1

From Language to Literacy

The Critical Role of Language Comprehension in Reading Comprehension

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Guiding Questions

1. What is language comprehension, and why is it important?
2. How do students develop language comprehension?
3. What is the role of instruction in supporting language comprehension?

THE WHAT AND WHY OF LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Every few years, the U.S. Department of Education releases *The Nation's Report Card for Reading* based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES, 2024b). When these reports are released, news outlets publish headlines indicating that substantial numbers of U.S. students are not proficient in reading. These headlines cause panic among policymakers, educators, and parents and reignite the "Reading Wars," a decades-long debate over how to teach reading. The debate continues and has been exacerbated by recent reports that NAEP Reading scores declined in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and have yet to recover (e.g., Belsha & Meltzer, 2025; Schwartz, 2025).

The debate in the "Reading Wars" is mostly focused on whether and how much to use phonics instruction to teach students to decode words. Research from fields such as neuroscience, psychology, and education, commonly referred to as the Science of Reading, has established that direct and systematic phonics instruction is important and has positive effects on decoding and reading comprehension outcomes (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

The focus on phonics is important, but attention to phonics has overshadowed attention to other aspects of reading comprehension that are necessary for students to meet the high standards set by the NAEP, which expects proficient fourth graders to be able to "integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding of the text to draw conclusions and make evaluations" (NAEP, 2024a).

Many educators are familiar with the Simple View of Reading, which suggests that reading comprehension is a product of decoding and linguistic comprehension, or Scarborough's Rope, which portrays skilled reading as a rope with interwoven strands of skills related to word recognition and language comprehension. (See Box 1.1.) As these models and other newer models of reading comprehension, such as the direct and indirect effects model of reading (DIER) discussed by Kim et al. in Chapter 4 of this book, suggest, reading comprehension requires students to decode words *and* to understand what words mean and how they work together to convey meaning across sentences, paragraphs, and texts. Shining the spotlight on decoding leaves language comprehension in the shadows. In this book, we seek to broaden the focus of the spotlight and highlight the importance of language comprehension in reading comprehension.

Box 1.1. Language Comprehension Terminology

Note that researchers have used different terminology in reference to language comprehension, sometimes referring to this construct as listening comprehension or linguistic comprehension. These terms may be used interchangeably in this book, but they all refer to the ability to understand or make meaning of language.

As noted in a recent National Academy of Education report, it is incredibly difficult to "move the needle" in reading comprehension (Pearson et al., 2020). Research suggests it can be done (Silverman et al., 2020), but it requires focusing on language comprehension in addition to decoding throughout early childhood and elementary school. The chapters in this book by leading researchers in the field provide background information and practical recommendations for supporting language comprehension to facilitate reading comprehension. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the research on language comprehension development and instruction and share major themes that have emerged from our research and research by other authors featured in this book. We hope these themes will be instrumental to educators as they consider how to apply the Science of Reading beyond decoding.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

While learning to decode is not a natural process and usually requires explicit and systematic instruction, the development of language comprehension is a natural process, and it occurs through everyday interactions that children have with caregivers and others in their environment. Children attend to the sounds their caregivers make and, through joint attention, learn to associate words and their referents and add them to their *vocabulary knowledge*. In English, children's first words are typically related to their immediate wants and needs (e.g., *no, more, baba* for bottle). They learn to distinguish words that sound similar (e.g., *ball* and *book*) and, thereby, develop *phonological awareness,* which is a core component of both decoding and language comprehension. Over time, they learn that smaller parts of words matter (e.g., if they hear /s/ at the end of the word *cookie,* that means more than one) and that the order of words matters (e.g., *Dad hit the ball* and *The ball hit Dad* mean different things) and, thereby, develop *morphological awareness* and *syntactic awareness*. They also learn that several words can refer to one thing (e.g., *woman* and *lady* could be used interchangeably) and one word can refer to many things (e.g., *bat* can refer to something used in baseball or a type of animal), and thereby develop their *semantic awareness*. Additionally, they learn abstract words that refer to concepts that are not tangible (e.g., *happy* or *sad*), and they learn words that refer to concepts that may be beyond their immediate environment or experience (e.g., *jungle* or *safari*), growing their vocabulary to include knowledge of more than 1,000 words before they enter prekindergarten.

