

# Listening Comprehension, the Cinderella Skill

## Giving the Neglected Stepchild Her Due

by Louise Spear-Swerling

Listening comprehension is sometimes called the “Cinderella skill” (e.g., Jalongo, 2010; Vandergrift, 1997) because of its tendency to be neglected in English language arts (ELA) instruction. The inclusion of listening in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may appear to address this oversight. Unfortunately, however, coverage of listening comprehension in the standards is inadequate at best. This article focuses on listening comprehension in terms of the structure of language and the specific skills that teachers require in order to address the listening needs of their students.

Listening comprehension is important in both theoretical and practical terms. It has a prominent role in widely referenced scientific models of reading. Both the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990) and Scarborough’s Rope Model (2001) include listening comprehension and word recognition as the two broad types of abilities foundational to good reading comprehension. Researchers have considered listening comprehension as a way to differentiate dyslexia from other types of reading problems and, historically, as a possible substitute for IQ in discrepancy-based definitions of dyslexia (e.g., Badian, 1999; Stanovich, 1991). The definition of specific learning disabilities (SLD) in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, popularly termed IDEA 2004, also includes listening comprehension as one of eight areas of achievement in which children may qualify for special education (§300.8(c)(10)). Moreover, listening comprehension is employed to clarify common profiles of reading problems (e.g., Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006; Kieffer, 2010; Spear-Swerling, 2015), whether or not those problems involve dyslexia or other disabilities.

In practical terms, listening comprehension is critical to students’ success in formal schooling, as well as everyday life. Children spend a lot of their time listening in school; by some estimates, as much as 50 to 75% of classroom time involves listening to the teacher, classmates, or orally presented material (Jalongo, 2010). Individual students’ listening comprehension has important implications for differentiating instruction and designing interventions, as well as for the selection of screening and progress monitoring tools, accommodations, and assistive technology. Students with good listening comprehension may benefit greatly from assistive technology involving orally presented content (e.g., audio books), whereas students with

weak listening skills may require additional supports, such as vocabulary aids. Universal screening measures that emphasize phonological skills such as decoding nonsense words are helpful for identifying many at-risk readers. However, phonologically based measures tend to miss at-risk children whose problems do not involve phonology (Riedel, 2007)—that is, those children whose difficulties involve only the listening comprehension component of the simple view. Scarborough (2005) notes that the accuracy of early identification efforts could be improved if schools supplemented their phonological screening efforts with other kinds of language screening.

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One reason behind the paradoxical neglect of listening comprehension in ELA teaching is a tendency to view listening comprehension as an ability that develops naturally, without the need for instruction. Yet encouragingly, we know that listening comprehension is sensitive to instruction (Goh, 2000) as well as to various school practices (Diakidoy, Stylianou, Karefillidou, & Papageorgiou, 2005). It is without doubt that many children, such as English learners or students with specific reading-comprehension disabilities (Nation, 2005; Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2014), can benefit from improving their listening skills. Evidence suggests that including an oral language component in instruction for children with reading comprehension difficulties is significantly more effective than addressing reading comprehension alone (Clarke, Snowling, Truelove, & Hulme, 2010). Why, then, is listening comprehension still the neglected stepchild?

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### Abbreviations

ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder  
CAPD: Central auditory processing disorders  
CCSS: Common Core State Standards  
ELA: English language arts  
ESL: English as a second language

IDEA 2004: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004  
IDA: International Dyslexia Association  
PPT: Planning and placement team  
SLD: Specific learning disabilities

### Vagueness of Definitions of Listening Comprehension

The meaning of the term *listening* might seem obvious. However, particularly with respect to its inclusion in definitions of SLD, the term is vague and imprecise (Moats, 1994a). Activities that can be conceptualized as involving listening include those as varied as following oral directions, comprehending the basic sequence of events in a simple story that has been read aloud, understanding social nuances in an oral narrative, recognizing intonation patterns in speech, and grasping key points in a lecture, to name but a few. In addition, although the terms *listening comprehension* and *oral language comprehension* are often employed interchangeably, the former is broader than the latter; it potentially encompasses nonlinguistic input such as environmental noise or music, as well as other cognitive processes besides those involving language. In this article, the term *oral language comprehension* will be used when the intended meaning is specific to language, as in the discussion of components of oral language in the next section. The term *listening comprehension* will be employed when a broader meaning is intended, to include not only language, but also other cognitive processes that influence listening skills.

