

## Language: A Key Component of Knowledge – And Vice Versa

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You're the cream in my coffee,  
You're the salt in my stew;  
You will always be  
My necessity--  
I'd be lost without you.

So sang Mel Torme, Nat King Cole, and Marlene Dietrich. And so should sing every educator about the destined match between knowledge and language. Language and knowledge go together. You can't know a lot without having a big vocabulary – that's obvious, but so is the fact that you can't have a big vocabulary without knowing a lot. Language and knowledge are fused in the human mind. You can't separate them any more than you can unscramble an egg.

We have always understood that the “Core Knowledge Program” is also a “Core Language Program.” Many people don't realize that language proficiency was the bulls-eye center of the Core Knowledge mission from the start. In my early book, *Cultural Literacy*, which came out at the same time the Core Knowledge Foundation was started, the key point was that literacy is far more than just the technique of reading and writing. In fact, the ability to read, learn, and communicate is not even mainly a technique; once basic mechanics are learned, it's mainly relevant knowledge. I cited a lot of research from various fields all of which converged on the conclusion that language proficiency is knowledge proficiency and vice versa. Since that time, work in cognitive psychology has confirmed and reconfirmed this insight. Nonetheless, many educational experts still persist in conceiving reading proficiency as mainly a technique, and you will find that idea enshrined in most the standard reading programs. But as Professor Joseph Torgesen and his colleagues have shown, when students show deficiencies in reading comprehension, it's most often because they lack knowledge.

If the world of American education had fully grasped that truth, our reading scores across the nation would not be so depressingly low. But to improve that result we have to take the long view. Growth in language and knowledge is very gradual. The Core Knowledge program has over time raised reading comprehension scores significantly. But beware of false overnight claims. Progress is slow. The only known way to enhance language abilities in all students is to follow a cumulative and coherent knowledge-based curriculum, with one grade building on the previous one in a coherent, cumulative way.

Advances in language and knowledge can be speeded up by schools in two ways. First, a school needs to focus selectively and coherently on the knowledge that is going to be the most productive for gaining proficiency in language. That's what Core Knowledge schools have been doing for a number of years. Second, schools can use time productively even within the literacy block where they can make sure that students stay immersed in a subject matter context (scientists call it a “domain”) long enough for them to become familiar with its concepts and vocabulary. The Core Knowledge Foundation has recently undertaken the large task of creating a comprehensive knowledge-based reading and language arts program to be used in the literacy block.

What is chiefly needed – as much as any program – is a change of view from the over simple idea that low reading comprehension is caused by poor technique to a truer conception that it is mainly caused by lack of knowledge. The problem of low reading comprehension across the nation will only be solved by taking the long view, and imparting a carefully sequenced knowledge-based curriculum that builds cumulatively from kindergarten through high school.