While the development of language comprehension is considered a natural process, it depends on language exposure. In fact, there is a robust research base on how caregivers and teachers can ensure children are provided with robust exposure to language that can facilitate language development. For example, in this book, Cabell and colleagues (Chapter 2) describe an approach they have developed called Strive-for-Five. Meant for teachers of students in prekindergarten through first grade, the approach can be used to foster back-and-forth conversations about text that support language development. A common interaction between a teacher and student in these grades entails the teacher asking a closed-ended question (e.g., "What was the boy doing?"), the student responding (e.g., "Riding a bike"), and the teacher evaluating that response (e.g., "Yes, that's right."). Using the Strive-for-Five approach, which calls for at least five back-and-forth exchanges with a student, teachers support and extend students' language and comprehension. For example, in a Strive-for-Five interaction, the teacher asks an open-ended question (e.g., "Why was the boy riding his bike?"), the student responds (e.g., "He wanted to visit his friend."), the teacher asks a follow-up question (e.g., "Why did he want

to visit his friend? How was he feeling that day?"), and the student responds with additional information (e.g., "He was having a bad day and was lonely."). The multiple back-and-forth exchanges in Strive-for-Five support children in interpreting and using language to a greater extent, which can facilitate their language comprehension.

While children's language development evolves rapidly in early childhood and elementary school, even adults are still developing their language comprehension. There are over a million words in the English language alone, and new words are being created every day. Thus, developing language comprehension is a substantial endeavor. Given the vast number of words to be learned and the various ways they could be affixed or combined, scholars have come to see language comprehension as an unconstrained skill that continues to develop across the lifespan (Paris, 2005). While decoding is critically important because children will not be able to access written words without the ability to decode, scholars view decoding as a much more constrained skill than language comprehension. For example, there are only 26 letters and 44 sounds in the English language, and though there are many sound-symbol correspondences children need to learn, the task of decoding is still much more constrained than the task of comprehending the thousands of words needed to understand language across contexts. Notably, for multilingual learners who are developing language comprehension across languages, the endeavor is even more formidable.

Given the scope of the development of language comprehension, scholars have recently stopped using the old adage used to describe reading development as the process of first learning to read and then reading to learn across the elementary school grades. Using this adage seemed to suggest that the focus of instruction in early elementary school should be decoding and the focus of instruction in later elementary school should be comprehension. Since language comprehension develops across the lifespan and children understand more than they can read for much of elementary school, scholars have begun to emphasize the importance of supporting language comprehension from the time children enter school in prekindergarten or kindergarten throughout elementary school; by the end, the goal of instruction is that children are able to decode and comprehend at a level that allows them to acquire new knowledge of concepts and content through reading.

Importantly, to prepare children to be able to comprehend text once they are able to access it on their own, children should have lots of experience with book language, which is often more formal or less familiar than the language used in everyday conversations at home and in school. Even though we rarely, if ever, say "once upon a time" in real life, children should know what this means because they have heard it from books read to them by their caregivers and educators. Exposure to the more rare vocabulary, morphology, and syntax in books will enable children to understand what they are reading when they have developed

the ability to accurately and automatically read the words in texts on their own. There has been debate in the field about whether to refer to what we call "book language" as "academic language" because the term academic language seems to suggest that the language used in school settings is superior to nonacademic language or the language used at home or in the community, creating a hierarchy of language that implies that one language is better or more important than the other. By using "book language," we hope to move away from any hierarchy of language and suggest that there are different types of language that are all equally important. For example, being able to communicate with family and friends at home is at least as important as, if not more important than, being able to access books, but, to do both, children must have comprehension of both types of language. This knowledge of how to use language across different contexts is called *pragmatic awareness*. While pragmatic awareness is often not mentioned in discussions of language comprehension, it is important to remember that different kinds of language are useful in different kinds of settings, and books often use language that is different from language we use in everyday life. (See Box 1.2 for definitions of terminology about language comprehension used in this section.)

