Reading comprehension strategies

Moderate impact for very low cost, based on extensive evidence.

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Reading comprehension approaches to improving reading focus on learners' understanding of the text. They teach a range of techniques that enable pupils to comprehend the meaning of what is written, such as inferring the 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 Meta-cognition and self-regulation).

How effective is it?

On average, reading comprehension approaches improve learning by an additional five months' progress over the course of a school year. These approaches appear to be particularly effective for older readers (aged 8 or above) who are not making expected progress.

Successful reading comprehension approaches carefully select activities for pupils according to their reading capabilities, and ensure that texts provide an effective, but not overwhelming, challenge.

Many of the approaches can be usefully combined with phonics, collaborative and peer-learning techniques. The use of techniques such as graphic organisers and drawing pupils' attention to text structures are likely to be particularly useful when reading expository or information texts. There are also some indications that computer-based tutoring approaches can be successful in improving reading comprehension, particularly when they focus on the development of strategies and self-questioning skills, though the evidence is less robust in this area.

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, both in terms of short-term and long-term impact. However, supporting struggling readers is likely to require a concerted effort across the curriculum and a combination of different approaches. It is important to remember that no particular strategy should be seen as a panacea, and careful diagnosis of the reasons why an individual pupil is struggling is very important when exploring possible intervention strategies.

How secure is the evidence?

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

In the UK, a recent evaluation of a programme that taught pupils to apply four reading comprehension strategies found some evidence of promise, but did not provide a robust estimate of the programme's impact.

What are the costs?

Costs for materials and professional development are estimated at £1,200 per teacher or £48 per pupil and therefore as very low. The costs associated with these approaches arise from the need for specific resources and professional training. Evidence suggests that the effectiveness of different approaches is related to the pupil's current capabilities in reading, so it is important that teachers receive professional development in effective diagnosis as well as in the use of particular techniques and materials to develop reading comprehension.

What should I consider?

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

1. Effective diagnosis of reading difficulties is important in identifying possible solutions, particularly for older struggling readers. Are you confident that the problem(s) a pupil is facing in making expected progress is in decoding the words, understanding the structure of the language used or understanding particular vocabulary, which may be subject specific?

2. How can you focus learners' attention on developing comprehension strategies which they can apply more widely?

3. A wide range of strategies and approaches can be successful, but these 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. 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?