

How to teach early reading comprehension

A whitepaper by Jo Gray



“I realized in a whiplash burst that those children, all mine for one year, might never reach their full potential as human beings if they never learned to read.”

Maryanne Wolf

The Importance of Early Comprehension and Language

Reading is fundamental in shaping children’s lives. Without the ability to read, children are unable to access the whole school curriculum, impacting on their educational success. Yet the impact of reading reaches further than this: it enables children to expand their world views. Being able to read gives children the power to not only change the direction of their own lives but also the lives of others.

There is no doubt that the teaching of early reading is incredibly important, yet it is a tricky area to get right.

This whitepaper will help you to:

- understand the complexities of teaching early reading
- use best practice evidence from the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF), the Department for Education (DfE) and academic research to inform teaching strategies
- explore the correlation between comprehension and word reading.
- develop practical ideas and strategies that can be implemented when teaching early reading.

So, what does the research around early reading say and how well does this translate into excellent classroom practice?

The Simple View of Reading

Reading is the product of decoding and comprehension, an interlinked combination first described by Gough and Tunmer in their 1986 model, the **Simple View of Reading**. This view has been fundamental to the teaching of reading ever since and this is reflected in the National Curriculum programmes of study, which explicitly presents ‘word reading’ and ‘comprehension’ as two distinct dimensions.

More recently too, the **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework** was revised in 2021 so that the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) were separated to show the importance of word reading and comprehension. To be able to read you therefore need to have good word recognition *and* good language comprehension.

The Dominance of Decoding

Despite evidence making it clear that there should be a balanced approach to teaching early reading, word reading has dominated at Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1.

Central to this has been a focus on the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), with DfE guidance such as **‘The Reading Framework: Teaching the Foundations of Literacy’** and Ofsted’s **‘Research Review Series: English’** expressing the need for teaching rigorous, systematic phonics as soon as children are settled in Reception.

The introduction of the Phonics Screening Check, a widely debated assessment introduced in 2012, has also contributed to a stronger emphasis on decoding. More recently, the DfE-imposed review and subsequent validation of phonics teaching schemes has only compounded the dominance of word reading across schools.

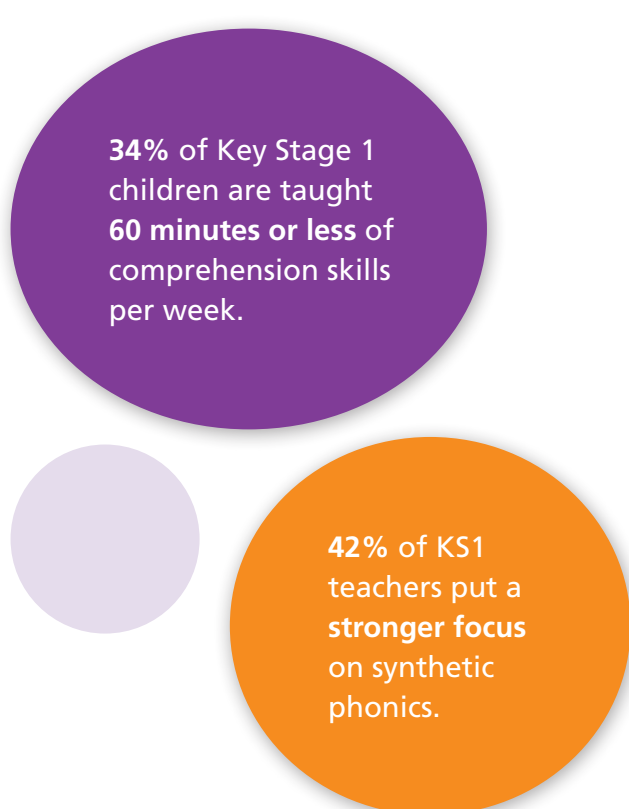
In a wide-ranging 2022 study, researchers at UCL’s Institute of Education undertook an analysis of multiple reviews, trials and international assessment data sets and concluded that teaching reading in England may have been less successful since the adoption of the synthetic phonics approach.