Box 1.2. Definitions Related to Language Comprehension

Phonological Awareness—The ability to recognize and manipulate the sound structures of spoken language, including syllables, rhymes, and individual phonemes (sounds).

Vocabulary Knowledge—The understanding and use of words in a language, including their meanings, usage, and relationships to other words.

Semantic Awareness—The ability to understand and interpret meanings in language, including word meanings, relationships (synonyms, antonyms, homonyms), and how words contribute to the meaning of sentences and discourse.

Morphological Awareness—The understanding of the structure of words and how morphemes (the smallest units of meaning, such as prefixes, suffixes, and root words) contribute to word formation and meaning.

Syntactic Awareness—The understanding of sentence structure and grammar, including how words and phrases are arranged to create meaningful sentences.

Pragmatic Awareness—The ability to understand and use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts, including understanding tone, conversational rules, and nonverbal communication cues.

INSTRUCTION FOR SUPPORTING LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Though, as suggested by the National Academy of Education report mentioned earlier (Pearson et al., 2020), it can be hard to "move the needle" in reading comprehension, research suggests that there are instructional methods focused on language comprehension that can make a difference in reading comprehension. In fact, one of the main findings of that report was that "Language drives every facet of reading comprehension" and educators should focus on "redoubling our efforts to enhance language development, both oral and written, for students across the age-span" (Pearson et al., 2020, p. 3). The research reviewed in the National Academy of Education report, the research we reviewed in our own meta-analysis of studies of language comprehension-focused instruction, and the research by authors of chapters in this book suggest several themes that can guide educators on implementing instruction to support language comprehension. We review these themes, depicted in Box 1.3, in the following sections.

Box 1.3. What the Research Says about Supporting Language and Reading Comprehension

- Instruction should focus on multiple components
- Instruction should be engaging and content-rich
- Instruction should leverage the linguistic knowledge of multilingual and multidialectical students
- Instruction should be guided by assessment and progress monitoring
- Technology can be used to facilitate language comprehension
- Professional development should focus on supporting teachers' knowledge of language comprehension

Instruction Should Focus on Multiple Components

As noted, there are many components of language comprehension, including vocabulary knowledge and semantic awareness, morphological awareness, and syntactic awareness. Language comprehension-focused instruction that focuses on multiple components rather than just one is more likely to move the needle in reading comprehension. One of the programs reviewed in the National Academy of Education report, in our meta-analysis, and in a chapter in this book (Piasta et al., Chapter 3), the Let's Know program for prekindergarten (PreK) through

grade 3 students includes attention to vocabulary knowledge and semantic awareness in addition to inference-making, which relies heavily on syntactic awareness, comprehension monitoring, and use of text structure to support comprehension (LARCC, Jiang, & Davis, 2017; LARRC, Jiang, & Logan, 2019). This program showed positive effects on measures of vocabulary, which indirectly affected reading comprehension and comprehension monitoring. Another program for PreK-3 reviewed in the National Academy of Education report, in our meta-analysis, and in a chapter in this book (Kim et al., Chapter 4) is called COMPASS, which stands for Comprehension Monitoring and Providing Awareness of Story Structure. This program addresses the same language skills (vocabulary knowledge and semantic awareness) as well as attention to text structure and comprehension monitoring and has also been shown to have positive effects (Connor et al., 2018; Noble et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2021). In their chapter, Kim et al. discuss a new program derived from COMPASS called Story Detective that also includes attention to syntax and inferencing.

