

Developing Reading Skills for GCSE English Resit Learners

Important note

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Course details

Title of content	Developing Reading Skills for GCSE English Resit Learners
Learning objectives	• Explore how to build learners' confidence in reading • Consider how to move learners from surface comprehension to higher-order reading skills while scaffolding, modelling and gradually reducing support
Course description	In this course, you'll explore how you can help GCSE English resit learners to develop stronger reading skills. You'll look at building confidence through motivation, early successes and effective scaffolding. You'll also consider how to move learners into deeper reading skills such as analysis, evaluation and comparison while gradually fostering independence. (This course is part of the 16–19 English GCSE Resit CPD offer, which aims to transform how English is taught and experienced in post-16 settings. The content is built on a foundation of research, practitioner insight and learner voices.)
Who's this course for?	Educators working with learners who are resitting GCSE English.

Course content

Module 1: Building confidence in reading

Lesson: Welcome and introduction

Page: Welcome to the course

Welcome to 'Developing Reading Skills for GCSE English Resit Learners'

This short on-demand course was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and developed by the Education Training Foundation (ETF).

It's part of the 16–19 English GCSE Resit CPD offer, which aims to transform how English is taught and experienced in post-16 settings. The content is built on a foundation of research, practitioner insight and learner voices.

What will you cover?

'Developing Reading Skills for GCSE English Resit Learners' is all about how you can better support your learners to move from basic comprehension towards confident, independent reading – building the skills needed for analysis, evaluation and comparison.

The course will provide bitesize advice and helpful links.

You should meet the following learning objectives:

- Explore how to build learners' confidence in reading
- Consider how to move learners from surface comprehension to higher-order reading skills while scaffolding, modelling and gradually reducing support.

As you move through the course and discover new information, ideas and perspectives, you can refer to these objectives and check your progress against them.

Resources and media

The resources in this self-directed resource are available to use under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#) except where otherwise stated.

Thanks are extended to everyone who took part in videos, audio clips and/or written case studies. (Please note: names and job titles were correct at the time of production – but some may have changed since then.)

Lesson: What's happening in this module?

Page: Welcome to Module 1

Welcome to Module 1.

This module focuses on three key areas that underpin effective GCSE reading instruction:

- **Understanding the learner profile** – recognising the barriers and motivations of GCSE learners.
- **Building early success** – using small, achievable tasks to boost confidence.
- **Scaffolding and modelling** – making reading strategies visible and gradually handing over responsibility.

These ideas are particularly important in FE and skills, where many learners arrive after repeated exam failure and often bring a strong sense of “I can’t do English”. The role of the teacher is not only to improve reading skills, but also to rebuild confidence and create opportunities for success.

You’ll see how these approaches can transform reluctant readers into more confident, independent learners. Activities throughout the module will enable you to check your understanding and practise applying the strategies.

Lesson: Building confidence in reading

Page: Understanding the GCSE learner profile

Many GCSE English learners in FE and skills settings have experienced the following.

- **Repeated exam failure**
...leading to low confidence, avoidance and defensive behaviours in class.
- **Exam-focused teaching**
...where practice papers dominate, often at the expense of wider, more enjoyable reading experiences.
- **Reading anxiety**

...especially when faced with 19th-century extracts or texts with unfamiliar cultural references.

This learner profile matters because it shapes how learners engage with any text. Without addressing these barriers, even the best teaching strategies may not 'land'.

Research insight

Research on reading makes it clear that:

1. **Motivation improves when learners experience success early and often.**
Experiencing 'mastery moments' builds confidence and encourages persistence in tackling challenging texts (Gambrell & Marinak, n.d.).
2. **Links to prior knowledge help learners to process new information more effectively.**
Activating background knowledge before reading strengthens comprehension and retention (Buccella, 2022).
3. **Supportive, specific feedback enhances engagement and gives learners a clearer sense of progress.**
4. Learners respond best when feedback is precise and focused on how to improve (EEF, 2021).

