I attended Alex Quigley's Closing the Literacy Gap webinar recently. He outlined 12 important reading strategies that weak readers don't use: skimming and scanning, questioning texts, evaluating texts, possession of tier 2 and 3 vocabulary, etc. He said we need to model and teach these strategies explicitly. The breakdown of the twelve strategies, along with some practical tips, was the main thrust of the seminar. 

Teaching the suite of advanced reading strategies through modelling and explicit teaching made up a good proportion of the modules in the KS3 Literacy Strategy many years ago, and, as a literacy consultant of old, I'm still very enthusiastic about the ideas and modelling approach. The new thread of focusing on tier 2 and 3 vocabulary is an important addition. I know that closing the vocabulary gap has been a major thrust in many schools in recent years.

However, despite presenting the statistic that 25% of 15 year olds have a reading age of 12 and under (I'm sure that's right, a conservative percentage for many schools like mine, in fact), Quigley didn’t emphasise the crucial role that partial alphabetic code knowledge, guessing habits or slow reading speed play in deficit reading ages, nor what secondary teachers need to do to address these issues.

This doesn't surprise me in secondary training because an emphasis on the alphabetic code and long-overdue recognition of the scale of the guess-reading problem is still only just emerging for the secondary sector. Quigley may have decided that, for a mixed subject audience, it might prove counter-productive to delve into the mechanics of reading.  But I was left feeling frustrated because encouraging children who don’t read accurately or quickly to skim or scan or summarise is, perhaps, putting the cart before the horse, and may actually compound frustrations and self-esteem issues.

One of the last boys I worked with 1:1 before lockdown read aloud to me a Y9 comprehension test paper which had been set for the class. He guess-read incorrectly 36 words out of approximately 400 so just under 10%. He read most of the words as look-alikes – or couldn’t attempt to pronounce them at all - and often didn’t stop to think when they didn’t make sense. At other times he paused for lengthy periods while he tried to think of a lookalike word that would fit the pattern of the word he was looking at. It was a slow and painful process. An analysis of his reading is attached.

I was amazed to find out that, when I read the words back to him correctly, he was able to explain the meaning of all but four. That’s 32 words he didn’t comprehend because of deciphering issues when he absolutely did understand them, based on his existing vocabulary knowledge.

Teaching this student the meaning of more, richer, higher tier vocabulary is no bad thing, but it won’t help him to decipher the new vocabulary in print or to encode it in his writing. There’s much he understands in his head already that he can’t access in print on the page.

However, more worryingly, this student is not ready to be taught to skim or scan, no matter how well I model the processes, because he has underlying, more fundamental issues: a guessing habit, gaps in his knowledge of the alphabetic code and slow reading speed, and all these need fixing first. Trying to teach him strategies that he’s not equipped to manage will result in yet more reading failure.

Teaching weaker readers the strategies that stronger readers use might be an upside down – or back to front - approach, I’m not sure which it is! Is it the case that weak readers can't skim and scan because they haven't been shown how to, or is it because they aren't strong, efficient readers? Isn’t being able to skim and scan and ask questions and evaluate texts the *product* of being an accurate, automatic, fast reader - it's possible to do these things when reading the print is effortless, and it's not possible when it isn't.

There seems to be a priority sequence for interventions; teaching some of the higher order strategies depends on fundamentals being already in place. The problem is that, typically, we aren't trained to tackle decoding issues in secondary schools and we're identifying the full extent of the problem either. We have to find ways to overcome that.

Right at the top we have to:

1. Make sure all students *can* decode spellings well. Plug alphabetic code and morphemic knowledge gaps as required.
2. make sure all students *do* decode. Stop the guessing and predicting habit. This is widespread and absolutely not just a special needs issue.
3. Find ways to get students to read more often to practise reading print in order to increase speed to at least speaking speed: reading aloud @ 180wpm or faster.
4. Teach and promote vocabulary extension in lessons across the curriculum.
5. Once students can read accurately, without guessing and aloud at 180wpm+, teach the more advanced reading strategies.

The sheer extent of guess-reading and the number of students reading aloud @ sub 150 wpm was a shock to us when we introduced 1:1 testing in September - for us it's nearly 30% of our KS3 students. The issue of accuracy and speed isn't one for SEND; it affects the very 25%+ who Alex Quigley refers to. We need to make most progress and effect change in guaranteeing the 3 fundamentals of good reading before teaching the 12 advanced strategies to the target 25%.

And, if we do, we might find that some of the higher level reading strategies take care of themselves...

An analysis of Student A’s reading is attached.