Scripted Lessons as a Didactic Device for Reading Instruction: Prescribed Structure, Teacher Activity and Pupil Engagement

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ABSTRACT:

Scripted lessons have become a defining feature of large-scale reading reforms across the developing world, their adoption typically justified by evidence drawn from randomised controlled trials in sub-Saharan Africa (Piper et al., 2018). Yet how these scripts reshape teacher professional activity — and what they mean for the quality of pupils' engagement with texts — remains poorly understood, especially in Francophone reform settings. This study takes up that gap. Drawing on Morocco's Pioneer Schools reform (Roadmap 2022–2026), it investigates how scripted lessons, as a prescriptive didactic device, configure reading instruction, constrain or enable teacher stances, and reshape participation dynamics at classroom level. An intra-subject comparative design was implemented across two pioneer schools in Fès, involving four teachers and sixteen observed lessons, each teacher working under two contrasted conditions. Condition A called for spontaneous delivery based on the official pedagogical guide; Condition B required strict script fidelity. Three theoretical lenses guided analysis: the double semiotization framework (Schneuwly & Dolz, 2009), Bucheton and Soulé's (2009) multi-agenda model of professional stances, and the prescribed/enacted work distinction (Goigoux, 2007). A structured observation grid coded question types (closed vs. open), interactional schemas (IRE, IRF, open exchange), teacher stance (piloting, accompanying, releasing, teaching, motivating), and pupil engagement (literal vs. interpretive). Findings converge strikingly across all four teacher pairs. Condition B systematically elicits a dominant piloting stance, locks interaction into a closed IRE schema, and narrows pupils' engagement to the literal level. Spaces of professional indeterminacy persist, most visibly during vocabulary mediation, where teachers exercise situated judgement and partially reconfigure the device. Implications are discussed in relation to ongoing debates about structured pedagogy, teacher autonomy, and the tension between instructional standardisation and authentic literacy development.

Keywords: scripted lesson, didactic device, reading instruction, double semiotization, professional stances, explicit teaching, structured pedagogy, Morocco

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in full accordance with ethical principles governing educational research. Informed consent was obtained from all participating teachers prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. The schools are identified by name with the explicit permission of the school principals and the participating teachers. No pupil data were collected or reported at the individual level, and no personally identifiable information regarding minors appears in this article. The study received institutional approval from the CREDIF Laboratory at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University.

1. Introduction

Few topics in education research are as simultaneously central and contested as reading instruction. Central, because reading underpins virtually every other form of school learning — and because its mastery remains, in the words of the 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report, a precondition for social and professional inclusion (UNESCO, 2023). Contested, because the question of how reading should be taught has generated some of the most sustained and acrimonious debates in educational policy, pitting advocates of structured, explicit approaches against those who favour more open, meaning-centred pedagogies. The rise of evidence-based education has not settled these disputes so much as reframed them.

Against this backdrop, structured pedagogies have gained considerable traction in middle- and low-income countries grappling with persistent basic skills deficits (Piper et al., 2018; Sailors & Price, 2015). Scripted lessons sit at the most prescriptive end of this spectrum: they specify not only what is to be taught and in what order, but also the exact words teachers should use, the interactions they should elicit, and the responses they should accept. Deployed at scale across parts of Africa and Latin America — frequently under the imprimatur of international development organisations — scripted programmes have attracted encouraging results in quantitative evaluations of decoding and literal comprehension (Piper et al., 2018). What those evaluations rarely illuminate is the texture of classroom life: how teachers actually engage with scripts, where they follow and where they deviate, and what the reading experience looks and feels like for pupils.

Morocco offers a revealing case. The country's Pioneer Schools reform (Roadmap 2022–2026) has placed scripted lessons at the centre of French-language reading instruction in primary school, drawing explicitly on the explicit teaching framework developed by Gauthier and Bissonnette (2025). The reform is notable not only for its ambition but for its context: the vast majority of the teachers asked to implement it have received no dedicated training in explicit instruction. The question worth asking, then, is not whether scripts raise test scores — but what they actually do to teaching and to the reading lives of children, under typical, uncontrolled conditions.

