

How to accelerate reading

Evidence supports the use of a variety of effective teaching models and strategies to accelerate students' learning. This resource aims to discuss opportunities to accelerate reading in a secondary school setting.

What is accelerated learning?

- 'Accelerated learning is achieved through specific teaching strategies, learning conditions, or scaffolded supports that enable learners to acquire skills more rapidly than they would under 'usual teaching conditions.'¹
- Accelerated learning differs from general classroom teaching and traditional forms of remediation, which often involve not using current year-level content with students to focus on filling gaps from previous years. In contrast, accelerated learning emphasises consistently providing students with appropriate and current year-level materials/tasks/assignments, supplemented with scaffolds to make the work accessible.
- Accelerated learning relies heavily on continuous monitoring of student progress against benchmarks and progress indicators, ensuring that the learning process remains aligned with year-level expectations.
- For more information on acceleration see: [Accelerated Learning Resource](#).

This resource is based on the research report commissioned by the Ministry of Education and provided by the University of Canterbury. The full report can be found here: [Accelerating learning in Oral language, Reading, Writing, and Maths](#). The secondary school section of this report focuses on children with reading challenges and dyslexia, as well as providing insights into students who are bilingual/multilingual and second language learners.

¹ [Accelerating learning in Oral language, Reading, Writing, and Maths](#). (Gillon et al., 2024, p. 13)

Common elements that facilitate accelerated learning

When planning an intervention programme to accelerate students there are several topic areas that need to be considered.

1. Explicit and systematic instruction

- Explicit and systematic instruction is highlighted as an important teaching approach. This includes teaching strategies such as front-loading small groups so they are prepared for the universal classroom lesson, modelling, scaffolding learners' attempts, guided practice, and providing learners with immediate corrective feedback.
- Well-structured lesson plans, or detailed teaching guides, based on the research evidence, are common features of effective interventions.

2. Intensity and duration of support

- Small group interventions up to 4 or 5 times per week (with 20–30-minute teaching sessions) for a minimum of between 8–11 weeks were found to be effective for most learners.
- Longer interventions are not necessarily more effective than shorter length interventions but may have their place in more tailored interventions. Increasing intensity of teaching and longer interventions are necessary for children with more severe learning difficulties or complex learning needs.

3. Tiers of support

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are advocated within the international scientific literature to ensure all children are successful in their learning. Three layers of learning support have been identified.

Tier 1	Universal (Te Matua)	This is evidence-based universal teaching for all children and involves strengthening inclusive environments, cultures, and practices, including teacher practice, curriculum design, and everyday routines and systems.
Tier 2	Targeted (Te Kāhui)	Targeted supports in small groups to accelerate learning for children identified as requiring additional teaching supports and to enhance children's participation, learning, and wellbeing.
Tier 3	Tailored (Te Arotahi)	Involves individualised support for children with greater learning challenges and provides more tailored supports to meet children's unique needs and contexts.

- The alignment of teaching strategies across these tiers of teaching may optimise children's learning potential, thus all tiers need to be considered when implementing an accelerated learning programme.

4. Incorporating technology

- Technology enhanced assessment and teaching approaches show promise. The study found that more research needs to be done in this area.
- Teaching that incorporates gamification can be effective, particularly for younger learners.

5. Professional Learning and Development

- Ongoing professional learning and development for educators is crucial to ensure the successful implementation of effective teaching strategies and is critical to the success of accelerated learning.
- Teachers implementing interventions for students with reading difficulties, including dyslexia, need strong linguistic knowledge and theoretical understanding of how learners acquire efficiency in reading and writing.
- It is important that this professional development is not in isolation, but that teachers are supported to integrate new learning into their daily teaching practices and have access to quality teaching resources.

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6. Culturally responsive teaching practices

- Researchers recognise the importance of culturally responsive teaching approaches, particularly in relation to supporting learners' engagement and motivation.
- Research on culturally responsive teaching practices in New Zealand schools emphasises the importance of integrating Māori knowledge and perspectives across the curriculum.
- The development of respectful relationships and partnerships with Pacific families and their communities is important in enhancing achievement for Pacific learners.

Teaching methods

Evidence supports the use of explicit and structured teaching methods to ensure learners have strong foundational skills in areas that support efficiency in **word decoding, spelling, reading fluency, vocabulary learning, and reading comprehension**.

