

## **Language Comprehension: The Power of Building Knowledge**

Hello, my name is Eva Boehm and two of my colleagues and myself are here today to provide a module to principals and other school leaders. And the title of our module is Language Comprehension: The Power of Building Knowledge.

This video is part of the series providing support for effective reading and writing instruction in elementary schools. It has been prepared for principals and other school leaders by the Minnesota Principals Academy at the University of Minnesota and HELP, the Higher Education Literacy Partnership of Minnesota.

Your presenters today are myself, my name is Eva Boehm. I am an instructor for the Reading Foundations course and reading field experience here at the university for elementary education majors. And I also am the Associate Director of Curriculum for the America Reads Program. My colleague, Debra Peterson and Dr. Carey Seeley will introduce themselves at this time.

Hi, I'm Debra Peterson. I've been an elementary teacher for about 40 years. I've had the privilege to be at the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Center for Reading Research for many years. During that time, I've had the opportunity to partner with schools around the United States as they're implementing the science of reading and looking at making modifications to their literacy instruction.

Hello everybody. My name is Carey Seely and I've been in education a little over 20 years. I started my career as a first grade teacher and was also a literacy coach. I've been a Curriculum Director and Assistant Principal, and I'm currently the principal at Ridgeview Elementary School. Welcome everybody. So as you can see, we have a few years of experience between all of us here and we're thrilled to be able to put this module together for you on this important topic related to reading instruction.

This module will progress through the following three components, and these are the outcomes of our learning for today. I will begin with unpacking the definition of language comprehension and the individual components of that definition. And then Debra will share and model explicit instruction with specific examples of text. And then Carey will come along and she will share her principal's perspective and sharing look-fors in language comprehension instruction in her role as a building principal.

We begin, what is language comprehension? Where is this in the entire framework on literacy instruction? Language comprehension abilities encompass receptive vocabulary, grammatical understanding, and discourse comprehension.

This may sound familiar, as you will see here, you've probably heard of the Simple View formula where language comprehension fits. Well we, as literacy educators know that teaching reading is anything but simple. But this formula is a framework that has been created by Gough and Tunmer in 1986. Decoding or word recognition times language comprehension ultimately leads to skilled reading comprehension. And so those of you who have experience in the LETRS training here in the State of Minnesota, this should look very familiar to you.

As well as our Scarborough's reading rope. And just recently, I was working with my pre-service teachers and I took a little picture of them and they created their own Scarborough's reading rope with their pipe cleaners. And we went through and defined all of the different

elements that go into a very complex process of teaching children to read. So you will see word recognition. And we've had other modules as part of this series that have been unpacking phonological awareness, decoding, spelling and sight recognition. But our focus today is going to be on language comprehension. And Debra is going to focus on what kind of background knowledge should we really encourage and to have our students think about vocabulary knowledge and conducting vocabulary to background knowledge, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. As you can see, this model is really great because it visually shows the interconnectedness and putting all of those threads together through increasingly strategic and increasingly automatic notions to become a skilled reader.

Then again, this is a phonics lesson plan that was introduced in the LETRS training. And you're thinking, okay, phonics lesson plan, where's the language comprehension part? How does this all go together? And you can see through this lesson plan, we're gonna be focusing where it is highlighted in yellow. How do we connect to word meaning? And also when students are reading texts, what are the pieces of our instruction that we should be facilitating, scaffolding and supporting them in. So we're gonna be looking at that connect toward meaning and then also through the reading of the text.

And then finally, we just want to emphasize the fact that this study done by NAEP in 2009 shows where and how much time students are spending in fourth, eighth, and 12th grade on literary texts, like poetry, drama, narrative stories and so forth, and informational texts. So you can see in fourth grade it's 50-50. But as the students move up in their grades, less and less time is being devoted to informational texts in the English language arts courses and is being distributed across all of these different content areas. As reading teachers, as literacy instructors, we really are striving to bring in more non-fiction examples and experiences for our students to engage with non-fiction text. That is my quick introduction of what this model is going to focus on. And I'm pleased to have Dr. Debra Peterson begin us and our journey as we learn about the research on vocabulary, the gradual release of responsibility, and explicit instruction.

