

Reading to learn: why and how to support reading comprehension in primary schools

RCAN
Reading Comprehension
Advocacy Network

Reading comprehension: the current context

A child with poor reading comprehension cannot effectively read for meaning and learn across different content areas, and is less likely to read for pleasure. Yet, 25% of UK children leave primary school without being able to read at their age-expected level¹, despite 90% passing the phonics screening check in Year 2². Poor knowledge about how to teach comprehension, a focus on assessment, and lack of resource are cited as barriers to effective reading comprehension instruction³.

Why reading comprehension matters

- **Reading comprehension in primary-school predicts learning across content areas and performance in secondary school.** Text processing skills in Year 3 predict KS2 SATs (English, Maths, & Science)^{4, 5} and reading comprehension in Year 10, after controlling for initial reading ability⁶.
- **Beyond decoding: Successful reading comprehension requires good language and text processing skills, in addition to word recognition.** Foundational language and text processing skills explain variance in reading comprehension scores, over and above word recognition and memory^{7, 8}.
- **Reading comprehension is related to reading motivation and engagement.** Better comprehenders report more positive attitudes to reading⁹ and engage in more leisure-time reading than peers¹⁰.

RCAN survey: four areas of concern³

- **Literacy instruction is fragmented.** Different aspects (word recognition, comprehension, oracy, writing) are taught separately, not integrated as research suggests they should be^{11, 12}.
- **Teachers do not know how to bridge the gap between teaching word recognition and text comprehension.** There is a belief that good comprehension results from word reading fluency¹³, but a lack of research support for a causal link^{14, 15}.
- **The teaching of comprehension is driven by assessment.** Tendency to teach to the test, using short extracts and previous SATs tests.
- **No time to foster reading for pleasure.** Busy curriculum provides little opportunity for reading to children, discussing and enjoying whole books, and fostering reading for pleasure (see also National Literacy Trust)¹⁶.

Policy recommendations

Start early! Reading comprehension can and should be fostered alongside instruction in word recognition skills. Reading comprehension instruction should be used to foster language, strategies, enjoyment, engagement, and knowledge growth - not just getting the word right. A focus on word recognition does not ensure good reading comprehension^{1, 2, 4, 5}.

Isolated skill and drill does not equal effective instruction. Instruction and interventions that include and integrate multiple skills and knowledge are most successful^{17, 18}.

Develop teacher knowledge. Teacher knowledge is related to effective classroom practice and reading comprehension scores¹⁹, yet UK teachers are less likely to have participated in professional development that targets the teaching of reading comprehension compared with teachers in comparator countries²⁰.

Reading comprehension should be included as a focus for English hubs. Hubs support CPD to improve the teaching of reading, yet do not currently list reading comprehension as a focus.

The Reading Comprehension Advocacy Network is co-lead by Prof Emerita Jane Oakhill (University of Sussex) and Prof Kate Cain (Lancaster University).

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The Reading Comprehension Advocacy Network (RCAN) was established in 2025. It will provide: **(a)** strategic direction and leadership to inform, challenge and influence education policy in England, at local, regional and national levels, and **(b)** opportunities to develop and transform policy and practice in the area of primary school reading comprehension. The main goals are to: **(a)** develop a position statement (with evidence-based report) on the current situation in English primary schools, and **(b)** establish the priorities for further research and action. The Reading Comprehension Advocacy Network (RCAN) will engage with stakeholders and policy makers to share ideas and findings. This collaboration will drive a more coherent and research-based approach to the teaching of, and remediation of difficulties with, reading comprehension.

We are psychologists, who research children's development of, and problems with reading comprehension, in primary school (both in collaboration and independently). We have authored numerous papers, book chapters, and books, including a co-authored handbook for teachers. We have each received national and international awards in recognition of our contributions to science and our work translating research to practice.

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