Explicit instruction	Systematic instruction
Explicit instruction is a structured, systematic, and direct teaching methodology where concepts are clearly explained, modelled, and practised rather than discovered. It minimises guesswork by breaking complex tasks into small, manageable steps and guides students until independent mastery is achieved. Key characteristics • Clear Objectives. Lessons begin by stating exactly what will be learned, why it is important, and how students know they have succeeded (success criteria). For further details see Accelerating progress in literacy – Teacher guidance. • Step-by-Step Modelling. Teachers demonstrate the skill while "thinking aloud" so students see exactly how to perform the task. • Supported Practice. The process follows a strict "<i>I do it, We do it, You do it</i>" progression to reduce cognitive overload. • Immediate Feedback. Teachers monitor progress closely, offering immediate affirmative and constructive feedback.	Systematic instruction is a structured, step-by-step teaching method where skills are broken down into logical, manageable parts and taught in a deliberate progression from simple to complex. It ensures students master foundational building blocks before advancing to more difficult concepts. Key components • Logical progression. Skills are taught in an intentional order, with each new concept building on previously mastered material. • Scaffolding. Teachers provide strong support initially and gradually provide less support as the students gain independence (<i>I do, we do, you do</i>). • Generalisation and maintenance. Lessons often include continuous practise and review to ensure students retain the skill and can apply it in different contexts.

How do systematic and explicit instruction differ?

These two terms are often used together, but they refer to different aspects of teaching:

- 'Systematic' dictates the **timing, order, and sequencing** of the curriculum (what gets taught and when).
- 'Explicit' refers to **how clearly the concept is taught**. Teachers use direct explanations, clear demonstrations, and leave nothing to chance.

Accelerated learning interventions for reading

- Formative assessment to determine need is a vital part of accelerative practice prior to beginning a learning intervention and throughout. It is also important that student progress against benchmarks and progress indicators is continuously monitored and adjustments made accordingly to interventions. The learning process should remain aligned with year-level expectations.
- Often, when we consider reading interventions in the secondary years, the focus is more on comprehension than efficiency in word decoding, or more on written text than each word. However, problems with word-level reading and spelling skills can persist through to adulthood. To ensure these learners have strong foundational skills it is therefore important to consider their ability in word decoding, spelling, reading fluency, vocabulary learning, and reading comprehension. Thus, accelerated learning interventions for reading should focus on the following:

Reading accelerated learning interventions:	Further information
1. Teach parts of words such as syllables, root words, prefixes, and suffixes	Phonological awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the sounds of spoken language, including words, syllables, and rhymes. Morphological awareness is the ability to recognise and manipulate morphemes - the smallest units of meaning in a language. It involves understanding how root words, prefixes, and suffixes combine to form, change, or define the meanings of words. Explicitly teaching these skills and showing students how they help to decode and spell words will help to accelerate their reading.
2. Teach how to read and write unfamiliar words	A big part of learning to read is learning to “sound out” words that do not look familiar. This skill is called decoding. Encoding in reading involves taking a word, hearing the parts of it, and writing or spelling it. Knowing how to decode and encode helps students to unpack and read new words.
3. Teach vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies early	Teachers should read ahead and ensure they explicitly teach the keyword vocabulary before the students read the text. Teaching the words and strategies to help students comprehend the meaning of unknown words before they read removes the barriers to understanding as students read. Also, explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies is more effective at improving reading skills than reading practice aimed at learning these skills implicitly.

4. Teach text structures	Explicit teaching of text structures is the direct modelling of how authors organise information in a text. The most common organisational patterns include: • Description: Provides details about a person, place, thing, or idea. • Cause and Effect: Explains why something happened and what the results were. • Compare and Contrast: Highlights similarities and differences between two or more subjects. • Problem and Solution (Conflict and Resolution): Presents a problem and then offers one or more solutions. • Question and Answer: Poses a question and then provides the answer within the text. • Sequence (Chronological Order): Organises events or steps in the order they occur. • Listing: Presents a list of items, ideas, or characteristics. (Taken from: A Guide to Teaching Text Structure - Graduate Programs for Educators).
5. Explicitly teach reading comprehension	Teachers use direct explanations and clear demonstrations of how to comprehend meaning when reading. This is more effective than reading practice alone.
6. Motivate disengaged learners	Students must be motivated to learn, for learning to occur. There are strategies a teacher can use to support motivation to learn in students who do not yet have this motivation intrinsically. For further information see: How to support student autonomy and enhance motivation - THE EDUCATION HUB

He Awa Whiria – Braiding the knowledge streams

He awa whiria is a metaphor for considering the relationship between Māori and non-Māori (predominantly Western) streams of knowledge. Understanding and knowing the learner's cultural and educational background as well as the integration of intervention strategies that address ecological and psychological influences on students' reading and writing development are important. Understanding these influences supports student motivation.

