

Research Round-Up

Oral Comprehension Sets the Ceiling on Reading Comprehension

By Andrew Biemiller

To succeed at reading, a child must be able to *identify* or "read" printed words and to *understand* the story or text composed of those words. Both identifying words and understanding text are critical to reading success. For many children, increasing reading and school success will involve increasing oral language competence in the elementary years.

The main argument is as follows:

- During elementary school, a child's maximum level of reading comprehension is determined by the child's level of listening comprehension.¹
- Children differ markedly in the language and especially the vocabulary they have upon entering kindergarten. Advanced children (75th percentile) are about a "year" ahead of average children, while delayed children (25th percentile) are about a year behind. (Bankson, 1977; Dunn & Dunn, 1982).
- Language continues to develop during the primary years. *However, the gap between children with advanced language and children with restricted language grows wider during the elementary years.* By grade 3, advanced children's comprehension is equivalent to that of average children in grade 4, while slower-progressing children are similar to average 2nd-graders or even younger children. Some of this difference is attributable to *cumulative vocabulary* deficits in less advanced children.
- *Current school practices typically have little effect on oral language development during the primary years.*² Because the level of language used is often limited to what the children can read and write, there are few opportunities for language development in primary classes.
- In the upper elementary grades, *those who enter 4th grade with significant vocabulary deficits show increasing problems with reading comprehension*, even if they have good reading (word identification) skills. The available evidence does not suggest a substantial "catching-up" process, but rather a continuing slippage relative to those with average and above-average achievement.
- Thus, early delays in oral language come to be reflected in low levels of reading comprehension, leading to low levels of academic success. If we are to increase children's ability to profit from education, we will have to enrich their oral language development during the early years of schooling. Although not all differences in language are due to differences in opportunity and learning, *schools could do much more than they do now to foster the language development of less-advantaged children and children for whom English is a second language.*

The listening comprehension of the average child begins to develop around 12 months of age and continues to grow long after grade 6. Reading comprehension typically begins to develop in kindergarten or 1st grade. At this point, the child's level of reading comprehension is obviously far below her listening comprehension. There is considerable evidence that for the majority of children, comprehension of printed language continues to lag behind comprehension of spoken language well past 3rd grade (Sticht & James, 1984). *When a child can understand language equally well whether presented in print or speech, the distinction between listening and reading comprehension ceases to be important.* However, a number of studies suggest that average children don't reach the point of being able to read what they could understand if they heard it until around 7th or 8th grade.³

Listening comprehension continues to grow during the elementary years. Thus the typical 3rd-grader can comprehend more complex oral stories, expositions, etc., than the typical 1st-grader. Broadly speaking, language can only "grow" through interaction with people and texts that introduce new vocabulary, concepts, and language structures. In grades 1 to 3, this growth *cannot* result mainly from reading experiences because most children are not reading content that is as advanced as their oral language. We often assume that children's reading experiences contribute much to their increasing ability to comprehend language (e.g., Nagy & Herman, 1987; Sternberg, 1987). However, for many children, most language growth continues to come from non-print sources (parents, peers, teacher lectures, class discussions, television, etc.) *throughout the elementary years.* For many children, the skills necessary for reading printed English remain too poor for them to read texts that introduce new vocabulary and new conceptual structures. The problem is even more severe for struggling students. For example, the listening vocabulary level of a 25th percentile 6th-grader is equivalent to that attained by the 75th percentile 3rd-grader. The same is true of reading comprehension measures.

If we could improve the word identification skills of children at the 25th percentile in reading comprehension, we would get some improvement--up to the child's *listening* comprehension level. But in many cases, we would still be looking at a child whose comprehension level is far below that of many peers. *To bring a child to grade-level language comprehension means, at a minimum, that the child must acquire and use grade-level vocabulary plus some post-grade-level vocabulary.* Obviously, this does not mean simply memorizing more words, but rather coming to understand and use the words used by average children at that level. Knowledge of this vocabulary will not guarantee success, but lack of vocabulary knowledge can ensure failure.

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References and Endnotes

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¹ Later, adolescents and adults may comprehend more complex printed narrative or expository text than spoken text because print remains after reading and can be reviewed, while oral language usually cannot be reviewed. However, children must reach the point where they can understand printed text as well as spoken text before their comprehension of printed text can exceed their comprehension of spoken text.

² This is true for children whose first language is English. Non-English-speaking children in English-speaking schools clearly acquire some English. However, as a group, they also clearly remain at a disadvantage compared to English-speaking children in elementary schools.

³ Of course they can understand simpler text sooner. Many second graders can read and understand "first grade" written text. But they cannot understand stories and expository material in print that they can understand when heard.