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TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION

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Enhancing Reading Comprehension: An Overview

By Hallie Cohen, CALT, SLDI and Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D.

Decoding (D) x Language Comprehension (LC) = Reading Comprehension (RC)

- The Simple View of Reading, Gough and Tunmer, 1986

Introduction

Reading researchers have developed various models to illustrate the processes involved in reading comprehension (Hoover & Tunmer, 2020; Kim, 2017; Scarborough, 2001). These models may offer a big picture view of the complex cognitive processes involved in reading, but may not necessarily guide instructional next steps. Our goal in this issue of ***Teaching Reading in Brief*** is to provide educators with a broad overview of reading comprehension instruction. We will use an analytic approach (examining the smallest, foundational components first) rather than a synthetic one (combining skills using a top-down approach) to identify students' underlying skills and gaps to help discern suitable instruction for reading comprehension in the classroom and through intervention and special-education services. The areas we will review include:

1. Phonological awareness and phonics
2. Oral language
3. Word retrieval, working memory, and fluid reasoning
4. Syntax
5. Background knowledge
6. Metacognition and attention

Curious Question

Although the basis of modern English, an estimated 11% has origins in Anglo-Saxon. What percentage of that original language spoken in England is still in use today?

Although vocabulary is one of the Five Components of Reading identified by the National Reading Panel (2000), this composite skill spans several of the above areas to be discussed throughout this article. Subsequent articles in this ***Teaching Reading in Brief*** series, **Teaching Reading Comprehension**, will address the following topics in greater depth: (1) oral language development, (2) syntax, (3) inferencing, (4) phrasing and argument structure, and (5) affective features of reading comprehension.

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Shanahan (2025) makes clear that the goal of teaching reading comprehension is to develop strategies that ultimately improve students' capacity to comprehend text on their own. He contrasts this approach with teachers providing students with informational content to help them understand a specific text, such as explaining background information, identifying key points, highlighting the author's inferences, and other teacher-led strategies that expand students' world knowledge. We may remember our favorite teachers who made subjects come alive with enthusiastic presentations or interactive activities that helped us understand and apply new content. This kind of engaging instruction is critical to student learning, but does not teach the comprehension strategies necessary for independent reading.

The two strands of Scarborough's (2001) Reading Rope–language comprehension and word recognition–depict the instructional implications of the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). The necessary instruction depicted in these two strands is gradually taught over years of schooling, with the goal of ensuring every student can read proficiently and independently.

Teaching reading comprehension can be expressed in the adage:

Give a person to fish, and you feed them for a day.

Teach a person to fish, and you feed them for a lifetime.

image: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trout

1. Phonological Awareness and Phonics

The lower strands of the Reading Rope include phonological awareness, decoding, and sight-word recognition. We start with phonological awareness (PA), what Moats (2020) describes as the "[m]etalinguistic awareness of all levels of the speech-sound system [that] includes word boundaries, stress patterns, syllables, onset-rime units, and phonemes" (p. 302). These foundational skills can feel invisible to strong readers, but for those with poor articulation, hearing, auditory processing, or phonological memory, they can be substantial barriers to reading comprehension. For these students, addressing the specific area of deficit, in addition to decoding and morphological instruction, will be necessary.

English is a challenging language to orthographically map to the brain. The forty-four phonemes representing 250+ graphemes require direct, systematic, explicit instruction in both decoding and encoding over at least three years, most effectively in grades K-2 (Foorman et al., 2016). To ensure that every student learns to read at or above grade level, each school, district, or state should have an established evidence-aligned scope and sequence drawn from several evidence-aligned curricula (no one program can address them all) in the following areas:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Morphology and vocabulary
- Handwriting and keyboarding
- Syntax, grammar, mechanics, sentence, and paragraph writing

Direct and cumulative reading and writing instruction with guided practice and ongoing review of previously taught concepts will require substantial classroom time, up to 90 to 120 minutes of daily instruction (Reading Rockets, 2025). Regardless of grade level, students with persistent gaps in applying foundational skills will require repeated instruction and practice during class and/or in intervention services. A scope and sequence of more advanced literacy concepts and skills, such as the grammatical relationships between words, phrases, and subject/predicate, as well as sentence structure and morphosyntactic awareness, should continue into upper elementary and through high school. We will discuss these concepts in depth in the third article of the **Enhancing Reading Comprehension** series in ***Teaching Reading in Brief***.