Strategies that researchers have considered in interventions to **support motivation and autonomy** include:

- game-based activities (e.g. computer games that focuses on word learning)
- collaborative learning activities (e.g. paired reading). Peer assessment builds metacognitive skills and provides students with the opportunity to monitor and adjust their own progress.

- allowing learners to choose reading materials (focusing on interest) or to set their learning goals and provide rewards for achievement (e.g. stickers or additional activities)
- strategies to support learners' own motivational development through monitoring their own reading and spelling goals (what do they want to get out of an activity?). Self-assessment can build metacognitive skills and allows students to monitor and adjust their own progress.
- strategies that focus on self-efficacy or self-esteem, such as believing that they can achieve a reading goal or that it is their own effort that has led to success rather than some external factor
- strategies to overcome negative self-perceptions that children with dyslexia may have developed because of negative education experiences associated with failure in learning to read. Therefore, learner motivation, along with cultural knowledge as a basis for knowledge development, has been found to be potentially useful in methods that have targeted primary school children who are struggling with reading and writing. These factors may increase in their importance as children increase in age through the primary years and into secondary school.

Core teaching strategies that support accelerated reading

Teaching Strategies	Resources	Further reading
• Teach students how to decode words. Including decoding within text writing practice will provide spelling practice which will in turn support the development of word-levels skills for reading.	Resources to help with decoding and encoding include: • make-a-word cards. Create cards with letters and letter groupings (prefixes and suffixes). Give one set to each group. Challenge the groups to meet certain criteria. For example: Create the longest word, Use as many cards as you can, Create as many words as you can in a set time. At the end the group must read their words. Prizes and competition will help with motivation for this activity. • Decoding New Words.	For more ideas see: • Decoding-Strategies-Language • Really great reading - Decoding strategies for success.

• Keyword vocabulary learning prior to text reading is useful for comprehension of that text. Simply increasing vocabulary size may not lead to huge improvements in reading comprehension. This may not greatly improve reading comprehension beyond that text, unless teaching English Language Learners (ELL) or students with specific vocabulary deficits.	Resources to help with vocabulary learning include: • Vocab Jumble • Mix and Match • Before and After Vocab Grid • Jeopardy • Vocabulary Frames.	For more ideas see: • Strengthen vocabulary knowledge Inclusive Education • Helping teenage students learn and retain vocabulary Cambridge • How to teach vocabulary to support learning and comprehension - THE EDUCATION HUB • Effective vocabulary instruction - THE EDUCATION HUB.
• Provide systematic teaching of reading comprehension strategies that involve asking and answering questions about the text (both in writing and verbally). Explicitly teaching students the strategies that help them to understand what they read supports their comprehension. Strategies can comprise clarification of material, summarising passages, outlining ideas, making predictions about content or overall themes, and sometimes using visual diagrams/figures (such as graphic organisers or mind-maps) to develop a 'model' of the text.	Resources to help with reading comprehension include: • Think-alouds Reading Rockets • Questioning • Predicting and defining • Reading Behind the Lines • Graphic Organisers.	For more ideas see: • Reading comprehension strategies • Seven Strategies to Teach Students Text Comprehension Reading Rockets.
• Teach students to think about how they read and learn. Metacognitive strategies such as summarising, questioning, and identifying key terms or main ideas in a text are effective. This will support the development of self-regulatory processes leading to increased self-efficacy and motivation to learn.	Resources to help with thinking about how we learn include: • KWL(H) Grid (last column) • Think Alouds AdLit Comment Codes.	For more ideas see: • Metacognition and Reading Comprehension Landmark Outreach • Reading Is Thinking: Metacognition Strategies That Work.

