



Reading Comprehension – Reading but not Understanding

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

Early reading involves the acquisition of basic **decoding** skills – the ability to decode written print into words. In kindergarten and first grade, this involves learning consonant and short vowel sound-letter associations, blending sounds into words, and automatic recognition of sight words and whole words. In second grade, decoding skills extend to advanced vowel digraphs (*ou, ow, oi, oy, au, aw, ew*), common word parts and patterns (*-tion, -ture*), multisyllabic word attack skills, and recognition of common prefixes and suffixes. By the middle of third grade, decoding skills are expected to be solid, and students begin *reading to learn* rather than *learning to read*.

Many children who appear to have basic decoding skills suffer from poor **reading comprehension**. Reading comprehension is the ability to derive meaning from written material, for a variety of text formats. For expository fact-based text, readers should be able to identify the main idea and supporting details. For literary texts, students are expected to identify elements such as characters and character traits, setting, plot, climax, and resolution. Other concepts that are important to master include cause-effect, compare-contrast, opinion versus fact, derivation of meaning from context, and inference (or reading between the lines).

What are the reasons for poor reading comprehension? Although it varies for each student, a number of factors can interfere with reading comprehension.

- 1) Weak decoding skills - Many children appear to have basic decoding skills, but are actually weak in many of the underlying fundamentals. When they reach third grade, their decoding skills cannot keep pace with the written material they are required to read. They may guess at words based on size or shape, letters in the word, or the context of the story. Poor reading accuracy results in misread or omitted words, which can change the meaning of sentences and interfere with reading comprehension. In addition, as reading material becomes more difficult, the effort required to read becomes increasingly fatiguing and there are fewer resources remaining to derive meaning from text.
- 2) Poor reading prosody - Prosody means reading with intonation, inflection, and appropriate phrasing (pausing at commas and “reading” periods). When readers run sentences together and read without appropriate prosody, it is difficult for them to “chunk” the language for meaning. For comprehension purposes, sentences should be read aloud so that they sound similar to spoken language.
- 3) Weak language processing skills - Some students have weak language skills for higher-level language syntax. In higher grades, written syntax becomes longer and more complex - with elements such as embedded phrases, pronoun



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referents, and passive tense. Children with weak language skills “lose” the meaning of the sentence when the syntax becomes complex, and have difficulty parsing and linking the different parts of the sentence.

- 4) Vocabulary - After third grade, vocabulary growth occurs largely through reading. Children’s books contain 25 less common words for every 1000 written words. Children who score above the 90th percentile on reading tests read an average of 1.8 *million* words a year – reading an average of 45,000 less commonly encountered words a year. Children who score below the 10th percentile typically read around 8,000 words a year – reading an average of 200 less commonly encountered words a year. This difference has a dramatic impact on vocabulary growth. Weak readers typically read less frequently. As vocabulary lags, more unknown words are encountered, reading becomes progressively more difficult, and the vocabulary gap widens.
- 5) Memory – Reading for comprehension requires the ability to “hold” information in memory across sentences, in order to derive overall meaning from a paragraph or passage. For longer passages, concepts from multiple paragraphs must be retained in memory and linked together. Students with memory weaknesses have difficulty “holding” information in memory as they read, and may not be perceive how paragraphs build upon ideas or how ideas are linked together.
- 6) Lack of Active Processing - Some children have excellent decoding skills, but are not actively processing the material they read. They need to learn to actively engage with written material, through techniques such as wondering, predicting, clarifying, linking ideas, relating material to their own life experiences, and visually picturing scenes in a story or passage (similar to seeing a movie in their head).

Reading comprehension is crucial for success in school. After third grade, much academic learning in subjects such as science, history, social studies, and literature occurs through reading. Students with poor reading comprehension may struggle in multiple academic areas, and begin to lose confidence in their learning abilities. It is critical that reading comprehension difficulties are identified as early as possible, so that students have the skills they need to succeed in school.

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