Reading eggs

The Great Debate:
Reading Skills vs. Content Knowledge

By Lynne Kulich, Ph.D.

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Who fishes?

It's 2011, the day after our state ELA test. I was a literacy coach at an urban middle school when three 7th-grade boys knocked on my office door.

"How was the test?" I asked.

Their response is one I'll never forget: **"Can you believe we had to read a story about fishing? Who fishes?!"**

Ironically, I live just 10 minutes north of that school, and my backyard boasts a lake where my own children fish off our dock. Clearly, these students had never fished and probably couldn't leverage any background knowledge while reading. If the text included words like *culling*, *barb*, *angler*, or *backlash*, those boys were probably sunk.

That moment stayed with me – not because the passage was unfair, but because it revealed something important: **comprehension depends on more than reading skills alone.**

Why background knowledge matters

When students can flexibly connect sound and meaning, the next challenge is ensuring they have the background knowledge to make sense of complex texts.

> **One of the strongest findings in reading research is that comprehension improves when students have deep knowledge about a topic.**

Yet many classrooms still move from text to text without systematically building the coherent background knowledge that makes comprehension possible.

We've made important progress through Science of Reading-aligned instruction, particularly in early grades. But if students don't continue building vocabulary and knowledge over time, the gains from early reading reforms can fade in later grades.

The goal isn't to choose *between* reading skills and knowledge-building. The goal is to design instruction that intentionally supports *both*.

Beyond "how to read": Teaching students what to read about

I'm reminded of a story my husband tells about his grandfather, who spoke Russian and very little English. They were together on a dock with fishing poles when his grandfather said:

"Fish... bite... hook."

That was the extent of the fishing lesson.

Teaching kids to read requires more than a few mechanics. **Students need both foundational skills and a growing "tackle box" of knowledge** to help them understand what they read.

Research supports what many educators observe: teaching comprehension strategies alone – like using context clues or "making inferences" – is not enough. Comprehension depends heavily on students' language comprehension, vocabulary, and understanding of the world.

That means reading instruction can't be separated from experiences embedded with content. **Comprehension develops by reading deep and wide**. Students need exposure to rich stories, engaging nonfiction, and meaningful discussion that deepens vocabulary and builds background knowledge.

In many classrooms, this takes the form of:

- **Thematic units in science or social studies**
- **High-quality read-alouds**
- **Structured conversation and writing**
- **Repeated exposure to important concepts and vocabulary**

Below are practical ways schools and districts can build knowledge across the day while still protecting foundational skills time.

Practical instructional strategies to build knowledge and strengthen comprehension

1. Read-alouds (yes, even for older students)

Students who read for pleasure tend to select books aligned to their interests. Over time, they may build deep knowledge in familiar areas.

But many students, especially striving readers, need additional support to expand their knowledge base. One powerful way to do that is through intentional **daily read-alouds using rich, complex texts students may not yet access independently.**

Read-alouds:

- **Build vocabulary and background knowledge**
- **Expose students to both complex sentence structures and academic language**
- **Support comprehension without requiring students to decode every word**
- **Work across grade levels, including middle school**

Read-alouds can happen beyond the ELA block, too – during science, social studies, advisory, or intervention time.

2. Text sets that build coherent knowledge

Text sets are curated collections of texts intentionally grouped around a topic or theme. They help students build knowledge through multiple exposures and perspectives.

Text sets can:

- **Build cumulative understanding of a topic**
- **Support comprehension by filling knowledge gaps**
- **Introduce and reinforce domain-specific vocabulary**
- **Integrate literacy with science and social studies**
- **Differentiate instruction using varied complexity levels**

When students repeatedly read, discuss, and write about connected topics, they're better prepared to comprehend complex texts over time.

3. Vocabulary as the bridge to comprehension

If we want students to comprehend a text, they must understand most of the words within it. When students lack content-related vocabulary, their ability to make meaning breaks down, especially in informational texts.

Treating vocabulary as anything less than essential is a dead end, because vocabulary directly drives academic success across all content areas.

Strong vocabulary instruction includes:

- **Student-friendly definitions (not dictionary language)**
- **Explicit teaching of key terms tied to meaning**
- **Multiple exposures across contexts**
- **Integration with knowledge-building content**

A practical way to choose which words to teach is to ask:

- **Is this word essential to understanding the text?**
- **Will students see it again this year (or across subjects)?**
- **Will it show up in discussion and writing?**
- **Is it a "power word" that unlocks related concepts?**

When vocabulary and content instruction work together, students build stores of knowledge that support comprehension, writing, and long-term achievement.

4. Images and videos that build (not replace) understanding

Multimedia can be a powerful tool for building background knowledge. It can be particularly beneficial for multilingual learners and students who need additional context before reading complex texts – but under one condition: it must be used intentionally.

Effective multimedia use includes:

- **Using visuals to make abstract concepts concrete**
- **Keeping videos short and focused**
- **Guiding attention with an essential question**
- **Pausing for discussion and reflection**
- **Teaching students how to "read" images and evaluate sources**
- **Supporting critical thinking (authenticity, bias, and context)**

During multimedia time, students should be active viewers, not passive consumers. When visuals support reading rather than replace it, they can strengthen comprehension and accelerate learning.

The takeaway for district and school leaders

The most effective literacy systems do not treat reading as a set of isolated or disconnected skills.

They build fluent decoding *and* the knowledge that makes comprehension possible. They protect foundational skills time while also prioritizing content-rich instruction, vocabulary, and coherent learning across the day.

This is where the "great debate" resolves:

> **Students need both skills and knowledge — because comprehension depends on both working together.**

How 3P Learning Supports Knowledge-Rich Literacy Instruction

Strong literacy systems develop both the foundational skills required to read and the knowledge that makes comprehension possible.

3P Learning's literacy programs are designed to support this balanced approach by combining explicit instruction aligned to the Science of Reading with meaningful exposure to rich texts, vocabulary, and knowledge-building content.

Reading Eggs (PreK–Grade 5)

Reading Eggs supports the development of essential reading skills through structured, evidence-based instruction, including:

- **Phonemic awareness**
- **Phonics**
- **Vocabulary**
- **Fluency**
- **Comprehension**

Beyond foundational skills, Reading Eggs helps students build the knowledge and language comprehension needed for deeper understanding through:

- **A digital library of 4,000+ books spanning a wide range of topics and genres**
- **Vocabulary development embedded in meaningful reading experiences**
- **Comprehension activities that encourage students to think about and learn from texts**

Supporting Strong Tier 1 Literacy Instruction

Reading Eggs helps schools strengthen Tier 1 instruction by supporting both the decoding skills and the background knowledge students need for lasting reading success.

Through explicit instruction, rich texts, and structured vocabulary development, these programs help educators build confident readers who are prepared to understand increasingly complex material across subjects.

Schedule a consultation today.

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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.

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