That question organises the present study. Specifically, we ask: how do scripted lessons, as a prescriptive didactic device embedded in the Pioneer Schools reform, structure reading instruction while simultaneously reconfiguring the professional activity of the teacher and the dynamics of pupil engagement? Analysis proceeds along three axes: how the script organises pupils' entry into the text and the construction of meaning; how teachers appropriate — or quietly resist — the script in real classroom conditions; and what the observable consequences are for the quality and nature of pupil participation.

2. Theoretical Framework and State of Research

2.1. Scripted Lessons in the International Literature: Between Efficacy and Controversy

The term scripted lesson, as used in the anglophone literature, refers to any instructional device that prescribes the conduct of a session in substantial detail — covering not only task sequences and learning content, but the specific

utterances teachers should produce and the types of pupil response considered acceptable (Stein et al., 2007). The concept gained prominence during the American reforms of the early 2000s, particularly through the federally mandated Reading First programme, and it has generated a substantial body of debate about what tightly specified curricula do to teachers' professional lives and to the quality of what gets learned.

The quantitative record is mixed. Randomised controlled trials from sub-Saharan Africa (Piper et al., 2018) report meaningful gains in decoding and literal comprehension, especially in the earliest primary grades — gains that Sailors and Price (2015) show can be amplified further when scripts are paired with sustained instructional coaching. But a different set of findings complicates that picture. Achinstein and Ogawa's (2006) concept of the deskilling hypothesis captures how highly prescriptive scripts can erode teachers' professional agency, nudging them toward procedural compliance rather than expert pedagogical decision-making. Freedman and Appleman (2009) find this tendency especially marked among novice teachers, for whom the script functions less as a professional scaffold than as a substitute for the didactic knowledge they have not yet developed. Valencia and Buly (2004) offer a further caution: test-score gains mask the diversity of reader profiles in any given classroom, and standardised devices are poorly equipped to serve that diversity.

Taken together, these studies shift the research question away from the binary of 'does scripted teaching work?' toward the more productive question of under what conditions it works — and for whom, and at what cost. This is the space the present study occupies.

2.2. The Notion of Didactic Device and the Transformative Tool

The concept of the didactic device carries considerable theoretical freight in French-language educational research (Schneuwly, 2023; Daunay et al., 2011). Without rehearsing its full genealogy — from Foucault's (1976, 1977) analytics of power through Brousseau's (1998) theory of didactic situations to the more recent work of Schneuwly and Dolz (2009) — it is sufficient for present purposes to define it functionally: a didactic device is the organised ensemble of choices, materials, tasks and language interactions through which a teacher structures the relationship between learner, text and knowledge. Crucially, it is not a neutral container. It shapes, enables and constrains the activity of every actor in the classroom.

Schneuwly and Ronveaux (2021), working from an instrumental conception of the didactic tool, argue that such tools transform both the objects they act upon and the subjects who use them (as cited in Wirthner, 2020, p. 2). A scripted lesson is an extreme instance of this dynamic. It transforms the object of reading by segmenting it, pre-sequencing it and subjecting it to a predetermined battery of questions. And it transforms teaching by assigning gestures, formulations and relational stances that leave little to situational judgement.

2.3. Double Semiotization: A Reading Key for the Script

Schneuwly and Dolz's (2009) concept of double semiotization captures this dual transformation with analytical precision. Semiotization of the object refers to how a didactic tool selects, decomposes and reshapes the knowledge object in order to make it teachable: in the case of a scripted lesson, this is visible in the choice of text extracts, the formulation of comprehension questions and the prescription of validated reformulations. Semiotization of activity, by contrast, refers to how the tool configures the professional gestures, forms of interaction and modes of pupil response validation.

The two processes are tightly coupled. How a text is segmented and questioned largely determines what kinds of interaction become possible — and vice versa. This coupling is precisely what gives the scripted lesson its distinctive character: it is efficient, in that it provides a coherent comprehension pathway, but it is also inherently restrictive, in that it forecloses forms of textual engagement that were never anticipated in the design.

