Reading: The Basics

A brief introduction to some key areas of this complex task

Take Home Message

Reading is a complex cognitive task, requiring the combination of many processing subskills as well as knowledge gained from our life experiences.

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Spoken versus Written Language

- Spoken language is typically acquired
- Written language has to be taught
- Reading builds on spoken language:
  - Vocabulary skills
  - Phonological awareness
  - Knowledge of the world (semantics)
- With appropriate reading instruction we can all learn to read

What Does Reading Involve?

Actions involved in reading include:

- Scan page from left to right
- Distinguish letters
- Translate letter(s) into sounds
- Blend sounds into words
- Recognise and understand words
- Recognise where words and sentences stop/start
- Use grammatical knowledge and the structure of language to assist comprehension
- Use contextual knowledge to assist comprehension
- Use of our knowledge of the world to assist comprehension

What Does Reading Involve?

Reading processes differ between single word and text reading in a number of ways:

- Once a single word has been perceived, recognition of pronunciation and meaning take place. Long or unfamiliar words are read phonologically (decoding or word-attack). Short and familiar words are recognised whole (sight reading)

- Reading a sentence or text involves more skills and processes as we need to analyse each word as it is read and to derive some overall meaning, for example, context is required to help us to determine how words such as "tear" should be read: a tear in her eye versus a tear in her skirt

- In an experienced reader, these processes take place simultaneously

Regular & Irregular Words

Regular words:

- Have a regular grapheme-phoneme correspondence i.e. the graphemes map onto phonemes in a regular way e.g. "beef"

Irregular words:

- Have an irregular grapheme-phoneme correspondence e.g. grapheme "ea" in "steak" is not pronounced in the same way as the "ea" in "streak", "sneak", "leak", "beak"

English has many irregular words, for e.g.:

- Homographs (pairs of words spelt the same but with different pronunciations and meanings) –"bow" and arrow versus "bow" and curtsey

- Lexical hermits –"island", "aisle", "yacht"

- Homophones –"there"/"their", "pear" / "pair", "leak" / "leek"

Reading strategies (1)

We can see two clear ways of reading emerging:

1. Decoding or using "word-attack" strategies –identifying the sounds of individual letters, holding them in memory and blending them into pronunciations that are recognised as real words

2. Sight reading –using memory to read words that have been read before –spelling, pronunciation and meaning are all activated

Reading strategies (2)

Two other methods for reading unfamiliar words:

- Analogy -recognising how the spelling of an unfamiliar word is similar to a familiar one, this will use memory to access a familiar word and then adjust it e.g. fountain –mountain

- Prediction –or guessing the word based on for e.g. the initial letter(s) of the words, preceding or following words in the text, context and clues, such as pictures that accompany the text

But reading is not just about decoding single words, some individuals are able to do this accurately but are not able to comprehend or understand what they have read

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Linguistic comprehension

Understanding what we read depends on reading accuracy (i.e. accurate decoding) but also involves broader non-phonological skills or higher level language skills such as:

- vocabulary knowledge

- understanding the grammatical structure of language

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Further reading:

- Cain, K. (2010). Reading Development and Difficulties. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

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