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Oral Language Development and Its Impact on Reading Comprehension

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In this second article in the comprehension series, the following questions are answered:
- What is language?
- How does language typically develop from early childhood through elementary school?
- What is Developmental Language Disorder?
- How does oral language comprehension affect reading comprehension?
- How can language comprehension skills be assessed?
- How can language comprehension skills be remediated in schools and clinics?

Language: Content, Form, and Use

Language is defined by the American Speech Language and Hearing Association (ASHA) as "the words we use and how we use them to share ideas and get what we want." The **content** of language is knowledge of word meanings, or vocabulary. This includes morphology – different word parts that change the meanings of words, as discussed in Volume 3 of *Teaching Reading in Brief*. The **form** of language is putting words together in sentences, or syntax. Syntax will be further discussed in this Comprehension series. How language is used is referred to as **social pragmatics**, which includes body language, perspective-taking, and conversation skills.

Expressive language is speaking, and **receptive language** is listening.

Foundation for Reading

Spoken language development supports reading comprehension and includes vocabulary acquisition, knowledge of sentence structures, and discourse awareness. ASHA (2001) points out that "spoken and written language have a reciprocal relationship, such that each builds on the other to result in general language and literacy competence." Vocabulary knowledge is important when reading multiple-meaning words, such as *saw* or *bat*. Sentence structure, or syntactical knowledge, allows a reader to fluently predict what type of word will come next in a sentence and understand how the ideas are related through function words like conjunctions or the verb *to be* (*am/is/are/was/ were*). At the discourse level of combining sentences into a larger structure, language knowledge enables readers to track main ideas and avoid being distracted by inconsequential details. Social understanding is critical for perspective-taking and inferencing while reading. These language skills become increasingly important as students read longer passages in older grades.

Curious Question

What is likely the most common adverb in English?

Typical Language Development From Early Childhood Through Elementary School

Language development typically begins when babies attend to voices and make sounds in response to caregivers. A caregiver might tell the infant about what they are doing and lean in close, pausing to give the baby a turn. The infant may then coo and reach toward the caregiver in return. By age 1, toddlers can usually understand yes/no questions and simple directions. They can often point and say sounds with inflection or tone of voice. By age 2, toddlers should be able to use at least 50 words and combine some of them into two-word phrases. Caregivers can boost language skills even at these young ages by narrating children's activities, telling interactive stories, reading picture books, and singing rhymes.

In preschool, around ages 3 and 4, typical learners start using important function words and morphemes, such as *in, on, the, -ing*, and *-er*. Preschoolers are usually mostly intelligible. In kindergarten, children typically use time markers such as *yesterday* and *tomorrow*, and conjunctions such as *and* and *because* to tell simple stories.

By the end of first grade, most children speak in complete, grammatically correct sentences. Typically, they can answer *wh-* questions and follow two-step directions. In second grade, children should be able to give and follow three-step directions with time and place concepts. By the end of third grade, students can usually explain and use academic vocabulary. Most can stay on topic and summarize a story. By the end of fourth grade, students should be able to organize and use language for different reasons, such as to persuade, inform, or entertain. In fifth grade,

students can usually deliver speeches effectively. ASHA (2026) lists some milestones for the end of each grade on its public website.

Speaking and listening skills are part of English Language Arts in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Some of these expectations include students staying on topic and building on each other's contributions through questions and comments. CCSS for Language includes grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary, which reminds teachers that these components should be part of the general-education curriculum. Teachers can introduce content vocabulary and grammatical structures that correspond with each unit. Students should speak these new words and sentence types aloud in class as part of learning to read them. (More information about teaching the Speaking, Listening, and Language Standards is below in the intervention section.)

Language development can be delayed due to neurological and biological causes, such as autism, Down Syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome, cerebral palsy, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, malnutrition, hearing loss, or brain injury. In addition, learning multiple languages does not impair language development. However, sometimes language development is disrupted without a known biological cause, which is often referred to as Developmental Language Disorder.

