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Auditory Processing and Comprehension

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IDA PURPOSE STATEMENT
The purpose of IDA is to pursue and provide the most comprehensive range of information and services that address the full scope of dyslexia and related difficulties in learning to read and write...

In a way that creates hope, possibility, and partnership...

So that every individual has the opportunity to lead a productive and fulfilling life, and society benefits from the resource that is liberated.

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, scientific and educational organization dedicated exclusively to the study and treatment of the specific language disability known as dyslexia. We have been serving individuals with dyslexia, their families, and professionals in the field for over 55 years. IDA was first established to continue the pioneering work of Samuel T. Orton, M.D., in the study and treatment of dyslexia.

IDA's membership is comprised of people with dyslexia and their families, educators, diagnosticians, physicians, and other professionals in the field. The headquarters office in Baltimore, Maryland, is a clearinghouse of valuable information and provides information and referral services to thousands of people every year. IDA's Annual Conference attracts thousands of outstanding researchers, clinicians, parents, teachers, psychologists, educational therapists, and people with dyslexia.

IDA supports efforts to provide individuals with dyslexia with appropriate instruction and to identify these individuals at an early age.

While IDA is pleased to present a forum for presentations, advertising, and exhibiting to benefit those with dyslexia and related learning disabilities, it is not IDA's policy to recommend or endorse any specific program, product, speaker, exhibitor, institution, company, or instructional material, noting that there are a number of such which present the critical components of instruction as defined by IDA.
People talking, telephone calls, radio, and television surround us. We spend much of our waking day listening and responding to material that we hear. The articles in this issue explore how we process this verbal information and how we learn to understand it, pay attention to it, and, sometimes, turn it off and ignore it.

Auditory comprehension and processing are critical skills, not just in learning but in everyday interactions with people. They are often missing or not fully functional in people with language learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and specific language disability. In many cases, they are a critical part of the problem. The articles in this issue discuss the impact of having auditory comprehension and processing problems on people with disabilities and students learning English as a second language. They also outline ways to help the problems that this difficulty creates.

The articles make it clear that measuring auditory comprehension is not easy. This lack of precision in measurement can be frustrating. Parents, teachers, and psychologists all wish for a simple answer. After all, we can measure height and weight with no problem. Of course, we might not like the answer that the scale gives us but it is there in black and white; we cannot argue. But measuring auditory comprehension can be like trying to stand on a cloud. From a distance, clouds look solid but if you fly through them in an airplane you realize that they are just water vapor. However, the articles in this issue propose some solutions to the problem of measurement.

The authors emphasize that teachers, psychologists, and parents need to understand the nature of oral and print language and all its levels. Hearing the words that people say, whether in conversation, the media, or the ever-present telephone is important but understanding the messages is the critical skill. Decoding the words on the page is essential but so is putting these words together in a meaningful way.

We hope that these articles will enlighten you. To learn even more about auditory comprehension, please consider attending the IDA conference at the Marriott Orlando World Center in Orlando, Florida, October 26-29, 2016. This year the Conference will feature six symposia, over 100 breakout sessions, an exhibit hall, networking opportunities, and much more. Please join us at the bookstore on Friday to meet and greet members of our Editorial Board and theme editors and authors from recent issues of Perspectives.

Stay connected with IDA via social media to receive up-to-date information on the Conference, including special discounts, giveaways, and more. Be sure to use the hashtag #Dyslexiacon for all conference-related news and discussions.

We look forward to seeing you in Orlando.

Linda S. Siegel, Ph.D.
Managing Editor
Volume 66, Issue 2, July 2016

IDA members can access the following articles from the July 2016 issue of *Annals of Dyslexia* with all the benefits of electronic access:

- Reading under the skin: physiological activation during reading in children with dyslexia and typical readers
  Valentina Tobia, Paola Bonifacci, Cristina Ottaviani, Thomas Borsato, & Gian Marco Marzocchi

- Too little or too much? Parafoveal preview benefits and parafoveal load costs in dyslexic adults
  Susana Silva, Luís Faíscia, Susana Araújo, Lúis Casaca, Loide Carvalho, Karl Magnus Petersson, & Alexandra Reis

- Implicit learning of non-linguistic and linguistic regularities in children with dyslexia
  Luciana Nigro, Gracia Jiménez-Fernández, Ian C. Simpson, & Sylvia Defior

- The relations between reading and spelling: an examination of subtypes of reading disability
  Irit Bar-Kochva & Meirav Amiel

- Implicit learning deficits among adults with developmental dyslexia
  Shani Kahta & Rachel Schiff

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The print edition is available to members at a special rate of $15 per year. Members can request the print edition when they join or email member@dyslexiaida.org

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THEME EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
Auditory Processing and Comprehension

by Melissa Lee Farrall

Welcome to the other side. This issue of Perspectives takes you from the comfort of your armchair away from the world of decoding and into the sphere of the lesser known—the sphere of listening comprehension. Listening comprehension, also known as linguistic comprehension, is one of the variables in the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). According to the simple view, both decoding (D) and linguistic comprehension (LC) contribute equally to reading comprehension (D x LC = RC). Although this equation makes sense, we as a field have long felt more comfortable with our chairs positioned on the left side of the multiplication sign. Print is permanent, and decoding is measurable. Listening comprehension, in contrast, is ephemeral and some might say elusory.

Listening comprehension, as our authors will tell you, is a chameleon-like entity. Its meaning varies with the beholder. Its lack of definition makes it hard to discuss and harder to measure. It is surprising that listening comprehension has not been more deserving of our attention. Listening is, after all, considered by some to be an art. It is the primary way in which we learn from our elders and from our teachers. Our strength as listeners has important implications for our ability to understand content, whether it be language by ear or language by eye.

The authors of this issue have bravely forged into an area that has not been well researched. They will validate listening comprehension as a skill in its own right, a skill that not only supports social interaction but one that has the potential to foreshadow problems with reading comprehension long before children have mastered their basic phonics skills. Listening comprehension has the potential to help educators identify challenges with vocabulary, syntax, and discourse, challenges that can sometimes be obscured by gaps in decoding or lack of fluency.

The problem with the study of reading comprehension is that we typically attempt to study it through the window of print. Although this statement may appear to be nonsensical, it is paradoxically true. There is much to be learned through the window of oral language, and our authors are here to help us do it.

In the first article, “Listening Comprehension, the Cinderella Skill: Giving the Neglected Stepchild Her Due,” Louise Spear-Swerling reviews the structure of oral language, and how the components of listening comprehension support the development of literacy. She reminds us of the need for teachers to be knowledgeable about language at all levels—words, sentences, and discourse. It is this knowledge that permits educators to interpret assessments and deliver research-based interventions in reading, as well as written expression. She points out shortcomings with the Common Core State Standards and discusses how the International Dyslexia Association professional standards can serve as a blueprint toward improved teacher training.

In the next article, “How Listening Comprehension Informs Instruction,” Suzanne Carreker reviews the research on the relationship between receptive language skill and academic success, and how listening comprehension is represented in the Common Core State Standards. Carreker shows us how formal and informal measures can be used to identify specific learning profiles and appropriate paths for evidence-based instruction. She provides us with a rubric for retelling and two methods for documenting skill with inferencing.

In “Post-Otitis Auditory Dysfunction,” a reprint of an article originally published in 1998, John O. Willis discusses how untreated ear infections are a serious and underestimated cause of multiple learning problems in schools. Willis discusses the nature of middle ear infections, the resulting buildup of fluid, and the difficulties that children experience with listening tasks. Willis then reviews recommendations for support and specialized instruction.

In “Listening Comprehension: Special Considerations for English Learners,” Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan explains the unique needs of English language learners and the challenges that non-native speakers face when attempting to learn the language of instruction and the language of content. In particular, she discusses the challenges that English language learners face when attempting to take in and discriminate a language with unfamiliar sounds, unfamiliar intonation and phrasing, and different rules for pragmatics. She speaks to the importance of understanding a child’s listening profile in his or her native language, and the process by which children become skilled in English for the purpose of social interaction and for more specialized content area learning in the classroom.

In “Assessing Listening Comprehension in a Reading Evaluation,” Melissa Lee Farrall reviews the definitional issues that plague listening comprehension and how those issues impact the field of assessment. She discusses the two stages of listening: how speech sounds are captured in memory and the process by which meaning is made. Farrall then discusses the advantages and disadvantages of testing listening comprehension directly through formal assessment and indirectly through classroom-based activities. She concludes with a review of standardized, norm-referenced measures of listening comprehension with an eye toward designing assessments that will be helpful to educators.

Finally, we conclude with “Teaching Listening Comprehension,” in which Blanche Podhajski provides guidelines for listening comprehension instruction, taking the learner, the structure of language, and the context into account. She highlights the individual needs of learners who come to listening situations with varying degrees of attention, memory and...
executive functioning. She reminds us that listening, the ability to process oral language, is not without environmental considerations, and that classroom noise can undermine the efforts of the best teachers. Podhajski makes our responsibility as educators clear, and her recommendations offer a comprehensive array of considerations, strategies, and instruction that will help children in their development as language learners.

In summary, this issue of Perspectives examines the often unrecognized need for educators and evaluators to consider, first and foremost, children’s availability for and skill with listening as a foundation for academic success. The authors establish through a review of the research and by virtue of their own expertise how listening comprehension is a foundation for academic success in general and for literacy in particular. It is the hope with this issue that listening comprehension will assume its rightful place in our training of teachers, our classroom environments, and in our ability to meet the increasingly diverse needs of our students.

References

Melissa Farrall, Ph.D., is the author of Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition, and the co-author of All About Tests & Assessments published by Wrightslaw. She presently works as the program manager for evaluation at the Stern Center for Language and Learning in Williston, Vermont. Dr. Farrall received her doctorate from Brown University in 1981.
Listening comprehension is sometimes called the “Cinderella skill” (e.g., Jalongo, 2010; Vandergrift, 1997) because of its tendency to be neglected in English language arts (ELA) instruction. The inclusion of listening in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may appear to address this oversight. Unfortunately, however, coverage of listening comprehension in the standards is inadequate at best. This article focuses on listening comprehension in terms of the structure of language and the specific skills that teachers require in order to address the listening needs of their students.

Listening comprehension is important in both theoretical and practical terms. It has a prominent role in widely referenced scientific models of reading. Both the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990) and Scarborough's Rope Model (2001) include listening comprehension and word recognition as the two broad types of abilities foundational to good reading comprehension. Researchers have considered listening comprehension as a way to differentiate dyslexia from other types of reading problems and, historically, as a possible substitute for IQ in discrepancy-based definitions of dyslexia (e.g., Badian, 1999; Stanovich, 1991). The definition of specific learning disabilities (SLD) in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, popularly termed IDEA 2004, also includes listening comprehension as one of eight areas of achievement in which children may qualify for special education (§300.8(c)(10)). Moreover, listening comprehension is employed to clarify common profiles of reading problems (e.g., Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006; Kieffer, 2010; Spear-Swerling, 2015), whether or not those problems involve dyslexia or other disabilities.

In practical terms, listening comprehension is critical to students’ success in formal schooling, as well as everyday life. Children spend a lot of their time listening in school; by some estimates, as much as 50 to 75% of classroom time involves listening to the teacher, classmates, or orally presented material (Jalongo, 2010). Individual students’ listening comprehension has important implications for differentiating instruction and designing interventions, as well as for the selection of screening and progress monitoring tools, accommodations, and assistive technology. Students with good listening comprehension may benefit greatly from assistive technology involving orally presented content (e.g., audio books), whereas students with weak listening skills may require additional supports, such as vocabulary aids. Universal screening measures that emphasize phonological skills such as decoding nonsense words are helpful for identifying many at-risk readers. However, phonologically based measures tend to miss at-risk children whose problems do not involve phonology (Riedel, 2007)—that is, those children whose difficulties involve only the listening comprehension component of the simple view. Scarborough (2005) notes that the accuracy of early identification efforts could be improved if schools supplemented their phonological screening efforts with other kinds of language screening.

Listening comprehension is critical to students’ success in formal schooling. It has important implications for differentiating instruction, designing interventions, and selecting screening and progress monitoring tools, accommodations, and assistive technology.

One reason behind the paradoxical neglect of listening comprehension in ELA teaching is a tendency to view listening comprehension as an ability that develops naturally, without the need for instruction. Yet encouragingly, we know that listening comprehension is sensitive to instruction (Goh, 2000) as well as to various school practices (Diakidoy, Stylianou, Karefilioudou, & Papageorgiou, 2005). It is without doubt that many children, such as English learners or students with specific reading-comprehension disabilities (Nation, 2005; Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2014), can benefit from improving their listening skills. Evidence suggests that including an oral language component in instruction for children with reading comprehension difficulties is significantly more effective than addressing reading comprehension alone (Clarke, Snowling, Truelove, & Hulme, 2010). Why, then, is listening comprehension still the neglected stepchild?

Continued on page 10

Abbreviations

ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
CAPD: Central auditory processing disorders
CCSS: Common Core State Standards
ELA: English language arts
ESL: English as a second language

IDEA 2004: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004
IDA: International Dyslexia Association
PPT: Planning and placement team
SLD: Specific learning disabilities
The ability to listen with understanding is built on a platform of underlying processes that include auditory processing, attention, working memory, and executive function (e.g., Cutting, Materek, Cole, Levine, & Mahone, 2009; Daneman & Merikle, 1996). Some of these areas have been implicated in certain disabilities. For example, auditory processing is complicit in central auditory processing disorders (CAPD), working memory problems in specific language impairments (Montgomery, 2003), and attention and executive function in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Barkley, 1997). Children with auditory processing disorders may have trouble perceiving or discriminating speech sounds in spoken words, which can affect both their listening comprehension and literacy development. Working memory is important to the listener’s ability to hold words in memory while constructing meaning; individuals with working memory problems may not recall the subject of a sentence by the time they hear (or read) the end of it. Executive function helps listeners and readers make decisions about what is important and what is not; students with poor executive function may have difficulty following a discussion because they fail to recognize key points or are overwhelmed by details.