2. Oral Language

One of the primary indicators that a student might struggle with reading comprehension is weak oral language skills. Expressive and receptive language intersect and integrate to form the basis of reading comprehension. This encompasses vocabulary, phonology, word decoding, and pragmatics (how language is used between people in various settings).

> Evidence from studies suggests that oral language measures account for a significant portion of the variance in reading comprehension, beyond word reading, and that children with persistent comprehension problems typically show weaknesses in these oral language domains (Adlof, 2020).

To assess oral language, teachers can listen to students' speech patterns, such as sentence formation and vocabulary. Teachers can also observe students' speech from a pragmatic perspective, such as how they understand and interact with peers and adults. These oral-language indicators reveal students' potential for comprehending grade-level text. Therefore, strengthening oral language will yield measurable gains in later reading comprehension (Scarborough, 2001). In the second article of this series, speech-language pathologist Cara Arduengo will delve into language acquisition and reading development, as well as instructional strategies to advance students' oral language.

3. Word Retrieval, Working Memory, and Fluid Reasoning

Successful comprehension of a text requires multiple neural networks that integrate both new and old information. These networks work together to facilitate information retrieval (Frank and Hicks, 2019). The speed at which an individual processes information, the way they integrate information from the text, and how they retain that information for later application play key roles in reading comprehension. What follows are four major cognitive components that influence reading comprehension proficiency.

- **Word retrieval** involves the brain searching for both phonological and semantic information about a word to produce it (i.e., retrieve it from memory).
- **Processing speed** and Rapid **Automatized Naming** refer to the speed at which an individual can access information.

list continues on the next page

- **Working memory** is the cognitive ability to hold and manipulate information presented in the moment.
- **Fluid reasoning** is a higher-order cognitive process that requires integrating new or stored information to solve problems, infer, or evaluate.

While there are clear connections between memory, processing speed, and fluid reasoning abilities and reading, researchers have not been able to consistently use a student's cognitive profile to identify intervention groups or plan for reading instruction. Training on cognitive processes tends to improve measures of those cognitive processes, but does not often transfer to improved reading skills (Kearns & Fuchs, 2018). Rather, the most beneficial information for planning reading instruction and intervention continues to be diagnostic data on the underlying language and literacy skills necessary for skills reading, with instruction focused on systematic, explicit, and diagnostic instruction to fill gaps and bolster automaticity (Burns et al., 2017). Students with relative weaknesses in processing speed and working memory often benefit from individualized, intensive instruction that ensures they reach mastery and automaticity with foundational literacy skills.

4. Syntax

Sentences are the building blocks of paragraphs, which are chock-full of content to comprehend. Thus, when students have awareness of sentence structure (syntax), they can more easily derive meaning from text.

Let's consider some of the elements of syntax that students need to learn:

- Subject/predicate relationships: Who or what? / Does what?
- How each word functions in a sentence (parts of speech)
- Morphosyntactic structures, such as the role of suffixes and how they change a word's function in a sentence

Cain and Oakhill (2009) explain the need for syntactic knowledge to aid comprehension. Syntax not only refers to the various parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, article, pronoun, preposition, and interjection) but also how words or phrases function in a sentence. To say only that a noun is a person, place, or thing, and a verb is an action word doesn't take into account usage. For example, the word ***dance*** can function in several different ways.

Dance as a **noun**: Come to the dance tomorrow night.
Dance as a **verb**: They dance until dawn.
Dance as an **adjective**: The dance competition went on for hours.

