

There's No Such Thing as a Reading Test

Real literacy involves learning about the world, not just letters and sounds.

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It is among the most common of nightmares. You dream of taking a test for which you are completely unprepared -- you've never studied the material or even attended the course. For millions of American schoolchildren, it is a nightmare from which they cannot wake, a trial visited upon them each year when the law requires them to take reading tests with little preparation. Sure, formally preparing for reading tests has become more than just a ritual for schools. It is practically their *raison d'etre*! Yet students are not prepared in the way they need to be.

Schools and teachers may indeed be making a Herculean effort to raise reading scores, but these efforts do little to improve reading achievement and to prepare children for college, a career, and a lifetime of productive, engaged citizenship. This wasted effort is not because our teachers are lazy or of low quality. Rather, too many of our schools labor under fundamental misconceptions about reading comprehension -- how it works, how to improve it, and how to test it.

Reading, like riding a bike, is an ability we acquire as children and generally never lose. Some of us are more confident on two wheels than others, and some of us, we are told, are better readers than others. The culture of testing treats reading ability as a broad, generalized skill that is easily measured and assessed. We judge our schools and increasingly individual teachers based on their ability to improve the reading skills of our children. When you think about your ability to read -- if you think about it at all -- the chances are good that you perceive it as not just a skill but a readily transferable skill. Once you learn how to read you can competently read a novel, a newspaper article, or the latest memo from corporate headquarters. Reading is reading is reading. Either you can do it, or you cannot.

This view of reading is only partially correct. The ability to translate written symbols into sounds, commonly called "decoding," is indeed a skill that can be taught and mastered. This explains why you are able to "read" nonsense words such as "rigfap" or "churbit." Once a child masters letter-sound correspondence, or phonics, we might say she can read because she can reproduce the sounds represented by written language. But clearly there's more to reading than making sounds. To be fully literate is to have the communicative power of language at your command -- to read, write, listen, and speak with understanding. As nearly any elementary schoolteacher can attest, it is possible to decode skillfully yet struggle with comprehension. And reading comprehension, the ability to extract meaning from text, is *not* transferable.

Cognitive scientists describe comprehension as domain specific. If a baseball fan reads "A-Rod hit into a 6-4-3 double play to end the game," he needs not another word to understand that the New York Yankees lost when Alex Rodriguez came up to bat with a man on first base and one out and then hit a groundball to the shortstop, who threw to the second baseman, who relayed to first in time to catch Rodriguez for the final out. If you've never heard of A-Rod or a 6-4-3

double play and cannot reconstruct the game situation, you are not a poor reader. You merely lack the domain-specific knowledge of baseball to fill in the gaps.

Even simple texts, like those on reading tests, are filled with gaps -- presumed domain knowledge -- that the writer assumes the reader knows. Research also tells us that familiarity with domain knowledge increases fluency, broadens vocabulary (you can pick up words in context), and enables deeper reading and listening comprehension.

Think of reading as a two-lock box, requiring two keys to open. The first key is decoding skills. The second key is oral language, vocabulary, and domain -- specific or background knowledge sufficient to understand what is being decoded. Even this simple understanding of reading enables us to see that the very idea of an abstract skill called "reading comprehension" is ill-informed. Yet most U.S. schools teach reading as if both decoding and comprehension are transferable skills. Worse, we test our children's reading ability without regard to whether we have given them the requisite background knowledge they need to be successful.

Researchers have consistently demonstrated that in order to understand what you're reading, you need to know something about the subject matter. Students who are identified as "poor readers" comprehend with relative ease when asked to read passages on familiar subjects, outperforming even "good readers" who lack relevant background knowledge. One well-known study looked at junior high school students judged to be either good or poor readers in terms of their ability to decode or read aloud fluently. Some knew a lot about baseball, while others knew little. The children read a passage written at an early fifth-grade reading level, describing the action in a game. As they read, they were asked to move models of ballplayers around a replica baseball diamond to illustrate the action in the passage. If reading comprehension were a transferable skill that could be taught, practiced, and mastered, then the students who were "good" readers should have had no trouble outperforming the "poor" readers. Just the opposite happened. Poor readers with high content knowledge outperformed good readers with low content knowledge. Such findings should challenge our very idea of who is or is not good reader: If reading is the means by which we receive ideas and information, then the good reader is the one who best understands the author's words.

You have probably experienced the uncomfortable sensation of feeling like a poor reader when struggling to understand a new product warranty, directions for installing a computer operating system, or some other piece of writing where your lack of background knowledge left you feeling out of your depth. Your rate of reading slows. You find yourself repeating sentences to make sure you understand. If this happens only rarely to you, it is because you possess a broad range of background knowledge -- the more you know, the more you are able to communicate and comprehend. The implications of this insight for teaching children to read should be obvious: The more domain knowledge our children receive, the more capable they will become as readers.

The message has not yet reached American classrooms. A stubborn belief in reading comprehension as a transferable skill combined with the immense pressures of testing and

accountability results in ever more time being wasted on scattered, trivial, and incoherent reading. A study sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that only 4 percent of first-grade class time in American elementary schools is spent on science and only 2 percent, on social studies. In third grade, about 5 percent of class time goes to each of these subjects. Meanwhile a whopping 62 percent in first grade and 47 percent in third grade is spent on language arts.

