

Reading Comprehension Strategies for Discipline-Specific Texts among University Students: A Literature Review and Implications for Language Education

Nguyễn Thị Gấm

MA, Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Ha Long University, Quang Ninh, Vietnam

Email: nguyenthigam@daihochalong.edu.vn

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 Aug 2026

Accepted 28 Aug 2026

Available online 31 Aug 2026

Keywords:

Reading comprehension strategies; discipline-specific texts; university students; language education; strategy instruction.

Indexed in:



and in major libraries

ABSTRACT

This literature review synthesizes evidence on the strategies university students use to comprehend textbooks and discipline-specific texts and derives implications for language education. A structured search of Scopus retrieved 790 records, of which 15 journal articles published between 1986 and 2023 met the inclusion criteria. Findings were examined through thematic synthesis. Four interrelated strategy categories emerged: cognitive processing strategies, metacognitive monitoring and regulation, learning-support strategies, and text-structure strategies. Across the studies, strategy use varied according to reading and linguistic proficiency, prior disciplinary knowledge, field of study, text characteristics, presentation format, and task demands. Evidence from survey, think-aloud, and intervention research also showed that different designs illuminate different aspects of reading and should not be treated as directly equivalent. Nevertheless, intervention studies consistently indicated that explicit strategy instruction can improve comprehension and content retention when it is aligned with text type, learner characteristics, course content, and expected learning outcomes. The synthesis further highlights the need to support both print and digital reading, including navigation, attention management, and link evaluation in hypertext environments. The review concludes that reading strategy instruction should be integrated into discipline-specific course teaching and assessed through both comprehension outcomes and process-based evidence. These findings provide a focused basis for designing textbook-reading support in university language programs.

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1. Introduction

Textbooks and discipline-specific texts are primary sources through which university students engage with concepts, theories, and knowledge in their fields of study. Completing assigned readings, however, does not necessarily entail deep comprehension or the ability to apply the knowledge presented. Ritchey and List (2022) observed that students may not fully engage with assigned reading when instructors' purposes and expectations are unclear. Effective textbook reading therefore depends not only on linguistic proficiency but also on the ability to identify reading purposes, select appropriate information-processing strategies, and monitor comprehension.

For students in language-related programs, comprehending discipline-specific textbooks also requires identifying discourse structures, interpreting terminology, and integrating textual information with disciplinary knowledge. Previous studies have examined reading across several text types, including university textbooks (Block, 1986), English-language financial accounting texts (Pereira Rojas, 2016), printed and hypertext medical texts (Shang, 2018), and technical and academic English texts (Karimi, 2018).

Differences in content, organization, and mode of presentation require readers to select strategies suited to the text rather than rely solely on linear reading or word-for-word translation.

Research on second-language reading conceptualizes comprehension as an active process in which readers coordinate multiple strategies to construct meaning and address difficulties arising during reading (Block, 1986). Taraban et al. (2004) distinguished between analytic cognitive processes that support comprehension and pragmatic study behaviors oriented toward learning outcomes. Nergis (2013) identified syntactic awareness and metacognitive strategy use as significant contributors to academic reading comprehension. Similarly, Chen and Intaraprasert (2014) reported that Business English majors with higher reading proficiency used reading strategies more frequently than their less proficient peers.

Comprehension is also shaped by disciplinary knowledge, text structure, and presentation format. Pereira Rojas (2016) found that students met basic requirements when reading financial accounting texts but experienced difficulty with higher-order processes such as interpretation, inference, and reasoning. Pascual and Goikoetxea (2014) reported that prior

disciplinary knowledge and summarization supported deeper comprehension of university-level texts. In digital reading contexts, Shang (2018) identified differences between strategy use for printed texts and hypertexts. Evidence from instructional studies further indicates that reading strategies can be taught. Instruction in text-structure recognition has been associated with improved comprehension and learning outcomes (Latawiec, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2017). In a study involving 801 first-year students, Yapp et al. (2023) reported gains in academic reading comprehension following explicit ESL reading strategy instruction. Taken together, these findings indicate that independent textbook reading is more effective when students receive guidance on reading purposes, text processing, and comprehension monitoring.