2.4. Prescribed Work, Real Activity and Didactic Catachresis

A foundational insight of activity ergonomics and professional didactics is that prescribed work and real work never coincide (Goigoux, 2007; Jorro, 2006). Teachers are not executants: even when working from a densely specified script, they adjust, reinterpret and improvise in response to pupils' reactions, local constraints and their own accumulated professional knowledge. Wirthner (2020) describes this as didactic catachresis — the appropriation of a tool for purposes that differ, sometimes subtly, sometimes substantially, from its intended use. Far from representing a failure, catachresis is the hallmark of genuine professional agency working within, and sometimes against, the constraints of a given device.

For the present study, this concept serves two analytic functions. First, it guards against a naive reading of observational data — one that equates what is prescribed with what happens. Second, it draws attention to the gaps between script and practice as sites where professional competence is actively exercised, and where targeted training might make a meaningful difference.

2.5. Teacher Professional Stances: The Bucheton and Soulé Framework

The third theoretical pillar of this study is Bucheton and Soulé's (2009) multi-agenda model, which identifies five professional stances characteristic of effective teaching: piloting (maintaining the lesson's procedural flow), accompanying (providing individualised support), releasing (granting pupils significant autonomy), teaching (transmitting knowledge directly) and motivating (sustaining affective engagement). Expert teaching, on this account, is less about mastering any one stance than about moving fluidly among them in response to shifting classroom dynamics.

The Moroccan scripted lesson structurally biases teachers toward piloting: every step is specified, every exchange is pre-scripted, every acceptable response is defined in advance. The stances of accompanying and releasing — which require precisely the openness and productive uncertainty that scripts eliminate — are effectively crowded out. As the data presented below suggest, this has real consequences for the quality of pupils' reading experience.

3. Method

3.1. Epistemological Positioning and General Approach

This study is grounded in a qualitative, interpretive tradition of didactic research concerned with the analysis of actual teaching practices (Garcia-Debanc, 2008). The aim is not to render a verdict on scripted lessons — to declare them pedagogically good or bad — but to understand how they work, concretely and under real conditions, on the human beings who use and are used by them. A multiple-case logic (Yin, 2014) was adopted, enabling the documentation of cross-case convergences while preserving sensitivity to individual variation in modes of script appropriation.

3.2. Research Setting and Participants

Fieldwork was conducted in two pioneer schools in Fès: Ghosn Ezzaytoun School and Fatima El Mernissi School. Both were selected for their early participation in the pioneer schools programme, which ensured that teachers had some prior exposure — however limited — to the official instructional materials. Four Year 6 French teachers agreed to take part, two from each school. All had more than a decade of teaching experience, a criterion that controls for the confound of general professional inexperience. Crucially, none had received any formal training in explicit instruction — a condition that made them representative of the broader population of teachers implementing the reform across Morocco.

3.3. The Intra-Subject Comparative Protocol

Each teacher taught the same reading lesson to two different class groups under two contrasted conditions, with condition assignment randomised to minimise sequentiality effects.

In Condition A (control), teachers delivered the lesson spontaneously, drawing on the official assessment sheet for Didactic Unit 2 (DU2, Week

10) around the theme of Nutrition and Health, but without any constraint on how they structured or conducted the session. In Condition B (experimental), teachers used the official scripted lesson PowerPoint and were instructed to follow its prescribed steps closely; they also prepared a mind map summarising the lesson structure beforehand. Across four teacher pairs, the protocol yielded 16 observed sessions in total: 8 per condition.

3.4. Data Collection and Coding

Observations were recorded using a structured grid organised along three dimensions: structural (task sequencing, dominant question type, interactional organisation), professional (teacher stance, coded according to Bucheton & Soulé, 2009), and participatory (pupil engagement and interactional pattern). The unit of analysis was the interactional episode — any continuous stretch of at least 2 minutes bounded by a change of task or modality. Table 1 lays out the full coding scheme.

Table 1 Observation Session Coding Grid

Dimension	Indicator	Code	Observed Examples
Structuring	Dominant question type	Q-closed / Q-open	Single-answer Q vs. interpretive Q
	Prescribed / flexible sequencing	Seq-P / Seq-F	3-step protocol vs. free sequencing
Teacher stance	Dominant stance (episode)	P / A / L / E / M	[P] hand-raising / [L] pair work
	Postural transitions / session	Trans-pos	Number of stance changes
Pupil participation	Interactional pattern	IRE / IRF / Open	IRE: Init-Resp-Eval / Open: free exchange
	Engagement level	Eng-lit / Eng-interp	Literal retrieval vs. open interpretation

Note. P = Piloting; A = Accompanying; L = Releasing (Lâcher-prise); E = Teaching; M = Motivating. IRE = Initiation–Response–Evaluation; IRF = Initiation–Response–Feedback.