For teachers, this means starting small, using relevant content and always showing learners where they are making progress.

Pause and reflect

- Do any of your learners struggle to engage with texts because of issues like repeated exam failure and reading anxiety?
- How do you currently support them, and – with the above research in mind – what else could you do?

References

Buccella, A. (2022), 'The Science of Reading: What is prior knowledge and why is it important?' [online]. Available from: <https://greatminds.org/english/blog/witwisdom/the-science-of-reading-what-is-prior-knowledge-and-why-is-it-important> [Accessed 21 August 2026].

Education Endowment Foundation (2021), 'Feedback' [online]. Available from: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/feedback> [Accessed 21 August 2026].

Gambrell, L. & Marinak, B. (n.d.), 'Reading Motivation: What the Research Says' [online]. Available from: <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/motivation/articles/reading-motivation-what-research-says> [Accessed 21 August 2026].

Motivation is central to reading improvement.

The **Self-Determination Theory** pioneered by the psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan identifies three psychological needs that drive motivation.

- **Autonomy**

Learners feel more motivated when they have some choice. In GCSE English, this could mean choosing between two texts on the same theme (eg different viewpoints on climate change).

- **Competence**

Success breeds motivation. Setting learners up to achieve early in the course helps shift their mindset from “I always fail” to “I can do this.”

- **Relatedness**

Learners are more engaged when texts connect to their lives, their interests or current events.

(Weir, 2025)

Practical applications

So, how can you apply these insights in the GCSE English classroom?

- Instead of assigning a single article, offer two thematically linked extracts. Both should be relevant to the exam, but the element of choice increases buy-in.
- Begin with short, manageable extracts to reduce anxiety before gradually moving to longer, exam-style passages. Use collaborative predictions (eg “What might this text be about?”) before reading to spark curiosity and collective investment.

Pause and reflect

How do you help your learners to stay motivated when developing their reading skills? Do you have any successful strategies that you’d recommend to others?

References

Weir, K. (2025), ‘Self-determination theory: A quarter century of human motivation research’ [online]. Available from: <https://www.apa.org/research-practice/conduct-research/self-determination-theory> [Accessed 21 August 2026].

Page: Building early success

Early wins are essential for learners who associate reading with failure. When learners experience achievement from the start, they begin to reframe their self-image as capable readers.

Consider the following strategies for building early success.

- **Prediction tasks**

Encourage learners to guess what a text will cover based on its title or a related image – or predict what will happen next. For example, ask learners “Based on this image, what do you think the extract will be about?” This is low stakes and accessible – and it builds curiosity. A really interesting text to base this on is Roald Dahl’s ‘Lamb to the Slaughter’ – before the protagonist murders her husband, get your learners to predict what happens next.

- **One-sentence summaries**

After a short extract, encourage learners to write a single-sentence summary before they do any deeper analysis. This will build their confidence in identifying main ideas.

- **Basic retrieval first**

Ask “What does the writer say about...?” before moving on to inference or evaluation questions.

These activities are deliberately scaffolded so that every learner can contribute something. They create momentum that can later be channelled into more demanding analysis.

Page: Effective scaffolding

Scaffolding provides learners with the structure they need to access difficult texts.

It does not lower expectations but **supports learners to meet them**.

Common scaffolds include the following.

