Does Reading a Background Text Enhance Retrieval Practice?

Engaging in retrieval practice has been shown to produce better long-term memory than engaging in repeated study. The purpose of the present study was to examine if reading a background text before retrieval practice improves the mnemonic benefits of retrieval. In the experiment, subjects learned important concepts about the human ear either through retrieval practice or repeated study. Moreover, some subjects read a relevant background text prior to learning the concepts. Two days later, subjects were given a final cued recall test. The subjects who practiced retrieval during initial learning recalled more concepts on the final test than the subjects who repeatedly studied the concepts, thus replicating the standard retrieval practice effect. However, no mnemonic benefits of retrieval were discovered after reading the background text. Thus, reading a background text does not seem to benefit retrieval practice.