Other programs reported on in our meta-analysis that showed positive effects on language and/or reading comprehension outcomes include the Morphological Awareness Intervention Program (Apel et al., 2013), RAVE-O (Morris et al., 2012), the CLAVES program (Proctor and Silverman, Chapter 11), and Word Generation (Jones et al., 2019). The Morphological Awareness Program was developed for and implemented with kindergarten through second-grade students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and included attention to inflectional and derivational affixes and semantic awareness (i.e., words that are related by meaning). RAVE-O, implemented with first- and second-grade children described as "struggling readers," included systematic emphases on phonological decoding processes, orthographic knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the writing system), and semantic, syntactic, and morphological awareness. The CLAVES program focuses on vocabulary, morphology, and syntax in a program developed to support multilingual learners in upper elementary school. Finally, Word Generation, studied with fourth and fifth graders as well as middle schoolers in high-poverty schools, included attention to vocabulary, unpacking morphologically or syntactically dense text, and text organization.

What is common across all of these instructional programs is that they do not focus on just one facet of language comprehension and, instead, support children in multiple aspects of language comprehension. Interestingly, together, these studies show positive effects of a multicomponent approach across grades PreK-5 (and beyond), with multilingual learners, with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and with students who are considered "struggling readers," suggesting that multicomponent instruction to support language comprehension is

relevant for all students in elementary school. Since Let's Know, COMPASS, and CLAVES are discussed in other chapters in this book, let's take a look at how this multicomponent approach is enacted in RAVE-O. In a sample lesson sequence in RAVE-O, which has lessons appropriate for first to fourth graders and students with or without dyslexia, students are introduced to a core vocabulary word and participate in a brief activity to support awareness of multiple meanings of the word. In one example, students are introduced to the word *track* and are shown illustrated cards representing running on a track, a train track, tracks in the snow, and a detective tracking a suspect. RAVE-O lessons also include intentional focus on the sounds and spellings of words (e.g., a focus on *tr*). Next, students discuss syntax and morphology as they read sentences and spell words. For example, they read the following sentences: "Sam can brush the tracks with sand. Then he can track the little sandy tracks. Sam is quite the tracker." Then, they discuss how the word track is used across different parts of speech to serve different functions in the sentence and how different morphemes are used to convey parts of speech and meaning. At the end of a lesson, students typically read and reread passages using the skills they have learned to build fluency. Focusing on many aspects of words and how they are used to convey meaning in text provides students with a solid foundation of language comprehension skills that enable them to read with comprehension.

Though RAVE-O focuses primarily on vocabulary knowledge, semantic awareness, morphological awareness, and syntactic awareness, many of the other programs mentioned above included attention to other skills related to language and reading comprehension, including the use of comprehension strategies such as inferencing and monitoring and attention to text structure. As discussed in a chapter in this book by Biancarosa (Chapter 7), inferencing is a critical skill necessary for reading comprehension. Inferencing is highly related to syntactic awareness in that, in order to infer meaning across sentences, attention to how grammar conveys meaning is needed. For example, to understand what *it* is referring to in the following sentence, it is necessary to understand how syntax affects meaning: "My book was wet, though I could still read *it*." However, inferencing goes beyond syntactic awareness and involves linking ideas across larger sections of text and understanding the broader theme or purpose (e.g., inferring the main idea of a passage based on multiple details). In this way, inferencing is related to other comprehension strategies such as monitoring, which includes tracking understanding while reading, and using text structure to support comprehension. In this book, Wijekumar and colleagues (Chapter 5) discuss how knowledge about text structure can enable students to generate main ideas, extend main ideas to summaries, and leverage main ideas to extrapolate inferences. Therefore, multicomponent instruction to

support language and reading comprehension should integrate a focus on components of language, including vocabulary knowledge, semantic awareness, morphological awareness, and syntactic awareness, with attention to comprehension strategies such as inferencing and monitoring and the knowledge of text structures.

