Invited Column
Setting the Stage for Reading Comprehension

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Have you ever had a student read a passage fluently and then miss all the comprehension questions? As a classroom teacher, I always wanted to say, "But you literally just said the answer!" However, contrary to popular belief, comprehension is not something that just *happens* as we read. It is an active process that involves processing language on many levels simultaneously (National Reading Panel, 2000; Oakhill & Cain, 2012). In hindsight, I know the reason my students demonstrated inconsistent comprehension – I had not properly prepared them. I had not set the stage.

Developed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, the Simple View of Reading is a theoretical model to explain reading comprehension as the product of word reading times language comprehension. The central components of the Simple View of Reading, word recognition and language comprehension, have been acknowledged for over a century (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). The multiplicative nature of the equation illustrates that both word reading and language comprehension are necessary for reading comprehension to occur, and that a strength on one side of the equation does not compensate for a weakness on the other side. For a student with limited decoding skills, reading comprehension is unlikely to be improved by focusing exclusively on comprehension-specific processes, such as vocabulary and inference. As a child gains proficiency in decoding, placing greater emphasis on comprehension-specific processes, like vocabulary, becomes more effective in enhancing their reading comprehension (Lonigan et al., 2018). Reading comprehension requires strength in both word reading and language comprehension.

Further, comprehension is not a skill that we can directly teach. Yes, you read that right. While there is evidence in research to support teaching comprehension strategies, they are only one piece of the complex puzzle of reading comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010). The purpose of strategy instruction is to show students that ideas within the text *should* be connected, but not necessarily *how* to make those connections for themselves (Willingham, 2017).

A budding cyclist learning to ride may look to a more experienced rider with the assumption that it is a natural talent. Then, picking up a bicycle, discover over the course of a few skinned knees the complexity required to ride well. A cautious parent may opt for training wheels, providing a scaffold until the child is ready to ride without them. Just like training wheels help a beginning cyclist learn to balance, comprehension strategies can help readers learn to connect ideas in the text. Over time, a cyclist learns to balance without training wheels, and readers learn to connect ideas without explicit comprehension strategies (Willingham, 2023). We would not wish to keep training wheels on a child's bicycle as a long-term cycling strategy, nor should we rely on strategies alone as a means to develop comprehension.

There are three processes involved in reading comprehension: A reader must (1) extract ideas from individual sentences, (2) connect those ideas across sentences, and (3) build a general idea,

or mental model, of the text (Willingham, 2017). A skilled reader has years of practice weaving these three processes together while reading. And yet, even the most skilled readers cannot read every text with flawless fluency and comprehension. Why is that?

In addition to engaging in the three processes of reading comprehension, we must also consider a reader's interaction with the text, which provides several variables that can make comprehension more or less challenging (Hennessy, 2024). For example, the reader has strengths and weaknesses in word recognition and language skills, as well as in working memory and other cognitive skills needed for reading. The text can vary in complexity based on the content, organization, academic language, and syntax. Finally, the purpose for reading should also be considered. A reader is likely to engage differently with a text read for pleasure compared to a text read to learn complex information.

How can we, as educators, maneuver among these complex layers of comprehension to teach students how to meaningfully engage in the processes of extracting and connecting ideas across sentences to build a general understanding of the text? Comprehension is an outcome of instruction, not an isolated skill that can be directly taught. However, there are evidence-based practices that can set the stage for reading comprehension development for all students.

Consider the ways comprehension can break down:
"Comprehension will suffer if a word has been incorrectly recognized, if the text includes words that are not in the reader's oral vocabulary, if the linguistic structure of the sentence is overly complex, or if the topic of the reading material is so unfamiliar that the reader cannot make inferences ("read between the lines") that are necessary to understanding the text" (Snow et al., 1999, p. 51).

This comprehensive explanation by Snow, Scarborough, and Burns (1999) details how to set the stage for reading comprehension.