The lack of a clear definition of listening comprehension has resulted in confusion within the field of assessment, with little consensus as to what listening comprehension is or how it should be measured. Components of listening may be tested selectively and sometimes with the presumption that they measure listening as a whole. But should following oral directions stand as the proxy for listening comprehension in general? Are sentence-level tasks valid representations of listening in the classroom? Furthermore, listening comprehension involves the integration of multiple linguistic (and nonlinguistic) components, and these components may be tapped differently across varied tests, all purporting to measure the construct of listening comprehension in its entirety.

Although underlying components of language interact with each other, individual children may have weaknesses in some components of language and strengths in others. Recognizing and understanding these underlying patterns of strengths and weaknesses have important practical implications. Appropriate intervention for difficulties in listening comprehension or literacy therefore requires consideration of the structure of language.

### Important Components of Oral Language Comprehension

Important components of oral language comprehension include phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics (Farrall, 2012; International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2010; Moats, 1994a). Individual components, as well as combinations of components, tend to affect different aspects of children’s reading and writing development. Each component is briefly reviewed below and summarized in Table 1.

**Phonology** is the aspect of language that involves speech sounds. The study of phonology is divided into two main disciplines. Phonetics is the study of the physical properties and perception of speech sounds in the context of their production, transmission, and reception; it is the foundation for human processing of an incoming speech stream. Phonemics is the study of speech sounds in their abstraction, what we refer to as phonemes. The awareness of phonemes plays a key role in children’s development of word decoding and spelling skills. In English and other alphabetic languages, learning to decode and spell requires that children become explicitly aware of sounds in the speech stream, in order to grasp the alphabetic principle and begin mapping letters to sounds. Individuals with dyslexia often have impairments in phonology, despite relative strengths in other areas of oral language (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003).

**Morphology** is the aspect of language involving word parts that convey meaning, such as root words, inflectional endings, prefixes, and suffixes. For instance, the inflectional ending –ed on the word jumped conveys that the jumping happened in the past, and the inflectional ending –es on boys conveys that there is more than one boy. Similarly, a multisyllabic word such as astronomer is better understood if the student recognizes the relevance and meanings of the individual morphemes in the word (i.e., astr- means star, -onomy means the study of something, and –er refers to a person who is studying it). Because English words have a morphological as well as phonological

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**Vagueness of Definitions of Listening Comprehension**

The meaning of the term *listening* might seem obvious. However, particularly with respect to its inclusion in definitions of SLD, the term is vague and imprecise (Moats, 1994a). Activities that can be conceptualized as involving listening include those as varied as following oral directions, comprehending the basic sequence of events in a simple story that has been read aloud, understanding social nuances in an oral narrative, recognizing intonation patterns in speech, and grasping key points in a lecture, to name but a few. In addition, although the terms *listening comprehension* and *oral language comprehension* are often employed interchangeably, the former is broader than the latter; it potentially encompasses nonlinguistic input such as environmental noise or music, as well as other cognitive processes besides those involving language. In this article, the term *oral language comprehension* will be used when the intended meaning is specific to language, as in the discussion of components of oral language in the next section. The term *listening comprehension* will be employed when a broader meaning is intended, to include not only language, but also other cognitive processes that influence listening skills.

The lack of a clear definition of listening comprehension has resulted in confusion within the field of assessment, with little consensus as to what listening comprehension is or how it should be measured. Components of listening may be tested selectively and sometimes with the presumption that they measure listening as a whole. But should following oral directions stand as the proxy for listening comprehension in general? Are sentence-level tasks valid representations of listening in the classroom? Furthermore, listening comprehension involves the integration of multiple linguistic (and nonlinguistic) components, and these components may be tapped differently across varied tests, all purporting to measure the construct of listening comprehension in its entirety.

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structure, an understanding of morphology is important to reading, spelling, and vocabulary development (Carlisle, 2010).

**Semantics** is the aspect of language involving meaning at the word level and beyond. Knowing the meanings of words in an oral discussion or text; grasping multiple meanings of words (e.g., a bed that one sleeps in vs. a bed of flowers); and understanding metaphorical expressions such as to put words in someone’s mouth, all involve the semantic aspect of language. Semantic abilities such as vocabulary knowledge strongly predict both oral language comprehension and reading comprehension. Furthermore, oral vocabulary development in preschoolers is a precursor of phonological awareness (Walley, Metsala, & Garlock, 2003), and vocabulary knowledge influences children’s word reading skills (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

**Syntax** is the aspect of language that involves grammar and word order at the sentence level. Good syntactic abilities are required to understand a grammatically complex sentence such as: The dog who ran to the kitchen door and who barked furiously at the cat had thick, dark brown fur. A child who lacks good syntactic abilities may misunderstand who has the dark brown fur—the dog, not the cat. Syntax is an often unrecognized building block of paragraph comprehension and written expression (Nelson, 2013).

**Discourse** involves understanding and use of language beyond the sentence level. Students who understand genre, story elements, and text structure will have better comprehension and improved recall of a lengthy lecture or story. Similarly, students who are adept at understanding anaphoric references (the use of pronouns or words that refer back to previously mentioned words or phrases) will be able to follow a train of thought and build a cohesive mental model of the topic of discussion, be it oral or in print. Oral narratives, lectures, and texts also vary in how cohesive and well-structured they are (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978), with some being more considerate of the reader’s or listener’s needs than others. Considerate texts (Armbruster & Anderson, 1985) facilitate comprehension through features such as an introduction, a clear sequence of topics, explicit definitions of important words, and the use of cohesive words—such as however, in addition, and furthermore—to link important ideas across sentences.

**Pragmatics** involves understanding and using language, both oral and written, in a social context, such as turn-taking in conversation, learning to say please and thank you, or understanding social nuances in a conversation or text. Students with pragmatic weaknesses may have trouble understanding the interactions between characters in a narrative or inferring the motivations underlying characters’ actions. Because social aspects of language can vary greatly by culture, students who are English learners may have difficulty in this area, not because of an actual impairment in pragmatic language, but because the pragmatics of their native languages differ from English. Pragmatic aspects of language also can be affected by certain disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorders (e.g., Dodd, Ocampo, & Kennedy, 2011).

Continued on page 12

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**TABLE 1. Important Components of Oral Language Comprehension**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Sample Assessment Task</th>
<th>Examples of Relationships to Literacy Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonology</td>
<td>Aspect of language that involves speech sounds</td>
<td>Teacher asks students to blend orally presented sequences of phonemes into a spoken word, e.g., “What word is this: /s/, /a/, /k/?”</td>
<td>Central to acquisition of word decoding and spelling skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphology</td>
<td>Aspect of language that involves word parts that carry meaning (e.g., roots, prefixes, suffixes)</td>
<td>Teacher asks students to identify root words and affixes in multisyllabic words such as geography, geographic and geological</td>
<td>Plays a key role in word recognition, spelling, and vocabulary development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantics</td>
<td>Aspect of language involving meaning, especially at the word level and beyond</td>
<td>Teacher asks students to explain the meaning or connotation of a word such as thrift</td>
<td>Central to vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and written expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>Aspect of language involving grammar and word order (sentence level)</td>
<td>Teacher asks students who have heard a grammatically complex sentence to explain who or what is doing the action in the sentence</td>
<td>Important to comprehension of sentences in reading and the ability to write effective sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Aspect of language beyond the sentence level (i.e., passages and lengthy discussions or texts)</td>
<td>Teacher asks students to explain how a story is organized differently from an informational or nonfiction type of text</td>
<td>Important to reading comprehension and written expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics</td>
<td>Aspect of language involving understanding and use of language in a social context</td>
<td>Teacher asks students questions that require them to infer characters’ feelings from dialogue in a story they have heard</td>
<td>Important to reading comprehension and written expression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Listening Comprehension, the Cinderella Skill continued from page 11

Important components of oral language comprehension include phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics. Limited awareness of these components may affect teachers’ capacities to provide effective literacy instruction and intervention.

The interrelationships among the various aspects of oral language and literacy are complex. Some components (e.g., phonology) relate more to word-level reading skills such as decoding and spelling. Others relate more to sentence-level (e.g., syntax) or higher-level (e.g., discourse and pragmatics) skills. In addition, although all components are ultimately important, they are not equally important at each developmental stage. Phonological abilities are especially critical to the early stages of literacy development, when children are first learning to read and spell words, whereas discourse-level abilities tend to play greater roles in the advanced stages of development, when children are expected to read and write increasingly lengthy, complex texts. Also, the relationship between oral language and literacy is not unidirectional; just as oral language abilities influence literacy acquisition, wide reading also influences the acquisition of oral language abilities such as vocabulary (Stanovich, 2000).

The path to higher student achievement in literacy is paved by an understanding of these component language abilities and their complex interrelationships with literacy. As displayed in Table 2, knowledge about language structure pervades the IDA (2010) Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading, whereas other professional standards for educators—and certainly those for students such as the CCSS—do not make all of these components of language explicit in a clearly organized way. Wider use of the IDA standards in preservice teacher preparation and professional development would therefore be a valuable step forward for ensuring that educators can provide effective literacy instruction for all students, including those with literacy difficulties.

The Impact of Definitional Vagueness

The vagueness of the term listening comprehension, and the fact that so many abilities can be conceptualized under its umbrella, has created problems for educational practice, policy, and research. Listening comprehension tests vary widely in the tasks they use to measure listening comprehension. The types of questions asked and the content heard—narrative, expository, or other content such as radio commercials—all vary by test, as does the length of the content and whether children respond orally or (for group-administered measures) in writing. Diakidoy et al. (2005) studied listening comprehension and reading comprehension in a sample of children in grades 2, 4, 6, and 8, using expository and narrative texts. They found differing results by text type. For expository texts, reading comprehension was more efficient than listening at all grade levels. The advantages of listening pertained only to narratives, and this was only true for younger children. For eighth graders, reading comprehension was higher than listening comprehension for both narrative and expository texts, perhaps because of students’ ability to reread and control the pace at which they read.

Research on tests of reading comprehension (e.g., Cutting & Scarborough, 2006; Jenkins, Johnson, & Hileman, 2004; Keenan & Betjemann, 2006) also has implications for measurement of listening comprehension. Jenkins et al. (2004) examined children’s performance on a state-mandated reading comprehension assessment requiring written responses to open-ended questions. These investigators found that writing skill accounted for significant variance in test performance. In other words, individual children might sometimes perform poorly not because of true comprehension problems, but because of writing difficulties. Keenan and Betjemann (2006) studied the use of passage-independent comprehension questions—questions that could be answered by virtue of a student’s background knowledge—on a widely-used commercial reading test. The findings indicated that the use of such questions could significantly inflate the performance of struggling decoders, making them appear to have better reading comprehension than they actually did. (The test has since been extensively revised.) Although reading comprehension tests and listening comprehension tests differ in fundamental ways, it is likely that many of the issues raised about reading comprehension tests are pertinent to listening comprehension, as well. Children who have strong background or vocabulary knowledge, for example, may do well if tested with passage-independent questions on a listening measure, even if they have some significant component language weaknesses.

IDEA 2004, the most influential federal law in the United States pertaining to the education of K-12 students with disabilities, leaves the choice of specific measures to be used in eligibility determinations for special education to the collective wisdom of the planning and placement team (PPT) evaluating the student. The use of varied tests of listening comprehension may also have an impact on English learners’ consideration for English as a second language (ESL) services as well as their eligibility for special education. This variability may have important consequences in individual cases. Consider, for instance, a student with significant vocabulary weaknesses being evaluated for SLD. Educators may determine that the student has low achievement in listening comprehension using a listening comprehension test that presumes strong vocabulary knowledge. Another team may draw a different conclusion based on the use of a listening comprehension measure with relatively fewer vocabulary demands. Likewise, the PPT may find a student with attentional or executive function weaknesses to have listening comprehension problems on a measure with long passages and relatively heavy attentional
demands, but not on a different measure that requires less sustained attention.

Perhaps most vitally, the lack of a clear understanding of listening comprehension as an area of academic achievement and its relative importance as a skill in its own right may influence what educators teach (or fail to teach). Children who do not receive support in listening and the components of oral language are at risk for challenges in literacy, as well as acquisition of general background knowledge and content-specific knowledge. Furthermore, without testing of key component areas of language, students identified with broad problems in “listening” may fail to receive appropriately targeted intervention.

**The Current State of the Field**

Unfortunately, in the 20 years since Moats (1994a) observed the many problems with the term listening comprehension, not much seems to have changed, at least with regard to educational practice. As noted in the opening to this article, an apt example involves the CCSS for ELA, adopted by 43 out of 50 states as of May 2016. The CCSS do include anchor standards for speaking and listening. The listening standards, however,
Listening Comprehension, the Cinderella Skill continued from page 13

tend to emphasize students’ behavioral dispositions for participating in discussions—following rules for discussions, coming prepared, working effectively with peers—rather than actual language skills. Given this focus, it is entirely likely that the needs of students who are cooperative in following rules and working with peers would stand unrecognized, and that these students would continue to experience weaknesses in vocabulary, syntactic comprehension, and/or discourse knowledge. Although vocabulary is included in the CCSS, there are many omissions of other important components of language, and the organization of the included component areas is perplexing. Skills related to oral language are presented without regard to the structure of language as a whole. Vocabulary is found not under listening, but under a separate area for language, and is grouped with basic writing skills such as capitalization and punctuation. Overall, this organization does little to enhance teachers’ understanding of important components of listening comprehension, nor does it help ensure that educators will address these components when teaching students.

