

Building the Bridge to Comprehension

Why Fluency Matters in Effective Literacy Instruction

By Lynne Kulich, Ph.D.



School and district leaders across Canada are increasingly focused on strengthening literacy outcomes through evidence-based instruction. As schools continue to prioritize foundational reading skills, fluency plays a critical role in helping students move from accurate decoding to deep comprehension.

This article explores why fluency instruction matters, what research tells us about effective fluency practices, and how schools can strengthen literacy outcomes through consistent, explicit instruction that supports diverse learners.

Why strong fluency instruction matters

For many school and district leaders, fluency is often viewed as a classroom-level skill — important, but secondary to curriculum implementation, assessment, or intervention support.

In reality, fluency plays a much larger role in literacy success.

When fluency is weak or inconsistently taught, comprehension suffers, student confidence declines, and increasing numbers of students require additional support. Strong fluency instruction helps learners move from accurate word reading to meaningful understanding, strengthening literacy outcomes across the classroom.

This is not simply an instructional concern — it is a broader school improvement priority.

As schools across Canada continue to strengthen evidence-based literacy instruction and foundational reading practices, fluency deserves renewed attention as the critical bridge between decoding and comprehension.

Foundational reading models: What leaders need to know

Decades of research confirm that learning to read is not intuitive. It requires explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills, beginning with **phonemic awareness** and **phonics**. These foundational skills allow students to connect sounds (phonemes) to letters and letter patterns (graphemes), enabling accurate word recognition and, ultimately, comprehension.

Research has consistently identified five essential components of effective reading instruction that are central to the Science of Reading:

- **phonemic awareness**
- **phonics**
- **vocabulary**
- **fluency**
- **comprehension**

While many schools have strengthened their focus on phonics and decoding instruction in recent years, fluency can still receive less intentional attention despite its critical role in supporting comprehension.

Several well-established reading frameworks reinforce this point:

- **The Simple View of Reading** defines comprehension as the product of word recognition and language comprehension. If either component is weak, comprehension is affected.
- **Scarborough's Reading Rope** illustrates how multiple strands – including phonological awareness, vocabulary, background knowledge and language structures work together to support skilled reading.
- **The Active View of Reading** expands these models by highlighting the importance of engagement, self-regulation and strategic processing.

Across each of these frameworks, one conclusion remains consistent:

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Fluency is the bridge that allows students to move from accurate decoding to meaningful comprehension.

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Fluency: An overlooked component of effective literacy instruction

Fluency is commonly misunderstood as reading speed. In reality, fluent reading requires three integrated components:

- **Accuracy** – reading words correctly
- **Automaticity** – reading efficiently without cognitive overload
- **Prosody** – reading with appropriate expression, phrasing and natural intonation

When students decode accurately but slowly, cognitive resources are consumed by word reading rather than comprehension. When students read quickly but without expression or phrasing, understanding can also suffer.

For school and district leaders, the implications are significant. Research indicates that many students who struggle with comprehension also demonstrate weaknesses in fluency. When fluency is not addressed consistently within classroom instruction, schools often experience:

- Increased intervention and learning support demands
- Persistent reading gaps despite additional support
- Greater pressure on teachers and specialist staff

In short, inconsistent fluency instruction can contribute to larger intervention demands later on.

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True fluency supports understanding, not performance alone.

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Fluency and early support through strong classroom instruction

High-quality classroom instruction should support the needs of most learners. When fluency is embedded intentionally within literacy instruction, it acts as a preventive support measure, reducing the number of students requiring additional intervention.

Conversely, when fluency instruction is inconsistent or overlooked:

- More students experience ongoing difficulties with reading progress and comprehension
- Intervention resources become stretched
- Teachers spend increasing amounts of time addressing foundational gaps that could have been strengthened earlier

From a leadership perspective, fluency should not be viewed as an 'extra', but as an **essential component of high-quality literacy instruction**.