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The ability to listen with understanding is built on a platform of underlying processes that include auditory processing, attention, working memory, and executive function (e.g., Cutting, Materek, Cole, Levine, & Mahone, 2009; Daneman & Merikle, 1996). Some of these areas have been implicated in certain disabilities. For example, auditory processing is complicit in central auditory processing disorders (CAPD), working memory problems in specific language impairments (Montgomery, 2003), and attention and executive function in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Barkley, 1997). Children with auditory processing disorders may have trouble perceiving or discriminating speech sounds in spoken words, which can affect both their listening comprehension and literacy development. Working memory is important to the listener's ability to hold words in memory while constructing meaning; individuals with working memory problems may not recall the subject of a sentence by the time they hear (or read) the end of it. Executive function helps listeners and readers make decisions about what is important and what is not; students with poor executive function may have difficulty following a discussion because they fail to recognize key points or are overwhelmed by details.

The lack of a clear definition of listening comprehension has resulted in confusion within the field of assessment, with little consensus as to what listening comprehension is or how it should be measured. Components of listening may be tested selectively and sometimes with the presumption that they measure listening as a whole. But should following oral directions stand as a proxy for listening comprehension in general? Are sentence-level tasks valid representations of listening in the classroom? Furthermore, listening comprehension involves the integration of multiple linguistic (and nonlinguistic) components, and these components may be tapped differently across varied tests, all purporting to measure the construct of listening comprehension in its entirety.

Although underlying components of language interact with each other, individual children may have weaknesses in some components of language and strengths in others. Recognizing and understanding these underlying patterns of strengths and weaknesses have important practical implications. Appropriate intervention for difficulties in listening comprehension or literacy therefore requires consideration of the structure of language.

### Important Components of Oral Language Comprehension

Important components of oral language comprehension include phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics (Farrall, 2012; International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2010; Moats, 1994a). Individual components, as well as combinations of components, tend to affect different aspects of children's reading and writing development. Each component is briefly reviewed below and summarized in Table 1.

*Phonology* is the aspect of language that involves speech sounds. The study of phonology is divided into two main disciplines. Phonetics is the study of the physical properties and perception of speech sounds in the context of their production, transmission, and reception; it is the foundation for human processing of an incoming speech stream. Phonemics is the study of speech sounds in their abstraction, what we refer to as phonemes. The awareness of phonemes plays a key role in children's development of word decoding and spelling skills. In English and other alphabetic languages, learning to decode and spell requires that children become explicitly aware of sounds in the speech stream, in order to grasp the alphabetic principle and begin mapping letters to sounds. Individuals with dyslexia often have impairments in phonology, despite relative strengths in other areas of oral language (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003).

*Morphology* is the aspect of language involving word parts that convey meaning, such as root words, inflectional endings, prefixes, and suffixes. For instance, the inflectional ending *-ed* on the word *jumped* conveys that the jumping happened in the past, and the inflectional ending *-s* on *boys* conveys that there is more than one boy. Similarly, a multisyllabic word such as *astronomer* is better understood if the student recognizes the relevance and meanings of the individual morphemes in the word (i.e., *astr-* means star, *-onomy* means the study of something, and *-er* refers to a person who is studying it). Because English words have a morphological as well as phonological

structure, an understanding of morphology is important to reading, spelling, and vocabulary development (Carlisle, 2010).

