



### The Road to Reading Comprehension

By: Lynn Brown, M.Ed, CERI certified Structured Literacy Teacher, Owner Willamette Valley Dyslexia Center

The process of reading is best captured by the Simple View of Reading, where decoding (D) multiplied by language comprehension (LC) equals reading comprehension (RC), expressed as  $D \times LC = RC$ . To gain a full understanding of this equation, let's dig deeper into its components: decoding (D) and language comprehension (LC). Dr. Scarborough introduced this model in the early 2000s, widely known as The Reading Rope.

At the top of the reading rope are Phonological Awareness, Decoding, and Sight Recognition. These elements form the foundational skills for effective reading. Below them, we find the strands of Vocabulary Knowledge, Background Knowledge, Language Structure, Literacy Knowledge, and Verbal Reasoning. Dr. Scarborough identified these strands as essential skills that need to be developed individually and then interwoven together to create Reading Comprehension (RC). It does not need to be said that reading is a complex skill. But, despite the complexities, achieving proficiency in reading is entirely attainable. It is achievable when taught in an accessible way. A way that is systematic, explicit, and cumulative.

So, let's explore each strand of the reading rope to gain a more profound understanding of how reading comprehension is achieved

**Phonological Awareness** - Phonological Awareness is the missing link for struggling readers. It involves understanding, differentiating, and manipulating individual sounds in words—such as rhyme, syllables, alliteration, and sound isolation, manipulation, and deletion. These elements are the pillars of spoken language, crucial for word creation and decoding in reading and spelling.

The Dyslexia Connection: individuals facing reading challenges struggle to access these sounds in spoken words. For instance, asking a child to say "bring" without /r/ and hearing "bing" illustrates the difficulty in isolating and deleting phonemes to form new words.

The manifestation looks like writing words that are missing letters. It sounds like a young child's struggle with rhyming. For example, substituting "bunny" for "rabbit" in a sentence suggests reliance on visual cues rather than phonetic decoding during reading. Early recognition and intervention in Phonological Awareness are vital for literacy development.

**Decoding** - Decoding follows the realization of the Alphabetic Principle, understanding letter-sound connections. This awareness that sounds are represented by symbols enables word decoding. The most efficient decoding route involves learning approximately 40 English spelling rules and 31 grammar rules that dictate word spellings. Our current scope and sequence of spelling rules, used at the tutoring center is comprised of over 100 lessons.

Decoding Fluency is attainable in around three years of instruction, making it a subconscious skill, much like breathing. Even when unaware, individuals continue decoding.

In a systematic approach to teaching reading, a student would be introduced to the easiest most predictable skills first, and progress through variable spelling patterns, eventually tackling common or irregular patterns. This structured progression includes short vowels, consonant blends, variable vowel teams, and more intricate patterns like "tion/sion."

**Sight Recognition** - Sight Recognition differs from common perception and can be limiting. Science tells us that our short-term memory can typically hold up to 9 words.

Traditional sight word lists like Dolch, which has about 300 words, published in the 1930's, and Fry, from the 1950's with 1,000 words both dominate. But, interestingly enough, both Dolch and Fry were not advocates of phonics before age 9, and their lists mainly consist of decodable words.

**Reframing your thoughts of sight words** -If you consider a systematic and cumulative reading approach, new readers have received less instruction in letter-sound connections compared to experienced readers, limiting their decoding ability based on exposure. A sight word is now defined as a word not yet decodable, meaning new readers have more "sight" words than experienced readers.

Fun Fact: The English Language is 95% decodable when rules are known.

Sight words serve to make text accessible, especially in decodable texts tailored to the student's skill level. New readers inevitably need specific sight words to fluently access passages.

Rather than using outdated lists, consider using words breaking the taught rule as sight words (often called "heart words," totaling 82). Also, include specific words necessary for passage access, typically vocabulary terms.

These aspects form the top strands of the reading rope, collectively known as word recognition—a critical component of reading comprehension.

**The LC (language comprehension) of this equation will be a topic for another article.**

In short, reading comprehension encompasses the culmination of a student's entire experience. Every conversation, content knowledge acquired, and all instruction contribute to the strands of Vocabulary Knowledge, Background Knowledge, Language Structure, Literacy Knowledge, and Verbal Reasoning. Applying these verbal structures to printed text for new learning and meaning defines reading comprehension. Achieving reading comprehension unlocks a world of independence for students. They are no longer reliant on others' guidance but are free to acquire learning on their own terms.

Reflecting on the Reading Rope, it is undeniable that learning to read is a complex process. Taking the innate abilities of oral language and applying it to the human-invented written code of the English Language is tedious but not impossible. The most efficient route to learning to read is to embrace the instruction of the 26 letters, the 75 basic spelling patterns (graphemes) and the 31 spelling rules which interplay with the phonograms and affect the pronunciation and spelling of words.

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Stay tuned for the next installment where we will talk about how the components of the Reading Rope feed the Structured Literacy Lesson Plan

#### **About the Author:**

Lynn Brown is a Special Education Teacher turned Dyslexia Tutor! After a decade of chasing the "how to" of teaching reading, She finally discovered the Science of Reading. She had no idea at the time, what this new learning in Orton-Gillingham methodology was actually going to do for her students or her teaching practice.

Today, she runs a thriving tutoring center in the Willamette Valley! She has trained many tutors & teachers how to successfully implement the OG lesson plan with fidelity, and with great results! Collectively her tutoring center has taught over 1,000 students to read successfully!

She wants to share this "magic" with you!

She is a CERI Certified, Structured Literacy Teacher. She has an M.Ed. in Educational Leadership from Arizona State University, and 1,000's of teaching, tutoring, and mentoring hours in the OG methodology. She also has a dyslexic child.