1. **To prevent a word from being incorrectly recognized, we must prioritize foundational reading skills, intensifying phonics instruction when necessary.** As Dr. Anita Archer is known to quip, "There is no comprehension strategy powerful enough to compensate if a student cannot read the words" (Archer, 2008). This idea underscores the Simple View of Reading – no matter the language comprehension skills a reader possesses, their reading comprehension will continue to depend on skill in word recognition.

   When we discover a student lacking foundational reading skills, how should we intervene? Burns et al. (2014) studied 22 meta-analyses of reading interventions to determine the essential attributes of the most-effective interventions. The following five essential attributes were identified in the reading interventions with the largest effects: explicit instruction in the skill, targeted instruction tailored to students' needs, frequent opportunities for students to respond, an appropriate level of challenge, and immediate corrective feedback.

   Systematic and explicit instruction does not mean blindly marching along the scope and sequence of a curriculum, regardless of learning needs. Systematic instruction incorporates a comprehensive system of assessments to determine the instructional needs of each student,

implement targeted and intensive phonics intervention, monitor progress and regroup as necessary. Once needs are identified, effective instruction must include frequent opportunities to respond, which can increase engagement, on-task behavior, and accountability, promote desired behaviors while reducing inappropriate behaviors, and keep instruction moving at a perky pace (Archer, 2024).

"Every day, in every class, every student is participating by speaking, writing, or doing. Everyone does everything" (Archer, 2024, p. 35). Archer recommends 3-5 simple responses per minute through choral responses, gestures, or response cards. One response that is more complex per minute, through partner sharing or a written answer; and one very complex response every 10-30 minutes, such as writing to a prompt. Eliciting frequent responses from students is a way to embed formative assessment into instruction, allowing the teacher to monitor understanding, provide feedback, and adjust instruction to best target student needs.

2. **We must foster language-rich environments, strengthen oral language, and explicitly teach sophisticated vocabulary to expand a reader's oral vocabulary.** Oral language lays the groundwork for reading development and language comprehension (Cardenas-Hagan, 2020). In fact, once a student has heard a word, that word becomes easier to decode when encountered in print (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). This is not a one-to-one correlation such that if a student has heard the word *pneumonia*, they will automatically be able to decode it when they see it in print. However, between two students who encounter the word *pneumonia* in print, the student who has heard the word is more likely to be able to decode it than the student who has never heard it. Through a combination of daily conversations and explicit instruction, we can develop our students' oral language, adding sophisticated language to their repertoire, with the end goal of strengthening reading comprehension.

   The term "strive for five" was originally coined by David Dickinson in 2003, and provides a concrete way to support oral language development through a series of five brief interactions between teacher and student (Hennessy, 2021; Zucker & Cabell, 2024). A typical conversation lasts three turns – teacher questions, student responds, teacher evaluates. The "strive for five" framework encourages educators to take the conversation further – teacher questions, student responds, teacher challenges, student responds, teacher extends. Here is an example of a five-turn conversation during a read aloud:
   Teacher: How is the bunny feeling about not being invited to the party?
   Student: Mad.
   Teacher: That's right! The bunny was mad, maybe even furious. How can you tell?
   Student: His forehead is scrunched up and his arms are crossed.
   Teacher: I see that, too. The bunny is communicating his feelings without words, which is called nonverbal communication.

   Students who have strong oral language often seek out interaction, while students who need more practice may avoid interaction or be overlooked (Hadley et al., 2020). By using a conversational tracker and integrating conversational turns into classroom routines, we can ensure that all our students have opportunities to engage with rich language models (Zucker & Cabell, 2024). Another opportunity provided by the five-turn framework is the chance to expose students to sophisticated language that they may not otherwise hear. Vocabulary

knowledge is critical, as it opens the gate to reading comprehension (Wright, 2021). Incidental exposure to vocabulary through conversations can be strengthened with explicit vocabulary instruction, which includes focusing on spelling, sounds, word parts, providing student-friendly definitions, placing words in context, and checking for understanding (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

3. **To prevent complex linguistic structure from impeding comprehension, we must teach syntax as a means to build sentence-level comprehension.** Consider the difference between these two sentences: *I saw the man with the telescope*. *With the telescope, I saw the man*. By changing the order of words, the meaning was altered. Reading comprehension is complex, relying on our ability to process many layers of language simultaneously (Oakhill & Cain, 2012). One of these layers is syntax, which refers to the organization of words to create meaningful sentences. Understanding how syntax shapes meaning is essential in explaining how a sentence either aids or hinders comprehension (Hennessy, 2024).