*Semantics* is the aspect of language involving meaning at the word level and beyond. Knowing the meanings of words in an oral discussion or text; grasping multiple meanings of words (e.g., a *bed* that one sleeps in vs. a *bed* of flowers); and understanding metaphorical expressions such as *to put words in someone's mouth*, all involve the semantic aspect of language. Semantic abilities such as vocabulary knowledge strongly predict both oral language comprehension and reading comprehension. Furthermore, oral vocabulary development in preschoolers is a precursor of phonological awareness (Walley, Metsala, & Garlock, 2003), and vocabulary knowledge influences children's word reading skills (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

*Syntax* is the aspect of language that involves grammar and word order at the sentence level. Good syntactic abilities are required to understand a grammatically complex sentence such as: *The dog who ran to the kitchen door and who barked furiously at the cat had thick, dark brown fur*. A child who lacks good syntactic abilities may misunderstand who has the dark brown fur—the dog, not the cat. Syntax is an often unrecognized building block of paragraph comprehension and written expression (Nelson, 2013).

*Discourse* involves understanding and use of language beyond the sentence level. Students who understand genre, story elements, and text structure will have better comprehension and improved recall of a lengthy lecture or story. Similarly,

students who are adept at understanding anaphoric references (the use of pronouns or words that refer back to previously mentioned words or phrases) will be able to follow a train of thought and build a cohesive mental model of the topic of discussion, be it oral or in print. Oral narratives, lectures, and texts also vary in how cohesive and well-structured they are (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978), with some being more considerate of the reader's or listener's needs than others. Considerate texts (Armbruster & Anderson, 1985) facilitate comprehension through features such as an introduction, a clear sequence of topics, explicit definitions of important words, and the use of cohesive words—such as *however*, *in addition*, and *furthermore*—to link important ideas across sentences.

*Pragmatics* involves understanding and using language, both oral and written, in a social context, such as turn-taking in conversation, learning to say *please* and *thank you*, or understanding social nuances in a conversation or text. Students with pragmatic weaknesses may have trouble understanding the interactions between characters in a narrative or inferring the motivations underlying characters' actions. Because social aspects of language can vary greatly by culture, students who are English learners may have difficulty in this area, not because of an actual impairment in pragmatic language, but because the pragmatics of their native languages differ from English. Pragmatic aspects of language also can be affected by certain disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorders (e.g., Dodd, Ocampo, & Kennedy, 2011).

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**TABLE 1. Important Components of Oral Language Comprehension**

Component	Brief Description	Sample Assessment Task	Examples of Relationships to Literacy Development
Phonology	Aspect of language that involves speech sounds	Teacher asks students to blend orally presented sequences of phonemes into a spoken word, e.g., "What word is this: /s/, /a/, /k?/"	Central to acquisition of word decoding and spelling skills
Morphology	Aspect of language that involves word parts that carry meaning (e.g., roots, prefixes, suffixes)	Teacher asks students to identify root words and affixes in multisyllabic words such as <i>geography</i> , <i>geographic</i> and <i>geological</i>	Plays a key role in word recognition, spelling, and vocabulary development
Semantics	Aspect of language involving meaning, especially at the word level and beyond	Teacher asks students to explain the meaning or connotation of a word such as <i>thrift</i>	Central to vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and written expression
Syntax	Aspect of language involving grammar and word order (sentence level)	Teacher asks students who have heard a grammatically complex sentence to explain who or what is doing the action in the sentence	Important to comprehension of sentences in reading and the ability to write effective sentences
Discourse	Aspect of language beyond the sentence level (i.e., passages and lengthy discussions or texts)	Teacher asks students to explain how a story is organized differently from an informational or nonfiction type of text	Important to reading comprehension and written expression
Pragmatics	Aspect of language involving understanding and use of language in a social context	Teacher asks students questions that require them to infer characters' feelings from dialogue in a story they have heard	Important to reading comprehension and written expression