CCSS listening standards tend to emphasize students’ behavioral dispositions for participating in discussions rather than actual language skills. Its limitations are made worse by the fact that many educators appear unaware of the importance of addressing oral language and its components in literacy instruction.

The limitations of the CCSS are made worse by the fact that many educators appear unaware of the importance of addressing oral language and its components in literacy instruction. For example, in one study, a colleague and I (Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014) asked teachers to complete a paper-and-pencil instructional planning task involving a hypothetical two-hour, elementary-level ELA block. The task required participants to describe the ELA activities that they would use, as well as the amount of time they would allocate to each activity. Despite the long two-hour block, both general and special educators proposed allocating less than 5 minutes on average to vocabulary; general educators proposed less than 11 minutes on average for oral language activities such as teacher read-alouds. Many teachers omitted one or both areas.

Limited awareness of important components of oral language comprehension may affect teachers’ capacities to provide effective literacy instruction and intervention in multiple ways, as shown in Table 2. Numerous studies (e.g., Brady et al., 2009; McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009; Moats, 1994b; see Spear-Swerling, 2015, Chapter 10, for a review) have documented that both general and special educators may lack knowledge of word-level aspects of language structure such as phonology and morphology. As investigators in this area have noted, without such knowledge, educators may interpret reading assessments incorrectly, choose inappropriate examples of words for phonics instruction, or provide inappropriate feedback for decoding and spelling errors.

Few studies have examined educators’ knowledge of language structure beyond the word level, but existing results are not encouraging. For instance, in a different study, another colleague and I (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012) examined teacher knowledge about important components of language and reading using a multiple-choice survey. We found that only 42% of participants recognized when sentence context failed to support children’s abilities to infer the meaning of a target word; only 32% recognized the potential influence of passage-independent questions on a child’s reading comprehension score. When asked a question involving a child with extremely limited decoding skills but strong listening comprehension, only 40% of participants recognized that teacher read-alouds and oral discussion at the child’s listening level could be used to develop comprehension abilities that likely would transfer to reading comprehension, once the child’s decoding improved. Considering these results as a whole, it is difficult to imagine that educators who lack this kind of knowledge can effectively interpret comprehension assessments or optimally support children’s comprehension development. Promisingly, however, on both word-level and comprehension-level scales of the knowledge survey, participants who had had professional development involving structured language training performed significantly better than those who had not.

In one study, teachers who had professional development involving structured language training performed significantly better than those who had not. Wider use of the IDA standards in preservice teacher preparation and professional development would help ensure that educators provide effective literacy instruction.

Next Steps

Literacy is not just about print. Effective assessment and intervention for literacy problems require an understanding of components of oral language, how they support learning in the classroom, and how they interact with various components of reading and written expression. Toward these ends, the use of the IDA professional standards in teacher education can be a valuable asset. In addition, collaborations among different professional groups with an interest in language and literacy—
such as general educators, special educators, bilingual educators, reading specialists, and speech/language pathologists—are vital. In the Cinderella tale, Cinderella’s fairy godmother used a magic wand to change a pumpkin into a coach for her, mice into horses, and her rags into a beautiful ball gown. However, absent a fairy godmother and her magic wand, crucial improvements in teacher education, assessment, and intervention are needed to help students with language and literacy difficulties.

References

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The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990) suggests that poor reading comprehension may be the result of inadequate decoding, inadequate linguistic comprehension, or inadequate decoding and linguistic comprehension. Poor reading comprehension that is solely the result of inadequate decoding (i.e., in the presence of adequate linguistic comprehension) should improve with intensive, explicit decoding instruction. However, if inadequate decoding is not interfering with skilled reading comprehension, then a deficit in linguistic comprehension is very likely the cause of the reading problem.

Linguistic comprehension is, as Gough and Tunmer (1986) offer, “…the ability to take lexical information (i.e., semantic information at the word level) and derive sentence and discourse interpretations through listening” (p. 131). Simply put, linguistic comprehension is the ability to answer questions about a passage that has been listened to, which suggests that the two are synonymous. The term listening comprehension will be used for the remainder of the present article.

Assuming a reader can decode, an increase in listening comprehension should result in an increase in the ability to process language in print. Increases in decoding skills alone will not increase reading comprehension beyond the student’s listening abilities. Although there is no denying the importance of decoding instruction, the path to increased reading comprehension will ultimately depend on a student’s understanding of oral language.

Listening Comprehension and Oral Language

Language skills, whether oral or written, fall into two domains: receptive and expressive. Receptive skills are those that involve understanding (reading and listening comprehension); expressive skills involve use (speaking and writing). Receptive and expressive language skills are related; most children express themselves in a manner commensurate with their understanding. In general, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which a student would be able to express more than he or she could actually understand. The similarities and contrasts between and among different expressions (oral or written) and domains (receptive or expressive) of language are presented in Figure 1.

Early emphasis on oral receptive language, or listening comprehension, is essential to the development of skilled reading comprehension in particular and classroom performance in general. This focus is of greatest importance for the students who are most at risk, such as those who are learning English as a second language, or those who have not been exposed to rich language in the home. Hart and Risley (1995) found that at age 3, preschoolers from professional families were exposed to or heard 30,000,000 more words than preschoolers from welfare families, a disparity that has far-reaching implications for reading achievement as research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of early oral language development. In a longitudinal investigation of 626 Head Start children, Storch and Whitehurst (2002) reported that 95% of the variance of oral language in kindergarten was predicted by preschool oral language, and 98% of the variance of oral language in grades 1 and 2 was accounted for by oral language ability in kindergarten. Roth, Speece, and Cooper (2002) and Kendeou, van den Broek, Continued on page 18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receptive Language</th>
<th>Expressive Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Language</td>
<td>Listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written Language</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Language comprehension includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Abbreviation

CCSS: Common Core State Standard
White, and Lynch (2009) found that general oral language abilities (e.g., receptive language, syntactic comprehension), not code-related abilities, were the best predictors of reading comprehension between kindergarten and second grade.

**Early emphasis on listening comprehension is essential to the development of skilled reading comprehension in particular and classroom performance in general.**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) provide a framework for listening comprehension instruction through the Speaking and Listening Standards for Kindergarten through Grade 12. In the early grades, listening comprehension is demonstrated through appropriate and meaningful participation in discussions and conversations. It serves as a proxy for reading comprehension. For example, kindergarten standards outline the expectation that students will:

1. Follow rules for discussions, such as listening to others and taking turns.
2. Continue a conversation through multiple exchanges.
3. Ask and answer questions orally about key details of a text that is read aloud or information presented through other auditory/visual media.
4. Ask and answer questions for a variety of purposes, such as to get information or to clarify what is not understood (CCSS, 2010).

These basic standards culminate in advanced levels of listening and oral discourse as delineated in the CCSS Grades 11-12 standards. For example, students will:

1. Be prepared, having read material under study, to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
2. Promote civil, democratic discussions and decision making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed among peers.
3. Pose and respond to questions that probe reasoning and evidence, and ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue.
4. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required (CCSS, 2010).

It is clear that to achieve the highest standards presented in the CCSS, students must develop skilled listening comprehension in the early grades. What is not clear is how teachers develop students’ skill in listening as a behavior and listening with understanding as a cognitive endeavor in its own right.

The CCSS, for example, do not stress the importance of teachers knowing that language, oral and written, has three fundamental and interactive components: form, content, and use (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). Form consists of rules for combining sounds (phonology), constructing words (morphology), and arranging words into sentences (syntax). For example, a listener understands that “The party is at six” carries a different meaning than “Is the party at six” even though the two sentences share the exact same words. Content encompasses rules for understanding the meanings of words and the relationships between and among words (semantics). In the sentence, “Her sporadic practice slowed her progress in a sport that requires steady practice” a listener can infer that sporadic is the opposite of steady. Use involves rules or codes for communication based on purpose, audience, and discourse (pragmatics). The listener, for example, can deduce the audience for an oral speech that begins “Ladies and gentlemen” versus “Hey, guys.” With a deep understanding of these major pieces of language, teachers can plan instruction to enhance listening comprehension as an integral part of effective communication and as a critical underpinning of reading comprehension.

**In the CCSS, it is not clear how teachers develop students’ skill in listening as a behavior and listening with understanding as a cognitive endeavor in its own right.**

**Using Listening Comprehension to Determine Learner Profiles**

The contrast of listening comprehension and decoding can distinguish causes of poor reading comprehension. The contrast of these two skills can be recognized on formal standardized measures by examining scores of subtests of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. A score on a listening comprehension subtest that is close to or greater than one standard deviation higher than scores on subtests of reading comprehension and vocabulary may mark difficulties with decoding. Keep in mind that low scores on reading comprehension tests can be due to a variety of factors, including the tests themselves. (See the Spring 2016 issue of Perspectives on Literacy and Language for more on reading comprehension and its testing.)

As seen in Figure 2, students may demonstrate 1) adequate listening and decoding, 2) adequate listening comprehension and inadequate decoding, 3) inadequate listening comprehension and adequate decoding, or 4) inadequate listening and inadequate decoding (Aaron, Joshi, & Williams, 1999; Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003). Students with adequate listening and reading comprehension are more than ready to benefit from
The contrast of listening comprehension and decoding can distinguish causes of poor reading comprehension.

Students with adequate listening comprehension but inadequate decoding may be diagnosed with dyslexia. Here, inadequate reading comprehension is unexpected in relation to adequate listening comprehension, which may be at or above grade-level expectations. The cause of poor reading comprehension for these students is most likely the inaccurate translation of symbols on the page into meaning. Explicit and systematic instruction in the reliable patterns of English orthography should improve reading comprehension to at least the level of listening comprehension.

Conversely, students with inadequate listening comprehension but adequate decoding are able to read accurately but struggle to understand what they are listening to or reading. Poor listening and reading comprehension would suggest that these students have language comprehension deficits in spite of adequate decoding. The use of learner profiles presumes that a hearing deficit would not be a factor in a student’s listening comprehension deficit. Memory could be a factor in inadequate listening comprehension if a student also demonstrates difficulties in other areas such as, learning spelling words, remembering math facts, and following multistep oral directions.

The last profile, students with inadequate listening comprehension and inadequate decoding, is the most complicated. In this case, a failure to comprehend is the result of poor word recognition and word attack skills and challenges in receptive language skill. Dyslexia could be suspected if inadequate decoding and inadequate listening comprehension are unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities or academic achievement. A thorough inventory of both word recognition and decoding skills, as well as receptive language skill is paramount to determine the exact underlying causes of inadequate decoding and language comprehension, so instruction can target specific areas of need. Difficulties with language comprehension may stem from multiple causes, such as inadequate vocabulary, insufficient background knowledge, lack of sensitivity to causal structures, or inability to identify semantic relationships (Nation, 2005; Yuill & Oakhill, 1991).

Inadequate Listening and Adequate Language Comprehension

If listening comprehension is viewed solely as a proxy for language comprehension, then one additional profile may be overlooked. There may be students with inadequate listening comprehension but adequate reading comprehension (Aaron, Joshi, Gooden, & Bentum, 2008). These students will seem to be a conundrum, and they will require different instruction. The fact that reading comprehension is adequate suggests that decoding is adequate and language comprehension is adequate. Why then is listening comprehension inadequate?

Students may demonstrate adequate reading comprehension while struggling with listening comprehension because they cannot maintain attention on what is being spoken. Students with this profile may have auditory processing deficits or inadequate working memory.

Consider that when reading, these students are able to reread and rethink about what they have read. However, they cannot replay what they have heard. Spoken language is ephemeral and is gone without a trace. Because spoken language lasts for a brief period of time, attention is critical. Students with attention deficits that may or may not be diagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity may demonstrate adequate reading comprehension while struggling with listening comprehension because they cannot maintain attention on what is being spoken. It is also possible that students with this profile may struggle because of diagnosed or undiagnosed auditory processing deficits or inadequate working memory.

Continued on page 20
Challenges taking in and processing auditory input may undermine efforts to remember and process what is heard. Challenges in working memory can make it difficult to deal with lengthy input or with content that is dense, i.e., laden with facts and concepts.

**Informal Measures to Inform Profiles**

To provide the most appropriate instruction, it is important to determine the cause of poor reading comprehension. A few informal measures that can be given to clarify student needs follow.

**Retelling rubric for determining learner profiles.** If a student struggles with reading comprehension, provide the student with two passages (300-400 words) with the same grade-level equivalent or Lexile level and the same text complexity (i.e., vocabulary and knowledge demands, syntactic complexity, explicitness of purpose and meaning). The student listens to one passage and retells the passage. The student then reads the second passage and retells the passage. To determine the most likely cause of poor reading comprehension, a retelling rubric such as the one found in Figure 3 can be used (Carreker, 2011). “Proficient” retelling is measured on this rubric with a preponderance of 3s and 4s. “Not Proficient” retelling is marked by a preponderance of 1s and 2s.