Instruction Should Be Content-Rich and Support Motivation and Engagement

Instruction to support language and reading comprehension should not only focus on multiple components, but it should also be content-rich and engaging. Though not a feature of the Simple View of Reading, other models of reading, such as Scarborough's Rope and the direct and indirect effects model of reading (DIER), include background knowledge, also referred to as content knowledge. When children are engaged in conversation, listen to books read aloud to them, or read on their own, they bring all of their knowledge of whatever the topic is to the experience. This background or content knowledge provides a schema (i.e., a framework or blueprint) for understanding the topic and includes knowledge of vocabulary and concepts related to the topic that help support comprehension of new information about the topic. O-Reilley et al. (2019) found evidence of a knowledge threshold, suggesting that students need a baseline of knowledge about a topic to comprehend a text on that topic. In fact, some of the instructional programs found to have positive effects on language and reading comprehension discussed above focused on building content knowledge as a critical aspect of the program. For example, the Let's Know program taught information and vocabulary related to animals and earth materials (LLRC et al., 2017); the CLAVES program supported content knowledge related to topics such as rights and freedoms (Proctor, 2020); and Word Generation included texts to build background knowledge on such topics as the role of government and education in society (Jones, 2019).

Content-rich instruction is important not only for building background knowledge but also for facilitating motivation and engagement. While motivation refers to the desire to read, engagement refers to active participation in the reading process. Whether and why a student is motivated to read will influence the extent to which they are engaged in reading. In a prominent line of work on what they referred to as concept-oriented reading Instruction (CORI), Guthrie (1993) found that concept-oriented instruction that highlights real-world connections to what students are learning and doing in school leads to greater motivation to read and more active engagement in the reading process, which, in turn, leads to greater reading comprehension. As Cho et al. discuss in Chapter 6 in this book, researchers have identified several instructional practices to facilitate

motivation and engagement in reading. Specifically, they discuss the importance of scaffolded instruction, which, by providing incremental support, fosters perceived competence, an important component of motivation. They also suggest that, to promote motivation and engagement, teachers should promote growth mindset, reframe mistakes as opportunities, and acknowledge effort and strategy use. Additionally, they note that leveraging interest, offering choice, and encouraging independence can support motivation and engagement. Finally, Cho et al. advise teachers to create learning environments in which students feel they belong and are valued.

Instruction Should Acknowledge and Leverage the Linguistic Knowledge of Multilingual and Multidialectical Students

While attention to motivation and engagement is important for all learners, it is essential to recognize that multilingual and multidialectal learners often do not feel they belong and are valued in schools that do not acknowledge and leverage their full linguistic repertoire, especially when they are in classrooms with teachers who do not share their linguistic background. Given the vast number of multilingual and multidialectical learners in elementary schools in the United States, researchers have focused on identifying practices that are supportive of these learners. As discussed in Chapter 8 in this book, Baker et al. conducted a review of research and analyzed effects of interventions focused on supporting language and reading comprehension for culturally and linguistically diverse students (i.e., students who come from a variety of cultural, social, and economic backgrounds and who speak a language other than English at home). These authors found that, as mentioned earlier, interventions that focus on multiple components of language are important. In particular, they found that shared book reading, with attention to vocabulary and other aspects of language, is productive, especially in prekindergarten and kindergarten. Additionally, they found that interventions that facilitate active engagement, include structured dialogue and feedback, and encourage students to use and make connections to their native language are effective for culturally and linguistically diverse students in elementary school.

Two of the chapters in this book discuss particular programs shown to be effective with multilingual learners. In Proctor and Silverman (Chapter 11), the authors describe CLAVES, a program focused on Cultivating Linguistic Awareness for Voice and Equity in Schools, particularly for multilingual learners in grades four and five. This program is multicomponent, as mentioned earlier, but it also focuses on multilingualism, highlighting comparisons or contrasts with other languages and encouraging students to share how to translate words into languages they know.

In Phillips Galloway's chapter (Chapter 12), the author describes work with teachers to develop a four-phase approach to supporting the comprehension of multilingual learners in upper elementary school. The approach includes teaching students the language of books and school, engaging students' translingual funds of knowledge (i.e., the knowledge they have about the languages they speak), fostering students' metalinguistic knowledge (i.e., knowledge of how languages work), and supporting students' application of new language knowledge in discussion and text reading. Importantly, both of these approaches center students' multilingualism as an asset students can use to support their comprehension and learning in school.