4. Analysis of the Scripted Lesson

4.1. The Source Text: An Unexploited Interpretive Potential

The lesson under analysis is built around a text called After-School Activities — an argumentative dialogue in which three pupils, Inès, Sami and Karim, defend divergent positions on video gaming. The text comes from Period 2, Session 3 of the Year 6 programme. Its didactic potential is genuine. The situation is immediately recognisable to the intended audience; the dialogue format is structurally accessible; and the characters hold distinct, sufficiently developed positions to sustain real interpretive debate. A reading lesson worthy of the text might have invited pupils to articulate their own views, trace the logic of each character's argument, or pit one position against another. The script does none of this.

4.2. Prescribed Sequencing and the Logic of the Three-Step Protocol

Twenty minutes are allocated to reading, during which the same three-step protocol is applied identically to each of the text's three sections:

silent reading, identification and collective explanation of difficult words, and responses to guided questions. The internal logic is recognisable — it mirrors the modelling/guided practice/autonomous practice progression associated with explicit instruction (Rosenshine, 2012) — and there is no denying that a predictable sequence can provide helpful scaffolding for less autonomous learners.

But the very repetition that gives the structure its coherence is also what forecloses interpretive depth. By treating each section of the text as a discrete, self-contained block, the protocol prevents pupils from ever reading the text as a meaningful whole. Inès, Sami and Karim are never set in relation to one another: each character appears, yields one piece of retrievable information in response to a closed question, and disappears. The argumentative logic of the dialogue — the confrontation, the refutation, the movement between positions — simply does not register within the device.

Table 2 Sequencing of the Reading Section in the Scripted Lesson

Step	Prescribed Task	Target Cognitive Process
1	Individual silent reading	Building a global representation
2	Identification of difficult words + collective explanation	Removing comprehension obstacles
3	Answers to guided (closed) questions	Meaning construction through scaffolding

Note. The three-step sequence is applied identically to each of the three text sections.

4.3. The Prescription of Questions and Its Effects on Engagement

The three prescribed questions trace a taxonomic arc worth examining. The first targets the literal level (What does Inès like to do after school?); the second probes causality (Why does Sami dislike video games?); the third gestures toward synthesis (What is important according to Sami?). As a progression, this is broadly aligned with the principles of Rosenshine (2012) and makes sound pedagogical sense.

What undermines it is the simultaneous prescription of acceptable answers. The script specifies not just which question to ask, but which response to validate — and even how to verbalise the reasoning process for pupils. Teachers are instructed to model the cognitive move explicitly: identify the question type, locate the relevant information in the text, and produce the authorised response. Word-for-word prescription of this kind does two things at once: it turns reading into a retrieval exercise, and it systematically pre-empts the unexpected or partial pupil response — which is, pedagogically speaking, exactly where the most interesting teaching opportunities tend to live.

4.4. Prescribed Interactions: The IRE Schema and Its Limits

The interactional schema that the script enacts is the classic IRE sequence — Initiation (teacher question), Response (pupil answer), Evaluation (teacher validation) — a pattern extensively documented in the classroom discourse literature (Cazden, 2001; Wells, 1993). IRE is not inherently problematic; it is efficient for checking literal comprehension and managing lesson tempo. What it cannot do is support meaning negotiation, peer-to-peer dialogue or the emergence of divergent, contested readings.

In the script under analysis, formulas such as Who wants to answer? Raise your hand and Find the answer in the text serve to lock the IRE structure in place and make the emergence of an IRF (Initiation–Response–Developed Feedback) pattern, or of free exchanges between pupils,

virtually impossible. The source text — an argumentative dialogue tailor-made for debate — is never used as a space for dialogue.