I just want to briefly summarize some of the key points that we know about effective vocabulary instruction. In the earlier modules, when you're thinking about learning letters and the sounds of the spelling patterns, the sounds that we hear in the English language. There's a finite number of those. When we think about vocabulary instruction, we're talking about an infinite realm. We're continuing to learn new words and refine our understanding of word meaning throughout our entire life. So when we think about the huge amount of vocabulary words that students need to learn and be exposed to in the elementary grades, we know that each word cannot be explicitly taught. There are just too many words. So we really have to be strategic in our instruction and select words and word families that are going to be the most beneficial and widely used for our students. We know that you can't just put a word on the board, give the definition and move on. Students need opportunities to use words, both reading them in contexts and writing with those words. We know from research that we learn words by association. So if I'm studying mammals, one of the words I'm going to learn is habitat. And I'm learning that in association to the things that I know about mammals. And we know that as learners, we need multiple exposures to the new words that we're learning. And so that is a critical component in our vocabulary instruction, to provide multiple exposure.

We also know from research that there are different kinds of words. We know that there's very common words that we use in daily language, words that some of our students may come to school already having quite a bit of background knowledge on. There are high utility words that we're going to see across multiple texts and multiple content areas. And then there are specific content words that are specific to an area of study. So we need to consider that as we're looking at how we teach these words, which words we select and the context that we're teaching those words.

We also know that there's four kinds of word learning. We can learn a new word for a known concept. E.g. most kindergarteners know sad, mad, bad, glad. But do they know words like frustrated or patient or compassionate? We know that we can also learn a new meaning for a word that we already know. We might know the word bank as a building that you go to to deposit your money. But there's a different meaning when we're reading about a river flooding the river bank. So learning new meanings for known words. We also can clarify our meanings. So when we learn a word like sprinting, we're thinking about, okay, how is that similar or different to running? And then there are new words for unknown concepts. And that's where a lot of our content-specific vocabulary comes into play.

So the easiest new words to learn are words for familiar concepts. If students already understand happy, it's going to be easier for them to understand and learn words like jubilant or elated.

And as I said, the most difficult words to learn are new words for unknown concepts. And so we're going to have to spend more time helping students learn these types of words. Here's an example from social studies using a graphic organizer called the Frayer Model, where we have definitions of the word, facts about the word, examples and non examples. So whether you're using this graphic organizer to teach a new word or not, providing students with information about definition, facts about the word, and then giving examples and non examples with the word is also very helpful.

So I'm going to give an example of what explicit instruction of a word might look like. When we go through this, you will see that it can be a time-consuming piece of instruction. And that's why I was saying earlier that we can't explicitly teach every single word. The ones that we carefully select that are going to have high utility are words that we're going to want to spend this time on. Now, astrolabe is probably not a high utility word for you. But I selected it because I was thinking that most adults may not know the word. So this is what explicit instruction might look like. Students our new word today is astrolabe. Say it out loud to yourself, please, astrolabe. Now say it slowly and count how many sounds that you hear in the word. Say it slowly. I counted eight sounds. Now why is it important to do that for this word? Well, it's important because we're going to be reading and writing this word. And when we think about the sounds that are in that word, it's gonna be easier to think of the letters that make up those sounds. So saying the word and thinking about the sounds is an important step in being able to read and write the word. Now say the word again and count how many syllables are in the word. The word is astrolabe. How many syllables are there? I count three. Again, being able to hear the syllables in the spoken word will help you read and write this word later. Now I want you to look carefully at the word. Are there any parts of the word that might give you a clue about the word meaning? Well, hopefully students will notice the beginning of the word, the prefix astro. And we might talk about what does that mean? What other words do we know

that start that way. Like astronaut. Astronomy. What does astro mean and how might that help us figure out this word's meaning? I give students an opportunity to use whatever their resources are, their handheld device to look up the meaning of the word. And then we're also going to write a sentence. Or for young children, I wouldn't be teaching them the word astrolabe. But if it is a word that I'm teaching them, I would ask them to orally create a sentence for the word.

So here's a photograph of an astrolabe. Astro does pertain to the stars. And this is a tool that helps navigators navigate, tell time, survey in the dark. Because it's using the stars to be able to give them an idea of their location and the time. So astrolabe. So those might be some of the steps that a teacher might take in helping students learn a specific word. Again, astrolabe is not a word that I'd use with elementary students. It was an example for us as adults.