- **Guiding questions**

Eg “*What is the writer’s attitude towards technology?*”

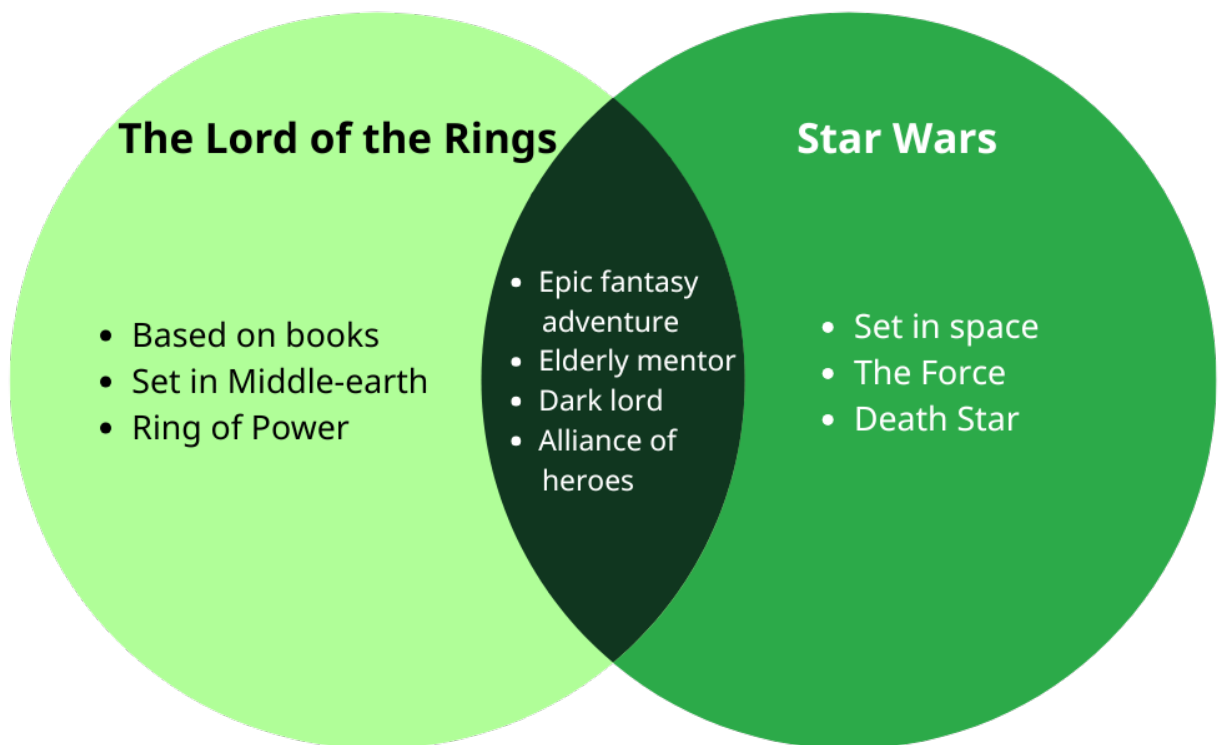
- **Vocabulary previews**

Select 5–7 high-utility words and teach them before reading to reduce ‘sticking points’.

- **Graphic organisers**

Venn diagrams or cause-effect charts can help learners to structure their understanding visually. You can find examples below.

Example Venn diagram



Example cause-effect chart

This cause-effect chart is based on *Return of the Jedi*.

Cause (Event/Action)	Effect (Consequence/Outcome)	Explanation (Why it matters)
Luke returns to Tatooine to rescue Han Solo	Jabba the Hutt is defeated	Shows Luke's growth and loyalty to friends

Emperor plans to trap the Rebels at Endor	Rebels face overwhelming odds	Builds tension and stakes in the final battle
Luke surrenders to Vader	Vader brings him to the Emperor	Sets up the emotional climax and father-son conflict
Emperor tries to turn Luke to the Dark Side	Luke resists and fights Vader	Highlights Luke's moral strength and inner conflict
Vader sees the Emperor torturing Luke	Vader kills the Emperor	Redemption arc for Vader; emotional resolution

The most important principle of scaffolding is **gradual release**: scaffolds should be withdrawn over time so that learners become increasingly independent.

Page: Modelling the reading process

Many learners assume that skilled readers simply 'get it'. Modelling demystifies the reading process by making the invisible strategies of expert readers visible.