Syntactic awareness is the understanding of how words function as different parts of speech. Consider the sentence: ***Sally called her friend Mabel.*** If one uses the exact same words but in a different order, the meaning changes: ***Sally called Mabel her friend.*** By changing the word order, the relationship between the subject and predicate changes, and a different meaning emerges (Gombert, 1992). Word order not only determines how well an individual communicates but also how well a person comprehends both text and spoken

language (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). Nation and Snowling (2000) emphasize the importance of continuing to teach syntactic awareness for reading comprehension in grades 4-12, when sentence and paragraph structures become increasingly complex.

The subject/predicate relationship is central to how readers construct meaning from text. A complete sentence has a subject and a predicate. In a kernel (simple) sentence, the subject is usually a noun/noun phrase, and the predicate is the verb/verb phrase.

Subject	Predicate
John	ran home.
The brown horses	trotted.

Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) demonstrate that readers rely on these sentence-level structures to build meaning while integrating new information with existing knowledge. Explicit instruction on this relationship will help students more easily glean information from the text, thereby improving comprehension. Two questions that need to be addressed when analyzing the subject-predicate relationship are: **Who or what / did what?**

For example, let's look at these sentences:

The boy found a penny under the rock while waiting for the bus.

This sentence is laid out clearly. Who found the penny? ***The boy.*** What did the boy do? ***Found a penny.*** As soon as the order of clauses is reversed, many students find it difficult to identify the subject and predicate.

While waiting for the bus, the boy found a penny under a rock.

Many students will see ***waiting*** as the **did what** (predicate) and forget about what the boy found. There will also be students who will identify the ***rock*** as the **what** (subject). Asking the questions "Who found the penny?" or "What did the boy do?" will immediately guide the student to the sentence's main idea.

Morphosyntactic structures illuminate word and sentence meaning, such as singular/plural, verb tense, and point of view (i.e., first, second, or third person). English suffixes play a key role in determining parts of speech. If the base element is understood, the suffixes are more accessible: e.g., a ***hero*** (noun) can become ***heroic*** (adjective) and also act ***heroically*** (adverb).We can also talk about a ***heroine*** (female hero) or the nouns ***heroism*** or its synonym ***heroicism***. The meaning of the base word ***hero*** remains the same, though its purpose and suffix change in accordance with the sentence structure. These are all examples of derivational suffixes, in which the suffix changes the function of the word.

Inflectional suffixes include subject-verb agreement and verb tense, both of which are key to sentence comprehension. Verb tense indicates whether the events in the text take place in the past, present, or future. For example, social studies texts rely on verb tenses to connect historical events to current events, as seen in this example:

> Many people **think** of the United States as a young country. Yet it **has** the oldest written constitution among the major countries of the world. Moreover, the U.S. Constitution **was** the first in history to specifically **limit** the powers that the federal government **would be able to exercise** over its citizens (Kids Britannica, 2026).

In fiction, a character may reflect on the past while living in the present, as seen in this example:

> In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden **shares** with his teacher that ***he had*** **dropped out** of school while **thinking** about his next steps.

The third article in this series discusses syntax in more depth and includes recommendations for instruction.