Evidence-based fluency practices that support reading growth

Research has consistently identified instructional practices that strengthen fluency when implemented systematically. These include:

- **Assisted reading practices** such as choral reading, echo reading and audio-assisted reading
- **Repeated reading** to build automaticity and accuracy
- **Phrased reading** to support meaning-making and comprehension
- **Performance-based reading**, such as readers' theatre, to increase engagement and prosody

These approaches are effective because they combine explicit modelling, supported practice, and meaningful repetition — all key features of evidence-based instruction aligned with how students learn best.

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For school and district leaders, the critical question is not whether these practices work, but whether schools are supported to implement them consistently across classrooms.

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The Fluency Development Lesson: A practical classroom model

One evidence-based approach that integrates multiple fluency practices is the **Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)**. Designed as a short, structured instructional routine (typically 15–20 minutes), the FDL combines:

- Explicit modelling of fluent reading
- Guided oral reading practice
- Vocabulary and comprehension discussion
- Opportunities for performance and student response

From a school-wide perspective, the FDL offers several advantages:

- **Efficiency** – it fits within existing literacy blocks
- **Consistency** – it provides a shared instructional structure
- **Equity** – all students access evidence-based fluency practice, not only those receiving intervention support

When implemented consistently, fluency routines like the FDL strengthen comprehension while reducing the need for later remediation.



Strategic considerations for school and district leaders

Schools seeking to strengthen literacy outcomes should consider the following questions:

- Is fluency explicitly addressed within our literacy expectations and instructional practices?
- Do our literacy programs provide sufficient opportunities for guided oral reading and fluency practice?
- Are teachers supported with professional learning focused not only on assessing fluency, but teaching it effectively?
- Does our student data suggest fluency gaps may be limiting comprehension outcomes?

Addressing these questions helps position fluency as a broader literacy priority rather than simply a **classroom strategy**.

Fluency, equity and long-term literacy success

In Canada, equity has moved to the centre of the literacy conversation. Ontario's Right to Read inquiry — a human rights investigation into how students with reading difficulties are taught — found that students were being failed when schools relied on approaches that weren't grounded in evidence, and it reframed effective reading instruction as a matter of equity, not just pedagogy. Its influence has since extended well beyond Ontario.

Strong fluency instruction supports equity by helping all students develop the skills needed to access increasingly complex texts.

It also supports sustainability by reducing long-term dependence on intensive intervention.

When fluency instruction is prioritized:

- Students comprehend more effectively
- Teachers spend less time remediating foundational gaps
- Support resources can be targeted more strategically
- Literacy instruction becomes more consistent across classrooms

Moving forward

Fluency is not an optional add-on to literacy instruction.



It serves as the critical connection between decoding and comprehension and plays a key role in whether students can successfully engage with increasingly complex texts.



School and district leaders who examine how fluency is addressed within classroom instruction, professional learning, and literacy planning position their schools to strengthen reading outcomes earlier and support more sustainable literacy improvement over time.

High-quality literacy instruction does not rely on remediation to compensate for weak foundations. It invests strategically in evidence-based classroom practice so comprehension, confidence, and achievement can grow for all learners.

Reading Eggs in an online reading program designed to complement classroom literacy instruction by providing students with additional opportunities to practise foundational reading skills, build fluency and engage with meaningful reading experiences. Through assessments and reporting, teachers can identify areas of need and provide targeted support.

Students can also access a broad library of fiction and non-fiction texts matched to a wide range of reading levels, including decodable texts that reinforce phonics knowledge while building reading confidence, stamina and engagement over time.

Explore how Reading Eggs supports fluency, comprehension and literacy development across the elementary years.

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About the author

Dr. Lynne Kulich is an educator, researcher and author with more than 30 years of experience in literacy education. She has served as a professor, curriculum and instruction director, literacy coach and classroom teacher, with a focus on early literacy and multilingual learners.

Dr. Kulich is the lead author of the bestselling book ***The Fluency Development Lesson: Closing the Reading Gap*** and regularly presents at national and international education conferences. She holds a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Akron and a bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University.

