



Department
for Education

The reading framework

Teaching the foundations of literacy

**Section 1: The importance of reading
and a conceptual model**

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Section 1: The importance of reading and a conceptual model

Why reading matters

I realized in a whiplash burst that those children, all mine for one year, might never reach their full potential as human beings if they never learned to read.¹

Maryanne Wolf's sudden awareness, as a new teacher, of her responsibilities towards her young class highlights why reading matters. To the individual, it matters emotionally, culturally and educationally; because of the economic impacts within society, it matters to everyone.

Developing children's spoken language

Becoming a fluent, skilled and attentive reader starts at the earliest stages, before children encounter a book for the first time, partly driven by the quality of their parents'² talk with them that expands their vocabulary.

This does not appear to happen only in economically advantaged families. This is based on evidence including the example of a study of a group of Spanish-speaking families in the United States, which suggests that:

Infants who experienced more child-directed speech became more efficient in processing familiar words in real time and had larger expressive vocabularies...³

To the researchers' surprise, the differences between the families, who were all disadvantaged, in the amount of talk directed to the child were almost as large as those reported in Hart and Risley's much-quoted 1995 study, in which the families differed markedly in terms of their socio-economic circumstances: children with wider vocabularies typically came from wealthier families.⁴

All talk is useful, especially when directed to the child specifically. For instance, children expand their language and vocabulary when they listen to or join in with a

¹ Wolf M (2018) 'Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world' New York: HarperCollins

² The term 'parents' refer to parents and other carers.

³ Weisleder A and Fernald A. ['Talking to children matters: Early language experience strengthens processing and builds vocabulary'](#) Psychological Science 2013: volume 24, issue 11, pages 2143-2152

⁴ Hart B and Risley TR (1995). 'Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children' Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing

story or rhymes in a well-scripted children's television programme, but an adult talking about it with them adds benefits. However, talk about books brings particular advantages.⁵

First, parents who engage their children in books prepare them to become committed and enthusiastic readers: they can transform their attitudes to reading.⁶ Their children learn to focus and share the enjoyment of the story; they learn how stories start and finish, and how a plot unravels and is resolved; they learn that books can transport them elsewhere. Without this, as Wolf said, they cannot experience 'the exquisite joys of immersion in the reading life.'⁷

Second, book-related talk introduces children to language that they might not hear in ordinary conversation, especially the vocabulary of the book itself.⁸ This primes them to understand what they read later, in their leisure reading and across the curriculum.

Researchers in the United States who had looked at the impact of parents reading with their children quoted the following figures in a news release about their findings:

Here's how many words kids would have heard by the time they were 5 years old: Never read to, 4,662 words; 1–2 times per week, 63,570 words; 3–5 times per week, 169,520 words; daily, 296,660 words; and five books a day, 1,483,300 words.⁹

The only effective route to closing this gap is for children to be taught systematically to read as soon as they start school. In this way, they do not have to rely on adults. Children who become engaged in reading can make huge progress in their literacy development simply through their independent reading, whatever the nature of their early experiences.

This is not to say, however, that all reading difficulties are caused by lack of conversation or engagement with books. Some parents provide the best possible opportunities for conversation and read to their children extensively, but their

⁵ Science Daily (2019). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/04/190404074947.htm>. Also see Jessica AR Logan, Laura M Justice, Melike Yumuş, Leydi Johana Chaparro-Moreno. '[When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap](#)' Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics June 2019, Volume 40, Issue 5, pages 373-386

⁶ See Appendix 1: For parents: reading stories to children

⁷ Wolf M (2018). 'Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world' New York: HarperCollins

⁸ For example, one study estimated, based on an assessment of the numbers of words in popular board and picture books, that children who are never read to at home are exposed to approximately 300,000 fewer words than children who are read to once day per day from birth to 5 years of age. Jessica AR Logan, Laura M Justice, Melike Yumuş, Leydi Johana Chaparro-Moreno. '[When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap](#)' Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics June 2019, Volume 40, Issue 5, pages 373-386

⁹ Science Daily (2019). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/04/190404074947.htm>.

children still have more difficulty than most in learning to read. Schools should teach these children early and effectively, so that their difficulties do not restrict their full access to the curriculum and so that they also become engaged in reading.

Reading for pleasure

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) said as recently as 2021 that 'PISA data consistently shows that engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading performance and is a mediator of gender or socio-economic status'.¹⁰ For example, when in 2000 the OECD analysed its data on the 15-year-olds who had taken part in that year's assessment, the literacy scores for students who were 'highly engaged in reading' were significantly above the international average; those who were 'poorly engaged' scored below it. This was the case whatever their family's occupational status. The OECD emphasised: 'Reading practices can play an important role in reducing the gap between the reading proficiency scores of students from different socio-economic backgrounds'.¹¹ But children cannot be 'highly engaged' if reading words is a struggle. It is vital, therefore, that phonics is a priority in teaching reading.