If a student’s retelling after listening to a passage is proficient but not proficient after reading a similar passage, then decoding may be the cause of poor reading comprehension. If a student’s retelling on both passages is not proficient, then decoding and listening comprehension or, as in this scenario, language comprehension, are the causes of poor reading comprehension. To better understand the needs of the student with poor listening and reading comprehension, two additional informal assessments can be given.

**Inferencing with prediction tasks.** According to Hogan, Adlof, and Alonzo (2014), “Language influences on listening comprehension include vocabulary, background knowledge, and inferencing, among others” (p. 206). An inference is an understanding or conclusion that is implied by a text and requires students to integrate information within, among, or beyond the lines in the text. The ability to make inferences best differentiates good and poor comprehenders (Yuill & Oakhill, 1991). In a prediction task (Yuill & Oakhill, 1988), a sentence in a short passage is hidden. The student determines the content of the hidden sentence based on the surrounding sentences. Is the student able to predict the content or idea contained in the bracketed sentence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Beginning 1</th>
<th>Developing 2</th>
<th>Mastery 3</th>
<th>Exemplary 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses complete sentences in retelling the passage</td>
<td>Uses incomplete sentences—many are not comprehensible</td>
<td>Uses complete and incomplete sentences</td>
<td>Uses complete sentences with simple structure</td>
<td>Uses complete sentences with varied structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captures the salient idea of each event</td>
<td>Does not recall all salient ideas or inaccurately expresses two or more ideas</td>
<td>Expresses one salient idea incompletely or inaccurately</td>
<td>Accurately captures the salient idea of each event but is verbose or not specific enough</td>
<td>Accurately and succinctly captures the salient idea of each event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequences events cohesively</td>
<td>Does not include all events or does not state all events in correct order</td>
<td>States events in order but without any transitions</td>
<td>Sequences events using transition words (e.g., first, then, next, finally)</td>
<td>Sequences events using words such as, then, next, therefore, that’s why, so, if, because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporates vocabulary from the passage</td>
<td>Does not incorporate any vocabulary words from the passage</td>
<td>Incorporates vocabulary words exactly as used in the passage</td>
<td>Uses appropriate synonyms for words from the passage</td>
<td>Uses vocabulary words from the passage in novel ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retells the passage with prosody</td>
<td>Does not complete the retelling and may say “I can’t remember” or “I forget”</td>
<td>Restates, pauses, or self-corrects while retelling the passage and may overuse “um”</td>
<td>Retells the passage haltingly but persistently</td>
<td>Retells the passage with ease, confidence, and expression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Retelling rubric. This rubric can be used to evaluate a student’s retelling of a passage. (Used by permission of Neuhaus Education Center, Bellaire, TX.)
• All the cars come to a stop. [The red light turns green.] All the cars speed up again.
• The candle flickers and lights the room. [A lamp is turned on.] The candle flickers but no longer lights the room.
• The farmer picks the plump grapes as the clouds overhead grow darker and darker. [Suddenly, rain begins to fall in buckets.] The soaked farmer runs for cover under a tree.
• The Pirates are behind by three runs. The next batter comes to the plate. The bases are loaded. [The batter hits a homerun.] The Pirates win the game.

The candle flickers and lights the room. [A lamp is turned on.] The candle flickers but no longer lights the room.

PDFs and PowerPoints of short passages for prediction tasks are available at http://neuhaus.org/stories-for-making-inferences/.

**Making inferences.** Short passages can be presented and read to a student with inadequate listening comprehension. Questions are asked about the passage to determine if the student is able to make inferences about information not directly stated in the passage. For example (Carreker, 2011): “The rooster crowed as the sun began to glisten on the freshly fallen snow. Maggie raced down the stairs and grabbed a piece of toast, as once again she had to run to catch the school bus.” (p. 7)

• What time of day is it? (Morning because the rooster crows, and the sun begins to glisten.)
• What time of year is it? (It is probably winter because there is snow.)
• What has happened? (Maggie has to race and run because she overslept.)
• Has this happened before? (Yes, the passage says “once again.”)
• Where is Maggie going? (Maggie is going to school because she is catching the school bus).

Additional passages are presented in Table 1.

**Identifying Learner Profiles**

Determining strengths and weaknesses in listening comprehension in comparison with strengths and weaknesses in decoding and reading comprehension can aid the identification of strengths and weaknesses in listening comprehension.

Continued on page 22

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**TABLE 1. Passages for Making Inferences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passages</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Inferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| As the few remaining leaves drift from the trees, tiny ants work hard gathering food to store for the cold days ahead. A grasshopper just fiddles on his fiddle and teases the ants. His tune will change when the falling flakes cover the land. | • What time of year is it?  
• Why does the grasshopper tease the ants?  
• Why will the grasshopper change his tune? | • It is probably fall as there are few leaves remaining and cold days (winter) are ahead.  
• The ants work hard while the grasshopper fiddles and doesn’t work.  
• When the falling flakes (snow) cover the ground, it will be difficult for the grasshopper to find food, and he will wish he had gathered food instead of fiddled. |
| Two hot and thirsty frogs search for water because it is always scarce at this time of year. They come to a well. The daring frog says, “Let’s hop in!” The cautious frog asks, “What if there’s no water in the well?” Soon, the two frogs hop away from the well refreshed and no longer thirsty. | • What time of year might it be?  
• Why are the frogs thirsty?  
• Why is water scarce at this time of year?  
• Why are the frogs refreshed and no longer thirsty? | • It is probably summer because the frogs are hot.  
• The frogs can’t find water.  
• Perhaps, the sun has dried up the streams and ponds, and there has been little rain.  
• The frogs decide to jump in, and there is water. |
| The olive tree boasted that she was the better tree because her leaves stayed green all year long. The maple tree looked at his strong but bare branches and sighed. After the first heavy snow, the olive tree looked at her green but broken branches and sighed. “I guess I am not the better tree,” she said. The maple tree smiled. | • What time of year is it?  
• Why did the maple tree sigh?  
• How did the olive tree’s branches break?  
• Why did the maple tree smile? | • It is winter because the maple tree has no leaves and snow falls.  
• The maple tree thought the olive tree was the better tree because her leaves stayed green.  
• The heavy snow broke her branches.  
• The olive tree may have green leaves all year long, but her branches are not as strong as the maple tree’s branches. |
of learner profiles. With these profiles, causes for poor reading comprehension can be determined and can ensure that the most appropriate evidence-based instruction is planned and delivered to meet the learning needs of each student.

References


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Post-otitis auditory dysfunction (POAD) is a serious and underestimated cause of multiple learning problems in schoolchildren. Despite Boucher’s (1986) dramatic findings, the problems of POAD often go unrecognized and untreated.

Middle Ear Dysfunction

Episodes of middle ear fluid buildup (serous otitis media) are a common plague of early childhood. Because young children often are not aware of the blockage and because the episodes are not life threatening, many such episodes go untreated or are treated too little and too late. Fluid accumulations may remain, blocking hearing, after any painful and visible symptoms have disappeared. A new episode may begin soon after the previous one and not be noticed. One consequence of these events is that a child may be deprived intermittently and unpredictably of usable hearing during critical stages of language acquisition.

Intermittent hearing loss can sometimes severely impair development of listening skills, auditory attention, and auditory perception.

Abbreviations

ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

POAD: Post-otitis auditory dysfunction
capacity to sustain listening attention, even when highly motivated. The central nervous system tends to abandon sensory systems that prove ineffective during critical developmental periods. For example, a strabismus (deviation of an eye off-center), causes overlapping, conflicting visual projections in the visual cortex of the brain, which eventually copes by shutting down the input from the lazy eye, resulting in amblyopia, a dimness of vision which cannot be corrected by prescription lenses. This self-destructive reaction is sometimes prevented by patching the straight eye so that the off-target eye is forced to work alone, sending a single, unambiguous projection to the brain. Similarly, intermittent hearing loss can sometimes severely impair development of listening skills. The young child, without knowing why, sometimes is able to hear and understand and sometimes is not. The child begins to learn that hearing is, at best, an unreliable process, and the development of listening skills, auditory attention, and auditory perception is impaired. Attention span and organizational skills may also develop poorly, mimicking attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Effects of POAD on Academic Achievement

The impairment of communication skills has many consequences. Not only do auditory, language, prereading, and prewriting skills suffer delays, but the child also suffers confusion and embarrassment from frequent social misunderstandings. The child is likely to spend considerable time not really understanding what is going on and therefore often saying and doing the wrong thing. Public ridicule is often the lot of the child with middle ear dysfunction, sometimes resulting in extreme shyness.

If episodes of fluid buildup continue into the child’s school years, the consequences can be especially severe. Confusion, misunderstanding, and embarrassment are exacerbated by difficulties with beginning academic skills. Even if the child no longer suffers from episodes of hearing loss, the problems with auditory perception, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, grammar, listening skills, hearing against background noise, and attention and organization persist, putting the child at risk for school failure and further embarrassment and confusion. Compounding the problem is the evidence that the child can hear, at least some of the time, even if the fluid buildup continues into grade school.

Even very sympathetic teachers find it difficult to believe—certainly to remember—that the child has serious auditory problems, since the child does hear adequately, under ideal listening conditions, between episodes of fluid buildup and after the episodes have finally ceased.

Boucher (1986) used pure-tone and impedance audiometry records to study all of the readiness and primary students with middle ear dysfunction in 10 New Hampshire towns. The students whose impedance testing showed evidence of previous otitis, even though they had regained normal hearing, showed double the normal rates of readiness placements, disability identifications, and repeated grades.

The most prudent and helpful approach for teachers is to assume that the student who has had fluid buildup has listening difficulties at all times.

Ways of Teaching the Student with POAD More Effectively

The most prudent and helpful approach for teachers is to assume that the student has listening difficulties at all times. Even after the episodes of fluid buildup have long since ended, the continuing problems with auditory perception, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, grammar, listening skills,
Students with POAD present teachers with special challenges and require hard work, but it can also be very rewarding to help a struggling student achieve his or her potential in your class.

Special Education Identification

If the student's POAD seriously impairs academic performance and is the primary cause of that impairment, if the student is no longer suffering a current hearing loss, and if the student requires a uniquely designed program of special education, the student is eligible for identification as having a specific learning disability (IDEA 2004:34C.F.R.§300.8(c)(10); Willis, 1990). If the other considerations apply, but the student needs classroom modifications without a uniquely designed program of special education, it might be more appropriate to provide the student with a plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112).

References


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq. (2004), 34 C.F.R. Part 300.8(c)(10) and 300.307 through 300.311. (2006).


Publication History


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The number of English learners has increased throughout the world. In the United States alone, there are 4.4 million English learners who attend public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These students face significant challenges. They must learn English, i.e., the language of instruction, while at the same time, they are attempting to master the content of their studies. Helping students learn a language and keep pace with grade-level content requires support and compassion. It also requires teachers who understand the particular needs of second-language learners and how to support the development of their listening comprehension skills. How do we as educators ensure that English learners have the listening skills necessary for learning? Are there specific strategies for improving listening skills among this population of students? These are just a few of the questions that we should ask ourselves as we prepare to teach a population that is increasingly diverse. The focus of this article is to describe listening comprehension, its impact on language and literacy skills in second-language learning and the special considerations for instruction with English learners.

Listening Comprehension Challenges for English Learners

Teachers who are knowledgeable about the underlying components of listening comprehension can support English learners in the classroom by ensuring that they receive comprehensible input. Comprehensible input includes providing information to English learners at a language level that they can understand and makes the content clear. Educators can use a variety of strategies such as the use of pictures, gestures, and/or primary language support to increase the likelihood for English learners’ understanding. Listening involves only auditory cues; reading comprehension, on the other hand, supports understanding with a visible record of the message. Listening comprehension begins with an acoustic signal, speech sounds that form words. The listener must derive the meaning of the words and group them into meaningful units as a foundation for comprehension.

For an English learner, the first stumbling block could be the realization that he or she just heard some new, unfamiliar speech sounds. These new sounds are difficult to decipher because the speech rate may exceed the listener’s ability to keep up. Although context may help, it is not sufficient to overcome the quality of the input. Additionally, many speakers do not produce all the sounds as distinctly when they express themselves in phrases and sentences as compared to single words. For example, the English learner may wonder whether the speaker said, “I see” or “iced tea.” Context may help but the listener’s attention and concentration and the use of deductive reasoning skills are also necessary. That is, extra attention is necessary to process the phrases correctly and then use context and deductive reasoning skills to ensure understanding of the message.

Altenberg (2005) found that second-language learners have difficulty fully using the acoustic phonetic cues available to native English speakers. Thus the language learner is missing valuable information that is necessary for the process of lexical retrieval and determining meaning. English learners do not always have the opportunity to ask for repetition or clarification, particularly when they are in the midst of native English speakers. Therefore, it is helpful when teachers slow down their rate of speech, provide repetition and offer opportunities to reflect upon the words used.

English learners may not be familiar with the pragmatics of language, and they may need support to learn colloquial expressions, social nuances, and nonverbal aspects of communication. They may have difficulty with regional dialects and common phrases. For example, a common phrase that a clerk in a store might say includes, “Do you want a receipt in the bag?” This question may not be familiar to the English learner who may think that the intent of the question relates to

Continued on page 32
whether a bag is desired. English learners may also require instruction in pitch, stress and the intonation patterns of spoken English. The speaker, for example, may say, “alright” or “alright!” The first example reflects a general agreement and the latter could include an impatient agreement.

