



## Language and Reading

Reading is an activity requiring segmentation of the speech stream into visually perceived units. Writing is the segmentation of speech into manually-scripted units. Certainly, both activities involve the underlying concepts of language knowledge and use.

Studies of typical populations of young children have determined that a child must learn many subtasks in order to master the task of reading. Basic among these subtasks are the language-based activities of comprehension and use of the spoken word. By the time children have mastered the ability to use their eyes and hands to work together, they have long since mastered the basics to understand and use language. Thus, when these skills are attained in the early primary years, children are ready to read.

There are two main areas in which basic development has already occurred by the time reading readiness occurs: 1) the visual-perceptual-motor domain; and 2) the verbal domain.

In the visual-perceptual-motor domain the prerequisite subtasks of reading include integrity of vision, i.e., eye coordination, as well as the ability to visualize, remember and interpret patterns, shapes and sizes. These must have phonetic representation in the alphabetic code to which the child then attaches meaning, activities that fall within the language domain.

Within this language domain, early readers have an abundant storehouse of words that give meaning to written material. These children have the ability to see how words are linked into thoughts which are understood as the basic sentence. These early readers learn that what is read often matches what is said and, because they understand and use the basic sentence with all the necessary grammatical flourishes, they learn that the basic sentence can be segmented into separate words that most often look a certain way. These children learn the conventions to this new game of "reading," i.e., punctuation and irregular uses of verbs and plurals, etc., just as they have learned how to punctuate their speech with rises and fallings of intonation and pitch, and to use proper past tenses of words, i.e. "fell" rather than "falled."

When we study an early reader who is showing signs of reading failure, it is important to remember that the child's disability may arise from difficulties in the language domain. While acknowledging that a reading problem may involve an underlying language problem, it is equally important to determine that the child's language development is progressing in a timely and age-appropriate fashion.

Writing in 1988, Wilson and Risucci demonstrated that early language learners with problems understanding the language, or with problems in auditory memory, or word retrieval, have a 30 to 50 percent chance of also having reading disabilities. Expressive language problems, on the other hand, do not appear to put children at risk for reading disabilities, although writing may be affected.



Consistent with previous studies, the most recent research by Catts, et.al. (1988) determined that reading difficulties were much more prevalent among school-aged children who had shown semantic-syntactic impairments when tested in kindergarten. Conversely, the best predictor of reading proved to be "phonological awareness," or a child's explicit awareness of the speech-sound structure of language. When compared with good readers, poor readers are shown to be less aware of, or insensitive to, the speech sounds in words.

Thus, presence of language problems during preschool years may serve as an indicator in early identification of reading disabilities. This is not to say, however, that early language difficulties are causally related to later reading problems. Rather, preschool language disorders and reading disabilities, according to Catts, et.al., "are each manifestations of a linguistic processing limitation that underlies the disorder."

### **Resources**

Catts, H.W. (1991). Early identification of dyslexia: Evidence from a follow-up study of speech-language impaired children. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 41 (2), 163-177.

Wilson, B. & Risucci, D. (1988). The early identification of developmental language disorders and the prediction of the acquisition of reading skills. In R. Masland & M. Masland (Eds.) *Preschool prevention of reading failure*. Parkton, MD: York Press.