

— MINDSHIFT

## To Boost Reading Comprehension, Show Students Thinking Strategies Good Readers Use



By Tara García Mathewson   Apr 11



An eight-year-long study of English-learners in the Santa Ana Unified School District found that students receiving cognitive strategies instruction improved their writing at greater rates than their peers for seven years in a row (*monkeybusinessimages/iStock*)

Once students learn how to sound out words, reading is easy. They can speak the words they see. But whether they understand them is a different question entirely. Reading comprehension is complicated. Teachers, though, can help students learn concrete skills to become better readers. One way is by teaching them how to think as they read.

Marianne Stewart teaches eighth grade English at Lexington Junior High near Anaheim, California. She recently asked her students to gather in groups to discuss books where characters face difficulties. Students could choose from 11 different books but in each group one student took on the role of "discussion director," whose task was to create questions for the group to discuss together. Stewart created prompts to help them come up with questions that require deep reading.

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**'When you find a strategy like this that really helps students wherever they're at, that's like gold.'**

—Marianne Stewart, English teacher at Lexington Junior High

This process of questioning while reading is one of a number of “cognitive strategies” Stewart teaches her students. The strategies focus on what research has shown to be the thought processes of good readers. Others include planning and goal-setting, tapping prior knowledge, making connections, visualizing and forming interpretations. By mastering these strategies explicitly, students learn that reading is an active process, not one in which they simply sound out words in their heads.

And it’s incredibly effective at improving their reading comprehension.

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Carol Booth Olson, a professor at the University of California-Irvine School of Education, developed a program called the Pathway to Academic Success Project that teaches cognitive strategies to improve student performance, in both reading and writing. Olson’s program trains teachers like Stewart to introduce them methodically and weave them into lessons throughout the

school year. First in Santa Ana and then in Anaheim, the Pathway Project clocked impressive results, closing achievement gaps for students who speak languages other than English and Latinos, who have traditionally had lower educational outcomes.

Now, with support from the U.S. Department of Education, Olson's Pathway to Academic Success Project is set to expand beyond California to six other states.

Olson has long focused on getting her program into urban schools, particularly those with large populations of students for whom English is not their first language. An eight-year-long study of English-learners in the Santa Ana Unified School District found that students receiving cognitive strategies instruction improved their writing at greater rates than their peers for seven years in a row. A follow-up study in Anaheim found Latino students in the group receiving cognitive strategies instruction outscored their white peers who didn't receive the instruction. And the 10th grade English-learners benefiting from the program outscored the state average on the high school exit exam by 20 percentage points, according to Olson.

"That's our goal," Olson said, "to level the playing field for all kids."

Stewart spends time at the beginning of the school year teaching kids all of the various cognitive strategies so that they can draw on them as needed throughout the year. She has found with her largely immigrant student population that cognitive strategies help them understand complex texts and help them move beyond just surface reading. These students have had a lot of vocabulary instruction to be able to make it through a passage, but Stewart said they struggled with deeper thinking about a text. The cognitive strategies not only remind them to think deeply but also help them figure

out what to do if they don't understand certain words or concepts as they read.

When it comes to writing, the Pathway Project prioritizes revision. With each revision, students take feedback from their teachers or the graduate students participating in the project to move toward deeper thinking. Less experienced writers tend to rely on summarizing, but "knowledge transformation" is what more experienced writers achieve.

Stewart has been an English teacher for 15 years. She has tried more writing strategies than she can keep track of, many of which try to make the writing and revision process hands-on by having students color code a draft and use symbols to annotate throughout.

"I've tried all the color codes and all the symbols," Stewart said. "You end up teaching the colors and the symbols, and not the content, until you're blue in the face and no one can remember what pink meant anymore."

Teaching cognitive strategies through the Pathway Project has been different. They keep the attention on the actual text, whether students are reading it or writing it. And they're flexible, Stewart said, so teachers can ask individual students to use specific strategies based on what they need at the time. That's important in classrooms where student strengths and weaknesses vary dramatically.

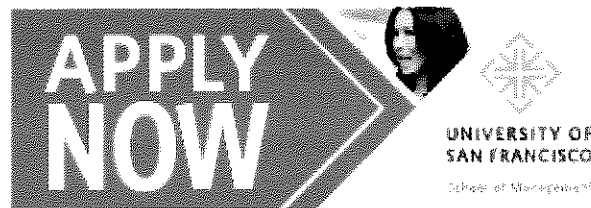
Olson acknowledges it's a hard sell to convince teachers to start using the cognitive strategies – even for a program with striking results. It takes time and effort to understand them and figure out where they can fit into existing lessons. The focus on revision to improve writing can be a big change for English teachers. Helping students revise their work is time-consuming. And Olson's program requires teachers to believe that explicit instruction and appropriate support can actually help all students achieve. Believing students are capable of this is not always a given, Olson said.

Over the last 20 years, 10 school districts in Southern California have adopted cognitive strategies instruction. The federal Department of Education's \$14.7 million Education Innovation and Research expansion grant will take the Pathway Project to schools in Arizona, Illinois, Minnesota, Nevada, Texas and Wisconsin over the next five years. It is expected to reach 240 teachers and 109,200 students.

Olson also plans to create teaching modules through a partnership with the Council of the Great City Schools that could bring cognitive strategies instruction to more teachers nationwide.

For Stewart, the value of the program is clear.

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*This story about strategies for teaching reading and writing was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.*

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