• Practise reading skills once they are acquired. Collaborative/paired (student and-teacher, student-to-student) reading strategies will provide opportunities for students to practise reading skills. Better outcomes are more likely if these collaborative/paired relationships are positive and motivational. Teacher-student interactive reading strategies can also highlight areas of difficulty and inform teaching practice.	Resources to help with collaborative reading include: • Jigsaw Reading • Think-Pair-Share. A collaborative reading strategy where students read a text and progress through three stages: thinking independently about a prompt, discussing their ideas with a partner, and sharing their insights with the whole class. • Reciprocal Teaching Reading Rockets.	For more ideas see: • Deepening Comprehension with 10 Collaborative Activities The Teaching Factor.
• Accessing a student's prior knowledge improves reading comprehension, as do familiar learning activities. Reading comprehension requires readers to integrate the meaning of the text with what they already know. These strategies are best taught using material that is at least partially familiar to the learning (which would include cultural knowledge).	Resources to help access prior knowledge include: • KWL(H) Grid • Before and After Vocab Grid • Anticipation Guides. Review a set of true/false or agree/disagree statements related to the text's main concepts before reading. This surfaces current beliefs and gives a specific purpose for reading. • Power Previewing. Scan the text for titles, subheadings, images, bolded words, and summaries. Use these clues to predict what the text will be about.	For more ideas see: • TEACHING AND LEARNING SEQUENCE - Activating prior knowledge • Building Background Knowledge Reading Rockets • International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences - Prior Knowledge Activation.

- **Practise reading fluency.**

This can be done through collaborative reading with a teacher or use of repeated reading strategies. Collaborative reading or repeated reading are useful to improve fluency, but slow text reading speeds should be considered alongside comprehension levels when determining poor reading skills as slower reading speeds can be indicative of a reading strategy used to support understanding.

Resources that help with reading fluency include:

- [Reciprocal-reading](#)
- Reader's theatre. A performance where students are given a script and are assigned a specific character. They typically receive the script at the beginning of the week and practise their designated part(s) multiple times until they can read it fluently. On the day of the performance, students stand in front of an audience and read their lines. Instead of using costumes, props, or other visuals, the readers must effectively communicate the story's message through their vocal expressions.

Readers theatre taken from: [Five Oral Reading Fluency Strategies for Supporting Struggling Adolescent Readers](#).

For more ideas see:

- [Understanding how to build fluency | Inclusive Education](#)
- [Do Adolescent Learners Need Fluency Instruction? - Keys to Literacy](#).

Supporting bilingual/multilingual and second language learners with reading

The same explicit and structured teaching methods (discussed above) that support struggling monolingual learners should also be effective for struggling bilingual/multilingual learners.²

Those with poor second language skills may be struggling with a standardised measure of word reading due to language experience rather than an underlying problem that can lead to poor word decoding skills.

There are two exceptions: **prior knowledge** and **current language proficiency**. These are discussed in the table overleaf.

² Graham, S , Tavsantli, O F , & Kaldirim, A. (2022). Improving writing skills of students in turkey: A meta-analysis of writing interventions, *Educational Psychology Review*, 34, 889–934.

Prior knowledge	Current language proficiency
• More consideration to the bilingual/multilingual learner's background (cultural knowledge) would be useful in supporting their written language development.	• A greater focus on vocabulary learning at the same time as supporting word decoding and spelling will support English language learners with less English learning experience. • More explicit support in language comprehension strategies should also be considered so as to accelerate the development of language as well as reading fluency and spelling.

Specific teaching implications for second language learners

- The same explicit teaching methods used for English speakers also works for English language learners.
- English language learners will benefit from teaching word parts such as syllables, root words, prefixes, and suffixes.
- Teaching vocabulary to English language learners is particularly important. This can be done using pictures or their first language when their understanding of English is low.
- Key vocabulary definitions in their first language or activating prior knowledge in their culture are important.
- Modelling strategies and practising with collaborative reading using a peer from their own culture will help skill development.
- Teacher PLD in this area is critical to support accelerated learning, particularly when teaching learners from different backgrounds. Teacher PLD will emphasise the importance of engaging with family, whānau, and the home.