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*Important components of oral language comprehension include phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics. Limited awareness of these components may affect teachers' capacities to provide effective literacy instruction and intervention.*

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The interrelationships among the various aspects of oral language and literacy are complex. Some components (e.g., phonology) relate more to word-level reading skills such as decoding and spelling. Others relate more to sentence-level (e.g., syntax) or higher-level (e.g., discourse and pragmatics) skills. In addition, although all components are ultimately important, they are not equally important at each developmental stage. Phonological abilities are especially critical to the early stages of literacy development, when children are first learning to read and spell words, whereas discourse-level abilities tend to play greater roles in the advanced stages of development, when children are expected to read and write increasingly lengthy, complex texts. Also, the relationship between oral language and literacy is not unidirectional; just as oral language abilities influence literacy acquisition, wide reading also influences the acquisition of oral language abilities such as vocabulary (Stanovich, 2000).

The path to higher student achievement in literacy is paved by an understanding of these component language abilities and their complex interrelationships with literacy. As displayed in Table 2, knowledge about language structure pervades the IDA (2010) *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading*, whereas other professional standards for educators—and certainly those for students such as the CCSS—do not make all of these components of language explicit in a clearly organized way. Wider use of the IDA standards in preservice teacher preparation and professional development would therefore be a valuable step forward for ensuring that educators can provide effective literacy instruction for all students, including those with literacy difficulties.

### **The Impact of Definitional Vagueness**

The vagueness of the term *listening comprehension*, and the fact that so many abilities can be conceptualized under its umbrella, has created problems for educational practice, policy, and research. Listening comprehension tests vary widely in the tasks they use to measure listening comprehension. The types of questions asked and the content heard—narrative, expository, or other content such as radio commercials—all vary by test, as does the length of the content and whether children respond orally or (for group-administered measures) in writing. Diakidoy et al. (2005) studied listening comprehension and reading comprehension in a sample of children in grades

2, 4, 6, and 8, using expository and narrative texts. They found differing results by text type. For expository texts, reading comprehension was more efficient than listening at all grade levels. The advantages of listening pertained only to narratives, and this was only true for younger children. For eighth graders, reading comprehension was higher than listening comprehension for both narrative and expository texts, perhaps because of students' ability to reread and control the pace at which they read.

Research on tests of reading comprehension (e.g., Cutting & Scarborough, 2006; Jenkins, Johnson, & Hileman, 2004; Keenan & Betjemann, 2006) also has implications for measurement of listening comprehension. Jenkins et al. (2004) examined children's performance on a state-mandated reading comprehension assessment requiring written responses to open-ended questions. These investigators found that writing skill accounted for significant variance in test performance. In other words, individual children might sometimes perform poorly not because of true comprehension problems, but because of writing difficulties. Keenan and Betjemann (2006) studied the use of passage-independent comprehension questions—questions that could be answered by virtue of a student's background knowledge—on a widely-used commercial reading test. The findings indicated that the use of such questions could significantly inflate the performance of struggling decoders, making them appear to have better reading comprehension than they actually did. (The test has since been extensively revised.) Although reading comprehension tests and listening comprehension tests differ in fundamental ways, it is likely that many of the issues raised about reading comprehension tests are pertinent to listening comprehension, as well. Children who have strong background or vocabulary knowledge, for example, may do well if tested with passage-independent questions on a listening measure, even if they have some significant component language weaknesses.

