

Fluency: The Missing Link Between Phonics and Comprehension

How schools and MATs can strengthen comprehension by focusing on the missing bridge between decoding and understanding



This article is based on insights from the 3P Learning EdChat Series, our expert-led webinar programme exploring evidence-based approaches to literacy and numeracy. In this session, we spoke with Dr Tim Rasinski, a leading literacy researcher, about the critical role fluency plays in early reading success and why prevention-focused interventions outpace traditional retention strategies.

Why prevention, not intervention alone, should be the focus of early literacy development

The early years of primary education mark a critical stage in reading development – the point where pupils move from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.

In England, most schools now work to a familiar milestone: the statutory Phonics Screening Check, sat by pupils in Year 1. In 2025, 80 per cent of pupils met the expected standard, unchanged from 2024, rising to 89 per cent by the end of Year 2.

But passing the check only tells schools that a pupil can decode words accurately. It doesn't measure whether they can read with the speed, accuracy and expression needed to genuinely understand what they're reading – and across the UK, this is where many pupils get stuck:

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they can sound out words, but fluency, and the comprehension it unlocks, remains out of reach.

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In our recent EdChat session, Dr Tim Rasinski, highlighted a critical but often overlooked component of effective reading instruction: **reading fluency**.



Why fluency matters more than many schools realise

Reading fluency – the ability to read with speed, accuracy and expression – is a key predictor of comprehension. Yet, many early literacy programmes focus solely on phonics, leaving fluency by the wayside.

As Dr Rasinski explains:

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Phonics is necessary, but it's not sufficient. It's like giving students all the ingredients for a meal but never teaching them how to cook. Fluency is the bridge between word recognition and true comprehension.

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Without fluency, even pupils with strong phonics skills struggle to process and understand what they read.

Why prevention beats intervention alone

Struggling readers who fall behind often need more than repeated instruction; they need a different kind of support. Simply giving pupils more time – or repeating the same instruction without fluency-focused strategies that address the specific gaps holding them back – tends to produce the same result: **frustrated pupils who continue to struggle.**

Pupils require intentional opportunities to:

- hear fluent reading modelled
- practise reading with support
- re-read connected text
- develop expression and phrasing
- build automatic word recognition



Fluency development helps pupils move from simply decoding text to truly understanding and engaging with what they read.

For schools and trusts, this represents an important shift:

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from remediation-focused approaches toward earlier, evidence-based fluency instruction embedded within everyday literacy teaching.

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A research-backed approach: The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)

During the webinar, Dr Rasinski shared an evidence-based strategy proven to accelerate literacy growth in as little as four months: **the Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)**. This 15-minute daily practice combines multiple research-backed techniques to dramatically improve fluency and comprehension.

How it works:

- **Modelled reading:** Teachers read texts aloud, demonstrating proper pace and expression.
- **Assisted reading:** Students read alongside a fluent reader (teacher, peer or audiobook).
- **Repeated readings:** Students re-read the same text to build automaticity.
- **Performance reading:** Students 'perform' a poem or passage for an audience.
- **Word study:** The lesson ends with phonics and vocabulary reinforcement.

This combination of modelling, guided support, repetition and meaningful reading practice helps students build fluency more effectively than isolated decoding instruction alone.



Proven results: What the research says

In a US study shared during the webinar, a fourth-grade teacher (equivalent to Year 5 in the UK) implemented FDL with six struggling readers, each at risk of retention. In just four months:

- **Fluency increased by an average of 28 words per minute** – twice the expected growth rate.
- **Comprehension levels jumped by more than a full year level.**
- **Pupils caught up to their peers** faster than traditional interventions allowed.

These findings mirror those of the US National Reading Panel and other literacy researchers: fluency-building strategies accelerate literacy gains more effectively than phonics alone.

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How schools and multi-academy trusts can implement this approach

School and trust leaders can advocate for fluency-based instruction within their literacy programmes as a core strategy, not an afterthought.

Here are several practical ways schools can strengthen fluency instruction across classrooms:

- 1. Embed fluency instruction into daily literacy blocks:** Integrate explicit and structured fluency practice as a core component of daily literacy instruction.
- 2. Incorporate repeated readings and performance-based activities:** Encourage pupils to read and re-read meaningful, engaging texts, including poetry, scripts and song lyrics.
- 3. Leverage technology for assisted reading:** Digital tools like [Reading Eggs](#) provide read-aloud features for fluency tracking and guided support to help pupils build automaticity.
- 4. Ensure struggling readers receive targeted fluency interventions:** Structured fluency-building practices, like the FDL, help struggling pupils catch up quickly and confidently.



The future of early literacy: From intervention to acceleration

As Dr Rasinski states, fluency is the missing piece in early literacy instruction. Rather than relying on repeated instruction alone, schools can prioritise fluency development so pupils move beyond decoding words to genuinely understanding and engaging with what they read.

By shifting the focus from catching up to accelerating growth, **schools can help more pupils meet expected reading standards the first time.**



About Dr Tim Rasinski

Dr Tim Rasinski is Professor Emeritus of Literacy Education at Kent State University and former director of its award-winning reading clinic.

A leading expert in reading fluency and word study, he has authored more than **50 books** and **over 200 articles** on literacy education. His research has been cited by the National Reading Panel and published in top journals, including Reading Research Quarterly and The Reading Teacher. Dr Rasinski has served on the Board of Directors for the International Reading Association, co-edited The Reading Teacher and Journal of Literacy Research and was elected to the International Reading Hall of Fame. He has received multiple awards for his contributions to literacy education.

Want to learn more?

- [Watch our full webinar recording](#): Access the full discussion with Dr Tim Rasinski.
- [Explore Reading Eggs for schools and MATs](#): Our EdTech Impact-certified, research-backed online literacy programme for students in R–7 provides fluency-building tools, hundreds of decodable texts and engaging reading lessons that help pupils build the bridge from decoding to comprehension.