Previous reviews and integrative frameworks have primarily examined the overall effectiveness of L2 reading-strategy instruction or addressed college reading compliance and comprehension in broad terms (Ritchey & List, 2022; Yapp et al., 2021). They have not specifically synthesized how university students approach discipline-specific textbooks in language-education contexts, where linguistic demands interact with disciplinary discourse, text format, and course tasks. This review fills that gap by integrating evidence on strategy categories, influencing factors, instructional effectiveness, and pedagogical implications for textbook-based reading in language programs. Accordingly, this review aims to: (1) identify the principal categories of reading comprehension strategies university students use when reading textbooks and discipline-specific texts; (2) analyze the reader-, text-, and task-related factors associated with strategy use; (3) synthesize evidence on the effectiveness of strategy instruction; and (4) derive implications for language education.

2. Methods

This study used a structured narrative synthesis to identify previously examined reading comprehension strategies, analyze factors associated with strategy use, and derive pedagogical implications for language education. Scopus was selected because it indexes peer-reviewed research across applied linguistics, education, psychology, and discipline-based higher education. The search combined terms related to reading comprehension, reading strategies, textbooks or discipline-specific texts, university students, and language-learning contexts. Studies were eligible when they were journal articles published in English between 1986 and 2023, focused on university or college students, and examined reading comprehension strategies in relation to textbooks, academic texts, technical documents, print texts, or hypertexts. Journal articles were selected to prioritize work that had undergone peer review and provided sufficient methodological detail; conference proceedings, book chapters, and dissertations were excluded to maintain a more consistent evidentiary standard.

The search retrieved 790 records from Scopus. As the search was conducted in a single database, no duplicate records or automation-tool exclusions were recorded before

screening. Title and abstract screening excluded 690 records, and 100 reports were sought for retrieval. Ten reports could not be retrieved, leaving 90 full-text reports for eligibility assessment. Of these, 75 were excluded because the population or context was outside university or college settings ($n = 18$), the study did not focus directly on reading comprehension strategies ($n = 25$), the text or material was outside the review scope ($n = 20$), or the report provided insufficient methodological information for the synthesis ($n = 12$). The remaining 15 journal articles were retained for thematic synthesis.

For each included article, information was extracted on study context, participants, text or material, study design, strategies examined, and key findings. The coding procedure was primarily deductive: reported strategies were organized under cognitive processing, metacognitive monitoring and regulation, learning-support, and text-structure categories, while influencing conditions were organized as reader-, text-, and task-related factors. Within those categories, recurring labels and relationships were compared iteratively across studies so that subthemes could be refined inductively. Because the review was conducted by a single author, validation relied on repeated comparison of coded summaries with the source articles and checks for internal consistency rather than inter-coder agreement.

The synthesis also compared survey, think-aloud, correlational, conceptual, and intervention evidence while retaining distinctions among these designs. Survey findings were interpreted as reports of perceived strategy use, think-aloud findings as process evidence, and intervention findings as evidence tied to specific instructional conditions. Because measures, samples, and outcomes were heterogeneous, the findings were integrated thematically rather than pooled in a meta-analysis.

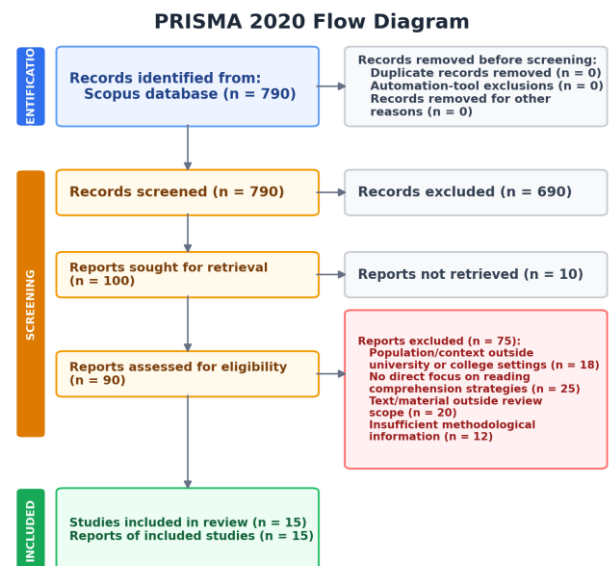


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study-selection process.

