

Teaching reading comprehension strategies in Key Stages 1 and 2

An overview of the evidence and commons myths and misconceptions



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Teaching reading comprehension strategies

What does the evidence tell us about teaching reading comprehension strategies?

Reading comprehension strategies focus on enabling pupils to understand written texts. But teaching reading comprehension strategies can be nuanced and challenging.



Read a summary of the evidence on reading comprehension strategies



The EEF's primary literacy guidance reports state that, in the early stages of literacy learning, pupils benefit from explicit instruction in and modelling of reading comprehension strategies.

The EEF is clear that teaching these evidence-informed strategies can support children to understand and interpret texts. These strategies are instructional techniques that teachers can use to develop pupils' successful comprehension and to build understanding of a text.

Common misconceptions

A key barrier for many Key Stage 2 teachers, as they interpret these definitions and the associated research, is the common confusion of reading strategies with the content domain references from the Key Stage 2 English test framework (2016).

In some instances, this confusion leads to the misconception that the statutory content domains, relating to 'types' of questions on the SATs assessments, are the aspects of domain-specific knowledge which must be explicitly modelled and taught.

This misinterpretation is exacerbated by similar terminology across research literature and mandated syllabuses (e.g., prediction, inferencing, summarising, etc.) This can mean reading instruction and schemes of work are designed predominantly around answering generic question types from SATs papers, rather than the complex cognitive processes and foundational knowledge needed for proficient reading.

Teaching reading comprehension strategies

Reading comprehension myth-buster

Is reading comprehension the ability to answer questions?

- As outlined in the EEF's Key Stage 1 guidance report, reading comprehension is the ability to make sense of the ideas expressed in a text. It is not the ability to answer certain kinds of questions.
- **Shanahan (2018)** reflects that comprehension strategies are not about coming up with answers to specific kinds of questions, but they describe actions that may help a reader to figure out and remember the information from a text.
- Strategies are the actions and processes consciously employed during reading to help construct meaning in real time.

If reading comprehension strategies are metacognitive, how can this be taught?

- Teachers can model the metacognitive process to children to show them how to monitor their comprehension and overcome barriers to understanding. This gives 'novice' readers the tools to think like 'experts' when reading.
- The teaching of reading comprehension relies on the explicit modelling of key strategies, including activating prior knowledge, predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarising at different points in the text. Because the modelling of reading comprehension strategies is about interacting with a text in real time as a process, the strategies can be modelled in any order and may be repeated.
- When introducing these strategies, they should be modelled and practised through the teacher verbalising their own inner monologue of what skilled readers do all the time.

Can children develop reading comprehension strategies with any text?

- The point of strategy instruction is to help make sense of challenging texts that cannot be grasped without considerable mental effort. Strategy instruction does not need to take place with texts that are easy to understand (Shanahan, 2018). Therefore text needs to be pitched at an appropriate level for strategy instruction to be effective and useful.
- The EEF's Key Stage 1 literacy guidance suggests that if we provide children with simplified texts they may already be able to comprehend and just focus on the ability to answer questions, we miss teaching the complexities of how to find meaning and understanding.

Teaching reading comprehension strategies

Reading comprehension myth-buster

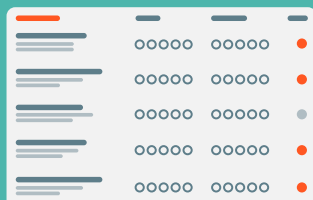
Should the strategies be taught in isolation?

- Strategies can be introduced in isolation but pupils should also be taught how to integrate effective comprehension of different texts (Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2).
- Reading comprehension strategies are the actions and processes that skilled readers use, usually unconsciously, to understand a text. Therefore, reading lessons should not focus on limited objectives such as, 'we are learning to predict' or 'we are learning to infer'. Experienced readers draw on and use a variety of strategies all the time, not just one in isolation. **DfE Reading Framework, 2023.**
- Teaching reading comprehension strategies in isolation may mean that children actually read less, as they spend time practising on short extracts of texts, rather than the more complex whole texts of a broad curriculum which would also build background knowledge.

