
Synthesis

Reading comprehension strategiesⁱ

High Impact for very low cost, based on extensive evidence



+6

Reading comprehension strategies focus on the learners' understanding of written text. Pupils are taught a range of techniques which enable them to comprehend the meaning of what they read. These can include: inferring meaning from context; summarising or identifying key points; using graphic or semantic organisers; developing questioning strategies; and monitoring their own comprehension and identifying difficulties themselves (see also Metacognition and self-regulation).

How effective is it?

On average, reading comprehension approaches deliver an additional six months' progress. Successful reading comprehension approaches allow activities to be carefully tailored to pupils' reading capabilities, and involve activities and texts that provide an effective, but not overwhelming, challenge.

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Many of the approaches can be usefully combined with Collaborative learning techniques and Phonics to develop reading skills. The use of techniques such as graphic organisers and drawing pupils' attention to text features are likely to be particularly useful when reading expository or information texts.

There are some indications that computer-based tutoring approaches can be successful in improving reading comprehension (although the evidence is less robust in this area), particularly when they focus on the development of strategies and self-questioning skills.

Comparative findings indicate that, on average, reading comprehension approaches appear to be more effective than Phonics or Oral language approaches for upper primary and secondary pupils, for both

short-term and long-term impact. However, supporting struggling readers is likely to require a coordinated effort across the curriculum and a combination of approaches. No particular strategy should be seen as a panacea, and careful diagnosis of the reasons why an individual pupil is struggling should guide the choice of intervention strategies.

Latin American Evidenceⁱⁱ

There is extensive evidence on the effect that reading comprehension strategies have on learning outcomes in Latin America and the Caribbean. This research tends to be focused more on assessing the effectiveness of different strategies at improving reading skills, such as reading speed, ways of organizing information, inferential thinking, and synthesis, than addressing the specific question of their impact on attainment. Most of this research makes use of correlational methods and, to a lesser extent, experimental or quasi-experimental techniques.

A study conducted in Bolivia addresses the question of attainment and reading comprehension strategies. By using an experimental design, with 200 students from fourth grade of primary, it shows that improving reading comprehension impacts positively on academic performance. Elements such as reading speed and accurate understanding of texts are also beneficial for other curricular areas; communication, mathematics, science and environment, and personal-social and religious education.

Other studies on this area assess the effect of using ICT, metacognitive strategies, and specific learning strategies to improve reading skills. There is also a range of research which investigates factors that influence the development of reading comprehension such as students' attention, family context, and teachers' professional development. They all tend to show general benefits of implementing this type of strategy to raise learning outcomes.

Besides, although there is limited evidence in this area, it would be interesting to delve deeper into estimating the specific effect that this type of intervention has on academic achievement. Current studies confirm that progress in reading comprehension is reflected on academic performance's generalised improvements. This could be due to the fact that, having incorporated strategies to develop a piece of writing, the student stops focusing on the reading process and starts focusing on its content. To achieve this goal, the role of the teacher is crucial to maximize students' progress.

How secure is the evidence?

There is extensive evidence in this area from a range of studies over the last 30 years. The majority of studies are from the USA and focus on pupils aged between 8 and 18 who are falling behind their peers or have difficulties with reading.

What are the costs?

The cost of the resources and professional training required to deliver reading comprehension strategies is estimated as very low. Evidence suggests that reading comprehension approaches need to be tailored to a pupil's current reading capabilities, so it is important that teachers receive professional development in effective diagnosis as well as training in the use of particular techniques and materials.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. A key issue for teachers is identifying the level of difficulty for comprehension activities that is required to extend pupils' reading capabilities. How will you ensure the texts used provide an effective challenge?
2. Effective diagnosis of reading difficulties is important in identifying possible solutions, particularly for older struggling readers. Pupils can struggle with decoding the words, understanding the structure of the language used, or understanding particular vocabulary, which may be subject-specific. What techniques will you use to identify particular pupils' needs?
3. A wide range of strategies and approaches can be successful, but they need to be taught explicitly and consistently. How are you going to identify the strategies that will meet the needs of your pupils and how will these be reinforced?
4. How can you focus learners' attention on developing comprehension strategies that they can apply more widely?

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