Developmental Language Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) can affect expressive or receptive language in the areas of form, content, and/or use. Students with DLD may have difficulty expressing thoughts clearly, understanding new information, or interacting with

peers. In Vermont schools, DLD is categorized for ages 3-5 as a Developmental Delay in language and for ages 6-21 as a Language Impairment or a Specific Learning Disability in listening comprehension or oral expression. DLD is surprisingly common, though often undiagnosed, and adversely affects reading comprehension. Among children aged 5-17, seven percent meet the criteria for DLD, suggesting that at least one child in a classroom does (Bishop et al., 2017). Students diagnosed with DLD would be in addition to those with the disabilities listed above. People with DLD are six times more likely to have reading difficulties (Young et al., 2002) because language disorders have a greater impact on reading than speech-sound disorders, and tend to take longer to remediate (Sices et al., 2009). Catts et al. (2002) found that many students with DLD were not discovered until passage comprehension was assessed in grades 4 and up, since single-word reading had been the focus in earlier grades.

Assessment

Classroom teachers, reading specialists, and other educators should look for how often the student correctly follows verbal directions, speaks in grammatically correct sentences, tells organized stories, and finds the right words. Students who are either very quiet and inattentive or very loud and disruptive may be hiding language-based skill deficits that create attentional overload (Elleseff, 2025). Teachers' awareness of how students use language can inform the assessment, as at least half of children with reading disabilities will have co-occurring DLD (McArthur et al., 2000). In addition to screening students' speech articulation, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) also screen, assess, and diagnose language disorders in both school and medical systems. Psychologists can also administer general cognitive and academic tests that may reveal weaknesses in language. Current criteria from the Vermont Agency of Education require an individualized, standardized evaluation to diagnose DLD.

Common comprehensive language tests assess both listening and speaking skills in vocabulary, sentence structure, and social pragmatics. These include the following: Test of Integrated Language and Literacy Skills (TILLS); Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF); Comprehensive Evaluation of Spoken Language (CASL), and Preschool Language Scales (PLS). The CELF and the PLS also have screening tests that take less than 15 minutes to administer and use age-based criteria to determine whether further testing is warranted.

Recent research has found that sentence-repetition tasks are a reliable screening measure for DLD (Summy et al., 2025). Sentence repetition tasks require a child to repeat increasingly long sentences with exact accuracy, and students with DLD tend to forget words or leave off word endings when repeating the sentences. The screening Test of Early Grammatical Impairment (TEGI) for ages 3-8 is free. These more formal language screening tasks are not yet universal, though Act 139 requires screening for comprehension as one of the five components of reading, and so listening comprehension should be assessed in kindergarten. Kindergarten screenings often include informal observations by SLPs as part of an effective screening system. Classroom teachers and SLPs look for red flags, such as grammatical errors and the use of the wrong words.

Developmental questionnaires commonly used in isolation by pediatricians and in preschools have not been effective at screening for DLD (Calder et al, 2023), but when used alongside parent and educator observations or a screening tool, they can provide information about developmental delays in language.

Intervention

Language skills can be explicitly taught to students with DLD by a speech-language pathologist. Teachers of reading can work together with SLPs to align goals and reinforce concepts. Classroom teachers can also boost comprehension by teaching vocabulary and sentence structure for particular text types and units of study. SLPs can consult with teachers to help them prepare lessons, analyze data to determine Tier II services within MTSS, and provide pull-out Tier III services (Duff, 2023). This Tier III instruction should be primarily direct instruction, with the SLP explaining the session's objective, modeling the skill, and providing many opportunities for students to meet the grammar, vocabulary, or sequencing target. Visual cues are used whenever possible, and feedback is specific to the student's attempts.

Intervention for language form teaches the necessary grammar for the type of text and can begin in kindergarten. For example, comparing texts requires that students learn adjectives with **-er** and **-est** endings and about compound sentences. Writing hypotheses in science requires using future verb tenses (i.e., "If plants get more sunlight, then they will grow taller."). Writing about scientific procedures requires complex sentences with prepositional phrases (i.e., "Place two grams of saline in the beaker."). Reading interventionists and SLPs can consult with teachers to help them instruct students in sentence combining using correct grammar specific to the unit being taught (Saddler, 2018).