Table 1. Characteristics and main findings of the 15 included articles

Article	Design, context, and participants	Text/material and strategy focus	Key finding
Bećirović et al. (2017)	Survey; Bosnia and Herzegovina; 140 English-language/literature and management undergraduates	Reading in English; metacognitive reading strategies measured with the Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ)	Use varied significantly by field of study, grade level, and gender; nationality was not significant.
Block (1986)	Think-aloud; United States; 9 remedial freshmen (6 ESL and 3 L1-English readers)	College textbook; cognitive and repair processes	Both L1- and L2-English readers used multiple active comprehension strategies.
Chen & Intaraprasert (2014)	Survey and comprehension test; China; 926 Business English majors	Business English reading; broad strategy use	Students with higher reading proficiency reported more frequent strategy use.
Daguay-James & Bulusan (2020)	Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design; 403 Filipino ESL freshmen enrolled in a General English course	Academic English texts; global, problem-solving, and support metacognitive reading strategies	Participants reported high metacognitive awareness. Problem-solving strategies were used most, followed by support and global strategies; reading to increase understanding and highlighting were highly used, and strategy use differed significantly by field of study.
Karimi (2018)	Think-aloud; Iran; 48 L1-Persian undergraduates	EAP multiple technical documents; strategic processing	L2 proficiency and prior topic knowledge shaped strategy type and frequency.
Latawiec (2010)	Longitudinal pre-/post-test; Poland; 115 EFL teacher-education students	Expository texts; text-structure awareness	Text-structure awareness was associated with comprehension and academic achievement.
Nergis (2013)	Predictive/correlational; Turkey; 45 ELT undergraduates	EAP/TOEFL passages; linguistic and metacognitive factors	Syntactic awareness and metacognitive awareness were significant predictors; vocabulary depth was not a strong predictor.
Pascual & Goikoetxea (2014)	Two experiments; university undergraduates	University texts; domain knowledge and summary	Students receiving either domain-knowledge or summary instruction consistently performed better on inferential questions; other effects were mixed and were not exactly replicated across the two experiments.
Pereira Rojas (2016)	Two complementary studies; Spain; Study 1 n = 20 and Study 2 n = 31 Business Administration undergraduates at Complutense University of Madrid	English financial-accounting texts in a pro-CLIL context; metacognitive strategies	Participants generally met the language and content demands, but weaknesses remained in justification, deduction, and inference; perceived strategy use only partly aligned with task performance.
Ritchey & List (2022)	Theoretically based conceptual framework; no participant sample	Assigned college reading; Task-Oriented Reading Instruction (TORI)	The framework recommends that instructors explicitly communicate reading goals, specify effective strategies, and

Article	Design, context, and participants	Text/material and strategy focus	Key finding
			align assessments with assigned-reading goals across courses and disciplines.
Schwartz et al. (2017)	Text-structure intervention; United States–Mexico border; 48 recruited and 33 analyzed L1-Spanish university learners	English/Spanish expository health texts; text structure and signal words	Instruction improved recall and comprehension across languages and encouraged more selective underlining.
Seifoori (2020)	Quasi-experimental; Iran; 39 ELT and 32 English Literature postgraduates (n = 71), selected from a pool of 130	Ten-session, content-integrated negotiated strategic awareness-raising; general reading comprehension and course-content retention	Both experimental groups achieved significantly higher general reading-comprehension and content-retention outcomes than their corresponding control groups.
Shang (2018)	Comparative/correlational; Taiwan; EFL medical students	Printed text versus hypertext; metacognitive strategies	Problem-solving strategies were most used in both formats; printed-text readers reported more frequent slow reading and use of background knowledge, while guessing and checking strategies were positively associated with improved hypertext comprehension.
Taraban et al. (2004)	Survey, principal components analysis, and cross-validation; United States; initial sample n = 575 and validation sample n = 574 college students	School-related reading; Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ)	The MRSQ yielded analytic and pragmatic factors and showed high validity, internal reliability, and structural stability in the cross-validation sample.
Yapp et al. (2023)	Seven-week regression-discontinuity intervention; Netherlands; 801 first-year polytechnic students across three treatment waves	L2 academic reading; explicit instruction in seven reading strategies; three equal-difficulty reading tests	Reading-comprehension gains after the intervention significantly exceeded gains before it in all three waves; effects were partly mediated by students' previous education level.

Note. EAP = English for Academic Purposes; EFL = English as a Foreign Language; ESL = English as a Second Language; ELT = English Language Teaching; CLIL = Content and Language Integrated Learning.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Categories of reading comprehension strategies used with textbooks and discipline-specific texts

The synthesis indicates that university students' reading comprehension strategies operate as an interconnected

set of processes encompassing textual processing, comprehension monitoring, and the organization of learning. Four broad categories emerged across the reviewed studies: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, learning-support strategies, and text-structure strategies.