How to model effectively

1. **Read a short passage aloud.**
2. **Pause and verbalise your thinking** – “The phrase ‘warm sunlight poured through the window’ makes me think the writer is creating a hopeful and welcoming atmosphere.”
3. **Highlight problem solving** – “I don’t know this word, but the next sentence helps me to guess its meaning.”

This shows learners not only *what* to do, but *how* to think.

Pearson and Gallagher’s Gradual Release Model works well here.

- **I do it**
The teacher models the strategy.
- **We do it**
The teacher and learners practise together.
- **You do it**
The learners apply the strategy independently.

(Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M. C. (1983)

Activity: Modelling reading strategies in practice

Read the scenarios below and consider how you would respond in your setting.

Scenario 1: Helping learners understand mood through language

You're teaching a GCSE English resit group. During a reading activity, a learner says, "I don't get what the writer is trying to say; it's just describing the weather." You want to model how to infer mood from descriptive language.

How would you respond to help the learner understand the mood being created?

Options:

1. "Let's look at the phrase 'the wind howled through the empty streets'. What kind of mood does that create for you?"
2. "Don't worry about the mood—just focus on what's happening in the story."
3. "You'll understand it better once we read the whole passage."

Answers:

1. Great choice! This encourages the learner to think about the emotional impact of language and allows you to model inference.
2. This misses an opportunity to model a key reading strategy. Mood is an important part of understanding tone and atmosphere.
3. While context helps, this response delays modelling and doesn't make the strategy visible to the learner.

Scenario 2: Encouraging deeper thinking

During a class discussion, you ask learners what the phrase "the shadows crept across the floor" might suggest. One learner responds, "It means the sun is going down."

How could you respond to help the learner move from a literal interpretation to a deeper inference?

Options:

1. "Let's move on to the next question."
2. "No, that's not what it means."
3. "Yes, and what kind of mood might that create?"

Answers:

1. This skips an opportunity to model inference and support learner development.
2. This could discourage the learner and misses a chance to scaffold their understanding.

3. Great! This builds on the learner's response and prompts deeper thinking about atmosphere.

Scenario 3: Tackling tricky vocabulary

While reading a passage, a learner asks what the word "melancholy" means. You want to model how to work out the meaning using context clues.

What's the best way to model this strategy?

Options:

1. "You should look it up in a dictionary."
2. "It means sad."
3. "Let's look at the sentence before and after – do they give us any clues about how the character is feeling?"

Answers:

1. Useful, but it misses the chance to model inference and problem solving using context.
2. While correct, this doesn't model the strategy – it gives the answer without showing the process.
3. Excellent! This models how to use context to infer meaning and encourages independent thinking.

Pause and reflect

- Can you think of a time when you successfully modelled a skill? What was the result?
- Can you think of a time when you missed an opportunity to model a skill – perhaps by simply providing the answer, or by moving the conversation on? What was the result?

References

Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M. C. (1983). 'The instruction of reading comprehension. Contemporary Educational Psychology', 8(3), 317-344. Available from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/P-Pearson/publication/364236124_Gradual_Release_of_Responsibility_Instructional_Model/links/6679f5591846ca33b84fa007/Gradual-Release-of-Responsibility-Instructional-Model.pdf?origin=scientificContributions [Accessed 25 August 2026]

Page: Building stamina for longer texts

GCSE exams require learners to sustain concentration over long extracts, often from challenging time periods.

Many resit learners lack the stamina to do this at first – so you need to build their stamina gradually using approaches like the following.

- **Chunking**

Divide a longer extract (eg 600 words) into three smaller sections, and then tackle each one with a clear purpose in mind (eg retrieval, language focus, evaluation).

- **Pause points**

At specific intervals, pose a quick discussion or prediction question to keep the energy up.

- **Progressive extension**

Begin with 200–300-word extracts, then move to 400–500-word extracts by the middle of the term and finally progress to 700–800-word extracts. This way, learners feel gradual success rather than being overwhelmed.