IDEA 2004, the most influential federal law in the United States pertaining to the education of K-12 students with disabilities, leaves the choice of specific measures to be used in eligibility determinations for special education to the collective wisdom of the planning and placement team (PPT) evaluating the student. The use of varied tests of listening comprehension may also have an impact on English learners' consideration for English as a second language (ESL) services as well as their eligibility for special education. This variability may have important consequences in individual cases. Consider, for instance, a student with significant vocabulary weaknesses being evaluated for SLD. Educators may determine that the student has low achievement in listening comprehension using a listening comprehension test that presumes strong vocabulary knowledge. Another team may draw a different conclusion based on the use of a listening comprehension measure with relatively fewer vocabulary demands. Likewise, the PPT may find a student with attentional or executive function weaknesses to have listening comprehension problems on a measure with long passages and relatively heavy attentional

**TABLE 2. Teacher Knowledge about Language Structure and Effective Literacy Instruction**

Component	Examples of Importance to Literacy Practice	Examples of Relevant IDA Knowledge and Practice Standards (Sections)	Examples of Specific IDA Knowledge and Practice Standards
Phonology	Assess and teach decoding, as well as spelling, effectively	Section I A 1; Section I B 1; Section I C-1, C-2, & C-6; Section I D 4 & 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Know or recognize how to order phonics concepts from easier to more difficult</li> <li>– Plan lessons with a cumulative progression of word recognition skills that build one on another (from Section I C-2)</li> </ul>
Morphology	Assess and teach word identification, spelling, and vocabulary effectively	Section I A 4; Section I B 2 & 7; Section I C-4 & C-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Recognize and explain the influences of phonological, orthographic, and morphemic knowledge on spelling</li> <li>– Analyze a student's spelling errors to determine his or her instructional needs (e.g., development of phonological skills versus learning spelling rules versus application of orthographic or morphemic knowledge in spelling) (from Section I C-6)</li> </ul>
Semantics	Assess and develop children's vocabularies; teach word choice in written expression	Section I A 1; Section I B 8; Section I C-4 & C-6; Section I D 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Understand the role of vocabulary development and vocabulary knowledge in comprehension</li> <li>– Teach word meanings directly using contextual examples, structural (morpheme) analysis, antonyms and synonyms, definitions, connotations, multiple meanings, and semantic feature analysis (from Section I C-4)</li> </ul>
Syntax	Scaffold instruction in reading comprehension (e.g., when students' comprehension falters); provide appropriate feedback to students' writing errors (e.g., help students correct sentence fragments and run-ons)	Section I A 1; Section I B 9 & 10; Section I C-5 and C-6; Section I D 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Identify in any text the phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and "academic language" that could be a source of miscomprehension</li> <li>– Anticipate confusions and teach comprehension of figurative language, complex sentence forms, cohesive devices, and unfamiliar features of text (from Section I C-5)</li> </ul>
Discourse	Facilitate reading comprehension by teaching important aspects of text structure; facilitate students' organization in writing	Section I A 1; Section I B 11, 12, & 13; Section I C-5 and C-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Explain the major differences between narrative and expository discourse</li> <li>– Classify text by genre; identify features that are characteristic of each genre, and identify graphic organizers that characterize typical structures (Section I B 11)</li> </ul>
Pragmatics	Assess and teach comprehension of narratives; assess and teach aspects of written expression such as writing for an audience	Section I C-5 & C-6; Section I D 5 & 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Interpret measures of reading comprehension and written expression in relation to an individual child's component profile</li> <li>– Using case study data, accurately interpret a student's performance on reading comprehension or written expression measures and make appropriate instructional recommendations (Section I D 6)</li> </ul>

demands, but not on a different measure that requires less sustained attention.

Perhaps most vitally, the lack of a clear understanding of listening comprehension as an area of academic achievement and its relative importance as a skill in its own right may influence what educators teach (or fail to teach). Children who do not receive support in listening and the components of oral language are at risk for challenges in literacy, as well as acquisition of general background knowledge and content-specific knowledge. Furthermore, without testing of key component areas of language, students identified with broad problems in "listening"

may fail to receive appropriately targeted intervention.

