

## **PALS Comprehension Scores and Instructional Reading Levels**

The purpose of reading is to comprehend, and most agree that comprehension is not possible if the words are not decoded or understood. Because word recognition and decoding enable comprehension, these two components of the learning to read process are emphasized in the primary grades (Paris & Paris, 2003). Basic word recognition and decoding competence are precursors to any measurable reading achievement and research has repeatedly demonstrated that automated decoding skills enable better comprehension with increasing age and proficiency. Reading comprehension requires the kind of intellectual reasoning that is possible only after decoding skills have become automated, thus freeing cognitive resources for understanding (Lagerge & Samuels, 1974).

If students can read words accurately and fluently, the *necessary* condition for reading comprehension has been satisfied. Without instruction, however, accurate and effortless word recognition may not be *sufficient* for good reading comprehension. Clearly there are other factors that can influence understanding. Background knowledge, engagement, vocabulary knowledge, application of metacognitive strategies, general intellectual capacity, practice, motivation, general language skill, and personality can influence reading comprehension even if words are effortlessly identified. Thus it might be said that word recognition and decoding are *necessary but not sufficient* to ensure reading comprehension.

What else is necessary to ensure reading comprehension? Researchers have suggested that language comprehension may be a key missing variable. According to Gough (1996), when difficulties with reading comprehension are observed, there are invariably deficits in language comprehension or decoding skill, and often in both. Gough's (1996) "simple view" of reading suggests that if we know a student's capacity for decoding and word recognition, and we know their capacity for understanding spoken language, we can predict the student's reading comprehension quite reliably. According to the simple view, reading comprehension is the product of decoding and spoken language comprehension ( $R = D \times C$ ). Consider a student who has excellent decoding skills (a score of 1) but very poor language comprehension (a score of 0). The simple view would predict that this student's reading comprehension would be also very poor ( $R = 1 \times 0$ ). Conversely, consider a student who has very poor decoding skills (a score of 0) despite outstanding language comprehension (a score of 1). According to this model, this student's reading comprehension would also be quite poor ( $R = 0 \times 1$ ). To truly assess students' reading comprehension then, we need a measure of their general language comprehension independent of print.

PALS does not consider reading comprehension scores in calculating functional reading levels because students' reading comprehension should be commensurate with their ability to comprehend spoken language. Since we do not have access to students' general comprehension of spoken language, we can not be certain *why* a student may have done

poorly on the comprehension questions following each passage. Unless a student's general understanding of spoken language is lower than the level at which he or she can decode and recognize printed words, there is no reason to move their instructional reading level down. Instead, teachers should teach background knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and the like, at each child's instructional level as determined by their ability to read and decode words. To do otherwise might unfairly hold students back and impede progress. A brief overview of the simple view of reading is available at: <http://www.balancedreading.com/simple.html>

## **References**

Gough, P. B. (1996). How children learn to read and why they fail. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 46, 3-20.

Laberge & Samuels, 1974

Paris & Paris, 2003