- **Track progress visually**

Show learners their stamina growing over time (eg a progress chart or tracker).

This incremental approach reduces the chances of learners being overwhelmed while still preparing them for exam conditions.

Lesson: Review your learning

Page: Well done

Well done – you’ve reached the end of Module 1.

In this module, focused on three key areas that underpin effective GCSE reading instruction:

- **Understanding the learner profile** – recognising the barriers and motivations of GCSE learners.
- **Building early success** – using small, achievable tasks to boost confidence.
- **Scaffolding and modelling** – making reading strategies visible and gradually handing over responsibility.

Together, these strategies help teachers to support learners in moving from reluctant, anxious readers towards confident, independent ones.

On the next page, you'll have the opportunity to review the tools recommended during this module – and some additional reading.

Page: Further resources

Links from this module

- [Great Minds | Buccella: The Science of Reading: What is prior knowledge and why is it important?](#)
- [EEF | Feedback](#)
- [Reading Rockets | Gambrell & Marinak: Reading Motivation: What the Research Says](#)
- [APA | Self-determination theory: A quarter century of human motivation research](#)

Additional reading

- [AFT | Rosenshine, B.: Principles of Instruction \(PDF\)](#)
- [Verywell Mind | Self-Determination Theory in Psychology](#)
- Willingham, D.T. (2017), *The Reading Mind*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cossett Lent, R. & Voigt, M.M. (2018), *Disciplinary Literacy in Action*. Corwin.

Module 2: From modelling to independent reading

Lesson: What's happening in this module?

Page: Welcome to Module 2

Welcome to Module 2

In this module, you'll look at the next step: helping learners to move from supported comprehension into *independent, analytical reading*.

You'll focus on three areas:

- **Making thinking visible through modelling** – showing learners how skilled readers analyse and interpret texts.
- **Using structured collaboration** – giving learners the tools to talk their way into understanding.

- **Building independence** – gradually reducing support so learners can succeed in exam-style tasks.

Lesson: Moving learners forward

Page: Why modelling matters in GCSE English contexts

For many GCSE resit learners, analysis feels like a mysterious skill reserved for ‘clever readers’. They may understand the words on the page but struggle to see *how* to comment on a writer’s choices.

This is where **modelling** becomes crucial. Instead of simply telling learners what a passage means, teachers need to **make their own thought processes visible**. By hearing a skilled reader think aloud, learners gain access to strategies that they can imitate.

Common pitfalls when modelling include the following.

- **Over-modelling**

The teacher dominates the reading and learners remain passive.

- **Under-modelling**

The teacher skips straight to the ‘answer’ without showing the reasoning.

A good think-aloud strikes a balance; it is clear, concise and focused on *process not product*.

For example, you might say something like:

“When I read the phrase ‘sunlight sparkled across the water’, the verb ‘sparkled’ stands out to me because it’s so positive. It makes the scene feel joyful and lively – I think the writer wants us to share in that sense of beauty.”

Activity: Why modelling matters

Read through the four scenarios and consider how you would respond in your setting.

Scenario 1: The missed opportunity

You’re teaching a GCSE English resit group and you read the following sentence aloud:

“The wind howled through the empty streets.”

You pause and say “that’s interesting”.

What do you do next?

Options:

1. You move on without explaining.
2. You say “The verb ‘howled’ makes the wind sound wild and threatening. I think the writer wants us to feel the emptiness and danger.”

Answers:

1. This is **under-modelling**. Learners need to hear your reasoning to understand how meaning is constructed.
2. This is effective modelling. You’ve made your thought process visible and linked language to effect.

Scenario 2: The monologue trap

Next, you read the following sentence aloud:

“Raindrops danced on the pavement.”

What do you do next?**Options:**

1. You launch into a five-minute explanation covering connotations, imagery, tone and writer’s intent.
2. You say “The verb ‘danced’ feels playful. It makes the rain seem cheerful. What effect do you think that has on the mood?”

