What is the Simple View of Reading?

Gough and Tunmer's 1986 theory of reading still has great relevance and importance today

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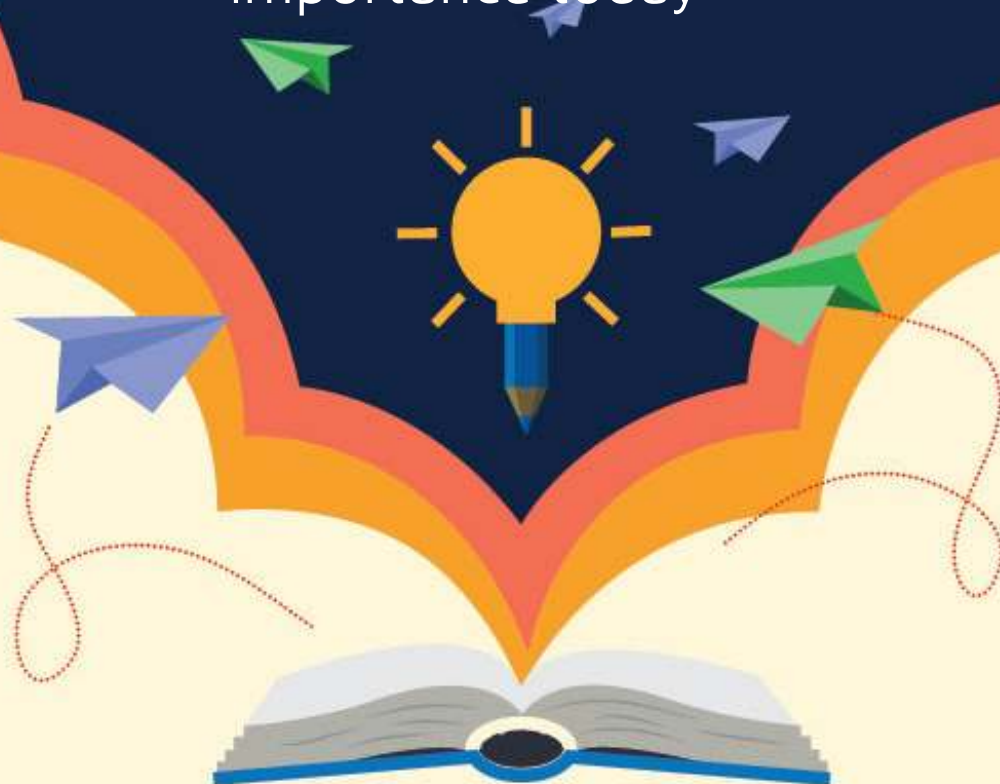www.speechlanguage-resources.com

Introduction

The Simple View of Reading is a scientific theory of reading that was offered to the education world in 1986 by Philip Gough and William Tunmer.

Education institutions at that time were in thrall to the Whole Language philosophy and its whole word teaching method. Most educators had little interest in a reading model that positioned decoding as being the best way to teach reading.

Professor Pam Snow states that thus for many teachers *'the Simple View of Reading was a gift that went missing in the mail.'* (Snow, 2019)

Simple view of reading endures

Yet, the Simple View of Reading endures, particularly in reading science circles. Its central thesis is that reading comprehension is the product of decoding ability and language understanding. This core concept remains highly influential.

(Mark Seidenberg in Language at the Speed of Sight states that Phillip Gough is being a little coy with the use of the word *simple,* and that the simple view actually reveals a deep insight about how we learn to read.)

The model is constructed from three variables...
$$R = D \times C$$

R is for reading comprehension,

D is for decoding,

C is for language comprehension.

The equation and its importance

Note that the multiplication symbol x is used. The variables in the Simple View of Reading must be multiplied, not added together.

So, successful reading = decoding x comprehension, or reading = 1 x 1.

True reading comprehension results from both successful decoding and comprehension of written text. The perfect 1.

Decoding and comprehension are independent of each other, but a score of 0 in either can only lead to reading failure.

Think of the Simple View of Reading as number symbols:

R = D x C
becomes…
1 = 1 x 1

In the Simple View of Reading, 1 is the target, the ideal score.

Yet, if by mistake we add the scores *together* instead of multiplying, the equation changes.

1 + 0 = 1

0 + 1 = 1 etc.

We always end up with 1, the ideal score. So addition is of no use here.

But, if we replace the + symbol with the multiplication symbol x, the equation changes.

1 x 0 = 0

0 x 1 = 0

0 x 0 = 0

1 x 1 = 1

Basic equations

These basic equations are at the heart of the Simple View of Reading. The examples listed are at the extreme ends of the equation: 0 = null, 1 = perfect, and should be considered a guide only.