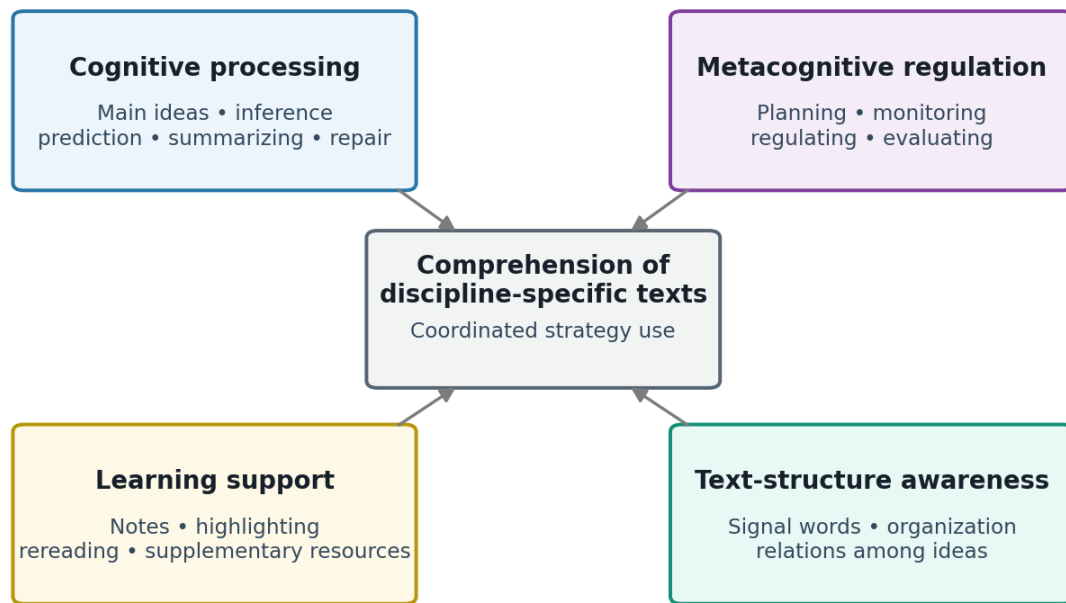


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the four interrelated strategy categories

Cognitive strategies are processes used directly to extract, organize, and integrate information, including identifying main ideas, drawing inferences, predicting, connecting ideas, summarizing, and repairing comprehension breakdowns. Using think-aloud protocols, Block (1986) demonstrated that both first- and second-language readers actively employed multiple strategies to address difficulties when reading university-level texts. Pascual and Goikoetxea (2014) found that summarization and the provision of disciplinary knowledge supported performance on inference questions about university texts. Daguay-James and Bulusan (2020) reported that first-year students used problem-solving strategies more frequently than support and global reading strategies. Collectively, these findings indicate that comprehending discipline-specific textbooks requires students to select, organize, and transform information rather than merely memorize content.

Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring comprehension, regulating the reading process, and evaluating outcomes. Taraban et al. (2004) distinguished analytic cognitive activities that support comprehension from pragmatic behaviors directed toward learning and academic performance. Nergis (2013) identified metacognitive awareness as one factor contributing to academic reading comprehension among EAP learners. Bećirović et al. (2017) and Daguay-James and Bulusan (2020) likewise documented varied use of metacognitive strategies across disciplines and learner groups. Accordingly, assessments of textbook-reading competence should examine not only students' answers to comprehension questions but also their capacity to recognize and regulate their own reading processes.

Learning-support strategies include note-taking, highlighting, rereading, consulting supplementary resources, and organizing information to facilitate

retention. Daguay-James and Bulusan (2020) identified highlighting as a relatively frequent strategy. Its effectiveness, however, depends on readers' ability to distinguish central from peripheral information. After receiving instruction in text structure, participants in Schwartz et al. (2017) underlined less indiscriminately and focused more selectively on signal words indicating structural relationships. Support strategies therefore appear most useful when grounded in an understanding of text organization; otherwise, they may become mechanical procedures with limited cognitive value.