**English learners may need support to learn colloquial expressions, social nuances, nonverbal aspects of communication, and how stress affects meanings at the word and sentence level.**

In addition, the meanings of words and sentences can differ when the syllable or words vary in their stressed and unstressed forms. When the word *content* is stressed in the first syllable it refers to a substance or material. When the word *content* is stressed on the second syllable it has a different meaning. It can mean happy or satisfied. An example of how stress affects meanings at the sentence level is in the example below. When we emphasize different words within a sentence there is a slight difference in the meaning of that sentence. English learners will often struggle with processing these subtle differences.

*Sara* ate the lunch. *Sara ate* the lunch. *Sara ate the lunch.*

As seen, there are many variables that can affect the listening comprehension skills of an English learner. These include the differing abilities of the student to perceive, attend to, understand, and remember spoken language while persisting in the face of such a complicated and multifaceted task.

English learner listeners may also have difficulty understanding discourse markers in formal and informal situations. Therefore, it is important for the instructor to include discourse markers such as: *first of all*, *next*, *also*, *finally*, and *in summary*. This is similar to understanding text structure for reading comprehension.

Verbal working memory may also be a factor for achieving high levels of listening comprehension. Therefore, it is important to examine verbal working memory and listening comprehension skills among second-language learners. Studies exist for working memory and reading comprehension. Few, however, address working memory and listening comprehension among English learners. Gutiérrez-Clellen, Calderón and Weismer (2004) found that there were no statistically significant differences in processing information in two languages for language proficient individuals. They also examined students who were proficient in only one language and those students, too, did not differ as a group on their processing of information. The researchers further examined the frequency distributions for each child in each language and found some differences. There were fewer participants who had achieved high word recall in English compared with the number of children who had high word recall in Spanish. The competing condition of language did not affect Spanish as much as it affected English for those individuals. In some previous studies, (Osaka & Osaka, 1992; Osaka, Osaka & Groner, 1993) verbal working memory is described as a task that is not language specific but a more general ability to process information. More studies are necessary to determine the role of verbal working memory and listening comprehension among English learners at varying stages of second-language acquisition.

There are several methods and strategies for listening that are based on the theories of bottom-up processing and top-down processing. Strategies that address a bottom-up perspective focus primarily on sounds that are then combined to form words, phrases, and sentences. In order to have meaning, the listener must understand supra-segmental features of language such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. This can be challenging for English learners. Top-down processing, in contrast, focuses on prior knowledge. Prior knowledge can facilitate understanding by providing a context for new learners. This is not always the case, however, for English learners. They may lack some necessary experiences and knowledge in English that can hinder their efforts to comprehend a particular utterance. This is a variable that is often not addressed explicitly or systematically for this population of students.

**English learners may struggle with dyslexia in their native language. Understanding a child’s linguistic and literacy profile in the native language will provide a better understanding of the individual’s strengths and weaknesses as he or she attempts to learn English.**

**Listening Comprehension, Oral Proficiency, and Reading**

Some students will be good listeners but will struggle with reading comprehension because they do not read accurately or fluently. A common profile of a dyslexic is that individual who has difficulty decoding sound-symbol correspondences in contrast to adequate listening comprehension. English learners may also struggle with dyslexia in their native language. Understanding a child’s linguistic and literacy profile in the native language will provide a better understanding of the individual’s strengths and weaknesses as he or she attempts to learn English. Some questions to ask include:

*Is the difficulty just a matter of the need for exposure in the second language?*

Students in the early stages of second-language acquisition may appear to have a disorder when the challenge is actually a natural consequence of learning a second language.
Does the child have a significant problem with listening or is it a problem with language comprehension?

The teacher may want to observe whether the student is demonstrating difficulty with attending to and processing the sounds of the English language or whether the student is demonstrating difficulty understanding the message or the content.

A framework for determining if a listening comprehension disorder is present in the native language can also be helpful. The chart below depicts four scenarios.

1. A student with good listening comprehension in the native language is likely to have good listening comprehension in the second language.

2. If the student exhibits good listening comprehension in the native language but not in the second language, then one might predict that the listening comprehension difficulties in the second language are related to lack of exposure, experience, or instruction in the second language.

3. If the listening comprehension difficulties do exist in the native language, then it is likely the listening comprehension difficulties in the second language are related to a deficit.

4. Some students present with weak listening comprehension in the native language and adequate listening comprehension in the second language. These students may have had limited opportunity to use their native language within the school setting where the language of instruction is primarily English. Students can experience loss of their native language when they no longer have opportunities to practice in social interaction and discussions. This is reflected in limited or no increase in native language abilities, and may even reflect a loss of prior abilities in the native language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening Comprehension – Native Language</th>
<th>Listening Comprehension – Second Language</th>
<th>Deficit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No (Exposure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No (Language loss)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to master listening comprehension in a second language such as English, it is most helpful for the student to have a strong foundation in the native language. In this way, second-language acquisition is likely to develop in much the same fashion.

Listening Comprehension and Oral Proficiency

A study of speakers who were learning French as a second language varied in their listening skill in relation to their oral proficiency in the second language (Vandergrift, 1999). The study showed that listening comprehension is related to second-language oral proficiency. Less skilled listeners engaged in more direct translation from first to second language. As a result, they have difficulty keeping up with the input (Goh, 2008). They also exhibit greater difficulty with holding meaning in memory. Those who were at the beginning level of second-language acquisition attempted to overcome their limited knowledge by using cognates and extra linguistic cues. Some examples of cognates in Spanish and English include words such as radio, telephone, doctor, and ambulance, words that are similar in spelling and meaning across languages. Extra linguistic cues can include stress and intonation patterns which help determine word boundaries in the second language and thus increase understanding. Intermediate-level students used strategies such as self-monitoring. They could process larger amounts of information and apply metacognitive strategies. Skilled listeners used twice the metacognitive strategies as their less skilled counterparts. These strategies included comprehension monitoring, questioning elaboration (personal, world, academic), and flexibility. That is, more skilled listeners used comprehension monitoring, reflecting on whether what they just heard made sense. If it did not make sense then they engaged in strategies such as asking for repetition, paraphrasing, and questioning. Murphy (1985) described skilled listeners as being open and flexible to using a variety of strategies for listening comprehension. The less skilled listeners concentrated on the text or their own world knowledge.

Second-language learners will need extensive vocabulary to achieve language proficiency, thus enabling them to engage in higher levels of listening comprehension.

O’Malley and colleagues (1985) found that strategy development occurred over time on a variety of language tasks. In their study, they describe distinct metacognitive strategies related to listening, such as an advanced organization, selective attention, monitoring, problem identification, and self-evaluation. More skilled listeners are more purposeful in their approach to the listening task. They monitor their comprehension for overall meaning and effectively use prior and linguistic knowledge while listening.

Listening Comprehension and Reading

In the Simple View of Reading, Gough and Tunmer (1986) describe reading as the ability to decode and understand the words that have been read. When considering listening comprehension and reading in English learners, it is important to determine if the reading skills are intact in the native language. If the student demonstrates the adequate language and listening skills in the native language, then the reading skills in the native and second language should develop and be intact. However, if the student demonstrates adequate listening and reading skills in the native language and is having difficulty in the second language, then once again it is more than likely related to the need for reading instruction in the second language.

Continued on page 34
Reading involves decoding and understanding the words that have been read. In order to understand the words, the reader must have an adequate vocabulary. For listening comprehension to occur, the listener must not only perceive the words but understand the words. Staehr (2009) found that vocabulary size and depth significantly correlated with listening comprehension. The higher the vocabulary level the greater the likelihood for understanding verbal information. Therefore, second-language learners will need extensive vocabulary to achieve language proficiency, thus enabling them to engage in higher levels of listening comprehension.

**Listening Comprehension Strategies for English Language Learners**

The Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) emphasizes how strategies such as predicting, exploring vocabulary, reviewing, retelling, question answering, question generation, and comprehension monitoring can be used to improve reading comprehension. These evidence-based reading comprehension strategies are somewhat similar to the listening comprehension strategies that are effective for English learners. Listening comprehension for second-language learners can be supported by clarifying the purpose of the listening assignment, previewing potential vocabulary, and developing background knowledge. Probing questions can also aid understanding. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) found that teaching second-language learners how to become strategic listeners through a metacognitive process improved their understanding. Some strategies that can aid English learners’ listening comprehension follow:

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**Listening comprehension for second-language learners can be supported by clarifying the purpose of the listening assignment, previewing potential vocabulary, and developing background knowledge.**

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**Strategies before listening to English**

- Provide direct instruction in the sounds of the English language.
- Provide English learners with different types of listening activities. They can listen to songs, rhymes, poems, and short read-alouds.
- Provide students with preparation time for listening. Introduce the purpose and the type of listening task. Explain the primary focus and describe the particular information that they need to acquire during the listening activity. This is similar to how we introduce students to a topic and prepare them for reading comprehension in English.
- Provide an outline so that the English learner can follow the lecture or discussion with more precision and ease.
- Have English learners make predictions about what they are about to hear. Prepare them for the topic and guide them in the prediction process.
- Activate prior knowledge and introduce key cultural concepts that may be unfamiliar.
- Introduce key vocabulary which will enhance listening comprehension in English.

**During listening in English**

- Provide visual cues. Visual cues can include words, pictures, or even short video clips of new concepts.
- Slow the rate of speech during the English listening activity.
- Monitor English learners’ capacity for attention and be aware of their frustration threshold.
- Have students reflect upon their understanding as they listen. Have them ask questions in order to self-monitor listening comprehension.
- Provide instruction and practice in metacognitive strategies for listening.
- Provide English learners with multiple opportunities to listen to the same information. Just as we provide opportunities for reading to build accuracy, fluency, and comprehension, we can do the same for listening.
- Have English learners listen for basic words and academic words. Next, they can listen for understanding and make inferences or draw conclusions regarding the information that was just heard.

**After listening in English**

- Have English learners make personal connections to the information.
- Have English learners describe what they just heard.
- Model or extend English learners’ responses to include complete sentences.
- Ask English learners explicit and implicit questions.
- Have students work with native English speaking partners to develop new questions about what they just heard.
- Provide another opportunity to listen.
- Provide a visual organizer and use electronic media to review the topic.

By using the same strategies and routines, English learners will develop the metacognitive skills necessary for improving
their listening comprehension. Language is a natural process; however, there are stages of first- and second-language acquisition that instructors must understand. This is necessary as oral language proficiency levels are related to listening skills. English learners need explicit instruction and much practice in order to become more strategic listeners. This can enhance their listening comprehension skills.

References

Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, Ed.D., is a bilingual speech language pathologist and a certified academic language therapist with a doctorate in curriculum and instruction. She is the director of the Valley Speech Language and Learning Center in Brownsville, Texas, and works with the Texas Institute for Measurement Evaluation and Statistics at the University of Houston. Dr. Cárdenas-Hagan’s research interests include the development of early reading assessments for Spanish-speaking students and the development of reading interventions for bilingual students. She currently serves as vice-chair of the International Dyslexia Association.
Assessing Listening Comprehension in a Reading Evaluation

by Melissa Farrall

Listening comprehension reigns as the first symbol system that children learn (Myklebust, 1954), however its status is that of a second fiddle. Listening is rarely taught. In contrast to all other modes of language, spoken or written, teachers expect their students to develop skill with listening on their own (Mendelsohn, 1984; Oxford, 1993; Tindall & Nisbet, 2008). Although rarely acknowledged, listening is a primary vehicle through which children learn. Failure to listen is often viewed as a characteristic of poor behavior: It is rarely perceived to be a weakness or a disability even when evidence or data is presented to the contrary. Although speaking, reading, and writing all manifest themselves in recognized behaviors, listening is a process that occurs internally. It is invisible.

Listening as a domain struggles from a lack of definition, and Moats is correct when she says that it is hard to assess what we have not clearly defined (1994). Sometimes listening means paying attention. Sometimes it has a sense of compliance as in listening to one’s mother. It can also refer to the understanding of lengthy speeches and narratives and the degree to which we grasp complex ideologies and contrasting points of view. In order to assess listening as a domain, we have to have a clear sense of what it is that we are trying to measure.

Although we think of print and oral language as distinct entities, they have much in common. We now have over 40 years of research that speaks to the intimate relationship between receptive language and reading and its potential for informing instruction (Bishop & Adams, 1990; Cain & Oakhill, 1999; Catts & Kamhi, 1999; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). As Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, and Siegelberg (2001, p. 42) so aptly expressed, “It can be reasonably argued that learning to read enables a person to comprehend written language to the same level that he or she comprehends spoken language.”

Methods of Assessments: General Considerations

In the classroom we make judgments regarding children’s understanding of what they hear. Children who are sitting quietly in their seats and looking forward at their teacher are generally presumed to be listening and understanding. Any experienced teacher, however, will tell you that nothing can be further from the truth. We never know what children are thinking unless we ask them. And so the question looms. How do we assess children’s skill in listening?

Listening is complex and failure to listen and understand breaks down in singular ways that are hard to measure (Brown,
We may have difficulty discriminating speech sounds and holding them in short-term memory as a precursor to further processing. We may fail to chunk words into meaningful units, or link pronouns to their antecedents. We may fail to correctly interpret words with multiple meanings or the meaning beyond the actual words. We may then fail to extract a gist, the essence of the message, which is stored in long-term memory for permanent access. It is the essence of the message that stays with us, causing us to remark on those occasions when we remember the precise wording of what was said, “I recall his exact words...” The assessment of listening comprehension must take each of the potential points of failure into consideration.

A Useful Guide

Listening comprehension involves the mechanics of how speech sounds are captured in memory and the process by which meaning is made. Working memory supports both of these stages of listening.

