

The Article that Introduced the Simple View of Reading

by David A. Kilpatrick

“To clarify the role of decoding in reading and reading disability, a simple model of reading is proposed, which holds that reading equals the product of decoding and [language] comprehension. It follows that there must be three types of reading disability, resulting from an inability to decode, an inability to comprehend, or both.”

Thus began the 1986 game-changing article that proposed the Simple View of Reading, written by two cognitive scientists, Philip Gough and William Tunmer.

This brief paper was just over 3 1/2 pages of text, yet it has been a game changer in the field of reading research. It has been cited over 650 times in the research literature. There have been over 150 scientific studies conducted to validate its premise across age levels (children to adults), reading skill levels, multiple languages, and a variety of educational disabilities. The Simple View of Reading proposed in this article is arguably the only overarching scientific theory of what is required for skilled reading comprehension cutting across all of the many subdisciplines within the reading research field.

Their Purpose

Gough and Tunmer wrote this article to address the educational debate over the role that “decoding” played in skilled reading comprehension. Their view was that decoding was central for skilled reading comprehension. Their notion of decoding covered all developmental abilities, including the beginner’s early ability to convert letters to sounds in order to sound out new words, and also the more mature reader’s developed skill of instantly recognizing words (word recognition). Gough & Tunmer’s work was a response to the view proposed by Ken Goodman and Frank Smith, who were the theorists that conceived of whole language and balanced literacy. Goodman and Smith believed that decoding was not central to skilled reading comprehension, but at most was something that developed as a side effect of learning to read.

Their Proposal

Gough and Tunmer proposed that reading was the product of two broad skills: the ability to read the words off the page and the ability to understand the oral language in which the material was written. Both of these skills *together* were necessary for skilled reading comprehension—neither alone could result in skilled reading.

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Their Proof

To demonstrate their point, they noted that those with dyslexia comprehended spoken language very well, but they lacked reading comprehension because they were so poor at decoding the words. They also noted that those with “hyperlexia” were good at decoding the words, but they lacked reading comprehension because they had difficulty with language comprehension (which Gough & Tunmer called *linguistic comprehension* or simply *comprehension* as seen in the quote at the beginning of this article). They finally noted there were some who were poor at

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both decoding and linguistic comprehension, and such individuals were poor readers who lacked reading comprehension. These cases, along with existing studies they cited in their article, showed that decoding can be separated from linguistic comprehension. Both were

central to reading comprehension, but neither alone can produce skilled reading comprehension. The Simple View of Reading realized Gough and Tunmer's purpose, which was to show that decoding, along with linguistic comprehension, was central to reading comprehension and not simply an unimportant side effect of learning to read.

In this issue, you will read articles that provide an update on the Simple View of Reading since Gough and Tunmer's game-changing article. In today's world of education, understanding the Simple View and its implications for reading instruction and assessment holds the promise of improved reading outcomes for our children.

References

Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 7, 6–10.



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