



Building the Bridge to Comprehension

Why Fluency Matters in High-Quality Literacy Teaching

| By Lynne Kulich, PhD



School and trust leaders across the UK are strengthening literacy outcomes by focusing on fluency as the bridge between decoding and comprehension. This article explores why fluency instruction is essential for strong reading outcomes, evidence-informed literacy teaching and sustainable support for all learners.

Why strong fluency instruction matters

For many school and trust leaders, fluency is often viewed as a classroom-level skill – important, but secondary to curriculum planning, assessment or intervention provision.

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

When fluency is weak or inconsistently taught, comprehension suffers, pupil confidence declines and increasing numbers of children require additional support. Strong fluency instruction helps pupils move from accurate decoding to meaningful understanding, strengthening reading outcomes across the classroom.

This is not simply an instructional concern – it is a whole-school literacy improvement issue.

As schools across the UK continue to prioritise evidence-informed teaching, systematic phonics and structured literacy approaches, fluency deserves renewed attention as a critical bridge between decoding and comprehension.

This paper explores why fluency matters, what research tells us about effective fluency instruction, and how schools can strengthen reading outcomes through consistent, explicit teaching practices.

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 pupils to map sounds (phonemes) to letters (graphemes), enabling accurate word recognition and, ultimately, comprehension.

Research has consistently identified five essential components of effective reading instruction:

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

While the Year 1 phonics screening check has kept attention firmly on phonics and decoding in recent years, fluency can still receive less intentional attention, despite its critical role in supporting comprehension.

Multiple research-based models 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 suffers.
- **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 pupils to move from accurate decoding to meaningful comprehension.

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Fluency: An overlooked component of effective literacy teaching

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

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

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

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

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

In short, weak fluency instruction can shift preventable literacy challenges into 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 teaching

Within effective literacy teaching, quality first teaching should support the needs of the majority of pupils. When fluency is embedded intentionally within classroom literacy practice, it acts as a **preventive support mechanism**, reducing the number of pupils requiring additional intervention.

Conversely, when fluency instruction is inconsistent or overlooked:

- More pupils 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 secured earlier

Ofsted places considerable weight on early reading and on how well schools support their weakest readers. Fluency sits at the heart of this. Pupils who read accurately but laboriously are precisely those who struggle to keep pace with comprehension, and addressing fluency within everyday classroom teaching is one of the most effective ways to keep them on track, before gaps widen into a need for intervention.

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

Evidence-informed 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-informed instruction aligned with how pupils learn best.

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For school and trust 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-informed 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 response

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

- **Efficiency** – it integrates naturally into existing literacy teaching
- **Consistency** – it provides a shared instructional structure
- **Equity** – all pupils 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 intervention.



Strategic implications for school and trust leaders

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

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

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

Fluency, equity and long-term literacy success

Strong fluency instruction supports equity by ensuring all pupils 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 prioritised:

- Pupils comprehend more effectively
- Teachers spend less time addressing foundational gaps
- Additional support resources can be targeted more effectively
- Literacy teaching becomes more consistent across classrooms

Moving forward

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

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

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

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

Reading Eggs is an online reading programme designed to complement high-quality literacy teaching by providing pupils 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.

Pupils 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 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.