“Policy changes have resulted in adaptations to pedagogy including devotion of a greater proportion of teaching time to phonics, separation of phonics from other literacy activities, and reliance on a limited number of phonics schemes.”

UCL's Institute of Education

In their paper, one of the lead researchers, Dominic Wyse, calls for “contextualised phonics teaching” in schools, arguing that phonics should be “properly embedded alongside teaching reading comprehension and other aspects of reading”.

Finding the balance between properly embedding the skill of decoding and developing the complex set of comprehension skills needed for words to make sense is a careful undertaking for teachers.



34% of Key Stage 1 children are taught **60 minutes or less** of comprehension skills per week.

42% of KS1 teachers put a **stronger focus** on synthetic phonics.

A Teacher Tapp survey commissioned by Schofield & Sims in June 2022 found that 34% of Key Stage 1 teachers were teaching an hour or less of comprehension skills per week. The same survey asked teachers to describe their approach to teaching reading in Key Stage 1, where less than half (48%) of EYFS and Key Stage 1 teachers felt they had an equal blend of synthetic phonics, comprehension and language skills within their weekly timetables.

How can we address this balance and give more attention to the teaching of comprehension skills, particularly in classrooms where children are still learning to decode?

Striking the Right Balance

Teaching language and reading comprehension in addition to a systematic synthetic phonics programme may seem like a huge amount to fit into an already overcrowded timetable, but it can be developed through strategies and approaches that you already use on a daily basis.

One example of this is within daily story time. Rather than reading a different text each day, educators could choose to use the same book for several days so that children’s skills around language and reading comprehension can be developed. By reducing the cognitive load of decoding and understanding, we can start to develop children’s skills in understanding what has been read.

Another way for teachers to do this is to create a series of ‘after reading’ comprehension questions that encourage children to delve deeper into the text of a decodable reader. These questions should become more complex over time in line with the children’s developing reading and comprehension skills.

Hearing stories and talking about what they read is important for children to develop comprehension skills. Modelling the process of retrieving information from a text or inferring how a character feels, and encouraging children to do the same, can have a profound effect on children developing their comprehension skills at an early stage.



Teaching Tip: Modelling Comprehension Skills

When sharing the text 'Little Red Riding Hood' in story time, you may say:

"I wonder how the wolf is feeling at the start of the story. I think he may feel hungry."

Building upon this, once children have heard the process being modelled several times, they may be able to have verbal discussions around the text, drawing upon skills that are useful in comprehending what is being read. The following are some example questions and answers, focussing on the key skills of retrieval and inference.

Retrieval

1. What happens at the start of the story?
At the start of the story Little Red Riding Hood makes a cake to take to her granny.
2. What does the wolf do when he gets to Granny's? *The wolf pretends to be Granny. OR The wolf eats Granny, puts on her clothes, and gets in her bed.*

Inference

1. What did the wolf think when he met Little Red Riding Hood? *The wolf wanted to eat Little Red Riding Hood. OR The wolf wanted to eat Little Red Riding Hood, and when he realised Little Red Riding Hood was going to Granny's, the wolf made a plan of how to do this.*
2. Can you explain why the wolf dressed up as Granny? *The wolf thought he would trick Little Red Riding Hood so that she would think he was her granny.*

Further development

As children develop their independence towards the end of Year 1, there may be some in your cohort who are able to complete short written activities about high-quality texts that they have listened and enjoyed.

Explicitly Teaching Comprehension Skills

Teaching children specific strategies to develop and monitor their reading will help them improve their reading comprehension. Indeed, an effective comprehension strategy can help children gain an additional six months of reading progress according to the EEF.

Word meaning, retrieval, sequencing, inference and prediction are seen as key comprehension skills that children need to learn in Key Stage 1. By that point, the National Curriculum expects them to be able to:

- identify key aspects of fiction and non-fiction texts
- draw upon on their knowledge, background information or vocabulary provided by the teacher
- combine evidence from stories with their own knowledge to come to reasonable conclusions
- discuss a sequence of events and how items of information are related
- predict what might happen next, based on what they have read so far.