There are numerous taxonomies for listening, and despite the many disagreements over definitional issues, there is consensus that listening comprehension involves two distinct stages (Carroll, 1972; Hughes, 1989; Rivers, 1966). The first stage is linguistic in nature; it involves the mechanics of how speech sounds are captured in memory. The second stage is one of application, the process by which meaning is made.

Using the taxonomies associated with these stages, we can attempt to measure discrete components that are part of listening. That said, it is hard to identify how specific components of listening comprehension work together to facilitate understanding. We could define listening as a bottom-up process that begins with the hardware in the ear or a top-down approach that focuses on the situational and pragmatic aspects of sending and receiving messages (Richards, 1983). As evaluators, however, we have to be content to sample listening performance with a limited set of tasks that are conducted within a contrived setting and time frame (Brown, 2004). There is no one test that will document all components of listening skill; there are also no tests that are completely authentic and measure listening comprehension as it occurs in real-life scenarios.

The assessment of listening comprehension is a diagnostic puzzle. Evaluators need to think about verbal attention, fatigue and distractibility, verbal/working memory, phonological gaps, morphological/semantic challenges, syntax, pragmatics, metalinguistics, verbal reasoning, narrative and expository skill, the manner of presentation, and acoustics. According to Michele Berg (personal communication, March 27, 2016), working memory plays a role of particular importance. Working memory supports the first stage of listening, which involves capturing speech sounds for further processing (Berninger & Wolf, 2009). It also supports a second stage of listening, in which meaning is made. Berg states, “Working memory determines not only the amount of auditory information that can be held, but also determines how long that same information can be held so that processing for meaning can take place. A weak working memory will not only impair the ability to follow directions, but also the ability to follow along in classroom discussions in social conversations.”

Following is a discussion of informal and formal assessment tasks to help us solve this puzzle.

Informal Listening Tasks
According to Brown (2004), we can assess listening comprehension in a communicative context if we think beyond formal assessment and consider the different types of listening tasks that are required in the classroom. The challenge with most listening tasks in the classroom, however, is that they provide indirect measures of listening comprehension. They do not provide a clear picture into a child’s mind and what he or she actually understands, leaving us to confuse, perhaps, skill with writing or speaking as evidence of understanding. Examples of classroom-based tasks that provide indirect evidence of listening skill include:

- **Note-taking tests** that can be scored for content, visual representation (neatness and organization), accuracy, and efficiency, i.e., use of symbols to save time;
- **Editing tasks** that require examinees to discern discrepancies between what they hear and printed text, a task that has great potential for teaching listeners how small changes in language may reflect different biases;
- **Retelling**, a method of assessment that has captured the attention of the progress monitoring industry that requires listeners to summarize a story or an article. A common method of scoring focuses on length as is true of the DIBELS-Next (Good & Kaminski, 2011), which uses retelling on fluency probes to ensure that children...
are reading for meaning and not speed. Scoring on the DIBELS-Next can be enhanced by identifying the presence of main ideas, supporting details, key phrases, and sequence;

• Interpretive tasks, in which listeners attend to a unit of discourse and respond to questions, thereby forcing listeners to provide evidence of their inferential thinking skills.

In the end, there is much to be learned through observation. Are children engaged? Are children slow to follow instruction? Can they remember what was said? Do they wait to see what their peers do before taking action? Do they require or request repetition or clarification? Brown and Yule state that listening is purposeful and strategic (1983). Are children provided with specific goals for listening? Are listening behaviors modeled?

Then there is the most basic of all questions: Can they hear? About one-third of students at any one time present with less than optimal hearing, and are experiencing challenges related to ear infections, allergies, and tinnitus (Flexer, 1997). (See the Willis article in this issue for more on post-otitis auditory dysfunction.) Of no less importance is the acoustic environment. According to the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, both teachers and students are affected by poor acoustic conditions and background noise (1997–2016).

Formal Assessment of Listening

It is difficult to conduct an evaluation of listening comprehension with language that is truly authentic, and there are many aspects of oral communication that are not captured by formal assessments. Spoken language has several nonstandard features, including dialect, slang, and colloquialisms (Buck, 2001). Spoken utterances tend to be shorter. Speakers routinely express themselves in incomplete sentences, pausing to restart or to reformulate their thoughts. They change their rate and their intonation; they may pause for dramatic effect. Speakers avail themselves of coordinating conjunctions (and, or, but...); writers link ideas in more complex ways. At best, the language of tests that purport to measure listening is contrived; it has more in common with the language of print than the language that we hear between teacher and student. Moats (1994) cites the plight of a field in which many listening comprehension tests lack validity. At worst, many tests measure an artificial form of language with novel tasks that do not replicate or capture how it is that human beings communicate. At best, we have an opportunity to contrast language in its oral and written forms.

Tests of listening comprehension fall into two groups: those that measure listening comprehension as a unitary construct and those that attempt to measure skills in discrete constructs (Farrall, 2012). The word attempt is used here because language is not diagnostically simple. Johnson (1994) notes that the layers of the structure of language are not distinct and unique. They overlap. Those structures are phonology (the sounds of the English language), morphology (meaningful parts of words), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (using language effectively and appropriately). We cannot speak of syntax without delving into morphology; we cannot speak of semantics without considering how small changes in word order (syntax) affect meaning.

Regardless of what the test purports to measure, evaluators need to use all of their observational powers to consider the behavioral aspects of listening. Are challenges related to attention, memory, or motor activity? Evaluators should be particularly alert to difficulties with auditory discrimination. Do children misunderstand because they have misheard what was said? Be cautious. The standard hearing screening that is documented in many children's files is not a reliable or valid measure of auditory discrimination and/or processing.

Evaluators also need to consider the mode by which children demonstrate their understanding. Listening comprehension cannot be measured directly. Some tests provide a window into understanding through open-ended questions that require children to speak, comining expressive language skill with receptive ability. Other tests measure listening skill through a pictorial multiple-choice format. This approach is thought to be more of a direct route to listening comprehension, and it should permit many children to express their thoughts in a manner more commensurate with their understanding. Although this approach may appear to be vastly superior to open-ended questions, Johnson (1994) suggests that it might be appropriate to discern how well children discriminate meaningful information in pictures before testing them with multiple-choice images. It would also be important to observe to what degree children actively examine the pictures before them and to document when they resort to a strategy of guessing. (I haven't said three in a while….so I will guess three.)

Standardized, norm-referenced tests are designed to allow educators to compare a child's performance to other children in the same grade or of the same age. The tests that focus on the meaning-making aspects of listening offer the following options:

• **Multiple-choice:** (Point to the picture: The circle is between the squares.) Students are asked to listen to passages and demonstrate their understanding by pointing to pictures best matching what they have heard. Unfortunately, pictorial representations are limited in their ability to portray abstract reasoning or shades of meanings. Good guessers can play the odds, enhancing their scores through a process of elimination. Carrow-
Woolfolk (2011) notes that diagnostic analysis can be difficult because we cannot tell whether examinees made blind guesses or whether they responded with an element of skill.

- **Open-ended format:** (Why did Johnny go to the store?) Students are asked to demonstrate their understanding of passages as evidenced by their expressive language skill. Although expressive language may not be a significant factor and can make it difficult to understand the degree of listening comprehension, responses can potentially be analyzed for word usage, syntax, and organization.

- **Listening to prompts designed to elicit specific language skills:** (Make a sentence using the following words without using and.) Test items are designed to measure aspects of language knowledge such as word meanings (semantics), syntax (sentence structure), supralinguistics (verbal reasoning and abstract/figurative language), and pragmatics (using language effectively and appropriately). Students may respond to open-ended or multiple-choice questions.

- **Retelling stories:** (I am going to read you a story. When I am through, I want you to tell me the story in your own words as best you can.) Students are asked to remember and recap stories that are presented orally, a potentially useful tool for educators who want to learn about children’s ability to build mental representations of what they hear (Gillam & Pearson, 2004). Narrative skill is built on a multifaceted foundation of language and cognitive processing, requiring that children understand and represent how characters interact in time and place. There is significant research that points to the importance of narrative comprehension and production as indicators of cognitive, social, and academic development (Bishop, 1997; Bishop & Adams, 1992; Dollaghan & Campbell, 1992; Garnet, 1986).

- **Following directions:** (Point to the circle after you point to the square.) Students listen to oral commands and point to objects in pictures as directed, tasks that are far more complicated than one would presume at first blush. Following directions necessitates that students interpret, recall, and carry out series of directives. This process requires an understanding of sequence, temporal relations, and conditional relations (Wiig, Semel, & Secord, 2013a).

Although each type of test or subtest may purport to measure specific aspects of oral language, we can never be 100 percent certain to what degree we are actually measuring listening as opposed to attention, memory, and word retrieval.

**Testing Listening in a Reading Evaluation**

Although Durrell’s call for a reading/listening ratio has been largely unheeded by the assessment community, there are several lessons that we, as practitioners, can learn from Durrell. Durrell (1969) warned against the practice of attempting to compare two tests, one from each domain, without a deep understanding of how the two tests differ in their content and design. Although written and spoken language have much in common, evaluators need to consider factors related to test design, content, and the language itself. Whenever possible, we want to compare listening comprehension and reading comprehension tests that have similar structures and similar norming samples. The Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Third Edition, for example, offers measures of listening and reading that are structurally similar and that are developed using the same sample population.

There are four possible profiles that evaluators may observe when including listening comprehension in an evaluation of reading skill. (See Table 1.)

Tasha has strong reading comprehension and strong listening comprehension. Educators would want to consider her overall stage of reading and language development with the goal of supporting Tasha to work with texts of increasing complexity and length. She might be ready, for example, to move from Chall’s third stage of reading for basic informational purposes to stage four and work on texts with differing points of view (1983).

Jorge has strong reading comprehension in the face of a relative weakness in listening comprehension. Inquiring evaluators might want to learn more about what it is that makes it hard for Jorge to process oral language-based content. Areas for additional investigation might include vocabulary, syntax, abstract and figurative language (nonliteral expressions), inferential thinking (drawing conclusions) and even pragmatics. Evaluators might also elect to examine attention, memory, auditory processing, and motivation or interest.

Leo’s profile in the example above should incite educators to learn more about his decoding skill as he is clearly not accessing printed content in a manner commensurate with his receptive language skill. Future testing might include phonological processing, sound-symbol correspondence, word recognition, and higher-level decoding skills, as well as automaticity and fluency. Leo’s skill with listening can be used to highlight what Leo could understand if we taught him to read the words.

**TABLE 1. Student Profiles – Listening Comprehension (LC) and Reading Comprehension (RC)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>RC</th>
<th>LC</th>
<th>Next Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Consider the stage of reading development and skills to promote continued growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorge</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Consider factors related to attention and auditory processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Investigate reading decoding, fluency, and phonemic awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Investigate aspects of decoding, language structure and background knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on page 40
Lucy, on the other hand, warrants further assessment of her receptive language skills and her decoding skills. We do not know, at this point, whether her low reading comprehension is a consequence of poor receptive language, limitations in decoding, or a combination thereof. This is a child who will require, in all likelihood, instructions that focus both on phonemic awareness and decoding, as well as the structure of language.

_Evaluators need to consider the behavioral aspects of listening and the mode by which children demonstrate their understanding. They should always determine whether a particular test or subtest is valid for the child in question._

Tests and Subtests Measuring Aspects of Listening Comprehension

Tests that purport to measure listening comprehension or aspects of receptive language skill are not all the same, and small differences between tests can have significant implications for how children perform. At this point, we have little research on listening comprehension as a domain, and our tests lack the specificity that would help us identify different listener profiles. An identified challenge in listening comprehension should serve as a red flag for underlying receptive language issues that may also be compromising reading comprehension. A failure to communicate or, in this case, understand may reflect weaknesses in vocabulary, syntax or semantics. It may reflect difficulties with abstract and figurative expressions or messages that are not directly stated. It may be a consequence of a memory that is fragile and unreliable or difficulty taking in lengthy utterances.

Tests of listening comprehension are not immune from issues related to reliability and validity, and evaluators should always determine whether a particular test or subtest is valid for the child in question. Evaluators should not rely solely on the reliability and validity data provided by test publishers. Evaluators need to rely on their powers of observation, as well as their own expertise in the structure of language. When children perform poorly on measures of listening comprehension, further assessment is warranted. The shrewd evaluator should then attempt to document listening performance at the word, sentence, and discourse levels within the context of auditory discrimination, attention, and memory.

According to Michele Berg (personal communication, March 27, 2016), deficits in working memory are not easy to identify informally and can be easily misidentified as attentional problems or more pervasive cognitive problems. Berg explains that both the Woodcock-Johnson IV Tests of Cognitive Abilities and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fifth Edition, offer increased specificity in the assessment of working memory components. Gathercole, Lamont, and Alloway (2006) recommend standardized tests, such as these, that permit evaluators to determine whether a low working memory score is domain specific (auditory or visual, for example) or whether it is the result of a more global challenge.

The tests and subtests in Table 2 are representative of the different types of assessments that are presently available.

**Raising Listening Skills’ Status**

Despite its second fiddle status, listening comprehension is a foundation skill for success in school, in the home, and in the workplace (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2001; U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). If listening is the first step in meaningful communication, listening skills need to receive the same attention and consideration as reading, writing, and speaking. Evaluators who are contemplating the inclusion of listening assessments in their reading comprehension batteries need to be knowledgeable about what tests measure, the structure of language, and the many factors that compromise how children learn through language, whether it be by ear or through print.