Similarly, Pittman et al. (Chapter 9) discuss the importance of an asset-based approach for African American students who speak African American English (AAE) as well. Also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English, AAE is a rich variation of English spoken by many African Americans in the United States. It has its own unique grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation patterns and is intricately connected to African American culture. Just as multilingual learners are often expected to use only English at school, African American children are often told not to use AAE at school. This approach results in a mismatch between what teachers are teaching and what students bring to school, making it unnecessarily difficult for children to access content and instruction. Pittman and colleagues argue that a much more productive approach is to validate the dialect children speak (e.g., by sharing texts with AAE in shared reading) and to engage students in critical conversations about how languages and dialects are similar or different and how and why they are used across cultural contexts.

Instruction Should Be Guided by Language and Reading Comprehension-Focused Assessments

While recent trends related to the Science of Reading have focused on the importance of screening and progress monitoring for phonological and phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency, there has been much less attention to the assessment of language comprehension. Yet, as we found in a study of the beginning of first-grade predictors of third-grade reading comprehension difficulties, screening that includes measures of both decoding and language comprehension is more effective at identifying students who may need additional support than screening that includes only measures of decoding (Silverman et al., 2021). In fact, Catts et al. (2016) have described students who they refer to as having late-emerging reading difficulties—reading difficulties that do not emerge until students are expected to read and comprehend complex text in upper elementary school—and explain that many of these students could have been identified and provided with support for

language comprehension, which could have prevented later reading comprehension difficulties. As Mancilla-Martinez and colleagues suggest (Chapter 10), there should be screening and progress monitoring focused on language comprehension for all students, and, as Piasta et al. indicate (Chapter 3), supplemental intervention should be provided to students who have difficulty in aspects of language comprehension.

Currently, in most districts, assessment of language skills is only implemented for multilingual learners who speak a language other than English at home. Mancilla-Martinez et al. point out in Chapter 10 that measures used with multilingual learners are often not appropriate because they do not consider children's language skills across languages. Such assessments may lead to over- or under-identification of multilingual students who need additional support through special education. Mancilla-Martinez et al. suggest that educators need to acknowledge the limitations of current assessments, encourage the development and validation of more appropriate assessments, and use alternative assessment practices such as those that focus on conceptual knowledge and take into account that multilingual learners may experience a different developmental trajectory than their monolingual peers.

As Phillips Galloway suggests (Chapter 12) suggests, language and reading comprehension-focused assessments need to hone in on features of language that are overrepresented in book or school language to guide instruction that supports this kind of language, which may be more or less familiar to students depending on their background knowledge or knowledge of language. Often, language comprehension measures focus on vocabulary to the exclusion of other aspects of language, such as morphology and syntax; however, using measures that disentangle vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, and syntactic awareness may be more useful in guiding instruction to support language and reading comprehension. Biancarosa (Chapter 7) suggests that measures that provide more detailed information on students' comprehension-related strengths and needs (e.g., in regard to inferencing) might lead to more targeted instruction. Assessment that provides this level of detail could be used to guide whole-class instruction as well as supplemental instruction focused on language and comprehension for those who need more support.

Technology Can Be Used to Facilitate Language Comprehension

In the chapter by Biancarosa, the author suggests, citing evidence from McMaster et al. (2019), that one way to support inferencing for young students is through

the use of video. While there is much more research on the use of technology to support decoding, we found in a meta-analysis that we conducted (Silverman et al., 2024) that there is evidence that technology can supplement (though should never supplant) instruction in supporting language comprehension as well. Videos that leverage verbal and visual pathways for learning have been shown to be useful in supporting vocabulary and language comprehension, and e-books with features such as text-to-speech, definitions of words, and animation of key concepts have been shown to support language and reading comprehension. Such technology can facilitate access to content above students' reading levels, which can support background knowledge, vocabulary, and concept learning. Additionally, programs that include additional practice, support, and feedback with aspects of language may serve as a helpful addition to teachers' instruction in school.

