

Reading taught inconsistently in primary schools, finds Australian survey

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A survey of 284 Australian primary school teachers looking at the strategies used to teach reading comprehension, reveals practices that are ad hoc, with little agreement in the Australian primary teaching

community about how reading skills are taught. The study, led by Reid Smith, a Ph.D. student in La Trobe University's School of Education, was published in the journal *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*.

The purpose was to examine teachers' beliefs about how children in the first seven years of schooling develop reading comprehension skills and to detail the self-reported practices and strategies they use to support children to comprehend connected text.

"We found that Australian primary [school](#) teachers hold a wide range of beliefs about reading instruction, some of which are in direct opposition to each other," Reid Smith said.

The study also found:

- Little consensus as to how reading comprehension is taught at the primary school level
- No uniformity in how much time should be apportioned to different tasks relating to teaching reading comprehension
- Commercial programs had significant penetration in schools, and many participants reported using multiple commercial programs, with varying levels of evidence
- Participants indicated that their most common source of knowledge about reading instruction was their own personal research, with few nominating university [teacher](#) education as a primary source of knowledge or expertise.

According to lead co-author, Associate Professor Tanya Serry, despite recommendations about effective reading practices made by three national reviews undertaken in Australia, the U.S. and the U.K. since 2000, reading instruction in Australian classrooms is still highly contested.

"The 'reading wars' debate impacts both the teaching of decoding and the teaching of comprehension," Associate Professor Serry said.

"Every day, Australian teachers are tasked with helping students develop reading comprehension. Given the importance of early reading instruction in preventing reading difficulties and promoting [academic achievement](#), the lack of consistency across teaching in Australia is of significant policy and practice interest."

According to Reid Smith, although Australia has a national curriculum that provides a framework for schools in terms of what to teach it's lacking specific information that might help teachers in this area.

"There are few guidelines as to how much time is devoted to the teaching of reading comprehension or which instructional approaches or strategies should be used," Reid Smith said.

"An additional issue is that the three national educational sectors (government-funded, Catholic and independent schools) are funded by differing combinations of Federal Government and student fees. These sectors vary in their policies, application of oversight, and governance, all of which can affect classroom practice in ways that are difficult to identify and measure."

Associate Professor Serry said that there is seven decades of evidence on the best way to teach reading comprehension.

"Teaching as a progression from word-level identification and meanings to sentence- and text-level comprehension. Instruction should be focused on developing each of these aspects of [comprehension](#) through explicit instruction, with the teacher playing a primary role in the classroom," Associate Professor Serry said.

"Despite all this evidence its clear from our survey that significant differences remain in how teachers conceptualize their role in the classroom."

In 2020, Professor Pamela Snow and Associate Professor Serry launched the Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab, at La Trobe University bringing together teachers and allied [health professionals](#)—including [speech-language pathologists](#) and psychologists—to ensure new knowledge is incorporated into classroom and intervention practice.

More information: Reid Smith et al, Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Reading Comprehension, *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* (2023). [DOI: 10.1044/2023_LSHSS-22-00118](#)

Provided by La Trobe University

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