Do the strategies have to be linked to content knowledge?

- Reading comprehension strategies should be integrated into the content of the text being read. Each text presents information in its own way, and reading comprehension is heavily bound up in the readers' knowledge of the topic covered by the text. So we should look for opportunities to align reading comprehension strategies with content knowledge.

Is teaching reading comprehension strategies the same as a reading comprehension programme?



- A further distinction should be made between explicit, focused teaching of strategies in a structured programme (which should be time-limited) and what a teacher might do generally in the classroom to provide pupils with examples in action.
- Limited and focused teaching of reading comprehension strategies can be beneficial, particularly for some readers in upper Key Stage 2. Findings suggest they can be useful for lower-attaining pupils and that successful programmes have a typical length of around 10 weeks. According to the EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit, they can be a low-cost, high impact strategy to support early reading skills.

Teaching reading comprehension strategies

Reading comprehension strategies: what they are, and what they're not

✓ They are...

- Strategies used to make sense of the ideas expressed in a text
- Employed during reading to construct meaning in real time.
- Deliberate and a product of metacognitive self-monitoring.
- Modelled by the teacher as expert reader, with gradual release of responsibility.
- Practised using whole texts pitched appropriately to ensure the strategies help to construct meaning and build background knowledge.
- Unique to each reading situation.

✗ They're not...

- The ability to answer certain kinds of questions.
- Used solely after reading to answer questions about the text.
- Taught in an isolated or discrete manner e.g. 'prediction' on Monday, 'summarising' on Tuesday etc.
- Practised in a generic way only using shorter extracts (it is whole texts that most typically requires strategy instruction).
- Learned by repetition (beyond a period of strategy instruction).

Further resources

EEF Blog	Supporting reading comprehension in Key Stage 2
EEF Blog	Teaching reading: embedding comprehension strategies
EEF Blog	The 'Reading Comprehension House' and the foundations that support word reading
EEF Podcast	Teaching reading: the Reading Comprehension House



Teaching reading comprehension strategies



Wider reading

Kozminsky, E., Kozminsky, L. (2001) How do general knowledge and reading strategies ability relate to reading comprehension of high school students at different educational levels? Available at: **(PDF) How do general knowledge and reading strategies ability relate to reading comprehension of high school students at different educational levels?** (researchgate.net) (Accessed 15 January 2024).

A paper exploring the relationships between general knowledge, strategic ability and reading comprehension.

Shanahan, T. (2023) Shedding light on reading skills and strategies. Available at: **Reading Skills and Strategies | Shanahan on Literacy** (Accessed 15 January 2024).

A blog emphasising the grey area between knowledge, skills, and strategies, and emphasising the need for purposeful planning and robust instructional approaches rather than categorisation.

Shanahan, T. (2018) Knowing and reading - what can we do to make sure kids know enough to comprehend. Available at: **Knowing and Reading Comprehension | Shanahan on Literacy** (Accessed 15 January 2024).

A blog dissecting the challenges of balancing reading instruction with content learning.

OUP. (2022) Comprehension skills and strategies. Available at: **Comprehension skills and strategies - Oxford Reading Buddy Support** (Accessed 15 January 2024).

Oxford Reading Buddy's framework of comprehension strategies and skills.

Willingham, D., Lovette, G. (2014) Can reading comprehension be taught? Available at: **willingham&lovette_2014_can_reading_comprehension_be_taught_.pdf (danielwillingham.com)** (Accessed 15 January 2024).

An article explaining the limitations of strategy instruction, emphasising the need for brevity of instruction and the importance of content knowledge.

Afflerbach, P., Pearson, P. D., & Paris, S. G. (2008) Clarifying differences between Reading Skills and Reading Strategies. Available at: **Clarifying Differences Between Reading Skills and Reading Strategies (pdavidpearson.org)** (Accessed 15 January 2024).

Peter Afflerbach et al. consider the implications of using the terms 'skills' and 'strategies' synonymously.