5. Background Knowledge

Researchers have determined that students' background knowledge and vocabulary significantly affect reading comprehension, particularly inferencing. Gaultney (1995) found that poor decoders demonstrate stronger reading comprehension when familiar with a topic than stronger decoders who were not. Kamhi (2007) asserts that background knowledge is crucial for reading comprehension and argues that comprehension is not a discrete skill that can be mastered with teachable strategies, as phonics can. Instead, reading comprehension is always content-specific. When reading, students with sufficient background knowledge can create a situational model – a mental representation of the setting, events, and individuals described. While science texts often include visuals, analogies, or a glossary of terms, social studies texts can be among the most difficult for students to comprehend because authors expect broader background knowledge than many students possess. This creates a conundrum when teaching reading comprehension. Clearly, the focus must be on understanding the content at hand, which can be accomplished by pre-teaching content and vocabulary and helping students visualize a mental model (Shanahan et al., 2010). During and after reading the section or passage, teachers lead discussions to help students analyze the text and make connections to other aspects of the current and previous units (Shanahan et al., 2010). Additionally, taking notes while reading, summarizing paragraphs, and answering comprehension questions can help commit the new information to memory (Shanahan et al., 2010). These are instructional approaches that should be included in the school's scope and sequence and remediated as necessary. This builds invaluable background knowledge. Teacher-led scaffolds can be removed as students gain independence.

There are several, widely used, K-8 curricula used to teach background knowledge across subject areas. A district may purchase a vertically aligned PreK-12 curriculum, or draw on multiple programs grounded in state and national content standards to establish a robust "guaranteed and viable curriculum" (Marzano, 2003). Teachers need relevant materials and training to deliver effective instruction that reaches all students, especially those with limited background knowledge. Additionally, students benefit most from reading printed materials, as shown in a meta-analysis comparing reading comprehension across printed and digital formats (Delgado, Vargas, Ackerman, & Salmeron, 2019).

6. Metacognition and Attention

Metacognition

Adler (2001) describes metacognition as "thinking about thinking" (p. 42). More specifically, Birsh & Carreker (2017) describe it as "the conscious choice of the strategies used to accomplish a task and processes to provide feedback on learning and performance" (p. 831). As students become proficient learners, they develop their own metacognitive strategies to understand and remember new content and make connections with prior learning. Teachers improve students' language comprehension by expanding their background knowledge, inferencing skills, and vocabulary with instructional strategies necessary throughout students' K-12 education.

In our teaching practice, we have sought to improve students' metacognitive strategies for reading comprehension in the following ways:

- Create the parameters for the reading task and establish its purpose, such as:
  - To answer specific questions
  - To understand the identified concepts for a project or assessment
  - To compare the text to previously read text
  - To identify examples of fiction and nonfiction literary devices (idioms, metaphors, signal words, tone, analogies, foreshadowing, etc.)
- Show reading expectations with a completed model, such as an annotated text, a completed graphic organizer, or answers provided to text-based questions
- Preteach vocabulary (including relevant morphemes) and provide a list with student-friendly definitions and a digital tool (such as Merriam-Webster's online dictionary) to quickly look up a word's meaning(s) and pronunciation(s)
- Respond to students' questions and, as necessary, reteach strategies
- Sprinkle text-comprehension questions throughout the text that require summarization
- Provide a graphic organizer designed for the text's purpose with key concepts
- Create an effective learning environment
  - Remove distractions and maintain a quiet atmosphere
  - Pre-arrange workstations (desk or table) with the necessary materials students will need

Attention

Barkley (2023) states that Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is an Executive Function (EF) disorder because of the neurological areas involved. Hoover and Tunmer (2021) assert that poor Executive Functioning is not a direct cause of reading difficulties, as it can affect all learning. They cite empirical, consensus evidence that reading problems stem from gaps in word recognition, language comprehension, or both. Attributing reading difficulties to other factors, such as poor EF (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), lacks a strong evidence base and can confuse teachers who are deciding which remediation to provide. We have added metacognition and EF as contributing (albeit indirectly) factors for teachers to consider and incorporate in lesson plan design and classroom management, not as goals in themselves, but as approaches for creating a conducive, productive learning experience for students.

