

## Does strategy instruction improve reading comprehension?

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### Statement of the problem

Reading comprehension is a complex multidimensional process. Understanding text involves being able to accurately and fluently read words, set appropriate standards for coherence, interpret syntax, understand morphology, draw inferences, as well as possess and readily access the necessary vocabulary and background knowledge. It also requires managing cognitive processes such as maintaining attention and monitoring comprehension. Some students will move from decoding to understanding what they are reading with relative ease, but others will struggle, even with adequate word reading.

### Proposed solution

Reading comprehension strategies involve cognitive processes that assist in extracting meaning from text. While there is no universal agreement, they commonly include instruction in comprehension monitoring, summarising or extracting a main idea, retelling, predicting and techniques for drawing inference.

### The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Strategies may assist the reader in establishing and evaluating their mental model of the text. Many, such as monitoring comprehension, are automatically employed by competent readers but may not be used by struggling readers. Comprehension strategies that are explicitly taught to students may become automatic over time and improve reading comprehension.

### What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

There is an extensive body of research supporting the effectiveness of a variety of strategies in improving reading comprehension in students who are at risk or have reading disorders (see Filderman et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2024), and smaller effects have been reported with whole-class instruction (Okkinga et al., 2018).

While there is clear evidence that strategy instruction can assist in improving reading comprehension, some caveats should be noted. There appears to be a dosage effect in that longer instruction does not necessarily improve outcomes. That is, there is little evidence to indicate that extended practice of discrete strategies offers additional benefit, so time spent on strategy instruction should be limited. There is also evidence that it may be

more effective to teach combinations of complementary strategies together (e.g. main idea, text structure and retell) to optimise cognitive load (Peng et al., 2024). It is also important to note that research on strategy instruction is characteristically conducted from Grade 3 onwards, a point at which students should have fluent word reading, thus freeing additional cognitive resources to focus on comprehension.

Finally, strategy instruction alone does not constitute a reading comprehension program. There is strong evidence that background knowledge mediates the effects of strategy instruction (Filderman et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2024) and the ability to interpret text appropriately will depend on a range of other factors, such as the ability to analyse syntactically complex sentences. Thus, strategy instruction should be considered as one part of a comprehensive program.

### Conclusion

There is clear evidence that time-limited strategy instruction, as part of a comprehensive program, is a useful approach for improving reading comprehension, particularly for students with reading difficulties.

### Key references

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