

Language Comprehension: Don't Leave It Stranded

By Lynne Kulich, PhD



Across the UK, schools have made significant progress in adopting evidence-informed approaches to literacy instruction. Systematic synthetic phonics and a structured approach to early reading now sit at the heart of how schools teach pupils to decode, supported by a growing emphasis on evidence-informed practice.

Within that shift, systematic synthetic phonics and decoding instruction have rightly drawn the most attention.

But while systematic synthetic phonics 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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pupils 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 systematic synthetic phonics, early reading gains can begin to plateau. By upper key stage 2, schools may see more pupils requiring additional support, widening attainment gaps and increasing difficulty accessing learning across the curriculum.

Inside reading comprehension

Decades of reading research, often referred to as the Science of Reading, explain how children learn to read and write. One of its most established findings 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 pupils 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 school and trust leaders, this distinction matters. Many schools have invested heavily in systematic phonics, but oracy, vocabulary instruction and knowledge-building do not always receive the same level of focus within classroom literacy practice.



Over time, this imbalance can limit pupil 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. Systematic synthetic phonics, 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 pupils 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 upper key stage 2 as comprehension demands increase.

When language comprehension becomes the limiting factor

In the early years, many pupils 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: pupils' language comprehension may fail to keep pace with rising literacy demands.

Research suggests that as pupils 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 attainment gaps, particularly for EAL pupils and those with less exposure to background knowledge**

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



What effective literacy classrooms do differently

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

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

1. Purposeful use of read-alouds

High-quality read-alouds expose pupils to sophisticated vocabulary, sentence structures and ideas beyond their independent reading level.

When implemented consistently, read-alouds:

- **Build background knowledge**
- **Expose pupils to academic language**
- **Strengthen comprehension across the curriculum**
- **Support oracy and oral language development**

Schools can strengthen this practice by:

- **Prioritising rich narrative and information texts**
- **Protecting time for shared reading**
- **Supporting professional development around interactive read-alouds**

Well-designed read-alouds support both literacy outcomes and equitable access to complex ideas and language.

2. Structured classroom talk and oracy

Language comprehension develops through purposeful discussion. Structured classroom talk gives pupils opportunities to process ideas, practise vocabulary, explain their thinking and deepen understanding.

Effective literacy classrooms:

- **Prioritise pupil talk and discussion**
- **Provide opportunities for collaborative learning**
- **Support teachers in scaffolding oracy**
- **Create consistent expectations for classroom talk**

These practices are particularly important for EAL pupils and those who may have had less exposure to academic language outside school.



3. Explicit and systematic vocabulary teaching

While some vocabulary develops naturally, academic and subject-specific language is unlikely to develop reliably without intentional teaching and repeated exposure (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013).

Effective literacy teaching:

- **Integrates vocabulary learning across the curriculum**
- **Emphasises morphology, including prefixes, suffixes and root words**
- **Revisits and reinforces new vocabulary regularly**
- **Connects vocabulary learning to reading, writing and talk**

Strong vocabulary teaching equips pupils with language that transfers across texts, year groups and subjects.



Why this matters for long-term literacy success

Language comprehension is foundational to strong reading outcomes. It belongs at the core of literacy teaching, not at its edges.

Schools that intentionally strengthen language comprehension are more likely to:

- **Strengthen reading comprehension outcomes**
- **Reduce the number of pupils requiring additional support**
- **Improve access to the curriculum**
- **Support equity through stronger background knowledge and oracy**
- **Build more sustainable whole-school literacy approaches**

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

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Schools create the conditions for stronger long-term reading when they align literacy teaching around both decoding and language development.

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Just as every strand contributes to the strength of a rope, language comprehension is one the rest cannot do without. When it is intentionally strengthened through evidence-informed classroom practice, pupils are far more likely to thrive – both now and into the future.

Learn how schools and trusts are using Reading Eggs to build comprehension alongside 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.

