The Role of Language in Learning to Read

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The Problem:
Too Many Students Are Failing to Learn to Read With Comprehension
Florida has made impressive improvements since 1998 in reducing the number of “below basic and basic” readers: 78% reduced to 61%.
Students categorized as “Black” are most at risk. They are 2 ½ time more likely to be at below basic levels than White students (42% vs. 16%).

Students from low-income homes are twice as likely to be reading at below basic levels as those from more advantaged homes: 32% vs. 15%.
“Every student who fails to complete high school costs society $260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity.” (Casey Foundation, 2010)

2007 median income of high school dropout: $23,000 vs. $48,000 for someone with a BA degree.

2012: No high school: 33.9% poverty rate; High school: 15.6%. (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2014).

Children who are reading below the “basic” level in third grade are much more likely to drop out.

2011: 3rd graders reading below basic levels accounted for 63% of those not graduating on time. (Hernandez, 2011)

Black and Hispanic children with low reading skills were 2x more likely to drop out than Whites with similar low reading levels.
What do children need to know in order to read and comprehend what they are reading?
Phonological Awareness

Letter - Sound knowledge

Decode:
Letters to words

Basic Skills, Phonics
Decoding Is More Than Linking Letters to Sounds

- See it in action. [https://www.youtube.com/v/hJCa_0Ea90Q](https://www.youtube.com/v/hJCa_0Ea90Q)

- What does she know:
  - Recognizes individual letters.
  - She associates letters with sounds they often represent.
  - She blends sounds together to create a “word-like sound.”
  - She makes a connection with a word she knows and then pronounces the word correctly and understands it.

- Decoding only occurs when the letter sounds activate a word she knows.
Comprehension

Meaningful Sentences

World Knowledge

grammatical knowledge

Vocabulary

Decode: Letters to words

Phonological Awareness

Letter - Sound knowledge

Basic Skills, Phonics

Oral Language, Content knowledge
By grade four language comprehension is clearly the strongest predictor of reading comprehension (Cain et al., 2016; Vellutino et al., 2006).

Age 3 and 4 vocabulary predicts grades 3 and 4 vocabulary and reading (ECCRN, 2005, Walker et al., 1994; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Kindergarten vocabulary predicts 7th grade vocabulary and reading (Dickinson & Tabor, 2001).

First grade vocabulary predicts 11th grade reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

For second language learners who start school with limited knowledge of English differences observed in the preschool years persist into middle school (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011).
Four-year-old Head Start children, on average, score at levels equivalent to children age 2;10 (Zill & Resnick, 2006).

At kindergarten entry there are large differences in achievement associated with income (1.25 SD). These widen somewhat in early elementary school. (Reardon, 2014)

Differences observed in the preschool years persist throughout the elementary school years.

- For native speakers of English (Farkas & Beron, 2004).
- For second language learners who start school with limited knowledge of English (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011).
How Can we Build the Language Skills Needed for Reading Comprehension?
Strategies for Success

- Use a curriculum that targets high level vocabulary and conceptual knowledge throughout the day.
  - Have clearly identifiable goals for teaching vocabulary and concepts.
  - Read high quality books multiple times with in ways designed to engage and teach.
  - Use book reading methods that teach words and build comprehension.
  - Systematically build concepts and vocabulary through hands on activities accompanied by teacher-child conversations.
- Teachers have sustained conversations with children (“strive for five”).
- Parents are helped to extend learning by making connections to what is happening in school and drawing on home and community experiences.
A Case Study: Kelly Bolton
Pre-K Teacher

- Used a preschool curriculum that use a thematic approach and has a strong focus on vocabulary and high level knowledge.
  - High quality books are read multiple times with in ways designed to engage and teach.
  - Selected vocabulary is taught each reading and used throughout the day.
  - Classroom activities build knowledge related to the vocabulary systematically.
- Received in-class coaching related to the curriculum.
20 Children, all but two entered speaking little English
8 from Arabic speaking homes, 12 from Spanish-speaking homes

Data:
- Pre-post data collection on children
- Twice yearly classroom observations

Children showed growth relative to national norms on standardized tests
(15 points = 1 standard deviation).

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