One thing that is very helpful for students of all ages and all language backgrounds is to provide them some kind of sentence frames or stems as they're either talking and using the new word, or as they're writing about it. So an example of navigators use tools like astrolabes to navigate and tell time. Other navigational tools might be a compass. So giving them those frames can be very helpful as they are having an opportunity to repeatedly practice the new words in their oral language and in their writing.

[Cut off] to give feedback and then to prompt students continue to apply that strategy when they're reading and writing on their own.

So this is an example. It's a routine that I would use with students second grade on up. In middle school and high school, I would use a similar kind of routine. If I was teaching elementary students in science or social studies, I might use this routine. And in this routine I'm going to explicitly model some vocabulary strategies. I'm also going to activate students' prior knowledge. And I'm going to actively engage the students so that every single student is expected to produce a response. Too often in classrooms we use turn-taking and only a few students are thinking and responding. When we structure our classrooms so every single student has to produce a response, we're ensuring that more students are practicing the strategy or the words that we're teaching them.

So in this example, let's just pretend that we're fourth graders. I would say fourth graders, we've been studying about weather. Now when we read a new piece of informational text, it's always a good idea to think about what you already know about the topic. Today we're going to be reading about storms. So I'm going to give you 1 min to list all the things that you know about storms. Now remember when we do a free write, I'm not worried about spelling. I'm not worried about you writing full sentences. I want you to write words and phrases that will help you remember your ideas about storms. Fourth graders, are there any questions about what you're going to do? Alright, you may begin. I would give the students a minute to write down their ideas. I would be walking around to make sure that everybody is writing something on their paper. If someone doesn't have anything on their paper or on their handheld device, I would stop and talk with that student and try to stimulate some ideas about storms. At the end of the minute, I would say, thank you fourth graders. Now you're going to work with your partner to talk about what you know about storms. And if your partner has a good idea that you didn't think about, go ahead and add it to your list because we're sharing ideas. And we'll take about 2 min for you to share your ideas with your partner. So students would have an opportunity to talk with a partner. This might be a place where I provide a sentence stem or

frame, like storms can \_\_\_\_\_. That might help them talk. After they've talked for about 2 min, I would ask them to write three questions together with their partner about storms. So they would write their questions. I would be walking around, checking in with students, making sure they're writing, making sure they're thinking about storms. I would coach those that needed some additional support.

Alright, fourth graders, we're going to read this paragraph about storms. I would like you to chorally read it with me. When we chorally read, we all read aloud at the same pace, which means we listen to each other. So we're going to start at the top with the word great. And we're going to read this paragraph together. Great whirling storms roar out of the oceans. So we would read the paragraph together. At the end of the paragraph, I would say. Now, fourth graders, as you're reading the rest of this text about hurricanes, you're going to come across some words that you can decode. You can sound them out, but you might not be sure of the word meaning. So I'm going to show you what you can do when you come across a word you don't know. One good thing is when you're reading the text with your partner, if you sound out a word, but you don't know what it means, just underline that word, like how you did here in this passage with the word tropical. So that's a word that I could sound out, but I'm not sure what it means. So once I've identified my word, then the second thing I need to do is go back and reread the sentences around that word. So I'm going to start with the sentence that says, they are born. They are born in the same way, in tropical waters. They develop the same way, feeding on warm, moist air. Okay, So I identified my word. I went back and re-read. Now I'm going to look for clues in the text that might help me understand the word tropical. I see warm, moist air. That makes me think about tropical rain forests. I have heard the word tropical when it's talking about rain forests. And I know that tropical rain forests, it rains a lot and it's really hot. So this is tropical waters. I wonder if tropical waters are water that's very warm. And so the moisture makes the air moist and warm and humid. I think tropical means warm and wet. Now, we're going to read the next paragraph with your partner.

And I'd like you to read it through chorally with your partner. So you'll both read aloud at the same pace. Then I want you to go back and use the steps that I did with the word that's underlined, that's atmosphere. So you're going to look at the word atmosphere, you're going to read the sentences around it, and you're going to look for clues that will help you figure out the meaning of the word atmosphere. So I would have students work as partners. Again as I'm going around and helping to coach and give feedback to students as they're working together. So that's an example of how I would explicitly model and actively engage students in accessing this text.