In the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment, the data for the UK showed that the year 5 pupils in the survey who liked reading the most scored, on average, 45 points more than those who said they did not like reading.¹²

Making sure that children become engaged with reading from the beginning is therefore one of the most important ways to make a difference to their life chances, whatever their socio-economic background. For this to happen, however, children need to learn to read as fluently as possible and be motivated to continue reading.

Motivation and cognitive differences

The OECD's report described the 'entangled relationship' between 'cognition and motivation, proficiency and engagement in reading'. Teachers cannot improve reading skills without also taking account of, for example, 'access to interesting and

¹⁰ OECD (2021). ['21st-century readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world'](#) Paris: OECD Publishing

¹¹ OECD (2002). ['Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000'](#) Paris: OECD

¹² McGrane J and others (2017). ['Progress in International Reading Literacy Study \(PIRLS\): National Report for England'](#) London: Department for Education

meaningful reading materials'.¹³ The DfE's internal analysis of the data from PIRLS in 2006 suggested it was particularly narrative rather than information texts that made the most difference.¹⁴ Although we tend to associate narratives with literature, they are simply stories and can bring subjects to life across the curriculum.

Children who are good at reading do more of it: they learn more, about all sorts of things, and their expanded vocabulary, gained from their reading, increases their ease of access to more reading. Conversely, those for whom reading is difficult fall behind, not just in their reading but in all subjects and a vicious circle develops. This is why the national curriculum says:

It is essential that, by the end of their primary education, all pupils are able to read fluently, and with confidence, in any subject in their forthcoming secondary education.¹⁵

Moreover, as far back as the 1970s, evidence was emerging suggesting that 'reading for pleasure had a powerful influence on children's cognitive development, especially in terms of their vocabulary'.¹⁶ It therefore seems that it is not just that the academically able children read more but that they have become academically more able through the reading they have done.

Economic and social argument

Teaching children to read as well as possible produces advantages for the individual. Without reading, it is impossible to access written information, on paper or online. Those who cannot read are also excluded from most social media. Crucially, being unable to read significantly narrows the range of work and life opportunities a person can access.

Reading benefits society, too, both economically and socially. Although estimates of the cost of low levels of literacy vary and the methods are often opaque, the costs to the UK are estimated to be very high. In a report published by the EEF in 2019, a foreword by Sir Kevan Collins cites the cost to the UK to be around £20 billion per

¹³ OECD (2002). ['Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000'](#) Paris: OECD

¹⁴ Department for Education (2012). ['Research evidence on reading for pleasure'](#) London: Department for Education

¹⁵ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

¹⁶ From the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), which has followed the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. Sullivan A and Brown M. (2013) ['Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading. CLS Working Paper 2013/10'](#) London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education

annum¹⁷ whilst other estimates are much higher.¹⁸ In social terms, better reading might enhance opportunities for individuals to become more engaged politically, increase their tolerance and involve them in their communities more effectively.¹⁹

Conclusion

All educators have a fundamental role in ensuring all children learn to read, including headteachers and initial teacher training (ITT) partnerships.

Extensive experience in early literacy indicates that, if children are taught well, their backgrounds, ethnicity, level of disadvantage, their disabilities and other variables, such as being a boy or summer born, should rarely prevent their learning to read. Some research supports this: in 2010, for example, Shanahan and Lonigan summarised the findings of the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel, which was published in the United States in 2008. That report was an extensive meta-analysis of around 300 studies. It also included meta-analyses of studies on teaching early literacy that had been published in journals. In their summary, Shanahan and Lonigan concluded:

It is possible that what works in early literacy works for all children, no matter their status and background...²⁰

The following pages describe what needs to happen at the earliest stages of teaching reading so that every child learns to read as well as possible.

The Simple View of Reading

Reading has been described as the product of decoding and comprehension, a model first proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, who called it the Simple View of Reading.²¹ It has been fundamental in changing the debate about the teaching of reading over at least the last 20 years. It is frequently shown as a diagram (Figure 1,

¹⁷ EEF (2019). [‘Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools Guidance Report’](#)

¹⁸ World Literacy Foundation (2018). [‘The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy’](#)

¹⁹ For example, one paper suggests better reading might enhance opportunities for individuals to become more engaged politically, increase their tolerance and involve them in their communities more effectively, but acknowledges that better evidence is required on these social benefits. Cherry G and Vignoles A (2020). [‘What is the economic value of literacy and numeracy?’](#)

²⁰ Shanahan T and Lonigan CJ (2010). ‘The national early literacy panel report: summary, commentary, and reflections on policies and practices to improve children’s early literacy’ *Educational Researcher*: volume 39, issue 4, pages 279–285. Also see the small scale longitudinal studies by Grant M (2014). [‘The effects of a systematic synthetic phonics programme on reading, writing and spelling’](#)

²¹ Gough PB and Tunmer WE (1986). [‘Decoding, reading and reading disability’](#) *Remedial and Special Education*: volume 7, issue 1, pages 6-10

page 8), consisting of two axes and four quadrants: a horizontal axis for word reading (decoding) processes and a vertical axis for language comprehension processes.