**References**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tests and Subtests</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boehm Test of Basic Concepts – Third Edition</strong> (BOEMH-3; Boehm, 2000)</td>
<td>Circling items in pictures to demonstrate understanding of relational concepts (size, direction, position, quantity, time, classification, and general) that are necessary for success in school. Grades: PreK and 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woodcock-Johnson IV Tests of Cognitive Abilities</strong> (WJ IV COG; Schrank, McGrew, &amp; Mather, 2014)</td>
<td>Story Recall: answering questions about stories that are read by an audio recording. Ages: 2–90+.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests – Third Edition</strong> (WRMT-III; Woodcock, 2011)</td>
<td>Listening Comprehension: answering literal and inferential questions about narrative and expository passages read aloud via audio CD. Initial items are read by the examiner. Ages: 4 years 6 months–79 years 11 months.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessing Listening Comprehension in a Reading Evaluation continued from page 40


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Teaching Listening Comprehension

by Blanche Podhajski

Listening comprehension is among the least understood and least researched of language skills. For many years, listening has been neglected as part of language arts curricula (Pearson & Fielding, 1982). A review of 30 years of listening comprehension research has indicated that most researchers considered it a passive skill, one that would develop without assistance (Osada, 2004). As contributors to this Perspectives issue have noted, listening comprehension has been regarded as a Cinderella stepsister educationally, secondary to speaking, reading, and writing (Nunan, 1997).

Recent educational trends have helped bring listening comprehension back into focus as an important instructional objective of its own as well as a strong partner in the development of other language skills. Scientific study of the important role of listening comprehension in reading comprehension (Cain & Oakhill, 1999; Catts, Herrera, Nielsen & Bridges, 2015; Cutting, Materek, Cole, Levine & Mahone, 2009) has helped increase attention to the powerful synergy between spoken and written language comprehension.

The rapidly increasing number of students in our schools who are English language learners has also sparked greater interest in teaching listening comprehension. This population’s instructional needs across speaking, reading, and writing have showcased active listening as a foundational skill (see Cárdenas-Hagan, this issue; Rubin, 1995).

Finally, Common Core State Standards (CCSS, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief School Officers, 2010) include Speaking and Listening Standards as an expectation for the classroom. This display of prominence alongside reading, writing, and math reinforces that listening comprehension deserves equal instructional attention.

Challenges Confronting Listening Comprehension Instruction

Despite its increase in popularity, listening poses challenges to teachers eager to provide good instruction. Listening remains hard to define and diagnose (see Farrall, this issue).

Is it listening to directions or stories? Is it the basis for good note taking during complex lectures involving expository text like in biology or Russian history? Is it the framework for social learning and being able to pick up nuances of pitch, tone, and volume? Is it a function of our vocabularies or background knowledge? Such questions highlight the dilemma of how we can be expected to teach a skill that is so difficult to explain and identify.

Another problem confronting the provision of good instruction is that students experiencing listening comprehension differences are heterogeneous. They may be children with attention problems, memory issues, language disabilities, cognitive differences, or be English language learners. It would be hard to say, “This is what a listening comprehension problem looks like” when the language behaviors of students who have difficulties listening are so variable and interwoven.

Finally, and perhaps most problematic to effective instruction, there is the compartmentalized way in which language itself is taught (Moats, 1994). Both assessments and interventions for listening comprehension tend to pull apart the whole of language. And nowhere are territory lines more evident than in the delivery of services to learners with language needs. A student demonstrating a problem that has an impact on spoken and written language comprehension may be taught by a speech language pathologist, special educator and/or reading specialist as well as a classroom teacher. Each brings different assessment and intervention tools. And yet, the root cause of the language problem may be the same and in need of integrated instruction. Wallach (2011) and her colleagues have long advocated moving beyond different specialists treating isolated symptoms or “teaching to the test.” So how do we integrate across the whole of language to teach listening comprehension well?

Students experiencing listening comprehension differences are heterogeneous. They may have attention problems, memory issues, language disabilities, cognitive differences, or be English language learners.

Background Knowledge for Teaching Listening Comprehension

It is important to review what we do know that can help influence our instruction decisions. Researchers have agreed that listening comprehension has two distinct parts (Carroll, 1972; Hughes, 1989; Rivers, 1966). The first is linguistic, requiring speech sound processing and memory. The second is meaning driven. Others have described these two parts of listening as auditory perception and message comprehension.

Message comprehension can be further divided into literal and reflective processing (Goss, 1982). Literal refers to content that is concrete and reflective refers to going beyond the information given. We could also consider meaning comprehension’s interactional function (Morley, 2001). Interactional comprehension occurs during conversation and is at the heart of social learning.

This article’s focus is on the meaning, message, and interactional comprehension elements of listening. Although it is always important to assure that auditory acuity is intact, our
Teaching Listening Comprehension continued from page 43

Purpose is not to evaluate programs designed to improve auditory processing skills. The interested reader is referred to a systematic review of the literature on auditory processing interventions conducted by Fey and his colleagues (2011). These reviewers cautioned that teachers need to be aware of the limitations of the evidence and use care to monitor their students’ spoken and written language.

Listening Comprehension Instruction Requirements

Listening comprehension that is meaning-based or message-driven is sensitive to instruction (Goh, 2000). Clearly, many children can benefit from improving their understanding of spoken language. These include students who are English language learners and those with specific reading comprehension disabilities (Nation, 2005; Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015). Instruction should be customized, explicit, and integrated across spoken and written domains.

Most agree that listening comprehension instruction must take into account learner profiles, the structure of language itself, and the context within which listening occurs. When all three of these contributing factors are considered, we can answer the questions: “Who are we trying to teach?” and “What are we trying to teach them where and how?”

Learners come to listening situations with different cognitive profiles. They display varying degrees of attention, memory, and executive functioning, the ability to flexibly plan and organize as well as control for competing interferents to attention (Denckla, 1994).

For successful listening comprehension in which we gather, store, remember, and act upon information, we need good attention, memory and executive functioning. We know that listening comprehension is particularly vulnerable in children with attention disorders (Cain & Bignell, 2014). Working memory is also a problem for children with attention issues (Alloway, Gathercole, & Elliot, 2010). Interestingly, accompanying listening activities with written text may facilitate listening comprehension and reduce the load on memory. Print provides the opportunity to reread even after the spoken information is gone.

When listening, students pay attention at many different levels (Douglas, 1972). Listening can mean coming to attention because one believes that whoever is speaking is worth listening to. It can mean maintaining attention, having the discipline to keep listening if a speaker drones on and the listener is thinking about everything else that would be fun to do. Or it can be selective attention, recognizing what is most important to be listening for: the answers to test questions that will be on a final, or where and when a birthday party is.

It is helpful to know what levels of attention are most problematic for students. Securing attention from the very beginning is important for children with attention and listening challenges. Simplify directions and alert children before presenting requests and information. Rather than, “Who was your favorite character in the story and why... Cooper?” use names first and break messages into parts: “Cooper, who was your favorite character in the story?” Following his response, ask “Why?”

Remember that just because a child is sitting attentively does not assure that attention maintains. We need to help students monitor their own listening. We also need to teach children what is most important to listen for. This extends beyond the names of the characters, dates, and places to discovering the premise, whether or not the child agrees, and how what he or she heard made him or her feel.

Students with listening comprehension issues may also have slow processing speed. Processing speed depends on the number of task components and the specific material being processed (Hale, 1990). We have strong evidence to show that many children with learning disabilities exhibit slower processing speed with verbal information (Felton & Wood, 1989; Torgesen, Kistner, & Morgan, 1987; Wolf, 1991). Listening may require increased energy because of inadequate background knowledge, lack of familiarity with a new language being spoken, and/or knowing how the language works. More often than not, it is a combination of these variables that needs to be identified and addressed instructionally. Customizing instruction for different learner profiles is key.

Understanding the structure of language is also essential to teaching listening comprehension. We need to help students understand the parts of language and how our English language works. Language includes phonology, the sound system; morphology, meaningful word parts; semantics, word meanings and relationships; grammar and syntax, the rules governing our use of spoken and written language; discourse, connected language as in stories or conversation; and, pragmatics, the social use of language. These concepts were introduced in this publication by Spear-Swerling and will be considered further for their specific relevance to listening comprehension instruction.

Listening occurs in many different contexts that need to be considered when planning instruction. Common listening environments are the classroom, home, and play spaces. We
Instruction in Listening Comprehension: Learners, Language Structure, and Context

Despite increased attention to the study of listening comprehension, a gap remains between listening comprehension research and instructional practice. Here are some evidence-based guidelines that can help support listening comprehension instruction, taking the learner, the structure of language and the context into account:

Assessing the learner

Listening is a fundamental skill that affects oral language, reading comprehension, and written language. Instruction should be explicit and integrated across language domains.

Listening comprehension should be customized. Students bring different learning profiles to listening comprehension tasks. Knowledge of student learning strengths and needs will maximize instructional effectiveness. Assure that students have been comprehensively assessed across cognitive processes, oral language, academic achievement, attention, and social learning.

Assessing the knowledge base

Listening comprehension is an active skill influenced by the structure of language. Knowing language’s parts and the influence of each on listening comprehension is important. Anyone who has studied a foreign language knows the challenges inherent to differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax (rules for word usage and sentence construction). Students who are English language learners as well as those with language disabilities may become confused by how the English language works.

Instructional Strategies, Resources, and Examples

While the structure of language is a vast area of study, examples of some impacts on listening comprehension and instructional strategies follow.

Improving sound awareness and speech

Phonology influences sounds spoken in words. We know the impact phonemic awareness has on reading. Research-based explicit reading instruction is built on a foundation of sound identification and sequencing. Some children also experience problems with sound production. Such difficulties with speech articulation make some children more difficult to understand than their peers. Lack of speech intelligibility takes a toll on listening comprehension and social interaction. When listeners do not interact with speakers because sound production is impaired, speakers may reduce their talk. Conversation development suffers and social isolation may result.

- The Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing® Program for Reading Spelling and Speech (Lindamood & Lindamood, 1975; 2011) is a good example of an integrated, explicit intervention to address sound awareness and production across spoken and written language.

Understanding the function of parts of words

Morphology, the study of meaningful word parts, affects our listening. Not knowing whether an action is happening now or has already happened, e.g., she talks, she talked, may be the result of not recognizing the tense markers –s and –ed. Such confusions may be subtle but confounding. Studies have shown that children with comprehension difficulties have problems with the marking of tense and subject-verb agreement (Adlof & Catts, 2015). These children would benefit from activities designed to highlight tense markers.

Building vocabulary

Semantics impacts word knowledge and relationships. It is important to include vocabulary instruction across multiple levels. In addition to concrete vocabulary, it is important to teach function words (Biemiller, 2009) such as if, because, from, so. It can be these “little words” that make the difference to listening comprehension.

- In Bringing Words to Life, Beck and her colleagues (2013) recommend a tiered approach to vocabulary instruction. Tier 1 includes words that are basic and often found in basal readers: look, car, girl, blue. Tier 2 comprises words that mature speakers use: harmony; suspicious, catapulted, multitude; and, Tier 3 addresses words based in content areas like science or math: stratosphere, viscous, coagulate, geometric.

- Text Talk is the strategy these authors designed to explain the teaching of Tier 2 words. Having young children listen to words the teacher identifies as Tier 2 words within stories read out loud helps build vocabulary. This technique can be extended through the reading of expository passages to older students. Students listen and identify both Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words.

Language comprehension

Grammar and syntax are rules that govern our language. We know that students have more difficulty with sentence comprehension when there are more words between the subject...
and verb (Fry, Weber, & DePierro, 1978). Consider the difference between The boy bought candy and The boy who we thought hated sweets was actually the classmate who bought the five-pound box of candy to share with everyone at school. Children may also have difficulty with relative pronouns, e.g., who, whom, whose and relative adverbs when, where, why. Like listening comprehension, grammar and syntax have regained deserved educational attention. It is also appropriately being recommended for instruction beginning in preschool (Arndt & Schuele, 2013).

- One of the first programs to address language comprehension in an integrated way across word and sentence levels for listening and reading comprehension as well as writing and higher order thinking is Visualizing and Verbalizing (V/V) by Nanci Bell (1986, 2007). V/V uses visual imagery to teach language comprehension explicitly and sequentially.

It is important to include vocabulary instruction across multiple levels. In addition to concrete vocabulary, teach function words such as if, because, from, so.

Developing discourse

Discourse is the connected language of stories and conversation. Comprehending discourse requires concentration, focus, and coordination of multiple levels of the structure of language: sounds, words, grammar, and syntax (Graesser, Millis, & Zwaan, 1997). It also taps knowledge of story structure, e.g., narrative features of characters, settings, and key events.

Reading stories expressively has been shown to increase story comprehension among preschoolers. Prosody, sometimes called the music or melody of language, includes pitch, stress and pausing. Prosody influences comprehension at the discourse level by calling attention to important features of text. It also helps memory (Mira & Schwanenflugel, 2013). Most of us tell the story of The Three Bears with an emphasis on the chair that was “jusst right.” Retellings are commonly used to assess children’s understanding of stories.

- Supporting Knowledge in Language and Literacy (SKILL) is a discourse processing program (Gillam, Gillam, & Reece, 2012) that extends beyond retellings. It provides explicit instruction of story elements and causal connections, elaboration and independent storytelling. It addresses comprehension monitoring, helping students hold what they hear in memory and integrate it with what they already know.

