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**The Reading Acquisition Framework**

From the cognitive perspective of learning to read, reading comprehension (or, simply, reading) is the ability to construct linguistic meaning from written representations of language. This ability is based upon two equally important competencies. One is language comprehension–the ability to construct meaning from spoken representations of language; the second is decoding–the ability to recognize written representations of words. These two main foundations of reading are represented by the two supporting legs in the graphic depiction of this cognitive framework.

Both of these are complex abilities themselves, each based on other abilities, as shown in the graphic. In this simple view of reading, both language comprehension and decoding are necessary for reading comprehension success. Neither is sufficient in itself. On the one hand, being fully competent in a language but having no ability to recognize its written words will not allow successful reading comprehension. On the other hand, neither will having the ability to recognize the written words of a language but not having the ability to understand their meaning. In this view, the only route to successful reading comprehension is through success at both language comprehension and decoding. Weakness in either ability will result in weak reading comprehension. Thus, knowing where obstacles to reading and its acquisition exist requires assessing both language comprehension and decoding abilities. Let's consider the abilities needed for success in these two broad domains.

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|   | The ability to read and understand a passage of text depends upon two equally important skills:* the ability to decode the words in the text
* the ability to understand the language the text is written in

Children who do not have problems understanding spoken language and who are able to fluently and easily decode text do not have problems with reading comprehension. On the other side of the coin, children who do have problems with reading comprehension always have problems with either the ability to understand language or the ability to decode written words (or both; see sidebar).There are three basic types of reading disorder (ranked in order from least common to most common):* Hyperlexia, which is characterized by the ability to rapidly and easily decode text without understanding what is being read (very rare).
* True dyslexia, or the ability to understand spoken language but an inability to decode text (less rare).

Garden-variety reading disorder, which characteristically involves a difficulty decoding text *and* a difficulty understanding spoken language (relatively common). |   |
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The ability to construct the meaning of spoken language, or language comprehension, requires a complex mix of different abilities, each somewhat dependent on the other. However, two large domains of knowledge are required for success. The first is linguistic knowledge, or knowledge of the formal structures of a language. The second is background knowledge, or knowledge of the world, which includes the content and procedural knowledge acquired through interactions with the surrounding environment. The combination of these two allows us to make inferences from language. We can go beyond the literal interpretation allowed by competence in the language, to inferences from language that are built in combination with our knowledge of the world. For example, entering your house on a cold winter day and being told that the door is still open allows you to infer that the speaker would like you to close it! The following text more fully describes each of the two domains that underlie such comprehension.

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Knowledge that underlies competence in a language can be divided into three large domains. Phonology describes knowledge of the sound structure of a language and of the basic elements that convey differences in meaning, including their internal structure and their relationships to each other. The child who cannot produce or hear the sounds that distinguish one word from another will not be able to use language effectively to communicate. Semantics deals with the meaning components of language, both at the level of individual units (words and their meaningful parts, or morphemes, such as "pre" in the word "preview") and at the higher levels that combine these units (morphemes into words, words into sentences, sentences into discourse). Thus, part of linguistic knowledge involves learning the individual meanings of words (or vocabulary) as well as the meaning of larger segments–sentences and discourse structures (e.g., narratives and expositions). Syntax constitutes the rules of language that specify how to combine different classes of words (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives) to form sentences. In short, syntax defines the structural relationship between the sounds of a language (phonological combinations) and the meaning of those combinations.

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Knowing how the everyday world works, both in terms of content and procedures, is a crucial component of language comprehension. While linguistic knowledge represents the rules for how language operates, background knowledge represents the substance on which language operates. In communicating through language, successful comprehension requires both the ability to use the language and knowledge of the substance to be communicated. One way to describe such knowledge is in terms of schemas–structures that represent our understandings (e.g., of events and their relationships). Schemas can represent fairly common knowledge (e.g., dining in a restaurant, including being seated, ordering, being served, eating, and finally paying a bill) or fairly esoteric knowledge (e.g., how computer programs complete searches for information). If you have a well-developed schema in a particular domain of knowledge, then understanding a conversation relevant to that domain is much easier because you already have a meaningful structure in place for interpreting the conversation. Now let’s consider the other major component of reading comprehension.

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Alphabetic languages are those whose writing systems relate the written and spoken form of words systematically. In English, both systematic and unsystematic (or idiosyncratic) relationships exist, and the successful reader must master both. Decoding is the ability to recognize both types of relationships between written and spoken words. And both of these are necessary for successful word recognition. Knowing these systematic relationships allows us to read many new words that we’ve never before encountered in written form. Knowing the exceptions allows us to access the meaning of a known word whose spelling violates the systematic relationships.

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The systematic relationships between written and spoken words are those that consistently relate the units of the written word (the letters of the alphabet) and the units of the spoken word (not the sounds themselves, but the abstract units–the phonemes–that underlie the sounds). Knowledge of these relationships is known as cipher knowledge. As an example, a word like "pad" exemplifies a systematic relationship between three letters and three phonemes. But "colonel" represents a systematic relationship between only its initial and latter units, not its medial ones (contrast this with the systematic relationship in "colon"). If a child learns the systematic relationships, she can recognize words she has never before encountered in print, but whose meaning she already knows from the course of language acquisition. This is the typical situation for the child learning to read.

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Beyond the systematic relationships captured in cipher knowledge are the exceptions–those instances where the relationships between the units of the spoken and written word are unique and do not follow a systematic pattern. Knowledge of these exceptions, or lexical knowledge, is necessary for a child to be able to access the meaning of words she knows (e.g., "stomach") but that do not entirely follow the patterns captured in her cipher knowledge.



To learn the two types of relationships upon which decoding ability depends, a number of other abilities are needed.

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The first is letter knowledge, or the ability to recognize and manipulate the units of the writing system. In English, these units are the letters of the alphabet. Knowing the names of letters is not what is crucial here (although most children learn to distinguish letters by learning letter names); rather, what is important is being able to reliably recognize each of the letters.

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In a similar fashion, one must be consciously able to recognize and manipulate the units of the spoken word–the phonemes that underlie each word. The knowledge behind this ability must be explicit, not implicit. That is, any child who knows a language can implicitly recognize and manipulate the sounds of the language that mark differences in meaning between words (e.g., "bat" and "bag" as different words with different meanings). However, knowing explicitly that this distinction in meaning is carried by a particular unit in a particular location (i.e., by the last unit in the preceding example) does not come automatically with learning the language. It is something that in most cases must be taught in order to be learned. This knowledge is phoneme awareness: the conscious knowledge that words are built from a discrete set of abstract units, or phonemes, coupled with the conscious ability to manipulate these units.

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Finally, it is not enough to simply know and be able to manipulate the units of the written and spoken word. To master both the cipher and lexical knowledge components of decoding, one must understand that there is, in general, a systematic relationship between these units, and that discerning the particular relationship is what is required to master decoding. Without the intent to discover this relationship, the would-be reader will not understand the task before her. This intent is captured in knowledge of the alphabetic principle: knowing that a systematic relationship exists between the internal structure of written and spoken words, and that the task of learning to recognize individual words requires discovering this relationship.



Finally, the basis for knowledge of letters and the alphabetic principle is knowledge of the mechanics of the printed word, or concepts about print. This includes knowing that printed text carries a linguistic meaning, that there is a correspondence between printed and spoken words, and that text in English runs left-to-right and top-to-bottom on a page.