

Appendix A:

Why Listening and Learning Are Critical to Reading Comprehension

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Those who follow education know all too well that concern about poor student achievement in literacy has reached levels that border on desperation. By every standard measure, it is clear that large numbers of students are leaving American schools ill-prepared to pursue higher education or careers due to poor literacy skills. On international comparisons of reading achievement, the United States ranks below nearly all other countries, surpassed by the likes of Finland, Korea, Japan, and even Hungary and Poland. Longitudinal test results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show little or no growth over a period of decades

Some progress has been made in recent years in the early elementary grades, thanks to both the Reading First initiative and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation which have underscored the importance of explicitly and systematically teaching decoding skills. Since the inception of these programs, test scores in the very early grades (K–2) have risen. This improvement reflects the benefits of explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, systematic phonics, and the development of fluency.

Unfortunately, however, these initial improvements have proven unsustainable. As these very same students moved into the upper elementary grades, their test scores have dropped or flat-lined. The conclusion is inescapable: the explicit teaching of decoding skills is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve the goal of full literacy. While systematically teaching decoding leads to improved performance on early reading evaluations, which focus on decoding skills, American educators have yet to find an analogous remedy that leads to improved test scores in the latter grades, when the focus shifts to assessing whether students understand what they read. The approach currently favored by most language arts programs, hours of instructional time to teaching and practicing an ever expanding collection of reading comprehension strategies, has proven ineffective. Current research suggests that teaching reading strategies has value in helping students recognize the purpose for reading and may lead to a slight boost in reading comprehension scores, but not the sustained improvement that would be indicative of true literacy. Something is still missing.

What’s missing is background knowledge. “Most of us think about reading in a way that is fundamentally incorrect,” observes University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham. “We think of it as transferable, meaning that once you acquire the ability to read, you can read anything. But being able to decode letter strings fluently is only half of reading. In order to understand what you’re reading, you need to know something about the subject matter. And that doesn’t just mean that you need to know the vocabulary—you need to have the right knowledge of the world,” he says.

The successful experience of schools using Core Knowledge during the past twenty years demonstrates the importance of background knowledge to reading comprehension. Time and again, schools implementing the content-specific Core Knowledge curriculum have noted that even though state and standardized tests are not tied to the *Core Knowledge Sequence*, student performance on such tests improves at statistically significant levels when students are exposed to Core Knowledge over several years. Instead of scores dropping or flat lining at the upper grade levels, Core Knowledge students’ test scores actually rise! “General reading comprehension ability is much more than comprehension strategies,” wrote Core Knowledge founder E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his 2006 book *The Knowledge Deficit*; “it requires a definite range of general knowledge.”

In order to understand what is read, it is absolutely necessary to have knowledge of relevant things that are not explicitly stated. Reading is a two-lock box, and opening that box requires not only adequate decoding skills but also language, vocabulary and background knowledge that provide a foundation and underlying context for students to understand what they are reading.

There is “truly a mountain of data that students must have content knowledge to read effectively,” says Willingham. Unfortunately, existing language arts programs have not been designed to build this foundation of language, vocabulary and background knowledge. This is why the Core Knowledge Foundation is creating the *Core Knowledge Language Arts* program.

LANGUAGE—LISTENING, SPEAKING, READING, AND WRITING

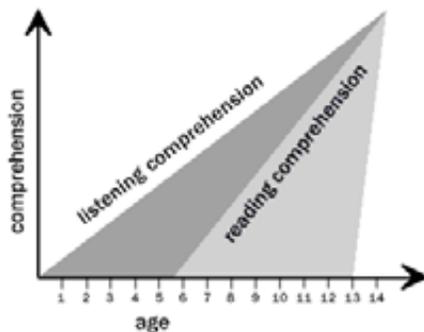
Traditional language arts instruction has typically paid little attention to listening and speaking. This failure to focus on the development of oral language in language arts instruction is a serious oversight. The ability to read and write written language, is highly correlated with students’ oral language proficiency, and the ability to understand a text read aloud is a prerequisite for making sense of the same text in printed form. It is essential that children build listening and speaking competency while also developing reading and writing skills.

Linguists distinguish between receptive and expressive language. Receptive language is language that we take in, process and understand. Expressive language is language we generate and produce. Oral language is spoken language or speech. Written language is print. Oral language is primary. Written language builds upon it.

| | Receptive Language | Expressive Language |
|------------------|---|--|
| Oral Language | Listening | Speaking |
| Written Language | Reading (two keys: <i>decoding + comprehension</i>) | Writing (<i>handwriting, spelling, written composition</i>) |

Researchers who study the development of language in young children point out that oral language development precedes and is the foundation for written language development. Children’s oral language competence is strongly predictive of their facility in learning to read and write. A child’s listening and speaking vocabulary, and even mastery of syntax, set boundaries as to what they can read and understand no matter how well they can decode.

It is important to note that for young children in preschool and the early grades, *receptive and expressive abilities do not develop simultaneously or at the same pace; receptive language generally precedes expressive language*. Science confirms what common sense suggests: children need to be able to understand words before they can produce and use them. The groundbreaking work of Hart and Risley (1995), who studied young children in the context of their early family life, found the number of words they heard before they arrived in kindergarten predicted how many words they understood and how fast they could learn new words in kindergarten. Even more significantly, five years later, in third grade, early language competence still predicted language and reading comprehension. The preschoolers who had heard more words, and subsequently learned more words orally, became better readers.