4.5. Spaces of Indeterminacy: Where Professionality Resists

Dense as the prescription is, the script does not close every gap. The most significant opening occurs during the difficult word identification phase. The question is specified (What words did you find difficult?), but the script offers no guidance on which words to anticipate or how to explain them. It is here, consistently across the four teacher pairs, that something recognisably professional breaks through: teachers draw on their lexical repertoire, construct contextualised explanations, and make connections to dialectal Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic depending on the word and the moment. Wirthner (2020) would call this didactic catachresis; Stein et al. (2007) would call it the teacher-enacted curriculum — the space where the script becomes, briefly, something more than itself.

5. Results

Cross-case analysis of the 16 sessions reveals a pattern of convergence that is, frankly, striking. Regardless of teaching experience or personal relationship to the literary text, all four teachers produce the same broad profile under Condition B. Table 3 summarises the comparison.

Table 3 Comparative Synthesis of Sessions — Four Pairs, Conditions A and B

Observed Dimension	Condition A	Condition B	Main Difference
Session structure	Flexible, 2 broad steps	Tight: 3 × 3-step protocol	Near-total prescription in B
Dominant questions	Open, debate possible	Closed, pre-set answers	Interpretive closure in B
Dominant stance (code)	[A] and [L] occasional	[P] almost exclusive	Reduced postural flexibility
Interactional pattern	IRF / Open partial	IRE dominant	Homogenised participation
Spaces of indeterminacy	Many, assumed	Limited: vocabulary, pairs	Reduced appropriation margins
Pupil engagement	Eng-interp possible	Eng-lit dominant	Subjective reading absent
Postural transitions / session	4 to 7	1 to 2	Marked postural rigidity in B

Note. Eng-interp = interpretive engagement; Eng-lit = literal engagement; IRE = Initiation–Response–Evaluation; IRF = Initiation–Response–Feedback; P = Piloting; A = Accompanying; L = Releasing.

Several dimensions of this pattern deserve elaboration. The postural data are particularly telling. Even the most experienced teacher in the group — someone who, in Condition A, moves fluidly between accompanying pupils individually, releasing them to work in pairs, and delivering direct instruction — collapses, under Condition B, to an almost unbroken piloting stance, with at most one or two postural transitions in the course of a 40-minute session.

This is not a personality trait. It is the device working as designed — or, more precisely, working as its logic inevitably dictates.

The interactional data tell a complementary story. Table 4 presents paired extracts from Teacher E2 at Ghosn Ezzaytoun School, illustrating the difference not as a matter of tone or style but of structural possibility.

Table 4 Illustrative Interaction Extracts in Conditions A and B (Teacher E2, Ghosn Ezzaytoun School)

Condition A — Accompanying Stance [A]	Condition B — Piloting Stance [P]
T.: What do you make of what Sami is saying here? P1: I play but not that much... T.: Not that much — so what does that look like for you? P1: Maybe an hour. T.: Right. Does everyone agree with him? **Engagement [Eng-interp] — open IRF pattern**	T.: Read the question. Why doesn't Sami like video games? P.: Because it hurts your eyes. T.: Good. And because it wastes time. Next. **Engagement [Eng-lit] — closed IRE pattern**

Note. T. = Teacher; P. = Pupil. Eng-interp = interpretive engagement; Eng-lit = literal engagement; IRE = Initiation–Response–Evaluation; IRF = Initiation–Response–Feedback.

In Condition A, the teacher probes, follows up, creates space for pupils to extend their thinking. In Condition B, the same teacher validates a partial response, completes it, and moves on — not because they want to, but because the script's logic leaves no other move available. The difference is structural, not personal.

6. Discussion

6.1. An Efficient but Reductive Device

The scripted lesson is, by any reasonable measure, organisationally effective. It provides a predictable framework; it sequences tasks in ways broadly consistent with the principles of explicit instruction (Gauthier & Bissonnette, 2025; Rosenshine, 2012); and it ensures that prescribed content is covered. In a context where teachers have had no formal preparation for the reform they are being asked to implement, that kind of structural security is not a trivial benefit.

But organisational efficiency is not the same thing as didactic efficacy. By pre-specifying questions, responses and validation procedures, the script effectively converts reading into an information-retrieval exercise, crowding out the interpretive engagement that fuller comprehension requires. This finding resonates with Valencia and Buly's (2004) important reminder that struggling readers are not a homogeneous group: many of the children who pass basic decoding tests still lack the capacity to move beyond literal meaning. A device that systematically reinforces literal-level processing risks deepening precisely those gaps over time.

