Literacy beyond phonics: the importance of building knowledge

At first glance, the science of reading is sometimes thought to simply be focused on phonics. The scientific research on reading instruction points to the importance of many other elements of reading instruction, including building **language comprehension** and **reading comprehension** (the ability to understand or make meaning of what we read).

One key idea is the "**simple view of reading.**" Reading comprehension is seen as the combination of two factors together: **word recognition** (decoding, built through phonics and foundational reading skills) and **language comprehension** (which involves vocabulary, background knowledge, and understanding language structures).

Both elements are necessary for reading comprehension and neither should be neglected. Although the simple view of reading may over-simplify things, it's a good starting point for understanding that both sides of this equation are necessary.

But how can students grow in their language comprehension? One key finding of the research is about the **importance of building knowledge** as central to reading comprehension. The overall argument is that a key problem in ELA instruction has been the practice of assigning students to read random texts, focused on isolated skills, at the expense of building coherent knowledge about the world. But **background knowledge about a subject is actually one of the very biggest predictors of and contributors to comprehension.**

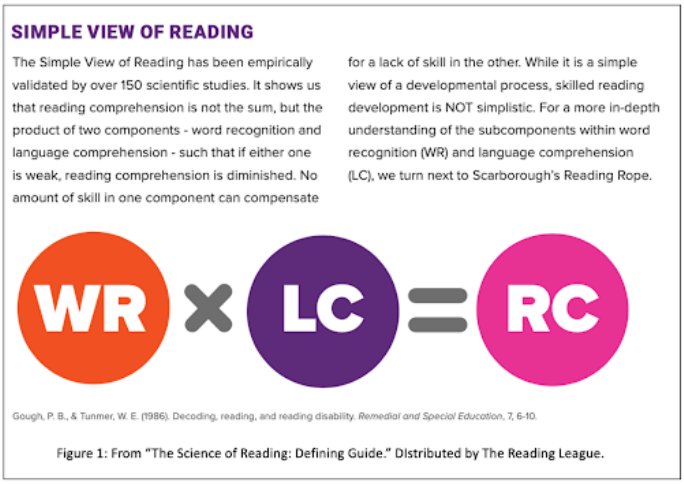

Figure 1: From "The Science of Reading: Defining Guide." Distributed by The Reading League.

At many schools there has been a shift toward more and more ELA/reading instruction and less and less science and social studies. But this may have actually made it harder for students to read, because they are not building enough background knowledge to understand what they are reading about. So, today, many now instead champion knowledge-building curricula that systematically and deeply build students' knowledge about the world. Simply adding in a little phonics will NOT be enough to ensure that our students become strong readers and writers. ***Giving them opportunities to learn about the world, and engage with complex texts about it, is essential too.***

Read more...

- **Book:** The Knowledge Gap by Natalie Wexler
- **Podcast:** Knowledge Matters
- **Advocacy Campaign:** Knowledge Matters Campaign
- **Article:** Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong by Natalie Wexler
- **Research:** How Knowledge Helps by Daniel Willingham
- **Article:** What is Background Knowledge and how does it fit into the science of reading?
- **Parent and teacher guide:** Building background knowledge (Reading Rockets)
- **Short Video:** Why Prior Knowledge Wins the Game

Activities to help build your child's background knowledge

- Literacy in the Sciences– family activities to build science literacy (tip sheets available in English and Spanish)
- Use Summer Fun to Build Background Knowledge
- Pairing books, activities, and experiences to build background knowledge
- How Parents and Families Support Background Knowledge

Dive deeper into GO's literacy library!