

# Five ways to ensure your teaching of reading is effective

Teaching children to read is complex. There are many things that schools need to get right for their pupils to flourish as readers. However, from observations in schools and discussions with fellow professionals, it is my belief that there are certain elements of reading teaching that are frequently overlooked despite their importance.

Here are five questions that deserve more consideration than they are currently afforded:

## 1. How is phonics monitored?

Every primary school in England is required to teach phonics systematically. It goes without saying that if phonics is not taught well, then children's reading will suffer. However, the extent to which children's phonics progress is monitored through Year 2 and beyond varies dramatically between schools. Often, even those children that pass the Phonics Screening Check return to school in Year 2 having forgotten much of the learning content experienced just a few months earlier. In response, schools should ensure that they can explain where every student is on their phonics journey and have systematic phonics interventions in place for those that still struggle despite thorough, responsive phonics teaching, be they in Year 2 or Year 6.

## 2. How is reading fluency taught and assessed?

There are several reasons why children in Upper Key Stage 2 might struggle to comprehend what they have read, and chief among these reasons is slow decoding that prevents understanding ([National Reading Panel, 2000](#)). [Editor's note: 'Upper Key Stage 2' refers to Years 5 and 6 in the English school system.]

There is a substantial body of evidence to suggest that repeated oral reading of short texts that are towards the upper limits of children's current reading ability can support children's development of the components of fluency, which are essential to reading comprehension<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, this crucial area is too often neglected in primary schools. In Year 2 and Lower Key Stage 2, fluency practice should be a major component of reading instruction, either as standalone lessons or as a regular part of reading sessions (see [Such, 2019](#), for more information on fluency practice). [Editor's note: 'Lower Key Stage 2' refers to Years 3 and 4 in the English school system.] Either way, it should never be dissociated from the ultimate purpose of reading, and well-chosen texts should ensure that the comprehension undertaken during fluency practice is valuable on its own terms ([Pikulski & Chard, 2005](#)).



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<sup>1</sup>These components of reading fluency can be described as accuracy, automaticity and prosody. Prosody is concerned with the tone, intonation, stress and rhythm of speech – in this case the idea that these allow oral reading to sound natural and comfortable, akin to spoken language.

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Fluency should also be assessed to allow timely responses to the needs of individual children and classes. Tests of reading fluency such as [DIBELS assessments](#), while something of a blunt instrument, are useful when used in conjunction with teacher judgements, which give context to results.

### 3. How much decoding do children do each week?

This is arguably the most important and overlooked question one can ask about a school's reading instruction. It may seem prosaic, but the process of learning to read – in particular the development of rapid word recognition – can be considered as statistical ([Seidenberg, 2017](#)); our brains are pattern-spotting machines, and we rely on vast quantities of information to strengthen and hone our command of the patterns in the English language.

This means it is essential that children spend lots of time meeting new text every school day, increasing their reading 'mileage'. You might be thinking, Isn't this obvious? Maybe it is, but this doesn't stop some children spending as little as 10 or 20 minutes each week processing text while children in similar schools do several times as much. While children's fluency is still developing, whole-class reading can ensure that reading mileage is prioritised. (I recommend children and adults take turns to read aloud; rulers and quick word checks can be used to ensure that children are focusing and keeping pace, and struggling readers can explore the text in advance during interventions to support this.)

Once fluency is relatively established (100+ words per minute oral reading speed with high accuracy), silent reading followed by text-dependent questions is the most efficient method for children to meet new text.

### 4. How is vocabulary development supported?

Reading comprehension and vocabulary development reinforce one another. Plenty of time spent reading is essential, but vocabulary development can be best supported in two ways – by teaching children particularly useful words and by revealing to them

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the etymological and morphological structure of the English language. The first of these requires a rationale for which words to choose, and [Beck, McKeown and Kucan \(2013\)](#) attempt to provide one by considering vocabulary as existing in three tiers. Crucially, what they define as 'Tier 2' words are those that are rare in day-to-day informal language, but are used across the curriculum (i.e., they are not specific to particular subjects or contexts). By combining the concept of Tier 2 vocabulary with the most common words in the English language, it is possible to compile a list of words that can be introduced to children, either in reading sessions, standalone vocabulary sessions or through 'word-of-the-day' style teaching. (For just such a list – or guidance on how to compile one – see [here](#)).

In addition, a large amount of the morphological and etymological structure of English can be revealed to children by teaching them key Latin and Greek root words (e.g., acro-, meta-) and by highlighting key morphemes that modify English words (e.g., un-, dis-). While this teaching of vocabulary might seem detached from context, trust me when I say that the context will find you; teach children a Tier 2 word like 'influence' or a morpheme like 'dis', and you won't

have to wait long for children to notice these in texts and class discussions, much to the benefit of their reading.

Ideally, however, Tier 2 vocabulary, Latin and Greek root words and morphological awareness can, and should, be integrated into your wider school curriculum, though this is naturally a task that takes a significant amount of time and thought, so consider teaching discrete vocabulary lessons in the meantime.

### 5. Does the rest of the curriculum build children's knowledge of the world?

Reading comprehension relies on background knowledge ([Kendeou & van den Broek, 2007](#)). Put simply, high-quality teaching of science, history, geography, etc. *is* teaching reading. A curriculum that is coherently structured allows the knowledge children gain to become part of a rich network of understanding that they can use in their reading and beyond.

Many elements of the teaching of reading are not included above, not least the power of reading aloud to children. What I have described in this article are just the elements that are most frequently overlooked, despite their importance. Whether you're a head teacher, a reading coordinator or a class teacher, thinking carefully about the five questions above is a considerable step towards ensuring your students have the best chance of learning to read.

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*This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [Primary Colour](#).*

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