Most young American children spend anywhere from 90 minutes to two and a half hours a day in something educators call "the literacy block," an extended period that might include reading aloud, small-group "guided reading," independent writing, and other activities aimed at increasing children's verbal skills. Reading instruction largely focuses on teaching and practicing reading -- comprehension strategies -- helping students to find the main idea of a passage and make inferences or identify the author's purpose. The general idea is to arm young readers with a suite of all-purpose tricks and tips for thinking about reading that can be applied to any text the child encounters. Careful readers may be thinking, "If the ability to understand what you read is a function of your domain-specific background knowledge, then how is it possible to teach all-purpose reading strategies?"

Reading strategies figured prominently in the 2000 report of the National Reading Panel, based on evidence that reading strategies work -- which they do, to a point. Reading-comprehension scores tend to go up after instruction in strategies, but it's a onetime boost. The major contribution of such instruction is to help beginning readers know that text, like speech, is supposed to make sense. If someone says something you don't understand, you can always ask that person to repeat, explain, or give an example. Reading strategies offer similar workarounds for print. They're not useless, but repeated practice seems to have little or no effect on scores.

"The mistaken idea that reading is a skill -- learn to crack the code, practice comprehension strategies, and you can read anything -- may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in the country," Daniel T. Willingham, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, recently wrote in *The Washington Post*. "Students will not meet standards that way. The knowledge base problem must be solved."

If our schools understood and acted upon the clear evidence that domain-specific content knowledge is foundational to literacy, reading instruction might look very different in our children's classrooms. Rather than idle away precious hours on trivial stories or randomly chosen nonfiction, reading, writing, and listening instruction would be built into the study of ancient civilizations in first grade, for example, Greek mythology in second, or the human body in third. Recently, the Core Knowledge Foundation has been piloting precisely such a language-arts program in a small number of schools in New York City and elsewhere. Initial results are promising; however, building domain knowledge is a long-term proposition. All reading tests are cumulative. The measurable benefit of broad background knowledge can take years to reveal itself.

At present, teachers are tacitly discouraged from taking the long view. Indeed, what incentive would second-grade teachers have to emphasize content that might not show up on a test until sixth grade, if even then? There is more upside for teachers in doing exactly what they chiefly do

now -- test prep, skills, and strategies -- unless we actively promote a domain-specific approach to language arts.

Consider a reasonable, simple, even elegant alternative to replace the vicious circle of narrowed curriculum and comprehension skills of limited efficacy, which over time depress reading achievement. By tying the content of reading tests to specific curricular content, the circle becomes virtuous. Here's how it would work: Let's say a state's fourth-grade science standards include the circulatory system, atoms and molecules, electricity, and Earth's geologic layers and weather; and social-studies standards include world geography, Europe in the Middle Ages, the American Revolution, and the U.S. Constitution, among other domains. The state's reading tests should include not just fiction and poetry but nonfiction readings on those topics and others culled from those specific curriculum standards. Teachers would still teach to the test, emphasizing domain-specific knowledge (because it might be on the test), but no one would object, because it would help students not only pass the current year's test but build the broad background knowledge that enables them to become stronger readers in general.

The benefits of such "curriculum-based reading tests" would be many: Tests would be fairer and offer a better reflection of how well a student had learned the particular year's curriculum. The tests would also exhibit "consequential validity," meaning they would actually improve education. Instead of wasted hours of mind-numbing test prep and reading-strategy lessons of limited value, the best test-taking strategy would be learning the material in the curriculum standards -- a true virtuous circle.

By contrast, let's imagine what it is like to be a fourth-grade boy in a struggling South Bronx elementary school, sitting for a high-stakes reading test. If you do not pass, you face summer school or repeating the grade. Because the school has large numbers of students below grade level, it has drastically cut back on science, social studies, art, music -- even gym and recess -- to focus on reading and math. You have spent the year learning and practicing reading strategies. Your teacher, worried about her performance, has relentlessly hammered test-taking strategies for months.

The test begins, and the very first passage concerns the customs of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. You do not know what a custom is; neither do you know who the Dutch were, or even what a colony is. You have never heard of Amsterdam, old or new. Certainly it's never come up in class. Without background knowledge, you struggle with most of the passages on the test. You never had a chance. Meanwhile, across town, more affluent students take and pass the test with ease. They are no brighter or more capable than you are, but because they have wider general knowledge -- as students who come from advantaged backgrounds so often do -- the test is not much of a challenge. Those who think reading is a transferable skill and take background knowledge for granted may well wonder what all the fuss is about. Those kids and teachers in the Bronx struggle all year and fail to get ready for *this*? Why, all the answers are right there on the page!

It ends, as it inevitably must, in the finger-pointing that plagues American education. But do not blame the tests. Taxpayers are entitled to know if the schools they support are any good, and reading tests, all things considered, are quite reliable. Do not blame the test writers. They have

no idea what topics are being taught in school and their job is done when tests show certain technical characteristics. It is unfair to blame teachers, because they are mainly operating to the best of their ability using the methods in which they were trained. And let's not blame the parents of our struggling young man in the South Bronx. Is it unreasonable to assume that a child who dutifully goes to school every day will gain access to the same rich, enabling domains of knowledge that more affluent children take for granted?

It's not unreasonable at all. That's what schools are supposed to be for. The only unreasonable thing is our refusal to see reading for what it really is and to teach and test accordingly.