

What is the Simple View of Reading?

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Delving deeper into what the Simple View of Reading can tell us about how children learn to read.

The question as to whether the simple view of reading is a theory about how skilled reading occurs, or if it is a theory about how children learn to read, or both, has often been raised.

My view on this is that the simple view of reading is not meant to be a theory at all; it is a statement of fact. And this is what I think [Hoover and Tunmer \(2018\)](#) are saying.

The fact is that reading, in the broader sense of reading comprehension, requires two separate and distinct skills or abilities.

The ability (a) to ‘read’ the word on the page, that is to convert the written symbol to the spoken word, and (b) to understand the meaning of the written symbol, or series of written symbols, on the page.

The ability to ‘read’ the word requires the ability to decode the word, using the term ‘decode’ in its broader sense – that is, the ability to recognise words in print.

As [Hoover and Tunmer \(2018\)](#) point out, within the reading literature ‘decode’ is usually more narrowly defined as a particular way to achieve word recognition. Specifically, decoding is word recognition accomplished through alphabetic coding, which relates the letter sequences within a given word to its pronunciation. However, after frequent exposures to a word recognition of the word becomes automatic, as the orthographic sequence of the word is linked directly to the pronunciation of the word, so the child no longer has to sound out the letters in the word to determine the pronunciation of the word. It is this more direct linkage between the letter sequence and the pronunciation of the word which supports the automaticity requirements for accurate and quick word recognition. To make it clear that the term ‘decoding’ is being used to refer to both the use of the alphabetic code to ‘sound out’ new or unfamiliar words, as well as the automatic recognition of familiar words that are stored in orthographic memory, it could perhaps be useful to use the combined term decoding/word recognition to make it clear that this is what is being referred to by the term ‘decoding’ in the simple view of reading.¹

The ability to understand the word or words read, on the other hand, is dependent on language comprehension, or knowledge of the spoken language.

I am not sure that anyone would dispute the fact that the ability to read, and to understand what is read, is dependent on these two separate and distinct skills.

And that this applies to both beginning readers and to skilled readers.

In practice, what happens is that beginning readers may have good language comprehension, at a level appropriate for their age, but poor or non-existent decoding skills.



That is, they can't 'read' the words on the page, so they can't derive any meaning from the written text.

Good readers, on the other hand, would have both good decoding skills, based on automatic recognition of a wide range of familiar words, as well as language comprehension appropriate to their age level.

They can therefore read the words on the page, and can also understand the meaning of the words and the information that is conveyed by the written text, at the same level as they would understand the meaning of the text if it was presented as spoken language.

There may also be some individuals who can read the words on the page, but have difficulty in understanding the meaning of the words and the written text because of poor language comprehension. Such people would have equal difficulty in understanding the written text if it was presented as spoken language. This sort of problem would occur in people who have poor language comprehension due to lack of exposure to a rich language background, and have both a limited vocabulary and limited general knowledge. It might also be typical of people who are reading a second language that they are not very familiar with, so that while they may be able to read the words on the page their knowledge of the language is too limited to be able to understand the meaning of the words they are reading, and the way that these words are used and understood in the language, as well as the different connotations of words and perhaps more subtle meanings of particular words.

Different levels of ability on these two skills will determine a person's reading ability at a specific point in time. Understanding that both these skills are required for effective reading will help to determine what sort of help an individual with a reading difficulty needs. Children in the early stages of learning to read, as well as those who have a specific difficulty in decoding words or adult illiterates who have never been taught to read

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are most likely to need help with developing decoding/word recognition skills. Individuals whose difficulty with understanding written text stems more from poor language comprehension due to a limited vocabulary or limited general knowledge would benefit more from a program that emphasises development of oral language skills, vocabulary and general knowledge.

This is how I understand the simple view of reading, and the implications of this view based on an understanding of the two separate and distinct skills that underlie the ability to read and comprehend written text.

- 1 For further information regarding the establishment of 'sight words' in the orthographic lexicon, see the [blog by Stephen Parker](#) on 'Sight Words, Orthographic Mapping and Self-Teaching'.

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