

A New Key to Helping Struggling Readers Comprehend

Summary: It's a truism in education that students who struggle to read by the end of third grade have an increasingly difficult time catching up. In a new article for the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, a group of researchers conducted a 3-year study that shed light on a key aspect of reading comprehension: understanding new words that are derived from other words.

Practical Applications

The authors followed a group of 3rd graders through their 5th grade year. They separated the students into three groups based on an expectation of their reading comprehension skills drawn from their fluency skills: Expected average comprehenders, unexpected good comprehenders and unexpected poor comprehenders. Importantly, they found that fluency skills – word reading accuracy, word reading speed, etc. – did not differ among all three groups; in other words, *fluency was not behind the difference in comprehension skill*.

The key difference, instead, came in the area of morphological awareness, or understanding how words are put together and what it means when you change parts of them. The authors distinguish between two types of morphology:

- **Inflected Morphology**, meaning that the base word keeps its meaning although the forms change (their example: execute → executing or executed), and the part of speech remains the same (in this example, the forms of execute are all verbs)
- **Derived Morphology**, meaning that the base word is changed in such a way as to become a different part of speech or completely change its meaning (their example: execute → executive or execution)

The authors found that the single greatest difference between unexpectedly poor comprehenders and the other two groups came in derived morphology, **and it became worse as the years went on**. This may have an especially strong impact on students' reading comprehension ability in the upper elementary grades as previous studies suggest as many as 40% of new words students encounter starting in 5th grade are derived from already known words. Inflected morphology was not as significant, but other studies have suggested that it too may play a major role in comprehension, especially with irregular verbs (to ring → rang, for example). Instructionally:

- “Although we cannot make any causal assumptions about the direction of the relationship between morphological awareness and reading comprehension, there is empirical evidence that instruction on morphology can boost children's reading comprehension and a recent review found that such instruction was more effective for less able readers.”

Conclusion and Citation

While this is a relatively new area of study, early results from studies such as these suggest that teachers should spend time instructing their students – especially struggling comprehenders – about how words change, what that implies for the meaning and usage of words, and how to react when seeing a new word that is similar to a known one.

Tong, X. et. al. “Morphological Awareness: A Key to Understanding Poor Comprehension in English.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 103.3 (2011), pp. 523-534. <http://bit.ly/nsvGEF> (subscription only).