Text-structure strategies are particularly important when students engage with textbooks and expository discipline-specific texts. Latawiec (2010) linked text-structure awareness to reading comprehension and learning outcomes among students in English-language teacher education. Schwartz et al. (2017) further found that instruction in signal words and the organizational patterns of expository texts improved information retention and comprehension. Pereira Rojas (2016) reported that students reading financial accounting texts continued to experience difficulty with interpretation, inference, and reasoning despite meeting basic linguistic and content requirements. Text-structure awareness thus supports not only information location but also the integration of ideas and the generation of inferences.

3.2. Factors influencing strategy use

Strategy use was associated with reading proficiency, linguistic and disciplinary knowledge, text characteristics, and reading-task conditions. Reading proficiency was particularly salient. In a study of 926 Business English majors, Chen and Intaraprasert (2014) found that high-proficiency readers reported more frequent strategy use than students with average or low proficiency, both overall and across numerous individual strategies. This finding

does not establish that greater strategy frequency necessarily produces better comprehension; rather, it indicates that readers at different proficiency levels select and combine strategies differently.

Linguistic knowledge and prior disciplinary knowledge also shape text processing. Nergis (2013) reported that syntactic awareness and metacognitive strategy use contributed significantly to academic reading comprehension in the study sample, whereas depth of lexical knowledge was not a strong predictor. Karimi (2018) found that second-language proficiency and prior topic knowledge influenced the frequency and type of strategies used in the comprehension of multiple EAP texts. Pascual and Goikoetxea (2014) likewise showed that disciplinary knowledge supported performance on questions requiring deeper comprehension and inference. Strategy instruction should therefore be accompanied by support for the vocabulary, linguistic structures, and background knowledge required by particular courses and reading tasks.

Strategy use also varied by discipline and year of study. Bećirović et al. (2017) reported associations between metacognitive strategy use and field of study, year of study, and gender, whereas nationality was not significantly associated with strategy use. Daguay-James and Bulusan (2020) similarly found variation across fields of study. These results caution against applying a uniform strategy framework to all disciplines. First-year students may require explicit guidance in identifying reading purposes, text structure, and main ideas, whereas more advanced students may benefit from support in critical reading, multi-source synthesis, and evaluation of arguments.

For example, humanities and language students may need to trace claims, evidence, and competing interpretations; science and health students may need to follow causal or procedural sequences and integrate terminology with diagrams; and business or accounting students may need to connect explanatory prose with tables, numerical relationships, and discipline-specific conventions. These examples are pedagogical applications of the observed disciplinary variation rather than direct comparisons tested across all 15 included articles.

Text format further influences reading behavior. Shang (2018) found that medical students used different strategies when reading printed texts and hypertexts. Readers of printed texts relied more heavily on careful reading and the activation of background knowledge, whereas prediction, verification, and contextual inference were associated with hypertext comprehension. This distinction is relevant to programs that combine printed textbooks, digital course materials, and learning management systems. Instruction in digital reading should address content processing alongside navigation, link selection, attention management, and control of digital distractions.

3.3. Effectiveness of reading strategy instruction

The reviewed literature generally supports explicit and systematic strategy instruction. Latawiec (2010) reported an association between text-structure awareness, reading comprehension, and academic achievement. Schwartz et al. (2017) found that students' retention and comprehension of expository texts improved after five sessions of text-structure strategy instruction. Strategies taught through

English-language texts were also applied when students read in Spanish, indicating cross-language transfer among the participants.

At the postgraduate level, Seifoori (2020) found that strategy-awareness instruction integrated with course content improved reading comprehension and content retention among students of English language teaching and English literature. Yapp et al. (2023), in a study of 801 first-year students, reported gains in academic reading comprehension after seven weeks of explicit instruction in seven reading strategies. The magnitude of these gains, however, varied with students' prior educational backgrounds. The effectiveness of strategy instruction thus depends on the alignment among instructional content, learner characteristics, and course-specific reading demands.

The reviewed evidence does not support the indiscriminate provision of a fixed list of techniques for use with every text. Ritchey and List's (2022) task-oriented reading framework instead emphasizes clarifying the purpose of reading, selecting strategies appropriate to the task, and aligning reading assignments with assessment. This framework is consistent with the intervention findings: strategy instruction is most meaningful when connected to text structure, course content, and the output expected from students after reading.

The strength and meaning of the evidence varied by study design. Self-report surveys describe perceived frequency but do not establish enacted strategy use or causality; think-aloud studies provide process evidence but may influence reading behavior and generally involve smaller samples; and intervention studies permit stronger claims about instructional change only within their specific conditions. The synthesis therefore treats convergence across designs as complementary evidence and does not assume that their outcomes are directly equivalent.

