

Reading comprehension is an outcome, not one specific skill

Reading Comprehension (RC) is a complex and often oversimplified term. RC is an outcome, not one specific skill. RC is the result of foundational reading skills intertwined with vocabulary, background knowledge, an understanding of how words and phrases work together, and strategies used to analyze and understand different kinds of writing. The problem is that many people talk about RC as if it were an isolatable skill.

When a child presents with what appears to be a RC problem, it is important to use assessment data to understand the root cause of the difficulty. For example, a child with dyslexia may have strong vocabulary and background knowledge, but struggles to read the words on the page. A child who cannot efficiently read the words on the page is not going to comprehend what they read. One easy way to see if this is the case is to read a child a passage and then ask them to answer questions about that passage. If they have no trouble with this task, they likely have a decoding problem, not a language comprehension problem. In other words, the problem is that they have not had a chance to master what letters make what sounds.

Conversely, another child may have no trouble whatsoever reading the words on the page, but does not have strong enough vocabulary or background knowledge to understand the words they are reading. As an example, if you were asked to read an article on neurobiology written by PhDs for PhDs, you may be able to read the words on the page, but it is unlikely you would comprehend what you are reading enough to answer questions about what you read.

Here is why it is critical to use assessment data to understand why a child appears to have a RC issue. We have tutored students who have clear decoding gaps and gaps in phonemic awareness (the

ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds in words), but their reading supports focus on RC strategies such as “Find the Main Idea” Or “Summarize.” These strategies, which the child has likely mastered in their regular classroom will never help the child read the words on the page.

Dr. Charles Perfetti in a piece he published in 1985 put this a little bit differently. He said “Reading is thinking guided by print.”

Let’s say that a child does, in fact, have comprehension difficulties that are not related to word reading difficulties. Research shows that children do benefit from instruction in reading comprehension strategies. However, research by Rosenshine and Meister (1994), and Rosenshine, Meister and Chapman (1996) demonstrated that a reading strategy program that consisted of relatively few sessions (around 6 sessions) was no more effective than a reading strategy program that included 50 sessions.

According to Dr. Daniel T. Willingham (2006), teaching reading comprehension strategies can deliver a “one time boost” but that more valuable is intentional, systematic development of vocabulary and background knowledge.

All of this ties back to what we know from research about what constitutes strong reading instruction. Children benefit from explicit, systematic phonics in order to be able to read the words on the page. Children also benefit from explicit, robust vocabulary instruction and deep dives into a variety of subjects in order to build background knowledge. Children also benefit from exposure to rich, diverse texts and skilled discussions about these texts. This is particularly important in early grade school when what a child can comprehend is typically above the level at which they can read. This exposure helps develop background knowledge and also provides exposure to the varied structures of written language. The latter empowers students to understand how words work together to form meaning.

In short, if we can teach children to read the words on the page and empower them with the vocabulary, background knowledge, and exposure to the rules and structures that govern our language, reading comprehension will be the result.

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