For language content, students with DLD need explicit instruction on word meanings, with multiple examples rooted in the context of a text, such as during a read-aloud (Evans, 2022). Students can organize word knowledge using the Frayer Model below as a common vocabulary visual. Teaching high-frequency words used across content areas (also called Tier II vocabulary, curricular vocabulary, or academic vocabulary) will have the greatest impact on reading comprehension (Beck, 2002). Students with DLD, on average, need two to three times more exposures to vocabulary words. Storkel et al. (2017) found that they need 36 exposures to learn a new word. One example treatment model involved weekly 30-minute sessions for a total of six weeks, where kindergartners defined words from interactive book readings and used synonyms and context sentences to explain them (Evans, 2022).
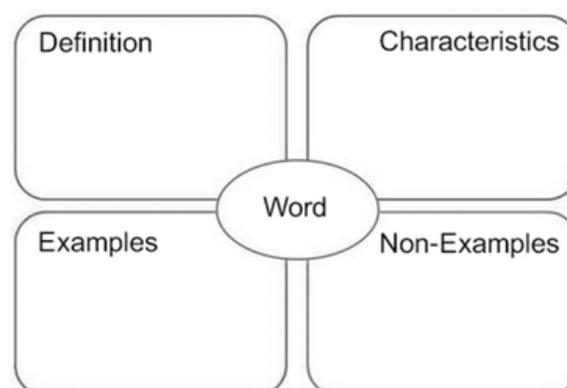
Image: Plankers, M. (2025). Language and literacy Frayer model. www.n2y.com/blog/language-and-literacy-frayer-model

Vocabulary knowledge increases accurate word reading when students use their set for variability skills to determine if what they sounded out is a real word that fits in that context (Duff, 2023). Set for variability is the skill of trying out different pronunciations to determine which is correct.

Intervention for the use of language often focuses on inferencing by building background knowledge and teaching students how to connect it to new information they hear or read. Often, a visual cue like the one below reminds students of the components of inferencing.
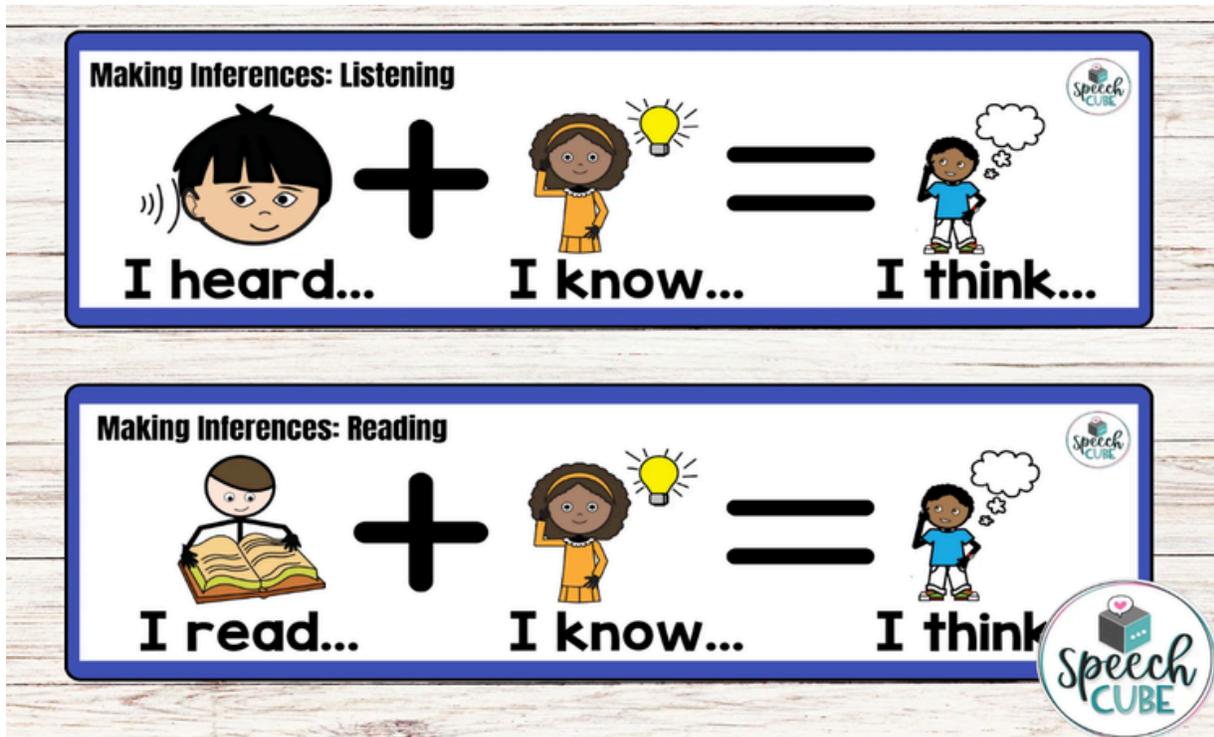

Image: Speech Cube, https://www.speechcube.com/products/making-inferences-visual-1

Language use instruction can also include teaching organizational structures of text using visual graphic organizers and how to attend to (or refocus attention) on details that follow the overall theme (Hall-Mills, 2020). This also requires understanding the author's purpose, which is taught in the classroom and reinforced in supplemental services if students need help taking perspectives. Intervention can also include direct instruction on figurative language and idioms for students who don't naturally pick up on nonliteral language.