The national curriculum programmes of study for reading reflect the model, presented as two dimensions: 'word reading' and 'comprehension'.²²

Language comprehension

Comprehension does not refer to reading itself but, rather, to the way in which we make sense of words, sentences and the wider language we hear or read.

Language develops through interaction with others. Inevitably, by the time they start school, some children understand more and know more words than others, because of the quantity and quality of the interactions they have already had with adults and others. Children who begin school with a poor understanding of language will need considerable support to develop their spoken language.

Decoding (word reading)

Decoding refers to:

- reading unfamiliar words (words that have not been decoded before) by saying the sounds corresponding to the letters in the words and then blending the sounds together, either aloud or silently
- reading familiar words accurately and silently 'at a glance'²³, that is, no longer saying the sounds consciously.

This document uses the terms 'decoding' and 'word reading' interchangeably, as in Gough and Tunmer's original description of the Simple View of Reading.

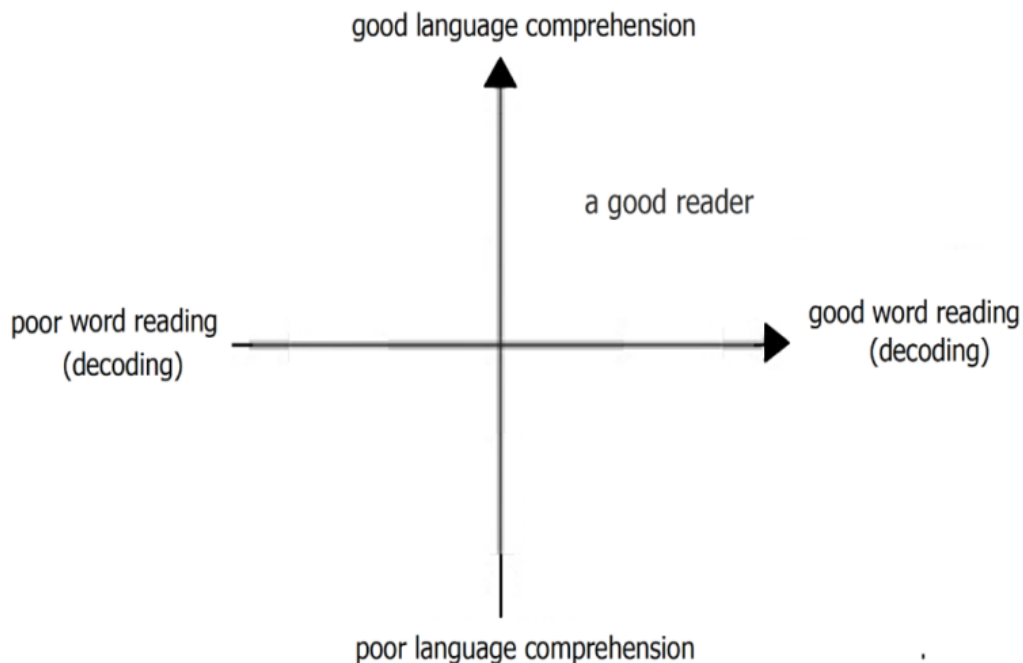
In contrast to spoken language, written language is a cultural invention. Most children do not develop the ability to read without direct teaching. For children who begin school with a poor understanding of language, being able to decode words is essential for equality, because their understanding of language, their vocabulary and their knowledge of the world will expand rapidly when they can read for themselves.

²² Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

²³ 'at a glance' is the helpful term used by Daniel Willingham. It does not mean children should be taught to memorise whole words. Willingham D (2017). 'The reading mind' San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Children need both good language comprehension and good word reading to become good readers.

Figure 1: The knowledge of a good reader



Implications of the model for beginner readers

Word reading and language comprehension require different sorts of teaching.

When children start learning to read, the number of words they can decode accurately is too limited to broaden their vocabulary. Their understanding of language should therefore be developed through their listening and speaking, while they are taught to decode through phonics.

However, when they can read most words 'at a glance' and can decode unfamiliar words easily, they are free to think about the meaning of what they read. They can then begin to develop their understanding of language through their reading.

Implications of the model for beginners' writing

We might think of writing similarly. Composition might be considered as the reverse of language comprehension; encoding (spelling) is the reverse of decoding (word reading). Writing might therefore be described as the product of composition and transcription.

But before children can write independently, they need to be able to say (aloud or just to themselves) what they want to write. A wide spoken language gives them more that they can write about and more words for what they want to say. Their expressive and receptive language develops through talk and listening.

In learning phonics, children learn to spell familiar words accurately and how to form letters. When they can do this, and can spell any word in a way that is at least phonically plausible, they can begin to write down what they want to say.

These models and the following sections

What follows reflects these models of reading and writing, namely that:

- language comprehension and composition are developed by talking, listening to and talking about stories, and by learning poetry and songs ([Section 2](#))
- decoding and encoding can be taught through a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme ([Section 3](#)).



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