Answers:

1. This is **over-modelling**. Learners become passive and may disengage.
2. You’ve modelled your thinking and invited learners to join in. This supports active engagement.

Scenario 3: The shut-down

A learner says “I think ‘crept’ means the shadows are sneaky.”

How do you respond?**Options:**

1. You say “Interesting! ‘Sneaky’ suggests something hidden or secretive. That could link to fear. Let’s explore that together.”
Feedback: You’ve validated the learner’s idea and modelled how to develop it further.
2. You say “Not quite. It’s more about fear.”
Feedback: This discourages learner agency and misses a chance to build on their idea.

Answers:

1. You've validated the learner's idea and modelled how to develop it further.
2. This discourages learner agency and misses a chance to build on their idea.

Scenario 4: The shortcut

Finally, you read "Her voice trembled like a leaf in the wind."

What do you do next?

Options:

1. You say "That means she was scared" and move on.
2. You say "The simile 'like a leaf in the wind' suggests fragility. It makes me think she's vulnerable. I wonder what's causing that."

Answers:

1. This skips the modelling process. Learners miss out on how you arrived at the interpretation.
2. You've modelled inference and interpretation clearly and concisely.

Page: Think-alouds in action

Think-alouds are most effective when structured.

Recap the three steps you considered in Module 1:

1. **Read aloud** – choose a short extract, ideally 3–4 sentences.
2. **Pause and verbalise** – make observations explicit (eg vocabulary, imagery, tone).
3. **Link to purpose** – show how the writer's choices create an effect.

For example, you might say something like:

"The sentence lists words like 'bright, golden and welcoming'. I notice the repetition of warm adjectives – it creates an uplifting mood. I think the writer wants the reader to feel safe and optimistic."

Tips for effective modelling

- **Keep it brief**
Focus on one or two points per extract.
- **Show problem-solving strategies**

For example, working out unfamiliar words.

- **Involve learners**

Ask “*What do you think I noticed here?*”

Page: Structured collaboration for deeper reading

Learners don't develop analytical skills by listening alone – they also need to practise with peers.

Structured collaboration provides the *scaffolding for talk* that leads to better thinking.

Effective approaches include the following.

- **Reciprocal reading**

Learners take turns leading a group through predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarising.

- **Jigsaw reading**

Each group reads a section of text, then comes together to share insights.

- **3-2-1 peer exchange**

Learners read a portion of text and note down 3 key words, 2 phrases and 1 quotation, before comparing their work with a partner.

In approaches like these:

- quieter learners gain confidence by speaking in smaller groups
- vocabulary for analysis emerges naturally through peer talk
- teachers can walk around the room, listening for misconceptions.

Pause and reflect

- Have you ever used reciprocal reading, jigsaw reading or 3-2-1 peer exchange?
- How else have you supported learners to collaborate on reading tasks? Do you have any successful strategies that you'd recommend to others?

Page: Scaffolding analytical and evaluative questions

Many learners struggle with the language of analysis.

Providing question stems and sentence frames gives them a way in.

You might consider following the four steps below.

1. **Begin with retrieval questions**
What does the writer say?
2. **Move to inference**
What does this suggest?
3. **Then scaffold analysis**
How does the writer's choice create meaning?
4. **Finally move to evaluation**
How effective is this technique and why?

The teacher's role is to bridge this progression by carefully sequencing questions and gradually reducing the scaffolds as learners gain confidence.

Pause and reflect

Consider this evaluation frame.

"The writer's use of [] is effective because []."

How might you complete this using an example question from one of your lessons?

Example response: "The writer's use of [imagery] is effective because [it helps the reader to feel immersed in the scene]."

Page: Developing evaluation and comparison skills

Evaluation requires learners to judge effectiveness, while comparison requires them to link two texts. Both are challenging but achievable with careful progression.

Consider the following tips for developing these skills.

