in this report have been used, developed with, and evaluated by teachers, and this gives us hope that they can work in every classroom, and with every learner



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- Fact Sheet 4

Effective practices for literacy development for students in vocational education and training (VET) and for adult learners



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Developing disciplinary literacy in VET

Teach students to navigate **technical vocabulary**; use inquiry- or problem-based learning to help students connect literacy practices with real-world applications.



Use outreach programmes to attract learners

- Many VET students and adults with low literacy skills may not recognise their need for improvement or may feel hesitant to seek help. Partner with community organisations, libraries, and workplaces to create accessible learning opportunities.
- Highlight the benefits of literacy, such as improved job prospects, better health outcomes, and enhanced family support.

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School of Education

The University of Nottingham

Miran Jarc Library, Novo mesto

Improving reading in Croatia and Slovenia: Effective Practices for Literacy Teaching



Colin Harrison University of Nottingham, UK

Link to the EPLT report:
https://tinyurl.com/ELTP-Full-Report
Link to the ELPT Factsheets:
https://tinyurl.com/EPLT-Factsheets

