Triple R Teaching

Hello, and thank you for joining me for the third episode in our series of the Science of Reading Bootcamp. Today, we're going to talk about two models that are key pieces of the science of reading.

If you do any study into the science of reading, you're going to come across these. It's really important that you understand them. One is called the Simple View of Reading and one is called Scarborough's Reading Rope. I'll just tell you upfront, this is a little bit tricky on a podcast when you're just listening, because visuals are important. But if you head to the show notes, reachallreaders.com/episode47, I'll give you some visuals

First of all, let's talk about the Simple View of Reading. This was proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986. It is a formula demonstrating that reading has two basic components: word recognition (often referred to as decoding), and language comprehension. The formula is a multiplication problem. Imagine on the left, you have decoding, then you multiply that by language comprehension, and it equals reading comprehension.

Because it's a multiplication problem, you've got to have a score of above zero for each one in order for any kind of reading comprehension to occur. So if a child cannot decode, cannot sound out words, they would get a zero for decoding. Even though they do understand the language and get a one for language comprehension, their reading comprehension will still be a zero because zero times one equals zero.

So students must be able to decode AND understand the language for reading comprehension to occur. The reason that Gough and Tunmer proposed this model is because at the time, many educators did not feel that strong decoding was necessary to achieve reading comprehension if children have strong language abilities.

Now, I'll just come right out and say it, this was me for a while. When I taught kids to read using a balanced literacy approach, they were "reading" leveled books and using the pictures and the first letter to help them read a lot of the words. They were figuring out the words or something close to them, and they were getting something out of the text. So I thought they were achieving reading comprehension.

But it wasn't reading comprehension because they weren't truly reading! To be truly reading, they really have to pull those individual words off the page by being able to sound them out or by just knowing them because they have sounded them out in the past and have orthographically mapped the words.

So the simple view of reading tells us that decoding skills and understanding of language must both be present for reading comprehension to take place. You might say, "Okay, that feels rather obvious. What's the point? What are the implications?"

Well, the first implication is that we need to make phonic decoding a focal point of early reading instruction! It shouldn't be just something on the side that we teach as it comes up, which can often happen when you're using leveled books with beginning readers. For example, you might say, "Well, this page has "ee" in it. So I'll teach them really quick that "ee" says /ē/."

Now, there's nothing wrong with doing that occasionally, but you need to have a structured phonics program and decodable books that give them practice on what you're teaching them.

Of course, we also need to make sure that we are helping build their language comprehension by building their content knowledge through strong, interactive read alouds and lessons in social studies and science.

Something else to think about in relation to the Simple View of Reading is that when older students are struggling readers - they're not comprehending what they're reading, many times teachers jump to the conclusion that language comprehension is the issue. But it could be that the real issue is that the child never really learned to be good at decoding.

So my first few years of teaching, I was teaching a combined class of third, fourth, and fifth graders. I had a student who was in third grade. I taught her for all three years. She was a brilliant artist, but she really struggled with reading. I wish I knew then what I know now! Looking back, thinking back to the errors she made, I know that she needed me to give her a phonics assessment with both real and nonsense words so that I could tell which phonics skills she had mastered. Then I needed to give her direct instruction in those phonics patterns.

There could also be the opposite issue. You could have a student who is brilliant at sounding out words, but struggles to make sense of text. This child may need more instruction in vocabulary, verbal reasoning, syntax, and so on. Or you may have a student who struggles in both areas.

The point which we can get from the Simple View of Reading is that you need to assess both a child's decoding ability AND language comprehension to be able to make a plan to help the child. So that's model one and I will have a visual of that in the show notes, reachallreaders.com/episode47.

Let's move on to Scarborough's Reading Rope. This is much harder to get a mental picture of so in the show notes, I'll send you to the International Dyslexia Association's websites so that you can actually see it. But imagine the strands of a rope, okay? When you think of a rope, it's made up of all these little pieces and fuzzy parts that come together, right? If you cut off the end of a rope, you can see where all the strands are. Well, Scarborough's Reading Rope is a visual metaphor for the complexities involved in learning to read. The strands - all those little strands of the rope - are the skills that must come tightly together for skilled reading to occur.

I like to think of it as two bundles of strands, okay? So it's sort of like two ropes that come together and twist together into one rope. Each bundle has its own set of strands. So imagine one bundle on top, one bundle on the bottom, and at the end of each bundle you've got these little strands coming out. So the top bundle is the language comprehension bundle and the bottom bundle is the word recognition bundle.

The strands of the language comprehension bundle are background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. The strands of the word recognition bundle our phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, decoding, and sight recognition. In other words, recognizing words because you've read them before and they're orthographically mapped. You just know them, not because you've memorized how they look.

Scarborough's Reading Rope was designed in 1992 by Dr. Hollis Scarborough as a visual for parents and teachers in the workshops she was giving. She wanted them to see how complex reading is. I like to think of the Simple View of Reading as the bird's eye view, and Scarborough's reading rope is zooming in to see all the sub-skills included in the two big domains of the Simple View of Reading. Now, I should let you know that Dr. Hollis Scarborough created Scarborough's Reading Rope completely separate from the Simple View of Reading. She had never seen it. Independently, they both came up with these two domains based on the research.

The thing I really like about Scarborough's Reading Rope is it helps us see that the science of reading is not just about phonics. There are two bundles, word recognition and language comprehension, and each has its sub-skills in those strands. Some key things we learn from Scarborough's Reading Rope are that word recognition and language comprehension are both necessary for skilled reading. Sounds familiar, right? We already got that from the Simple View of Reading. Something else we get from Scarborough's Reading Rope is that learning to read is complex and occurs over time.

So I've already talked to you about this visual where you've got this bundle on the top for language comprehension, and this bundle on the bottom for word recognition. You've got all these little loose strands, but remember these two bundles are going to twist together and all those strands are going to get tighter and tighter and tighter. So when kids are first learning to read, you've got to be working at all those sub-skills, but the stronger they get, the less you're going to be focusing on things like decoding, and the more you'll be working on things that keep growing over time like vocabulary.

So in conclusion, an understanding of the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope help us be more intentional about how we assess and what we teach.

Next week, we're going to talk about structured literacy and what that even means. If you're like me, you might think, ugh, that sounds boring! I promise that you can be an exciting, engaging teacher with structured literacy. In fact, it makes things a little bit easier for you because it's more efficient learning for your students. So we'll talk about that next week.

In the last two weeks of the series, we're going to get really specific with the nuts and bolts of what it means to understand the science of reading and apply it in your classroom. Don't forget our course "Teaching Every Reader" opens up on October 4th, 2021 so please mark your calendar! I would head to teachingeveryreader.com and make sure you get on the wait list so you don't miss it. The first few days that it's open, we have a special early bird price, but you need to enroll during those first couple of days to get it.

We'll talk to you next week!