

Components of Reading

What Are the Components of Reading?

Research has identified five components of reading:

1. Phonemic awareness
2. Decoding
3. Fluency
4. Vocabulary
5. Comprehension

Each of the first four components plays an important role in facilitating comprehension, the ultimate goal.

What Are the Components of Reading Instruction?

Paralleling the reading components are the instructional components:

1. Phonemic awareness training
2. Phonics instruction
3. Fluency development
4. Vocabulary development
5. Comprehension-strategies instruction

How Do the Components Work Together?

Comprehension is the goal of reading instruction. All of the reading components contribute to the development of comprehension.

Alphabetics: phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction

The foundation for reading is the ability to identify words in print. Word identification skills are often called alphabetics. The term alphabetics refers to phonemic awareness, decoding, and sight-word recognition.

Phonemic awareness.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to detect individual speech sounds within words. Phonemic awareness is required for developing accurate decoding skills. Some struggling readers have not acquired this ability, so phonemic awareness may need to be directly taught.

Decoding.

Decoding is a word identification skill that involves using letter-sound correspondences to recognize words in print. Decoding at higher skill levels also includes using larger word parts--like syllables, prefixes, and suffixes. Adults with weak decoding skills need explicit and systematic phonics instruction.

Sight words are those a reader recognizes automatically and reads rapidly. Some frequently encountered words, especially those that have phonetically irregular spellings, are initially taught to be recognized on sight, to enhance reading speed and fluency. But even if a reader initially identifies a word by decoding, after many exposures the word is stored in memory and can be quickly recognized. In this way all words eventually become "sight words."

The alphabetics skills of phonemic awareness and decoding are necessary but not sufficient for reading comprehension.

Fluency development

Fluency is vital to comprehension. A fluent reader identifies words rapidly and accurately with little effort, and is therefore able to focus on meaning. A fluent reader also "interprets" while reading to determine appropriate phrasing and expression. This aspect of fluency indicates comprehension of the writer's message. Guided repeated oral reading is a recommended strategy for building fluency in beginning and developing readers.

Alphabetic skills are required to develop fluency. Fluency is necessary but not sufficient to ensure reading comprehension.

Vocabulary development

Vocabulary is important to reading comprehension in two ways. The beginning reader uses decoding skills to "translate" print into words that are already in his oral vocabulary. At higher reading levels, vocabulary knowledge is critical for understanding increasingly difficult materials. Learners not only need to learn new words; they need to deepen their knowledge of words they already know. Vocabulary instruction should involve direct teaching and context-based approaches.

Vocabulary is vital to reading comprehension at all levels.

Comprehension-strategies instruction

Comprehension strategies enable learners to monitor their own understanding as they read and to solve comprehension problems. Direct and explicit instruction is required for new and developing readers.

Even accurate, fluent reading does not guarantee comprehension. Specific comprehension strategies may need to be taught.

Teaching the component skills

These components should not be seen as sequential. Students don't learn the alphabetic skills and then become fluent and then develop vocabulary and then focus on comprehension. Although the foundational alphabetic skills are a primary focus of beginning instruction, in fact, all the components reinforce each other, and as a result, often develop simultaneously. Teachers should address all the necessary components (at appropriate levels of difficulty) in reading lessons (Kruidenier, 2002).

In addition, the skills should be taught and practiced not only with drills and workbook exercises, but also with meaningful, authentic (real-life) materials, including texts in content areas like science, social studies, literature, and materials related to work and home life. The National Institute for Literacy's website, Assessment Strategies and Reading Profiles (www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/), clearly makes this point: "Reading is a combination of many sub-skills combined to achieve the common goal of comprehension. Teaching reading sub-skills in an authentic setting ensures that there is never a moment when comprehension is not a factor."

Print-based and Meaning-based Skills

Another way to understand the components is to group them into two categories:

- Print skills--phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency
- Meaning skills--vocabulary and comprehension

Print skills have to do with reading words accurately and rapidly. When use of these skills is comfortable and automatic, the reader can attend to the meaning of the text, which is the focus of vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction. This distinction is not only a helpful simplifier; it also reflects common patterns observed in groups of adult learners.

Indications and suspicions cannot substitute for a formal diagnosis, so you must not assume that an adult has a learning disability.

For instance, reading researchers suggest that adults whose meaning skills are significantly stronger than their

print skills present a profile associated with reading disability (Chall, 1994, as cited in Kruidenier, 2002). We now know that most reading disabilities are related to word reading. You may suspect a disability when an adult struggles with print skills--isolated word identification, phonemic awareness, and decoding--but has an adequate oral vocabulary and is capable of understanding text when it is read to her.

English language learners present the opposite profile. They often exhibit stronger word identification abilities and fluency, with relative weakness in the meaning-based components. What holds them back is more likely a limited English vocabulary, not a reading disability. These two types of learners may have fairly similar scores on a silent reading comprehension test and even on a test of word recognition yet have very different strengths and needs (Davidson & Strucker, 2002).

One lesson to be taken from these patterns is that you need to be able to assess adult learners' abilities in the component skills. A silent reading test alone often will not suffice. You have an opportunity to uncover problems that may never before have been identified and addressed. Unless you find out exactly what each learner needs, you will not be able to offer a real second chance at learning.

As you can see, research offers important insights about adult readers. It also provides guidance (or at least suggestions) for practice.

Excerpts from *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers*, Susan McShane.