So, for our purposes, if one of the components of reading, either decoding or comprehension, is 0, reading failure is the outcome. If both decoding and comprehension are 0, again, reading failure is the outcome.

For instance, if a child has good decoding but poor comprehension. The equation may look like this...

Decoding	Comprehension	Equation
Good decoding	Poor comprehension	RC: 1 x 0 = 0
		Outcome
		Reading Failure

For a child who has **good comprehension** but **poor decoding** ability the equation may look like this...

Decoding	Comprehension	Equation
Poor decoding	Good comprehension	RC: 0 x 1 = 0
		Outcome
		Reading Failure

For a child who has both **poor comprehension** and **poor decoding** the equation may look like this...

Decoding	Comprehension	Equation
Poor decoding	Poor comprehension	RC: 0 x 0 = 0
		Outcome
		Reading Failure

For a child with **good decoding** and **good comprehension** the equation may look like this...

Decoding	Comprehension	Equation
Good decoding	Good comprehension	RC: 1 x 1 = 1
		Outcome
		Reading Success

Gough and Tunmer refer to two distinct types of comprehension: language comprehension and reading comp-rehension.

The reading comprehension equation

Stephen Parker makes the point that to avoid confusion we should add the C to the R (RC – reading comprehension) and an L to C (LC – language comprehension). (Parker, 2019)

We will do the same here.
RC = D x LC

Reading Comprehension = Decoding x Language (listening) Comprehension.

What is language comprehension?

Language comprehension involves being able to hear and understand spoken language.

Reading comprehension is the end result of successful decoding and language comprehension. Put simply, the text a child decodes has to be understood by the child for reading comprehension to take place.

Successful Reading comprehension is **reliant** on a child's decoding and language comprehension abilities.

Gough and Tunmer stated in their original article that the most efficient path to reading comprehension success is for early years children to be taught decoding to a level of mastery.

Reading mastery

'Mastery in early decoding leads to skilled reading. As readers become more proficient, they progress from sounding out each word to recognizing words instantly. ' (Parker, 2019)

Decoding skill is being able to interpret the print symbols on the page to speech sounds.

Solid decoding skill leads eventually mastery of the alphabetic codes and enables children with strong language comprehension to competently access and understand age-appropriate text.

The result is reading comprehension success.

R = 1 (D) x 1 (LC)

Children with the profile of R = 1 (D) x 1 (LC) are well on their way to academic success and have made the critical shift from learning to read, to reading to learn.

Reading difficulty

Many children enter the school system with solid oral language skills.

They understand other people's speech well and can communicate their own wants and needs without too much effort.

In short, most children start their school lives with the necessary oral language skills to read and comprehend text well.

And yet for many students getting to the level of reading mastery is heart-wrenchingly difficult.

The breakdown often occurs because many children do not yet have the skill to accurately sound out and decode unfamiliar words.

The flow on effect of poor alphabetic code knowledge is years of reading struggle.

This impacts students' ability to access text and to engage in reading to learn activities. The simple view equation for children who are poor decoders is that they cannot reach the level of 1: reading comprehension success.

Poor decoding directly affects reading comprehension. Children simply fail to comprehend what they cannot decode.

Let us look at an example of how decoding affects comprehension.

A grade 3 boy, 9 years of age, has solid oral language skills but has always been poor at decoding.

The child is set to read a passage of 200 words, where let's say, 15 of the words are 3, 4 and 5 syllable multisyllabic words.

The child struggles to decode unfamiliar words, particularly multisyllabic words. The boy makes a floundering attempt to guess each of the unfamiliar 15 words, incorrectly in each case.

The child bravely forges ahead while reading the passage.

He makes no attempt to guess troublesome words at all, just leap frogs them like a gazelle.

Decoding difficulties

The child hopes to understand the passage by guessing the meaning of each section. Yet the lost 15 words were critical to understanding.

The child was able to recognize many single syllable sight words in the passage. There are even 2 syllable words that through rote memorization the boy has learnt to recognize.

Yet, because of an inability to decode unfamiliar words, the boy could not decode the 15 key multisyllabic words and thus was unable to understand the passage as a whole.

The result is reading comprehension failure.

Language comprehension difficulties

Children with fluent decoding can have reading comprehension difficulties. This can be a result of developmental language impairment, or an underlying cognitive difficulty.

Children from disadvantaged or trauma backgrounds can also begin school with an oral language difficulty.

This can affect a child's vocabulary development and understanding of complex language. A child with this profile may be able to decode unfamiliar text, but may struggle to understand extended complex passages.