3.4. Implications for language education

The synthesis supports integrating instruction in discipline-specific textbook reading into course teaching rather than treating it as students' sole responsibility. Before reading, instructors can clarify the purpose, learning outcomes, and types of information to be identified; activate relevant background knowledge; introduce essential terminology; and draw attention to the organization of the chapter or text. During reading, students can practice identifying main ideas, tracing relationships across sections, drawing inferences, making predictions, monitoring comprehension, taking notes, and regulating reading speed. Post-reading tasks such as summarizing, constructing graphic organizers, explaining concepts, comparing perspectives, and applying knowledge to new situations can assess depth of understanding rather than the reproduction of isolated information.

For digital textbooks and hypertexts, instructors should explicitly teach students to preview navigation structures, select links according to the reading purpose, evaluate the relevance and credibility of linked information, and record a purposeful navigation path. Attention-management routines—such as limiting unnecessary tabs or notifications and pausing to summarize after each section—can reduce fragmented processing. Practice tasks can ask students to justify link choices or

compare a linear print pathway with a nonlinear digital pathway through the same topic.

Instruction should also be tailored to proficiency level and field of study. Findings from Chen and Intaraprasert (2014), Karimi (2018), and Nergis (2013) indicate that reading proficiency, linguistic knowledge, and prior knowledge are associated with how students process academic texts. Less proficient readers may benefit from explicit support with terminology, sentence structure, and the identification of central information, whereas more advanced readers may require tasks involving inference, critical analysis, and synthesis across multiple texts. In language programs, strategy instruction can be implemented across both Vietnamese- and foreign-language texts to foster cross-language transfer, as observed by Schwartz et al. (2017).

Assessment should capture both reading outcomes and the processes through which those outcomes are achieved. Self-report questionnaires can indicate students' perceived strategy use, but they should be combined with comprehension tests and process-based evidence. Reading journals can document purposes, monitoring decisions, and repair attempts over time; think-aloud protocols can reveal strategy selection during difficult passages; concept-mapping tasks can show how well students integrate relationships among ideas; and annotated digital logs can capture navigation and link-selection behavior. These tools make it possible to assess whether students select strategies appropriately, monitor comprehension, and adapt their approach when difficulties arise.

Across the reviewed studies, reading strategies appeared teachable and adaptable to the demands of particular text types. The evidence base, however, was concentrated in EFL, ESL, and academic English contexts, and few studies directly examined discipline-specific textbook reading among students in language programs. Many studies relied on self-report data, while direct observations of reading processes, comparisons of print and digital textbooks, and evaluations of long-term strategy maintenance remained limited. Future research should integrate behavioral evidence with comprehension outcomes, examine a broader range of discipline-specific textbooks, and evaluate strategy-instruction models across diverse language-education contexts. Accordingly, the findings should not be assumed to transfer directly to first-language reading or to other-language and orthographic contexts not represented in the corpus.

4. Conclusion

The review of 15 articles identifies four interrelated categories of strategies used to comprehend textbooks and discipline-specific texts: cognitive processing, metacognitive monitoring and regulation, learning support, and text-structure awareness. Strategy use varied with reading and linguistic proficiency, prior disciplinary knowledge, field of study, text characteristics and format, and task demands. Across the intervention evidence, explicit and contextualized instruction was associated with improved comprehension and content retention.

The review's main contribution is to bring these strategy categories, influencing conditions, and instructional findings together around discipline-specific textbook reading in university language education. It

supports embedding strategy instruction in course content, aligning strategy choice with disciplinary texts and reading purposes, preparing students for both print and digital environments, and combining outcome measures with process-based assessment.

The conclusions remain limited by the concentration of studies in EFL, ESL, and academic English settings, as well as by variation in samples, texts, designs, and measures. Survey, think-aloud, and intervention findings are complementary but not directly comparable, and self-reports may not reflect actual reading behavior. The findings therefore should not be assumed to transfer directly to first-language reading or to other-language and orthographic contexts not represented in the corpus.

The most urgent research priority is the lack of studies on discipline-specific textbook reading within language programs, because this gap directly affects course design and targeted student support. Future research should examine authentic course texts and tasks in clearly defined disciplines, combine direct observation with comprehension outcomes, compare print and digital reading, and use longitudinal designs to determine whether strategy use transfers across courses and is sustained over time.

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