To be clear, for improving students' reading comprehension, teachers should focus on word recognition and language comprehension as well as address measured gaps in each of the subcategories:

- Language comprehension: Background knowledge, inferencing, syntax, and vocabulary
- Word recognition: Alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness, and phoneme-grapheme mapping

Thirty percent of students with dyslexia also have ADHD (International Dyslexia Association, 2020), and children with ADHD have a significantly higher risk of problems with reading and spelling than children who do not (Czamara et al., 2013). However, Kilpatrick (2015) states that, while students with ADHD "tend to have reading comprehension skills lower than their peers" (p. 241), many children with ADHD have strong comprehension. Thus, attention difficulties should not be the only attributed cause of reading difficulties. Barkley (2023) offers these focus strategies for students with ADHD:

- Don't rely on recollection. Instead, provide visible, physical reminders to guide students' behavior. In other words, externalize the information.
- Design more hands-on tasks to apply concepts, such as writing responses to questions or writing information in a graphic organizer.
- Chunk longer projects into smaller steps, with tasks completed daily to accomplish the goal.
- Provide timers to show how much time students have to complete a task.
- Motivate students by helping them visualize the learning goal and giving them opportunities to earn external rewards, such as tokens, privileges, or rewards.
- Replenish their resources for EF with short, preplanned breaks and positive feedback.

Reflection

Traditionally, teachers have taught reading comprehension with the assumption that their students have already mastered the necessary underlying skills, and thus, the only barrier to understanding is exposing them to unfamiliar content. However, barriers to reading comprehension may involve various cognitive profiles and a lack of underlying skills or access to prior high-quality instruction that can be remediated through explicit, targeted instruction in both the classroom and intervention services. When teachers address all the essential components of reading comprehension, this is a game-changer for student achievement across the curriculum.

Hallie shares this reflection of a student. Robert (a pseudonym) was referred to Hallie in eighth grade to address reading comprehension deficits. As she worked with him, it became clear that he was unable to categorize objects, such as cats, dogs, and birds under "animals," or fork, knife, and spoon under "utensils." Based on this information, her instruction focused on form (shape, color, size, etc.)

and function (purpose) to help him connect an item to its name. This initial vocabulary instruction to remediate his language gaps later evolved into morphological instruction. A speech-language pathologist (SLP) was brought in to help address some of his expressive and receptive language delays and poor word retrieval. The SLP used the Nancibell Visualizing and Verbalizing program (Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes, 2025) to help him more quickly connect images with words. After two years of targeted intervention, he can articulate his thoughts better when speaking and writing, has closed reading gaps, and comprehends at grade level.

Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

In England, fifteen percent of the original language is still in use.
Historically, Anglo-Saxon had i*nflectional suffixes* similar to Germanic and Romance languages, in which word endings were very specific, connecting subject and predicate.
In contrast, today English is mostly *analytic*,
and depends on *word order* to show relationships.

Some examples of words that have been replaced are *ācweorna* (squirrel), *nebb* (face), and *worn* (number). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changes_to_Old_English_vocabulary)

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Meet the Writers and Editor


Hallie Cohen, CALT, SLDI

Hallie Cohen's expertise in structured language and literacy is grounded in extensive training and over 30 years of teaching experience. She currently serves as a language therapist and assistant to a speech- language pathologist at the Greenwood School in Putney, VT. Hallie is a Certified Academic Language and Dyslexia Therapist and an Orton-Gillingham practitioner. Hallie's certifications include: Certified Academic Language Therapist through Academic Language Therapist Association and the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council; Certified Structured Literacy Dyslexia Interventionist through the Center for Effective Reading Institute; Advanced Orton-Gillingham training through Mayerson Academy, Mt. St. Joseph; and Orton-Gillingham trained through the Children's Dyslexia Center. To expand her understanding of structured-language approaches, she trained in Lindamood-Bell's Visualizing and Verbalizing and Wilson's reading programs. Hallie has training in the alphabet phonics approach through Literacy Through Multisensory Teaching, a cohort established by Judith Birsh at Columbia Teachers College. Last year, Hallie began presenting her work on sentence-level comprehension at national conferences in New York and Georgia. She attended the Ohio State University, State University ofNew York - Binghamton, and Ithaca College, receiving degrees in music performance and education.

Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction.*