How to create a lesson to support the acceleration of reading

- This lesson aims to demonstrate how to accelerate reading by unpacking a text in any subject. The text chosen will be 'at-the-level' of the curriculum for this class.
- This lesson uses a systematic instruction approach and provides a logical progression and scaffolding. This lesson has been separated into the following manageable parts to reduce cognitive load and support motivation (as well as simplifying planning for the teacher):
 - 10 mins starter activity
 - 10 mins teaching time

- 30 mins class activity (typically broken into 2-3 parts such as individual task, joint task, feedback)
- 5-10 mins closing activity.
- This lesson also has clear explicit instruction goals that uses supported practice following the process of “I do, We do, You do”.

Time	Activity	Teaching instruction	Why this activity?	How does this support reading acceleration?
10mins	Starter Activity – Anticipation Guides	Prepare a set of true/false or agree/disagree statements related to the text’s main concepts for students to review before reading. Students can do this quietly and, when finished, share their answers with a partner. Discuss as a class.	Teachers will want to give students a pre-taste of the topic. This is an opportunity for students to see some of the language, consider some of the issues they will read about, and potentially gain some insight from a partner. Class discussion from feeding back the answers allows the teacher to correct any errors immediately.	• Accessing a student’s prior knowledge improves reading comprehension, as do familiar learning activities. • Immediate corrective feedback is given.
10mins	Teaching Activity – Explicit teaching	Put your advanced organiser on the board. Talk the students through the lesson objectives and what they will learn. Explicitly teach the content knowledge students require for this lesson. This involves step-by-step modelling where you will demonstrate the skill while “thinking aloud” so students see exactly how to perform the task. This will later be supported by the reading you have prepared.	Lessons should have clear objectives that state exactly what will be learned, why it is important, and how students know they have succeeded. Content needs to be intentionally taught and not left to chance. Explicitly teaching the content prior to reading provides the basis from which students can process and think. They will also hear vocabulary used by the teacher that they may not recognise when written. This will help students to unpack unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts when they come to read the text.	• Lessons should have clear objectives and students should know what success in a lesson looks like. • Explicit teaching ensures concepts are clearly explained, modelled, and practiced rather than discovered. It minimises guesswork by breaking complex tasks into small, manageable steps. • Reading comprehension requires readers to integrate the meaning of the text with what they already know.

30mins	Class Activity – 1. Text Outline	Give students the reading and briefly provide the text outline, discussing the organisational pattern, headings, sub-headings, and graphics (i.e., teach text structure).	Students will require help to unpack a text. This requires scaffolding. The text outline will draw attention to the main points in the text. The headings often go unread by students so highlighting their importance is helpful.	• Explicitly teaching students the strategies that help them to understand what they read supports their comprehension.
	2. Comparison Chart 3. Discuss and question	• “I Do” – Read the first part of the text and model the activity you wish them to complete (we are using Graphic Organisers in the form of a comparison chart that students will complete as they read). • “We do” – Ask for a volunteer to read the next section. Take suggestions from the class to write in the chart. Guide the class to the correct answers with Questioning. • “You do” – Students complete the task individually. Discuss answers and question as you go.	Modelling a task cuts down on all the talk from students asking, ‘What do we do?’. If you show them what to do, check they have the right idea, and then slowly release them to work by themselves, there is more chance of a task being successful and the skills being learned. A discussion of the answers provides feedback to the teacher on progress and is an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings that may have occurred along the way, in a timely manner.	• Providing a slow-release strategy of ‘I do, we do, you do’ reduces cognitive load and helps to build student confidence and self-reliance.

5-10mins	Closing Activity – Revisit	Ask students to revisit their true/false and agree/disagree statements from the start of the lesson. Would they change any of their answers? Why? If there is time, ask students to highlight any words in the text where they were unsure of the meaning. These words can form the basis for a vocabulary starter activity in your next lesson. Go through the lesson objectives with the class to ensure they have been met.	Revisiting a task from the start of the lesson is an opportunity for students to reflect on what and how they learn. This will show students they learned something and if that changed or strengthened their position. Repeating a familiar activity is also beneficial for self-confidence and motivation as the task is known and feels ‘safe’. Highlighting unknown words in the context of an activity allows you to select the relevant ‘blockers’ for your subject. Showing the students that they have met the objectives of the lesson allows them to feel success and gain confidence.	• Teaching students to think about how they read and learn will lead to an increased self-reliance and motivation to learn. • Focusing on scaffolding requirements for the next lesson will help to accelerate learning.
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