

Foundations for Learning to Read: Oral Language

The companion paper to this document addressed the research base for the kindergarten through third grade levels of *Houghton Mifflin Reading*. Four major areas were discussed as foundations for learning to read: oral language, knowledge of letter names, phonological/phonemic awareness, and concepts of print. By the time children have reached fourth grade only the most severely limited, special needs students require instruction in areas such as knowledge of letter names, phonological/phonemic awareness, and concepts of print. However, oral language remains an important foundation for reading, and in some respects is more directly related to reading performance at fourth grade and beyond than it is in the early grades.

Most students who are at the beginning stages of learning to read have richer listening and speaking vocabularies than the vocabulary challenge of the materials they are reading. For most beginning readers the major reading challenge they face is decoding print into the oral language forms that they know. By fourth grade, however, there is a change in the challenges that reading makes on developing readers. By this time most students have developed the basic decoding or word identification skills for independently reading most of the words they encounter; however, they begin to face more challenging syntactic forms and words that are not in their listening and speaking vocabularies. Therefore, they need instructional support for dealing with this vocabulary.

By the middle grades, most students have acquired mature oral language syntactic forms which provide a base for understanding the more sophisticated linguistic ideas and forms they will encounter in their reading. However, many students will need instructional support to develop the oral vocabulary skills needed to construct the meaning of more challenging texts. (See section on vocabulary.)

The development of beginning reading skills clearly builds on oral language/vocabulary skills; however, by fourth grade, the rich vocabulary found in reading materials helps students to enhance oral language and vocabulary development if they are given the instruction and taught the strategies for learning new word meanings. Thus, the relationship between vocabulary development and reading becomes a reciprocal one—a rich vocabulary and highly developed oral language facilitate reading comprehension, but engaging in reading and encountering challenging, new words in texts contributes to oral language and vocabulary development.

Foundations for Learning to Read: Oral Language (continued)

The heightened relationship between oral language and reading beyond the early grades is also suggested by studies of the relationship between listening comprehension (sometimes called *auding*) and reading comprehension. While the relationship between listening and reading comprehension is weak in the early grades, it grows stronger in the later grades. In the early grades reading progress is highly related to decoding and word identification; however, as reading fluency develops, reading comprehension, like listening comprehension, becomes highly dependent on language development.

A research-based reading program for grades four and above will develop vocabulary and oral language skills which in turn contribute to reading comprehension. The following quotations provide support for the conclusions drawn in this section:

A research-based reading program for grades four and above will develop vocabulary and oral language skills which in turn contribute to reading comprehension.

- **1984 - Sticht & James**

“If reading builds upon a foundation of the person’s earlier acquired oral language competence, then it follows that raising the oral language base should elevate reading ability.” (p. 299)

“Together, both the empirical evidence and the three theoretical positions argue for the soundness of an approach to reading development which includes extensive activities to develop oral language knowledge and skills, while activities which focus upon bridging the gap between oral and written language (e.g., sound decoding programs) are emphasized at other times in the instructional day.” (p. 315)

- **1998 - Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris**

“Oral language is the foundation on which reading is built, and it continues to serve this role as children develop as readers.” (Topic 1, p. 1)

- **1998 - Snow, Burns, & Griffin**

“Spoken language and reading have much in common. If the printed words can be efficiently recognized, comprehension of connected text depends heavily on the reader’s oral language abilities, particularly with regard to understanding the meanings of words that have been identified and the syntactic and semantic relationships among them.” (p. 108)