This set of skills should be modelled and practised regularly in the classroom to ensure that they become embedded and fluent. Implementing strategies can be time consuming but there are resources available to support schools.



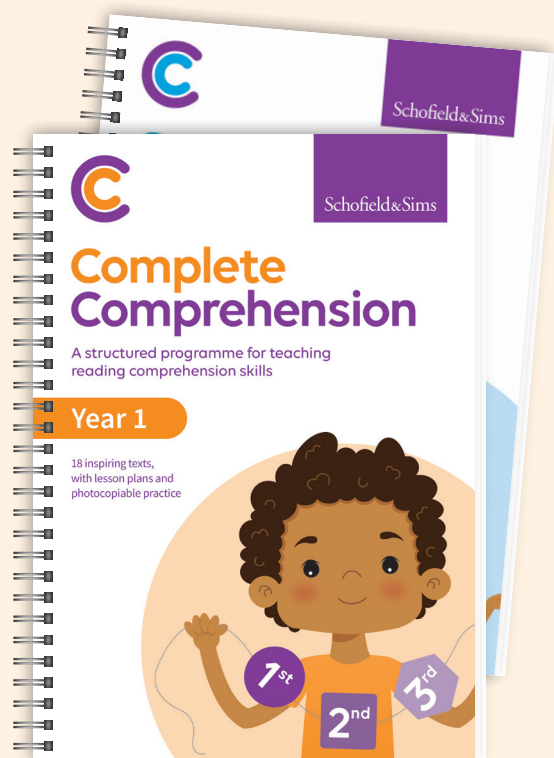
Complete Comprehension

Schofield & Sims' **Complete Comprehension** is a whole-school programme written by experts to support children from their first steps in reading comprehension.

Comprising six books of teacher's notes and photocopiable resources, it closely matches the curriculum requirements for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The inspiring texts and stimulating activities in each book develop cultural capital and vocabulary for children to apply outside of reading lessons.

Each **Complete Comprehension** book includes:

- in-depth explanations for each comprehension skill
- engaging text passages from a range of genres, including high-quality contemporary fiction
- lesson plans that support explicit vocabulary teaching
- extensive discussion activities to build background knowledge
- photocopiable target-skill questions and 'Mix it up!' questions
- three informal assessment checks to help you monitor progress
- online resources, printable texts and modelling slides for each unit.



The first book in the series, **Complete Comprehension for Year 1**, is designed to run alongside a systematic synthetic phonics programme and gradually introduces skills needed in comprehension.

It draws links to key phonics knowledge while using high-quality literature for educators and children to engage with.

The amount of independence builds up slowly throughout the book to ensure that language comprehension is successfully developed.

Building Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is critical to reading success and the more you know about a topic, the easier it is to absorb and retain the information included. Academics Recht and Leslie demonstrated this in 1987 when they ran an experiment to illustrate the impact that background knowledge can have on understanding what is being read. Using a passage about baseball with different groups of children, they were able to show that a

child's reading ability had little impact on how well they understood the story. In fact, those who were weaker readers did as well as strong readers if they had knowledge of baseball to reference.