Source: T. G. Sticht and J. James, “Listening and reading,” in P. Pearson, ed., *Handbook of Research on Reading*. New York: Longmans, 1984. (1984)

This finding offers a profoundly important lesson for educators. *Early language disadvantage persists and manifests itself as illiteracy when educational practices fail to recognize the importance of oral language.* A meta-analysis of research by Thomas Sticht (1984) reinforces the importance and primacy of oral language, suggesting that it endures well past the time during which most children have started reading independently. Sticht's analysis strongly suggests that children's listening comprehension outpaces reading comprehension until the middle school years (grades 6–8).

The takeaway message is clear and obvious: we must devote at least as much time during the language arts block to reading *aloud* to young children as we currently devote to providing children with the skills they will need to decode and encode language. This is one of the fundamental premises of the Listening and Learning Strand of the *Core Knowledge Language Arts* program.

BUILDING LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND CONTENT KNOWLEDGE BY READING ALOUD

Written text makes use of richer vocabulary and more complex syntax than conversational language. It is important that young children be exposed not only to the language of everyday conversation but also to the richer and more formal language of books. This is best done through frequent reading aloud. Children's ability to understand what they hear far outpaces their ability to independently read and understand written text. By listening to stories or nonfiction selections read aloud, children can experience the complexities of written language without expending cognitive energy on decoding. Helping young children develop the ability to listen to and understand written texts read aloud must be an integral part of any initiative designed to build literacy.

CHOOSING READ-ALOUDS

Not just any read-aloud(s), however, will do. First, careful consideration should be given to the selection of text read aloud to ensure that the vocabulary and syntax presented is rich and complex.

Furthermore, to make efficient use of instructional time, read-alouds must also be selected that build a broad knowledge base, while simultaneously building listening comprehension and language skills. To do this, the selection of *read-alouds within a given grade level and across grade levels must be guided by a coherent, sequenced approach to building knowledge.* This can be achieved by selecting fiction and nonfiction read-alouds from grade level topics identified in the *Core Knowledge Sequence*. The topics for read-alouds in the Listening and Learning Strand of the *Core Knowledge Language Arts* program have been chosen on this basis.

By reading a story or nonfiction selection aloud, we allow children to experience written language without the burden of decoding, granting them access to content they may not be able to read and understand by themselves. They are then free to focus their mental energy on the words and ideas presented in the text, gaining the language and background knowledge that will be needed to tackle rich, written content on their own.

DOMAINS AND STAYING ON A TOPIC

Building knowledge systematically in language arts is like giving children various pieces of a puzzle in each grade that, over time, will form the big picture. As noted above, read-alouds—within and across grade levels—need to be selected around topics or domains that systematically build knowledge. A domain is an area of knowledge, such as the human body, plants, astronomy, Native Americans, civil rights, and so on. It is strongly recommended that daily read-alouds focus on a single domain over a sustained period of time—about two weeks—rather than intermingling randomly selected read-alouds on a variety of topics. The *Tell It Again! Read-Aloud Anthologies* for the Listening and Learning Strand are organized by domain.

Staying on a topic or domain increases the chances that students will receive multiple exposures to key vocabulary words. For example, in the kindergarten Plants domain, students get multiple

exposures to key words from this domain, such as *nutrients*, *photosynthesis*, *crop*, and *harvest*. Hearing these kinds of words used in meaningful contexts over the course of a domain efficiently and exponentially increases the rate at which children acquire new vocabulary.

Acquisition of both language and knowledge will also be enhanced if, following each read-aloud, children participate in rich, structured conversations with an adult in response to the written text that has been read aloud. In this way, they can begin to orally practice comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing ideas in written text in much the same way as they will be expected to do as independent readers in the later grades.

ENSURING COHERENCE

The knowledge children have learned about particular topics in early grade levels should then be expanded and developed in subsequent grade levels to ensure an increasingly deeper understanding of these topics.

The *Core Knowledge Sequence* is designed to provide schools with a coherent, cumulative and content-specific curriculum. In Core Knowledge schools, teaching and learning are more effective as teachers help students build upon prior knowledge and make more efficient progress from one year to the next. All students enjoy more equal educational opportunities as they are motivated by consistently challenging content. And all children are prepared to become members of the wider national community, respectful of diversity while strengthened by the shared knowledge that helps unite us on common ground.

To learn more, visit the Core Knowledge Reading Room on our website at www.coreknowledge.org.

You can also find the following articles online:

Building Knowledge

The Case for Bringing Content into the Language Arts Block and for a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum Core for All Children

By E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

American Educator, Spring 2006

http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/hirsch.htm

How Knowledge Helps

It Speeds and Strengthens Reading Comprehension, Learning—and Thinking

By Daniel T. Willingham

American Educator, Spring 2006

http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/willingham.htm

Teaching Content Is Teaching Reading

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiP-ijdxqEc>

The Importance of Oral Language

The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3

By Betty Hart and Todd Risley

American Educator, Spring 2003

http://archive.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2003/catastrophe.html