   Within the processes of reading comprehension, one must extract ideas from sentences and connect these ideas across sentences before developing a general idea of the text (Willingham, 2017). A reader's ability to make sense of individual sentences is an essential ingredient in building a successful mental representation of meaning (Shanahan, 2022; Hennessy, 2024). Consider the following examples of complex linguistic structures.

Passive voice	*The cake was eaten by the children.*
Double negatives	*I never told him not to eat the entire bowl of candy.*
Conditional verb forms	*If she had studied harder, she might have passed the test.*
Articles	*This is **a** problem. This is **the** problem.*
Embedded clauses	*The woman talking to the man in the red hat is my aunt.*
Pronouns	*Tyra handed Kira the book, but **she** wasn't sure if **she** wanted to read it.*

These complex linguistic structures can be challenging for students. Rather than explicitly teaching each complex linguistic structure, try focusing on the function of words. "A word's part of speech is a clue to meaning" (Hennessy, 2024, p. 94). By focusing on the simplest expression of meaning – a noun names, while a verb shows action – even emergent readers can begin this complex work by sorting pictures and words into categories of "namers" and

"doers" (Gillis & Eberhardt, 2018). Once students have a solid understanding of sentence construction, this activity can be expanded to incorporate more parts of speech. This instruction focuses on pairing deconstructing sentences with questioning to build comprehension of complex sentences (Hennessy, 2024).

Article	Adjective: What kind?	Noun: Who or what?	Action Verb+ed: Did what?	Adverb: How?	Adverbial phrase: Where?
The	boisterous	kindergartener	laughed	maniacally	on the playground.

4. **We must systematically build students' background knowledge so the topic of the reading material will not hinder inference and comprehension.** Research by Recht and Leslie in 1988 studied the impact of background knowledge on reading comprehension. In the study, students were given a passage describing half an inning of a pretend baseball game and were asked to use wooden figurines to act out what they had read. The researchers found that reading ability did not align with who understood the story. Students who were weak readers with a strong grasp of baseball performed better than strong readers who knew little about baseball.

   Experts suggest that the background knowledge we possess on a topic creates a scaffolding for new information in our memories – a kind of mental velcro (Wexler, 2019). This velcro creates a snowballing effect in which new knowledge builds upon background knowledge. However, the reverse is also true - those who start out with less acquire less, resulting in an effect referred to as "the Matthew effect," in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (Wexler, 2019; Stanovich, 1986). This phenomenon has such alarming consequences that cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham proposed that "reading comprehension tests are really knowledge tests in disguise" (2017, p. 127). Connecting new information to what learners already know can foster higher cognitive learning (Cardenas-Hagan, 2020). For students who lack the necessary background knowledge to bridge the meaning of what they read, we must invest the time to systematically teach a knowledge-rich curriculum (Willingham 2017; Wexler, 2019).

As we reach the final act, the onus is upon all of us to consider the instructional changes necessary to set the stage for reading comprehension. We must prioritize foundational skills, intensifying through increased opportunities to respond and providing targeted, corrective feedback. Second, we must remember that word meaning matters. Without knowledge of words and how words connect to convey meaning, readers can get stuck in the weeds of complex language, unable to access the garden of comprehension. By strengthening oral language through daily conversation and providing explicit instruction in both vocabulary and syntax, we grant our students the vehicle through which to extract meaning from sentences. Finally, we must build background knowledge for our students, trusting that each brick laid is a step closer to a scaffolding in which knowledge begets knowledge.

The stage is now set. Your next moves determine what transpires upon the stage of reading comprehension. The curtain opens.

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