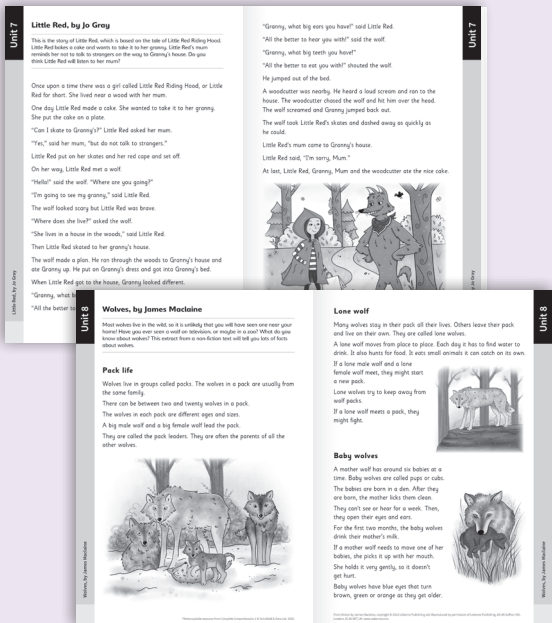
The early years of school are crucial for acquiring the knowledge needed to access the curriculum and if children do not develop an awareness of the world around them and an understanding of how life works, they cannot learn and achieve as well as their peers.



Teaching Tip: Pairing Texts

Complete Comprehension recognises the importance of background knowledge and uses paired texts to help children build background knowledge and form links within the topic. Doing so enables knowledge to move into the semantic memory, which allows children to transfer information, recall it and apply it in different situations.

For example in Year 1, children could read a story about Little Red Riding Hood followed by a non-fictional piece about Wolves before discussing the similarities and differences in the texts that they read.



Extract from Complete Comprehension Year 1

A child who does not know anything about wolves will not know that a wolf that wears clothes, hides in the woods and can talk is not a true representation of a wolf.

A child who understands that wolves are wild dogs has transferable knowledge they can bring to the text, ultimately resulting in them having a more comprehensive understanding of the text from the start than a child who does not.

Closing the Vocabulary Gap

Even if a child has firm background knowledge, they still need to develop language to communicate effectively. Children who do not have the requisite vocabulary to access and understand the primary curriculum cannot learn and achieve as well as their peers who have already developed sufficient vocabulary.

This disadvantage gap is described as the **'Matthew effect of accumulated advantage'** where, the word rich get richer but the word poor get poorer. In the 2018 report **'Why Closing the Word Gap Matters'**, teachers reported 49% of Year 1 children had a limited vocabulary to the extent that it affects their learning. The size and variety of a child's vocabulary is considered a reliable predictor of their future attainment, so it is vital that children acquire enough vocabulary in their early years.

"The unlucky ones – those children not born and brought up in such knowledge-rich environments, and who therefore do not develop a foundation of cultural capital – don't do as well in school because new knowledge and skills have nothing to "stick" to or build upon."

Matt Bromley, How to Close the Vocabulary Gap, 2019.



Teaching Tip: Building Knowledge and Vocabulary

A Year 1 class may be looking at growing plants in their science topic and within reading they explore a non-fiction book on plants.

Before reading the book, you may ask your class: *What do you know about plants already?*

The answers will vary depending on the children's experiences. If a child says that they do not have any knowledge about plants, the educator may remind them of any opportunities that they may have had in school already. Children may need opportunities to build their knowledge by exploring nature in and around the school grounds and the local area.

Continuing with the plant theme, you could take your class to a nearby wood, park or playing field and ask the children to look at all of the different types of plants that they can see growing there.

Encourage the children to use the vocabulary they have learnt in science to point out the different parts of a plant. If it is not possible to take the children outside, you could look at different types of plant and their features in the classroom.

This background knowledge will help to give children the opportunity to link what they hear, or read, to what they already know. It will also expose them to vocabulary in context.

Within English lessons, we aim to focus more on developing Tier 2 vocabulary than Tier 3, but if a text has some Tier 3 vocabulary within it then to support a child's comprehension of the text and to develop an understanding of a particular curriculum subject, we should plan opportunities to teach the new vocabulary.

By introducing the vocabulary that children will encounter in the text they are about to read, children will begin to understand what they read more accurately than if they were not introduced to the vocabulary prior to reading.

In **Complete Comprehension**, a language toolkit is provided in every unit. In KS1 this includes reference to phonemes and graphemes in the text, providing a useful guide to link comprehension lessons to phonics sessions.

These toolkits also list key vocabulary for children and educators to explore together before reading a unit's text, and provide vocabulary discussion questions to practise using the words in context, and vocabulary activities to reinforce understanding.