Conclusion

Struggles with language can often go unnoticed and may even be misconstrued as behavioral problems or inattention (Elleseff, 2025). Teachers of reading often have a window into students' skills, enabling them to identify gaps in their language foundations. Teachers can use effective instructional strategies to improve students' listening comprehension. As students read sentences, paragraphs, and longer texts, they must leverage their language skills for reading comprehension.

From My Perspective

I try to keep in mind the stories of students who thrive with the right intervention. I remember the eighth grader who moved to my school, tall but quiet in all of his classes and even in the lunchroom. I worked with his science and social studies teachers to set goals for learning curricular vocabulary, paraphrasing informational texts, and giving presentations. I introduced the Nancibell Visualizing and Verbalizing program (Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes, 2025) and taught rich mental representations of words and sentences using visual prompts. The student quickly moved from the program material to using the strategies to comprehend the science and social studies content presented by his teachers. By the end of the year, he gave a clear, logical presentation as part of a debate in social studies. More than that, he was joining class discussions and talking more with new friends.

Then there's the first grader who joined my intervention group with frequent, loud, boisterous participation, but mostly only in one-word utterances. Using a sentence strip with shapes for subject and verb, I expanded each enthusiastic utterance into a complete sentence of two or three words. Then, I had the student repeat the sentence, pointing to the shapes as they said each word. I also made the visual strip in hopscotch form to focus her physical energy on saying complete sentences. When the student started using the sentence strip with automaticity, I brought the tool into her classroom and worked with her teacher to tape it to her writing toolbox. The classroom teacher was able to carry over the expanded three-word sentences into the students' writing tasks. Shared expectations for success between the student, SLP, and teacher enabled the student to rise to the next level of language expression.

Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

The most common adverb in English is most likely the word *up*.

Here are some common uses among hundreds of others:
act up, amped up, back up, belly up, bottle up, break up, bring up, brush up, clean up, cover up, cough up, dig up, dish up, dress up, drink up, drum up, eat up, face up, fed up, fired up, fly up, follow up, gum up, jack up, keyed up, kiss up, leg up, loosen up, make up, pass up, perk up, pump up, rack up, rest up, riled up, rise up, run up, scrape up, shook up, spark up, shut up, spruce up, taken up, top up, warm up, washed up, wise up, and *work up.*

Inspired by Baugh, A. C. and Cable, T. (2013). *A history of the English language, 6th Ed.* Routledge.

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Meet the Writer and Editors
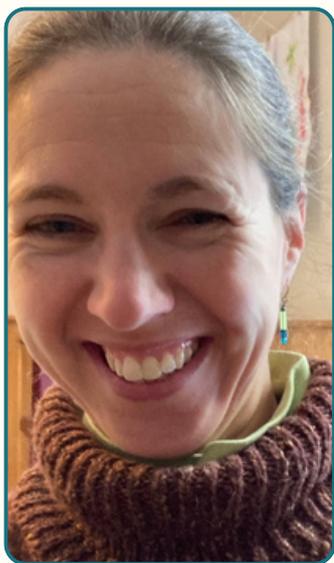
Cara Arduengo, MS, CCC-SLP, M. Ed.
Cara loves collaborating with teachers in Vermont public schools. After earning her Bachelor of Arts at Middlebury College, she attended the Upper Valley Educators Institute and New England College and taught 7-12 English Language Arts. She graduated from the Mass General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, where she pursued a certificate of advanced study in reading, recognized by the International Dyslexia Association. Her passion at work is analyzing the components and connections of written language. Cara presented the webinar, **School Systems to Address Students' Speech, Language, and Reading Needs**, with The Reading League Vermont in August 2025. Currently she is a speech-language pathologist (SLP) at Barre Town Middle and Elementary School. Previously she worked at The New School of Montpelier and Milton Middle School.

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 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. In addition, 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 of New 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.