The Case for the Narrow View of Reading

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Broad View of Reading

- Reading = decoding + comprehension
- Emphasis on word recognition and higher-level thinking processes
- Thinking guided by print
Problems with the Broad View

- Conflates word recognition and comprehension, which are two very different abilities.

- Unclear what reading failure means? Difficulty decoding, understanding, or both?
Word Recognition vs. Comprehension

Word recognition (decoding) is a skill that can be broken down into component parts (sounds, letters, sound-letter correspondences, orthographic sequences).

It can be proceduralized and taught because it involves a narrow scope of knowledge that once acquired results in fast, accurate sight word recognition.
There are numerous evidence-based instructional programs that have been shown to effectively teach word reading to all but the most severely disabled students (cf. National Reading Panel, 2000), and most of these severely disabled readers can be taught word reading skills with intensive phonic programs (Torgesen, 2005).
Comprehension

- Comprehension is not a skill; it is a complex of higher-level mental processes that include thinking, reasoning, imagining, and interpreting.

- These higher-level processes are strongly influenced by content domain.
Knowledge is the Key for Comprehension

Familiarity with the topic of a passage is in fact so important that poor decoders do better than good decoders when they have more knowledge of a topic than good readers.
Processing Demands are Knowledge Dependent

- Low processing demands (attention, memory) for familiar topics. Interest and motivation are typically high.

- High processing demands for unfamiliar topics. Attention, interest and motivation are very important for understanding unfamiliar topics.
What This Means

- Assessing and improving comprehension is much more difficult than assessing and improving word recognition.

- Hirsch (2006) reported that it took 5 years of a knowledge-based curriculum to impact a measure of domain-general comprehension (i.e., standardized test of reading).
The Narrow View

- Reading = Word Recognition

- Difficulty learning to read = Difficulty becoming an accurate and fluent word-level reader.

- Promotes differentiated assessment of word-level reading and content knowledge acquisition.
Advantages of the Narrow View

- Eliminates the reading crisis because all but the most severely disabled children can learn to read (defined as accurate and fluent word recognition).

- Teachers can teach their content areas without having to worry about how their students perform on conflated measures of reading.
Students with adequate word recognition skills will no longer be viewed as poor readers.

Instruction can focus on the true crisis in American education---knowledge deficiencies.
Embracing a particular point of view does not by itself revolutionize teaching or learning. Under a narrow view, what does it mean to practice what we preach?
Answer

- It means differentiated assessment and diagnosis of learning problems. Reading problems are differentiated from content-area learning problems.

- Recognize that improving domain-general comprehension is difficult. Better to focus on content specific knowledge acquisition (e.g., science, history, math, literature).
Under a narrow view, what meaning does the ubiquitous term "reading comprehension" have?

The ubiquitous term is problematic because it obscures the influence of background knowledge and assumes comprehension is a unitary measurable skill like word-level reading.
We should stop talking about assessing or teaching reading comprehension as if it were a single entity.

We should assess comprehension of familiar/unfamiliar texts with measures that evaluate sentence and text-level understanding (e.g., think alouds) and different levels of interpretation.
Qualitative Reading Inventory

- Narrative vs. expository
- Oral vs. silent vs. listening
- Familiar vs. unfamiliar texts
- Look-backs vs. no look-backs
- Independent, instructional, vs. frustration level
How should content knowledge be assessed?

With curriculum-based measures or EOG content-area assessments. Some states have content-area assessments (e.g., NY Regents exams).
How should content area teaching be improved?

There are many ways, but here are some basic principles from Ivey and Fisher (2006).

Have common goals and strategies across all content area instruction: English, science, social studies, art, physical education, music, and shop (Hoover HS, San Diego).
Instructional Targets and Activities

- Activate students background and prior knowledge

- Provide models of fluent reading (read alouds and shared reading)

- Provide visual models of specific content domain (e.g., concept maps, flow diagrams, tree diagrams)
Explicit vocabulary instruction

Use writing to help students think about content, reflect on their knowledge, share their thoughts, and indicate points of confusion.

Have student-directed discussion groups (reciprocal teaching).
Role of the SLP

- Promote the narrow view of reading.
- Promote differentiated assessment and instruction of reading and content-area learning.
- Collaborate, consult, assess, diagnose, and teach.
References