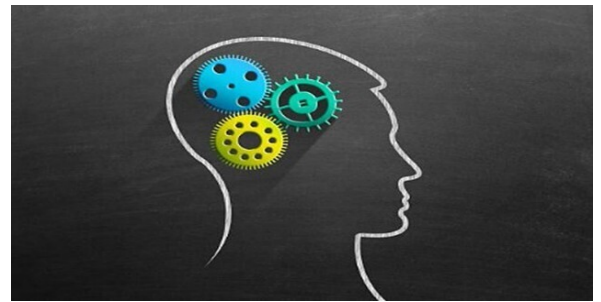The simple view equation for this might be...

RC = 1 (D) x 0 (LC).

Which is ultimately reading comprehension failure.

Language comprehension

Children who can decode fluently may still have decoding reading comprehension difficulties.

This can be a result of developmental language impairment, or because of an underlying cognitive difficulty. Children from disadvantaged or trauma backgrounds can also begin school with an oral language difficulty.

This can affect a child's vocabulary development and understanding of complex language. A child with this profile may be able to decode unfamiliar text but may struggle to understand extended complex passages.

The simple view equation for this might be...

RC = 1 (D) x 0 (LC).

Once more, reading comprehension failure is the result.

Children with developmental oral language disorder often have a general reading disability. They can neither decode nor understand much of what they can decode.

A significant language difficulty can be as devastating on children's acquisition of decoding skills as it is on them developing reading comprehension skills.

The best method of reading instruction

In their 1986 article, Gough and Tunmer made the case that decoding should have a prominent place in reading instruction.

If decoding plays a central role in the reading process, then it seems sensible to give it a comparable place in instruction...It might well be that direct instruction in Synthetic Phonics is the fastest route to skilled reading.' (Gough and Tunmer, 1986)

The Simple View of Reading informs many evidence-based, best practice methods of reading instruction.

Modern synthetic phonics teaching methods found in successful programs such as Multilit, Sounds-Write, Jolly Phonics, etc, have their theoretical roots in the Simple View of Reading.

Conclusion

The Simple View of Reading is a falsifiable theory. That is, the theory was put into the public arena for others to disprove.

Since 1986, the Simple View of Reading has been tested in over 100 studies. The studies have examined not just reading disability with school-aged children, but also adults, readers with typical reading skills, and readers with oral language difficulties.

Reading research supports the authors' original view that reading comprehension is a result of good decoding and oral language skills.

In a recent review of the Simple View of Reading, academics Anne Castles, Kathleen Rastle and Kate Nation stated that the Simple View of Reading got it mostly right.

'The logical case for the Simple View is clear and compelling: Decoding and linguistic comprehension are both necessary and neither is sufficient alone.

A child who can decode print but cannot comprehend it is not reading; likewise…reading cannot happen without decoding.' (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018)

The Simple View of Reading is an original and insightful theory that has stood the test of time and continues to point the way forward for reading teachers, educational psychologists, reading specialists and speech pathologists across the English speaking world.

References

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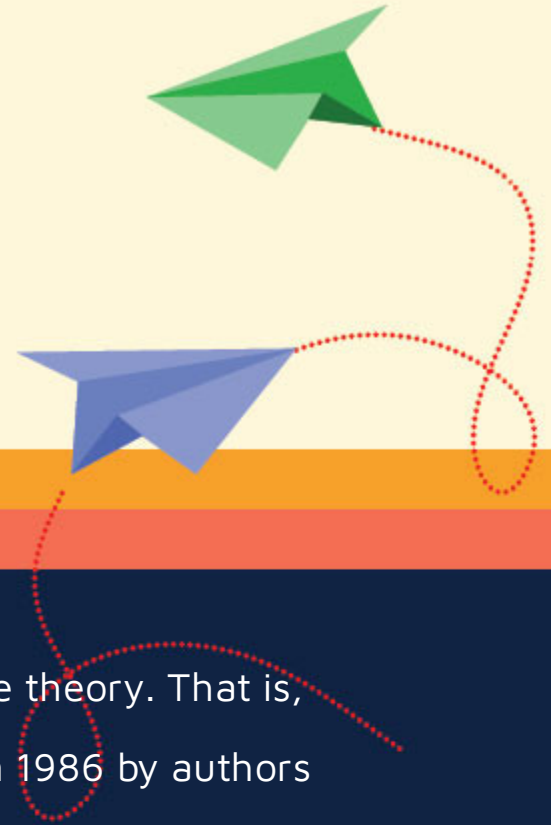
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