The selected key vocabulary might not always be phonetically decodable (depending on where a child is within their phonics programme), but, continuing with the idea that texts can be shared with children when introducing comprehension to reduce cognitive load, the words can be discussed verbally so that children understand the meaning of them.

In **Complete Comprehension Year 1**, Unit 15 explores the non-fiction text *Plant Facts* by Izzi Howell. To read this, children would need to understand the following words:

Language toolkit

Key vocabulary

algae	habitat	microscope
nutrients	reproduce	roots
shoot	sprouts	stem





Teaching Tip: Exploring Word Meaning

Once children have discussed the definitions of new words, you may want to explore the meaning of the words in more detail to help embed the knowledge.

One way of doing this is for children to play spin the wheel and follow the instructions for a new word they have learnt.



Developing a Love of Reading

Once a child learns to read, as clichéd as it sounds, they will be forever free. Reading, after all, is magic. The amount of research conducted around both decoding and comprehension are extremely important, but even if both are taught well, the engagement and enjoyment from reading high-quality texts also needs to be encouraged. We want our children to leave school not only being able to read but to be *willing* to read.

One of the best ways to develop a love of books is to ensure we read and share books with children as often as possible. Talking about texts and what we enjoy about a particular text, or even what we dislike, can also have a profound effect on the enjoyment of reading. To do this well, we need to choose high-quality texts, supporting children to discuss and create links between their learning and other texts that they read.

“Those who do read for pleasure tend to have positive reading attitudes, higher reading attainment and vocabulary, and good comprehension when compared to those who do not read for pleasure.”

Reading Agency’s 2015 ‘Literature Review’

Texts in **Complete Comprehension** are taken from high-quality real books so that children can hear the story in class or choose to read it from their class book area, and educators can also link what is being read to other areas of the curriculum.

Each **Complete Comprehension** unit has a reading list of supplementary texts around a similar theme that can extend children’s enjoyment of reading.

As educators, we can support children to develop a love of reading by:

- being readers ourselves
- modelling and sharing reading behaviours
- discussing and recommending books
- supporting families and developing a reading community.

In selecting high-quality texts, creating links across the curriculum, by sharing stories, poetry and non-fiction, and by supporting children to develop an enjoyment in reading, we contribute in supporting them with their word reading and their comprehension.

By teaching phonics in isolation, what a child reads would be just mere words on a page. Comprehension adds meaning to what is read and turns words on a page into ideas, inspiration and knowledge. Comprehension is what makes reading enjoyable, it is what makes life-long readers.

About the Author

As an education adviser, English specialist, and someone who spent many years teaching in Key Stage 1, Jo Gray is passionate about getting the teaching of reading correct from the start. Jo has many years of school leadership experience, working with schools, academies, trust and LAs all over the North West and beyond. She works across Early Years, KS1 and KS2 delivering leadership, literacy and whole school curriculum support. Jo is passionate about childhood, play and the magic that books can provide. She is a self-confessed book addict who is passionate in supporting all children and staff in striving to be the best they can be. Above all, Jo is an advocate for all children and works with the one principle of “putting children first”.

References

Ofsted English review: *English ‘fundamental’ to pupils’ educational success* (2022).

The Reading Framework: Teaching the Foundations of Literacy (2022).

The National Curriculum (2013).

Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (2021).

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), *Preparing for Literacy: Seven Recommendations to Support Improving Early Language and Literacy* (2018).

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF): *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1: Eight Recommendations to Support the Literacy of 5-7 Year Olds* (2020).

Oxford Language Report: Why Closing the Word Gap Matters (2018).

Teacher Tapp survey of 2,020 teachers on 13/06/2022.

Recht, D.R. and Leslie, L., *Journal of Educational Psychology: Effect of prior knowledge on good and poor readers’ memory of text* (1988).

Institute of Education: *Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers’ practices for teaching phonics and reading.* (2022)