

# Language Comprehension: Don't Leave It Stranded

By Lynne Kulich, Ph.D.



District leaders across the country have made significant progress aligning early literacy instruction to the Science of Reading. Phonics and decoding are receiving the attention they deserve, and that focus is necessary.

But at the same time, in many districts, an unintended gap is emerging: language comprehension is being underdeveloped within Tier 1 instruction. This means students are able to decode text, but it doesn't mean they fully understand it.

When language comprehension is not intentionally strengthened alongside decoding, early gains often stall. By upper elementary and middle school, districts may see increased intervention demand, widening achievement gaps, and students struggling to access grade-level content. Addressing this challenge requires system-level attention – action that extends beyond classroom-level effort.

## Why language comprehension must be a district priority

The Science of Reading is not a curriculum or program; it is a robust body of interdisciplinary research explaining how children learn to read and write (The Reading League; National Reading Panel, 2000). This research makes one thing clear:

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Reading comprehension depends on not one, but two equally essential components.

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According to the Simple View of Reading, **reading comprehension = decoding × language comprehension** (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Both must be strong. If either is weak, comprehension suffers, no matter how well students can sound out words.

Language comprehension includes:

- **Vocabulary**
- **Syntax (sentence structure)**
- **Background and content knowledge**

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

From a district perspective, this distinction matters. Many systems invest heavily in phonics-based instruction but do not provide equally intentional support for oral language, vocabulary development, and knowledge-building within Tier 1. Over time, this imbalance limits student progress and places increasing pressure on intervention services.



## Decoding and language comprehension must develop together

A common question in literacy planning is whether decoding should come first, followed later by language comprehension. We know now, thanks to research, that this is a false choice.

Language comprehension begins long before formal schooling – through oral language, conversation, and exposure to content. At the same time, decoding must be taught explicitly and systematically. These processes are not sequential; they are **reciprocal and concurrent**.

From a systems standpoint, this means

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**districts cannot afford to delay language development until students are “fluent readers.”**

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Language comprehension supports:

- **Prosody and fluency**
- **Access to increasingly complex texts**
- **The transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”**

Districts that wait to address language comprehension often see decoding gains plateau by third grade and comprehension gaps widen thereafter.

## When language comprehension becomes the limiting factor

In the early grades, many students possess oral language skills that exceed the simplicity of the texts they are learning to decode. However, as texts become more complex, the opposite can occur: students' language comprehension fails to keep pace with text demands.

Research indicates that by eighth grade, much of the variation in reading achievement is driven by differences in language comprehension rather than decoding ability (Adlof, Catts, & Little, 2006).

For district leaders, this pattern has clear implications:

- **Intervention lists grow longer**
- **Content-area learning becomes inaccessible**
- **Equity gaps widen, particularly for multilingual learners and students with limited background knowledge exposure**

If this happens in your district, it doesn't mean phonics instruction isn't working. Instead, it signals that Tier 1 systems need to more intentionally support language development.



## What strong Tier 1 systems do differently

Districts that successfully strengthen language comprehension do so by designing Tier 1 environments that systematically expose students to rich language and knowledge across classrooms and schools. And they do so not by adding more initiatives, but by enabling consistent, high-impact practices.

Below are examples of practices that, when supported at the district level, strengthen language comprehension at scale.

## System-enabled instructional practices that strengthen language comprehension

### 1. Purposeful use of read-alouds

High-quality read-alouds provide access to complex vocabulary, syntax, and ideas beyond students' independent reading levels. When embedded consistently within Tier 1, they:

- **Build shared background knowledge**
- **Expose students to academic language**
- **Support comprehension across content areas**

Districts play a key role by:

- **Ensuring curricula include rich narrative and informational texts**
- **Protecting instructional time for read-alouds**
- **Supporting professional learning around interactive read-aloud practices**

Well-designed read-aloud instruction aligns closely with standards while supporting equity by giving all students access to complex language and ideas.

### 2. Structured academic conversations

Language comprehension develops through purposeful talk. Dialogic reading and structured discussion allow students to process ideas, practice vocabulary, and deepen understanding.

At the district level, this means:

- **Encouraging instructional models that prioritize student talk**
- **Supporting strategies that help teachers expand and scaffold language**
- **Ensuring expectations for discourse are clear across classrooms**

Intentional conversation routines strengthen comprehension while also supporting oral language development, which is particularly important for multilingual learners.



### 3. Explicit and systematic vocabulary instruction

While students acquire some vocabulary naturally, research shows that explicit instruction is essential for learning academic and content-specific language.

Effective Tier 1 systems:

- **Integrate vocabulary instruction across subjects**
- **Emphasize morphology (prefixes, roots, suffixes)**
- **Reinforce new words consistently throughout the week**

When districts prioritize vocabulary development, they equip students with tools that transfer across texts, grades, and disciplines. This, in turn, reduces long-term reliance on intervention.



#### Why this matters for MTSS and long-term outcomes

Rather than treating language comprehension as an instructional “extra,” districts should recognize it as **foundational to effective Tier 1 instruction**.

Districts that intentionally strengthen language comprehension:

- **Reduce the number of students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 support**
- **Improve access to grade-level content**
- **Support equity by addressing background knowledge gaps early**
- **Build more sustainable MTSS frameworks**

From a leadership perspective, investing in language comprehension within Tier 1 is both an instructional and fiscal strategy. Shifting systems from remediation to prevention benefits students and protects budgets.

## Conclusion

Decoding instruction is essential, but it is not sufficient on its own. Without strong language comprehension, students cannot fully access meaning, learn from text, or sustain literacy growth over time.

For district leaders, the takeaway is clear:



**Language comprehension must be intentionally designed into Tier 1 systems.**



When districts align curriculum, instructional expectations, and professional learning around both decoding and language development, they create the conditions for lasting reading success.

Just as a rope's strength depends on every strand, reading comprehension depends on language comprehension as an anchor. If it is left underdeveloped, the entire system weakens. When it is strengthened deliberately and consistently, students are far more likely to thrive – today and in the years ahead.

## Let's talk about your district's literacy goals

[Schedule a consultation today](#)



## 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.