- Model how evidence supports judgements. Learners often think that evaluation is the same as opinion – but that's not quite right as an evaluation aims to reach an informed judgement supported by facts, whereas an opinion may not be supported by facts at all.
- Encourage "because" statements such as *"This is effective because..."*
- Move from short, accessible texts to paired GCSE texts to exam-style comparison.
- When modelling, emphasise multiple interpretations so learners see that evaluation is not about one 'right' answer.

Page: Reducing support and building independence

The end goal is for learners to approach GCSE texts with confidence without relying on scaffolds. Teachers need to plan for this by gradually reducing support and building independence.

- **Step 1**

Full support

In this step, you should rely on sentence stems, question frames and teacher modelling to support learners.

- **Step 2**

Partial support

In this step, remove some stems and encourage learners to complete part of the task independently.

- **Step 3**

Prompt-only

In this step, ask open-ended questions without frames and encourage learners to structure their own responses.

- **Step 4**

Learner-generated

In this step, get learners to design their own questions, create their own comparative organisers and summarise without scaffolds.

- **Step 5**

Independent

In this step, challenge learners to answer exam-style tasks with minimal support, mirroring assessment conditions.

When reducing support, you might (for example) move from:

- retrieval to inference to analysis to evaluation questions without stems.
- teacher-generated Venn diagrams to learners drawing their own
- guided think-alouds to learners explaining their own thought processes aloud.

The ultimate goal of GCSE resit teaching is to equip learners not just with exam strategies, but with the confidence to approach any text independently. Reducing support is not about *withdrawing help suddenly*, but about handing learners the tools to succeed on their own.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools can play a role in reducing teacher support and building learner confidence.

Before you reach the end of the module, watch the two videos below.

The first explores how you might use artificial intelligence (AI) tools like CoPilot, Gemini and ChatGPT to help GCSE English resit learners practise their reading skills.

As you watch, note any ideas you could develop and/or try with your learners.

Video 1: <https://youtu.be/612ygzl5iDE>

The second video considers how AI tools can act as reading coaches for learners who are increasingly taking responsibility for their own development.

Can you see the potential of this with your cohort?

Video 2: https://youtu.be/DSxB97pb8_4

Lesson: Review your learning

Page: Congratulations

Congratulations – you’ve nearly reached the end of ‘Developing Reading Skills for GCSE English Resit Learners’

Over the past two modules, you’ve covered the following learning objectives:

- Explore how to build learners’ confidence in reading
- Consider how to move learners from surface comprehension to higher-order reading skills while scaffolding, modelling and gradually reducing support.

What next?

Remember: this course is part of the 16–19 English GCSE Resit CPD offer, which aims to transform how English is taught and experienced in post-16 settings. The content is built on a foundation of research, practitioner insight and learner voices.

Page: Further resources

Additional reading

- [Reading Rockets | Think-alouds](#)
- [Read Write Think | Reading Informational Texts Using the 3-2-1 Strategy](#)
- [Facing History & Ourselves | 3-2-1](#)
- Cossett Lent, R. & Voigt, M.M. (2018), *Disciplinary Literacy in Action*. Corwin Literacy.
- Lemov, D., Driggs. C. & Woolway, E. (2016), *Reading Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Rigorous Literacy Instruction*. Jossey-Bass.
- Quigley, A. (2020), *Closing the Reading Gap*. Routledge.

Page: Action planning

Now that you have completed the course, what will you do next?

Use this page to set yourself short- and long-term targets relating to any part of this course.

Professional development is an ongoing process. Making time to reflect on and refine how you work can be really challenging – but it is time well spent. Creating a simple plan will help you to embed what you have learnt and set a timescale for your next steps.

Target	What will I do to achieve my target?	Who might help me?	When will I achieve it?

Remember: this is a process for you. It might be helpful to share some of your thinking with colleagues, a mentor or a line manager at an appraisal – but, first and foremost, an action plan should reflect what you feel is important.