### The Current State of the Field

Unfortunately, in the 20 years since Moats (1994a) observed the many problems with the term *listening comprehension*, not much seems to have changed, at least with regard to educational practice. As noted in the opening to this article, an apt example involves the CCSS for ELA, adopted by 43 out of 50 states as of May 2016. The CCSS do include anchor standards for speaking and listening. The listening standards, however,

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tend to emphasize students' behavioral dispositions for participating in discussions—following rules for discussions, coming prepared, working effectively with peers—rather than actual language skills. Given this focus, it is entirely likely that the needs of students who are cooperative in following rules and working with peers would stand unrecognized, and that these students would continue to experience weaknesses in vocabulary, syntactic comprehension, and/or discourse knowledge. Although vocabulary is included in the CCSS, there are many omissions of other important components of language, and the organization of the included component areas is perplexing. Skills related to oral language are presented without regard to the structure of language as a whole. Vocabulary is found not under listening, but under a separate area for language, and is grouped with basic writing skills such as capitalization and punctuation. Overall, this organization does little to enhance teachers' understanding of important components of listening comprehension, nor does it help ensure that educators will address these components when teaching students.

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The limitations of the CCSS are made worse by the fact that many educators appear unaware of the importance of addressing oral language and its components in literacy instruction. For example, in one study, a colleague and I (Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014) asked teachers to complete a paper-and-pencil instructional planning task involving a hypothetical two-hour, elementary-level ELA block. The task required participants to describe the ELA activities that they would use, as well as the amount of time they would allocate to each activity. Despite the long two-hour block, both general and special educators proposed allocating less than 5 minutes on average to vocabulary; general educators proposed less than 11 minutes on average for oral language activities such as teacher read-alouds. Many teachers omitted one or both areas.

Limited awareness of important components of oral language comprehension may affect teachers' capacities to provide effective literacy instruction and intervention in multiple ways, as shown in Table 2. Numerous studies (e.g., Brady et al., 2009; McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009; Moats, 1994b; see Spear-Swerling, 2015, Chapter 10, for a review) have documented that both general and special educators

may lack knowledge of word-level aspects of language structure such as phonology and morphology. As investigators in this area have noted, without such knowledge, educators may interpret reading assessments incorrectly, choose inappropriate examples of words for phonics instruction, or provide inappropriate feedback for decoding and spelling errors.

Few studies have examined educators' knowledge of language structure beyond the word level, but existing results are not encouraging. For instance, in a different study, another colleague and I (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012) examined teacher knowledge about important components of language and reading using a multiple-choice survey. We found that only 42% of participants recognized when sentence context failed to support children's abilities to infer the meaning of a target word; only 32% recognized the potential influence of passage-independent questions on a child's reading comprehension score. When asked a question involving a child with extremely limited decoding skills but strong listening comprehension, only 40% of participants recognized that teacher read-alouds and oral discussion at the child's listening level could be used to develop comprehension abilities that likely would transfer to reading comprehension, once the child's decoding improved. Considering these results as a whole, it is difficult to imagine that educators who lack this kind of knowledge can effectively interpret comprehension assessments or optimally support children's comprehension development. Promisingly, however, on both word-level and comprehension-level scales of the knowledge survey, participants who had had professional development involving structured language training performed significantly better than those who had not.

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*In one study, teachers who had professional development involving structured language training performed significantly better than those who had not. Wider use of the IDA standards in preservice teacher preparation and professional development would help ensure that educators provide effective literacy instruction.*

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### **Next Steps**

Literacy is not just about print. Effective assessment and intervention for literacy problems require an understanding of components of oral language, how they support learning in the classroom, and how they interact with various components of reading and written expression. Toward these ends, the use of the IDA professional standards in teacher education can be a valuable asset. In addition, collaborations among different professional groups with an interest in language and literacy—

such as general educators, special educators, bilingual educators, reading specialists, and speech/language pathologists—are vital. In the Cinderella tale, Cinderella's fairy godmother used a magic wand to change a pumpkin into a coach for her, mice into horses, and her rags into a beautiful ball gown. However, absent a fairy godmother and her magic wand, crucial improvements in teacher education, assessment, and intervention are needed to help students with language and literacy difficulties.

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