One program that was included in our meta-analyses that used technology was a cross-age peer learning program in which fourth-grade "older buddies" and kindergarten "younger buddies" experienced print text, videos, and e-books on topics such as animal habitats and talked about these texts together (Silverman et al., 2017b). This approach was effective at supporting the language and comprehension of both the older and younger buddies. Another program featured in our meta-analysis that used technology was called Improving Comprehension Online (ICON, Proctor et al., 2011). In this program, students read text with a variety of features, including Spanish translations of texts and directions; human read-alouds of each text in English and Spanish; English monolingual and Spanish–English bilingual pedagogical "coaches" who provided assistance with using the system and responding to prompts; a revisable electronic worklog that collected student responses; a multimedia glossary; and pictures illustrating the narrative and informational text content. Bilingual and monolingual fifth graders who used the program gained more in vocabulary compared to their peers. A third program that was covered in our meta-analysis was the Intelligent Tutoring for Text Structure Strategy (ITSS), which Wijekumar and colleagues discuss in Chapter 5. ITSS provides web-based instruction to students in grades four to eight that focuses on using text structures to select important ideas, generate a logically connected main idea, extend the main idea to a summary, and extrapolate inferences to promote a coherent representation of text in memory. ITSS features a pedagogical agent that provides scaffolding and support throughout the program. This program has been shown to be effective across numerous studies. Together, these programs show the promise of using technology to support language and comprehension. However, much more research on the role of technology in supporting language and reading comprehension is needed, especially as new technologies (e.g., programs using artificial intelligence) become available in schools.

Professional Development Should Focus on Supporting Teachers' Knowledge of Language Comprehension

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is incredibly difficult to "move the needle" in reading comprehension, in part because of the complexity and unconstrained nature of language comprehension. One of the main conclusions from the National Academies of Education report (Pearson et al., 2020) was that the success of efforts to improve language and reading comprehension depends on strong and supportive professional learning, including coaching and communities of practice (p. 286). Indeed, many of the chapters in this book talk about the importance of teacher professional development. For example, Piasta et al. (Chapter 3) discuss the critical role of teacher knowledge of language comprehension in efforts to support students. These researchers call for professional learning opportunities for teachers to develop explicit knowledge of language development and research-based instructional practices to support language comprehension skills in their classrooms. Importantly, this professional learning should also address supporting language comprehension for children experiencing language difficulties, those newly learning English, and those who may be less familiar with the vocabulary and syntax of book and school language. Phillips Galloway (Chapter 12) provides a promising model for professional learning. Working with teachers of multilingual learners who were not multilingual learners themselves, the research team first provided background information on how language works and on collaborative translating. Then, they collaborated with teachers to develop an instructional routine to use across short texts. This model of providing teachers with a grounding in the research base and then working with them to apply research-based practices for lessons to use with their own students may help bridge the gap between research and practice.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we reviewed what language comprehension is and why it is important to reading comprehension. Specifically, we noted that language comprehension is the ability to understand or make meaning of language, and we suggested that understanding language is critical to reading comprehension because, once students learn to decode, they need to know how to make meaning from the words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs they are reading. We also reviewed how students develop language from early interactions with caregivers and continue to build language comprehension through instruction in school and, eventually, texts

they read on their own. Finally, we reviewed the role of instruction in supporting language comprehension, highlighting that research on language comprehension indicates the following: (1) instruction should focus on multiple components; (2) instruction should be content-rich and engaging; (3) instruction should leverage the linguistic knowledge of multilingual and multidialectical students; (4) instruction should be guided by assessment and progress monitoring; (5) technology can be used to facilitate language comprehension; and (6) professional development should focus on supporting teachers' knowledge of language comprehension. We hope this review of the literature and the information provided by the leading scholars in the field in the chapters in this book will help teachers as they endeavor to move the needle on language and reading comprehension throughout elementary school.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you already incorporate what the research says about supporting language comprehension into your own instruction?
2. What additional ways can you incorporate what the research says about supporting language comprehension into your own instruction?
3. How will you know whether changes you make to your own instruction to support language comprehension are having a positive impact on your students?

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