Conversation has been described as the primary setting for spoken language comprehension, as well as production (Clark, 1996). Conversation, while something we do every day, requires a complex array of skills, including understanding turn taking and, with multiple speakers, following who said what when. As when listening to narratives, understanding the meaning of what is said and matching it to one’s own background knowledge is a complex process of integration (Avivi-Reich, Jakucbycz, Daneman, & Schneider, 2015).

To address the Common Core’s expectation for participation in collaborative conversations, teachers can provide scaffolding for asking questions, clarifying information, and following conversational conventions or rules.

- Two examples of excellent strategies we can teach to improve listening comprehension are paraphrasing and summarizing. Paraphrasing helps clarify and promote understanding. Preface responses in collaborative conversations with “this is what I think I heard you say…” Summarizing and “grabbing the gist” expand paraphrasing during discourse to make sure that listeners grasp the main ideas.

Understanding audience

Pragmatics, or language in use, is a logical follow-up to discourse, particularly as it involves conversation. To have a good conversation, students need to have an awareness of audience. By 4 years of age, most children can adjust their discourse by speaking differently to adults than peers. However, many children do not know how to adjust language to take the listener into account. They need to be taught explicitly how to understand the listener’s perspective.

- Advances in social learning interventions offer some excellent strategies such as those included in Social Thinking® developed by Michelle Garcia Winner (2007).

Awareness of the context within which listening occurs will promote instructional success. Social listening is different from academic listening, and academic listening in the classroom is different from in the school learning center.

Placing listening in its context

Finally, awareness of the context within which listening occurs will promote instructional success. Social listening is different from academic listening. And academic listening in the classroom is different from in the school learning center. The nature and genre of curriculum also change. Consider the different demands of narrative and expository text as well as of specific content areas across grades (Wallach, 2011).
Most interventions for listening across contexts utilize a learning-strategies approach. Learning strategies are intentional actions we take to facilitate learning (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). They are often divided into cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective strategies (Chamot, 1995; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990).

- Examples of cognitive strategies include taking notes, grouping or classifying information learned, making inferences, and using prior knowledge. Metacognitive strategies often involve planning before tasks, monitoring during tasks, and evaluating afterwards. Social/affective strategies involve questioning for clarification, peer collaboration, and positive self-talk to reduce anxiety. Good language learners use many strategies (Chamot, 1987).

Listening's Broader Benefits

Teaching listening comprehension is an important part of language learning. Despite its delayed entry to the educational landscape, listening comprehension can be taught in a customized, explicit, and integrated fashion when learner profiles and the structure of language are understood and addressed. Improving listening comprehension will facilitate success not only in language understanding but in speaking, reading comprehension, and writing as well.

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Continued on page 48
Teaching Listening Comprehension  continued from page 47


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This article describes efforts to develop Global Institutional Accreditation Standards to be applied internationally to institutions focusing on dyslexia and related language learning difficulties. It includes a synopsis of a pilot review and institutional perspectives and recommendations based on the review.

Development and Rationale

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is the oldest and only international organization to support education and research on behalf of people who learn differently. The Global Partners (GP), a coalition of 24 organizations in 21 countries, supports IDA's mission worldwide. In turn, IDA assists in the improvement of these institutions by providing them access to IDA's extensive network of experts and trustworthy resources.

In 2014, IDA initiated a plan to establish formal accreditation procedures to recognize institutions that have voluntarily undertaken activities to improve their quality and are implementing these improvements successfully. A coalition of IDA leaders, IDA members, and stakeholders joined forces to make this vision a reality. This team agreed that the intent of Institutional Accreditation by IDA is to assist worldwide institutions to develop services that are high quality, sustainable, and reasonable for different cultural contexts. As part of this developmental process, institutions seeking Institutional Accreditation have access to more formal guidance and mentoring from IDA experts.

IDA Institutional Accreditation is a formal recognition that the institution meets professional standards of operational integrity and quality consistent with IDA values and the established definition of dyslexia. These services, deemed reasonable within local cultural contexts, include, but are not limited to, instruction, teacher education programs, counseling, and assessment.

To establish uniform criteria for institutions seeking IDA Institutional Accreditation, we developed a set of Institutional Quality Standards. The goals of these standards are to:

- Improve and validate the quality of information and services available to people with dyslexia, including educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders;
- Provide an organizational framework to mentor applicant institutions;
- Assist IDA Global Partners in maintaining consistently high-quality operational standards;
- Increase transparency of external quality assurance.

These Institutional Quality Standards include criteria for institutional qualifications; mission and planning; organizational and financial resources; personnel qualifications; facilities and infrastructures; communication and engagement among affiliates; relationships with resource organizations; self-assessment; and ongoing development.

There are four levels of accreditation: (1) Applicant, (2) Provisional Accreditation, (3) Full Accreditation, and (4) Accreditation with Commendation. Applicant status is given to institutions whose application for accreditation has been accepted and are receiving mentoring in preparation for the accreditation visit team.

A team of IDA constituents reviewed and edited the initial draft of the Institutional Quality Standards and Accreditation process before piloting the criteria and procedures with the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS).

Pilot Review

To conduct the review, IDA selected a long-time member with the qualifications and experience necessary to make evaluative judgments for this review. In this case, the reviewer had doctoral training in reading and language, 40 years of research and practice, and participation on Department of Education (DOE) review teams as well serving on a team in charge of preparing for multiple DOE and American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA) accreditation reviews of his own academic program. Looking ahead, the evaluative requirements of accreditation underscore the need to recruit reviewers with significant professional experience, train them, and provide concrete procedural guidelines.

The main part of the pilot accreditation visit took place from March 15-18, 2016, at DAS's Rex House Learning Centre. The purpose of this pilot experience was to gain insight into the process to further refine the accreditation process and maximize its reliability and effectiveness.

For the accreditation process itself, the reviewer used an IDA Accreditation Matrix in which each of the above-mentioned criteria was broken down into specific forms of substantiating evidence. For example, under “Personnel” are listed forms of evidence such as: organizational chart; numbers and roles of employees, categorized by full- or part-time status and category (e.g., executive, administrative, professional, support staff); copies of credentials and/or letters confirming employee qualifications; and ratio of clients to providers.

Continued on page 50
Attainment levels for each piece of evidence were rated using the following scale: Green, meets IDA Institutional Quality Standards (5 points); Yellow, partially meets IDA Institutional Quality Standards (3 points); Red, does not meet IDA Institutional Quality Standards (1 point). For each example of evidence, spaces were left for comments, and each criterion page provided a section for summary comments. A formal cover page for the entire document collects overall summary information, such as institution reviewed, dates of review, mean scores for each criterion, overall score, and an executive summary.

DAS, like all of IDA's Global Partners, exists within a socio-cultural context. Singapore has its own culture with well-defined understandings and expectations for social and pragmatic interactions. Given the sensitive nature of any accreditation visit and the social interactions required, it will be important to select reviewers with cultural sensitivity who are empathic and able to respect and communicate constructively with people from cultures that may differ from their own.

DAS had clearly undergone many types of reviews previously; the administration was well-versed on how to schedule elements of the visit as well as organize substantiating information so that links to the accrediting criteria were transparent. Less developed institutions will likely need specific guidance on how to prepare for and organize the visit.

With respect to DAS's perspectives, the administration felt that the accreditation document was well organized with information requested within meaningful categories. DAS's recommendations include:

- Highlighting the confidentiality of documents with a statement that assures organizations seeking accreditation that information used for this process will be kept secured and not shared without prior approval.

With regard to the accreditation process:

- DAS felt their trial accreditation went well because it was conducted by a highly competent representative;
- The value of the accreditation is enhanced because the organization is validated by an expert who independently and impartially verifies compliance to a standard;
- The accreditation also raises the awareness of the organization of other best practices and affirms the best practices of the organization;
- It gives the organization the opportunity to review current practices. For example:
  1. DAS discovered through this process that it should more systematically collect client feedback;
  2. DAS received feedback on the student monitoring tool—a computerized curriculum-based assessment called MAP Track—and to enhance the tool by including a speed criteria for each item in addition to entire components and to document self-correction, for example;
  3. To further improve program evaluation and research via external partners;
- To consider 360 degree feedback—a process in which feedback from an employee’s subordinates, peers and supervisor, as well as self-evaluation for the employee’s performance is obtained—as compared to the current traditional approach.
- Ideally, the accreditation process should include all levels of accreditation but may proceed in increments depending on the organization seeking accreditation:
  1. The potential accreditation level of an organization should not be predetermined. The accreditation process should adopt a big picture view and work towards the baseline achievable by the organization. In doing so, we approach accreditation in a holistic and supportive manner rather than come across as only evaluative.
  2. If organizations are not ready for certain levels of accreditation (e.g., for individual accreditation), then there should be a discussion on how to work towards this level of accreditation.
- The accreditation process should deliberately include interviews with all stakeholders, for example students, their parents, board members, government representatives, and other key groups.
David Kilpatrick’s book, one of Wiley’s Essentials of Psychological Assessment series, is much more than a synthesis of test reviews, summaries of intervention research, illustrative case studies, and recommendations for reading and literacy interventions. While such content is pro forma in a guide for school psychologists, reading specialists, and educators, this book offers provocative new insights into the nature of reading development, reading difficulties, and effective instruction that deserve wide discussion and application in the field.

Kilpatrick, himself a school psychologist with extensive experience conducting evaluations in public school and clinic settings, has studied the scientific literature on reading development, reading difficulties, and reading instruction to an unusual degree for a psychologist whose formal training, as he laments, bypassed this literature almost entirely. Kilpatrick opens his book with insightful comments regarding the rift between the worlds of scientific research and educational practice (“The Unfortunate Reality about Reading Research: Nobody Knows about It!”), thoughtfully explaining not only the nature and manifestations of these divisions but also the reasons why they exist. His book, paradoxically, represents one of the most potent linkages between science and educational practice available to us now.

Three significant ideas, all advancements over typical assessment and instruction practices, resurface throughout the book. The first concerns the nature of and the measurement of the phonological skills that are most closely related to literacy; the second concerns the nature of and the educational remedies for sight word deficiencies; and the third concerns the characteristics of the most powerful interventions for students with reading difficulties. All are interrelated.

Phonological awareness, argues Kilpatrick, is most productively measured and taught with respect to three levels of proficiency: early, basic, and advanced. Basic phoneme awareness includes the segmentation and blending tasks commonly found in screening assessments such as DIBELS and AIMSweb that begin to lose predictive power after about the middle of first grade, when students have started to read and spell. Invoking data from his own studies and older work of Jerome Rosner and Pat Lindamood, Kilpatrick convinces the reader that advanced phonological skills are under-assessed in most test batteries and under-treated in instruction. These are the skills most closely associated with automatic word recognition, which in turn depends on a process called orthographic mapping.

Orthographic mapping is the second aspect of reading development that Kilpatrick portrays as poorly understood but critical for consolidation of proficient reading. Orthographic mapping is “the process students use to turn unfamiliar written words into instantly recognizable ‘sight words.’” While orthographic mapping is a construct familiar to experimentally trained researchers, it is generally unknown by educators and practicing psychologists. Orthographic mapping requires advanced phonemic awareness, consolidated knowledge of orthographic patterns and phoneme-grapheme correspondences, and the capacity to rapidly form connections between sound, spelling, and meaning as words are stored in the mental dictionary or lexicon.

Kilpatrick’s thorough review of intervention studies going back to the 1990s skillfully uncovers a major flaw in reports of educational effectiveness: over-reliance on reports of effect sizes that do not take into consideration the context of the study or the relationship between the experimental and comparison groups. Thus, for example, a study might report a moderate effect size because the experimental group maintained its relative standing while the control or comparison group got worse. Conversely, it might report a small effect size if the experimental group made major gains but the comparison group made significant gains as well. Kilpatrick mines the data within classic intervention studies, avoiding interpretive pitfalls, and concludes that the most powerful interventions for students with word reading deficits include three critical instructional components: phoneme awareness through advanced levels of proficiency; phoneme-grapheme correspondences and orthographic pattern sensitivity training; and ample time in meaningful reading of text where the student recognizes words with about 95% accuracy. These three components enable the most progress toward the end goal: efficient orthographic mapping and fluent reading with understanding.

This Essentials book is not without its flaws. Its organization is sometimes frustrating. The topics of spelling and writing receive only minimal treatment. When specifics of phonology and orthography are discussed, the author seems to have a less detailed grasp of linguistics than would be ideal. Nevertheless, this book is a great read and is highly recommended for professional learning communities, graduate students, and practitioners who strive to align practices with current reading research.

Continued on page 52
Overall, DAS has gained additional insight on areas it needs to strengthen while gaining validation for the work and achievements it has attained. DAS thanked IDA for providing this opportunity and expressed interest in sharing this experience with other organizations and being a part of future accreditation meetings.

After this pilot review, IDA modified the process according to the feedback provided by the reviewer and DAS before submitting it to the IDA Board Executive Committee for a vote.

The intent of this accreditation process is to assist like-minded institutions worldwide to develop services that are high quality, sustainable, and reasonable for different cultures. Global Partners that successfully complete the IDA Institutional Accreditation process will have formal recognition by IDA that the institution meets professional standards of operational integrity and quality consistent with IDA values and the established definition of dyslexia.

As a next step towards establishing international standards, IDA has begun translating and adapting IDA Fact Sheets and is developing a global adaptation of the Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading. Once these standards are developed and approved by researchers with knowledge of dyslexia in a representative range of global languages, IDA can move forward to offer accreditation to teacher education programs worldwide.

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