6.2. Teacher Appropriation as a Revealer of Professionality

The variability among teachers in how they exploit the script's spaces of indeterminacy is at least as interesting as the convergent trends. It reveals that the quality of script appropriation is not a function of the script — it is a function of the professional repertoire the teacher brings to it. The teacher who constructs the richest, most contextualised vocabulary explanations in Condition B is the same teacher who, in Condition A, sustains the most demanding interpretive dialogue. The script did not create that competence, and it cannot confer it. What it can do — in the hands of a skilled practitioner — is bend toward something more than it was designed to be.

This is consistent with Stein et al.'s (2007) work on the enacted curriculum, and with the finding from Piper et al. (2018) that what scripts do to learning depends critically on the professional development that surrounds them. It also raises a

pointed concern about reform designs that deploy scripts without accompanying teacher development: the risk is not just that the scripts will underperform, but that they will normalise a practice of continuous, low-initiative piloting as the default mode of professional conduct.

6.3. Piloting Stance, Deskilling and Teacher Training

The universality of the piloting stance in Condition B — across all four teachers, regardless of experience — lends empirical support to Achinstein and Ogawa's (2006) deskilling hypothesis. What the data suggest is that teachers, absent any theoretical framework for understanding why the script is built the way it is, treat it as a procedure to be executed rather than a tool to be wielded. This is not a failure of professional commitment. It is a predictable response to a reform that was implemented without the training infrastructure that would have made genuine appropriation possible. As Bucheton and Soulé (2009) argue, postural flexibility is a marker of teaching expertise — and expertise, by definition, takes time and structured opportunity to develop. Scripts deployed without that developmental context do not accelerate professional growth; they freeze it.

6.4. Beyond the Moroccan Context

The data are specific to two schools in Fès, but the questions they raise are far from local. The tension between standardisation and interpretive space — for teachers no less than for pupils — runs through educational reform debates across the Global South, from Structured Pedagogy programmes in East Africa to scripted textbook initiatives in Latin America (Piper et al., 2018; Sailors & Price, 2015). What this study contributes to those debates is a close-grained account of what standardisation actually does inside classrooms: not what it achieves on post-tests, but what it makes possible and impossible in the everyday transactions between teachers, texts and learners. The implication for policy is clear: scripted reform cannot stop at the design and distribution of materials. It must invest, from the outset, in the professional development that enables teachers to understand, appropriate and, where necessary, transcend the scripts they have been given.

7. Conclusion

Scripted lessons are neither villains nor saviours. They secure. They frame. They guarantee a minimum curricular coverage that, in under-resourced or under-trained contexts, represents a genuine achievement. At the same time — and these two things cannot be separated — they narrow the space for interpretive encounter with texts, pull teachers into a near-constant piloting mode, and homogenise pupil participation around the repetitive rhythms of IRE. Both things are true, simultaneously and inextricably.

What gives pause for optimism — and it is worth being precise about this — are the spaces of indeterminacy that the script cannot fill. These are the moments when a teacher, faced with a word the script never anticipated, constructs an explanation from scratch: drawing on context, on analogy, on the particular child in front of them. Brief, unscripted, often unremarked — these moments are nonetheless where professional teaching actually lives. They are reminders that even within the most prescriptive device, the teacher remains an agent, not a function.

Three implications follow from this study. On script design: future versions should build in phases that explicitly invite accompanying and releasing stances — spaces that the script frames without filling, preserving room for teachers to exercise contextual judgement. On teacher training: no script should be deployed without a parallel programme that helps teachers understand its theoretical logic, so they can use it intelligently rather than just faithfully. On supervision: what needs monitoring is not whether teachers follow the script, but what they do in the places where the script runs out — those are the sites where professional growth, or its absence, becomes visible.

Longitudinal research, combining video data, post-lesson interviews and sustained follow-up of pupil reading trajectories, would allow these questions to be pursued more deeply. Until such work exists, what we can say with confidence is this: the true test of scripted teaching is not what

it produces on a post-test. It is what it makes possible — and impossible — in the daily life of classrooms.

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