

Language Comprehension: Don't Leave It Stranded

By Lynne Kulich, PhD



Across Aotearoa New Zealand, schools have made significant progress in adopting evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction. Structured literacy now sits at the heart of national policy. Since the start of 2025, schools have been required to use a structured approach to teaching reading and writing in Phase 1, with explicit teaching of reading and handwriting a key priority under the refreshed New Zealand Curriculum | Te Mātaiaho.

Within that shift, explicit phonics and handwriting instruction have rightly drawn the most attention. A structured approach begins with phonemic awareness and phonics, with students building decoding skills through a systematic sequence, reinforcing it with handwriting and consolidating their reading in decodable texts.

But while decoding is essential, an important challenge is emerging in many classrooms: language comprehension is not always being developed with the same level of intentionality. In other words,

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students may be able to decode the words on a page, but that does not necessarily mean they fully understand what they are reading.

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When language comprehension is not strengthened alongside decoding, early reading gains can begin to plateau. In the later primary years, schools may see more students requiring additional support, widening achievement gaps and increasing difficulty accessing learning across the curriculum.

Inside reading comprehension

Structured literacy is an evidence-based approach to teaching reading and writing, grounded in decades of interdisciplinary research into how children learn rather than in any single program or product. One of the clearest findings from that research concerns what reading comprehension is actually made of: two equally important components.

According to the Simple View of Reading, it is the product of decoding and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Both must be developed together. If either is weak, comprehension suffers, regardless of how accurately students can sound out words.

Language comprehension includes:

- **Vocabulary**
- **Sentence structure and syntax**
- **Background and content knowledge**

These elements form a critical strand within Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001). Without them, decoding skills alone cannot support long-term reading success.



For schools and literacy leaders, this distinction matters. Many schools have invested heavily in explicit phonics instruction, but oral language development, vocabulary instruction and knowledge-building do not always receive the same level of focus within classroom literacy practice.

Over time, this imbalance can limit student progress and increase reliance on intervention support.

Why language comprehension can't wait

A common question in literacy planning is whether decoding should come first, with language comprehension following later. Research shows this is a false choice.

Language comprehension begins developing long before formal schooling, through conversation, storytelling, play and exposure to rich language and ideas. Decoding, by contrast, must be taught explicitly and systematically. The two are interconnected and reciprocal rather than sequential, which means schools cannot afford to delay language development until students become 'fluent readers'.

Language comprehension supports:

- **Reading fluency and expression**
- **Understanding increasingly complex texts**
- **The transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'**
- **Access to curriculum content across subject areas**

Schools that focus heavily on decoding without also strengthening language comprehension may see reading progress slow in the upper primary years as comprehension demands increase.

When language comprehension becomes the limiting factor

In the early years, many students have oral language skills that exceed the simplicity of the texts they are learning to decode. As texts become more complex, the opposite can occur: students' language comprehension may fail to keep pace with rising literacy demands.

Research suggests that as students progress through primary school, differences in language comprehension account for a growing share of the variation in reading comprehension outcomes, while the influence of decoding becomes less pronounced (Catts, Hogan & Adlof, 2005).

For schools, this can lead to:

- **Growing demand for literacy intervention**
- **Difficulty accessing curriculum content**
- **Widening equity gaps, particularly for English Language Learners and students with less exposure to background knowledge**

If this happens, it does not mean phonics instruction is ineffective. It signals a need to strengthen oral language, vocabulary development and knowledge-building alongside decoding instruction.

This aligns with New Zealand's curriculum expectations: building background knowledge and key vocabulary before reading improves students' ability to comprehend texts, and comprehension strategies are taught and revisited in the context of reading texts as tools to support students to make sense of complex ideas.



What effective literacy classrooms do differently

Schools that successfully strengthen language comprehension do so by intentionally creating literacy-rich learning environments that expose students to complex language, discussion and knowledge across the school day.

Importantly, the gains come from consistency, not new initiatives – embedding high-impact, evidence-based instructional practices across classrooms, such as:

1. Purposeful use of read-alouds

New Zealand's refreshed Phase 1 curriculum is explicit on this point: high-quality read-alouds should be part of daily instruction. Through read-alouds, students are exposed to sophisticated vocabulary, sentence structures and ideas beyond their independent reading level.

When implemented consistently, read-alouds:

- **Build background knowledge**
- **Expose students to academic language**
- **Strengthen comprehension across learning areas**
- **Support oral language development**

Schools can strengthen this practice by:

- **Prioritising rich narrative and informative texts**
- **Protecting time for shared reading experiences**
- **Supporting professional learning around interactive read-alouds**

Well-designed read-aloud instruction supports both literacy outcomes and equitable access to complex ideas and language.

2. Structured classroom discussion

Language comprehension develops through purposeful discussion. Classroom conversations give students opportunities to process ideas, practise vocabulary, explain thinking and deepen understanding. According to the curriculum, selected texts should *“provide opportunities to strengthen knowledge and understanding of a wide range of New Zealand perspectives when making meaning”*.

Effective literacy classrooms:

- **Prioritise student talk and discussion**
- **Provide opportunities for collaborative learning**
- **Support teachers in scaffolding oral language development**
- **Create consistent expectations for classroom discourse**



These practices are particularly important for supporting multilingual learners and students who may have had less exposure to academic language outside school.

3. Explicit and systematic vocabulary instruction

While some vocabulary develops naturally, the academic and subject-specific language students need has to be taught explicitly. New Zealand's structured literacy approach is built on this principle: Ministry of Education curriculum guidance states that teaching literacy components explicitly and systematically strengthens understanding and maximises students' progress.

Effective literacy instruction:

- **Integrates vocabulary learning across subject areas**
- **Emphasises morphology, including prefixes, suffixes and root words**
- **Revisits and reinforces new vocabulary regularly**
- **Connects vocabulary learning to reading, writing and discussion**

Strong vocabulary instruction equips students with language that transfers across texts, year levels and curriculum areas.



Why this matters for long-term literacy success

Language comprehension should not be viewed as an 'extra' within literacy instruction. It is foundational to strong reading outcomes.

Schools that intentionally strengthen language comprehension are more likely to:

- **Improve reading comprehension outcomes**
- **Reduce the number of students requiring additional support**
- **Improve access to curriculum learning**
- **Support equity through stronger background knowledge and oral language development**
- **Build more sustainable whole-school literacy approaches**

From both an instructional and school improvement perspective, strengthening language comprehension early helps reduce the need for reactive intervention later.

Conclusion: decoding opens the door, comprehension takes them through

Decoding instruction is essential, but on its own it cannot carry students all the way to skilled reading. Without strong language comprehension, students cannot fully access meaning, learn effectively from text or sustain literacy growth over time.

Just as every strand contributes to the strength of a rope, language comprehension is the strand that holds the rest together. When it is intentionally strengthened through evidence-based classroom practice, students are far more likely to thrive, both now and into the future.

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It's only when schools align literacy instruction around both decoding and language development, they create the conditions for stronger long-term reading success.

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Learn how schools are using Reading Eggs to support comprehension, not just decoding, across the primary years.

Explore Reading Eggs



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.