Another component that we're looking at with language comprehension is verbal reasoning. And many of our comprehension strategies that we're using help us verbally reason or solve problems when we're reading complex texts. And we know from research that we need to explicitly teach these strategies. And the ones that have a lot of research behind them are comprehension monitoring. Some people call that clarifying, making inferences, generating and answering questions, and summarizing. We also know from research that using graphic or semantic organizers can help students as they're problem-solving and digging into complex and rich texts.

Remember that our goal for any strategy, whether it's a vocabulary strategy or comprehension strategy, is for students to have a lot of tools in their toolbox. So when they come across a piece

of text and they think, wait, I don't understand what I just read, that they'll have many strategies that they can pull out and try as they're trying to make sense of the text. And this is especially true in the content areas. So even if you're not a literacy instructor, as a science or social studies, a history teacher, these are very important strategies for students to know and use.

So the example I'm going to be showing next is a kindergarten example showing how we would summarize informational texts. There is a difference between summarizing narrative versus informational text. In informational text, we're looking for a main idea. This is a very difficult thing for many students to identify. What is the main idea of the text? Then to pull out three or four details that support that main idea, to connect the ideas in the text to something else that we know, and to put that information in our own words in no more than three or four sentences. This is how it might look in a kindergarten class.

Kindergarteners, we've been reading about plants. And we planted seeds and we've been watching them grow and we've been charting and graphing the growth that the seeds have been taking. And today we're going to read a text about a special kind of plant, or a category of plant, called ferns. Ferns are plants that have roots, stems, and leaves. So I would read the text to the kindergarteners. At the end of that text I would say, oh, kindergarteners, there are so many things that we learned about ferns. We learned that they don't have seeds, they have spores, that they're beautiful, that they're popular houseplants. Oh, there's so much information, it's gonna be hard for us to remember it all. So we're going to use a strategy. The strategy is summarizing. Say summarizing, kindergarteners. Summarizing. Summarizing helps us remember and understand what we read. When we summarize, we're going to think about what is the main idea of this passage? Now it has a lot of details. But I think the most important part of this passage is that ferns are different than other plants.

They don't have seeds, they have spores. So I believe that's the main idea of the text because most of that paragraph was about spores and the how ferns are different from other plants. So what are some of the details from that text that relate to ferns being different from other plants? Well, ferns have spores. They make thousands of spores. The spores are stored in dots underneath the leaves. Now, this reminds me of the text we were reading yesterday. We were reading about molds. Molds also produce spores. We just made a connection to something we already know. Now we're going to put this into our own words. Ferns are different from other plants because they don't have seeds. Ferns have spores. They make thousands of spores, and they store them underneath their leaves. Many plants have spores, including molds. Alright, that was our summary, kindergartners. That will help us remember and understand what we read.

Alright, thank you so much, Dr. Debra Peterson. So I'm gonna be talking just a little bit about what this might look like from a principal lens. So as you are walking into classrooms for either formal or informal visits, there's gonna be some things that you're going to want to be looking for. Some of the things that myself and colleagues that I've worked with have really talked a lot about is, what is the teacher doing or saying? As Dr. Peterson pointed out, is there a why that's shared? What is the objective? Is that obvious? Is it stated? Is it a couple of different places in the room? What are students doing and saying, and does that actually follow the objective? Is it in line with that? And of course, also it's really important to see are all students having an opportunity to create meaning? Whether that be through reading, writing, speaking, or listening. we want to make sure that all students are having that opportunity for meaning-making. Then again, how is language comprehension being applied? It can be through those four modalities.

There's lots of ways that you can see that, but really take note of what that looks like. Then in the classroom, what are you seeing evidence of related to vocabulary? Is it visible for students? Do you maybe see some student-created charts? Is there evidence that students have been interacting with the teacher in creating some of these models? You might see teacher created things that have been shared with students, especially if they're primary age and that's fine, but just looking for different examples.

Alright, and then as we listen for that explicit teaching related to language, in the beginning of our presentation, we talked about that example in a phonics lesson. So are teachers really exposing students to vocabulary words multiple times? Is it just one time? Do you see it come up again and again so that students really have that opportunity to have it be something that they are hearing, they're seeing, they are able to do. And again, this goes back to that meaning-making.

Then again, it's really important to look for that student engagement. And you can see lots of different examples for that. As we're seeing examples here, we look for writing, we look for reading, we look for word work. You could see some word sorts or word games. And again, just because students are maybe having fun doesn't mean that they're not learning. In some ways, that's really the most relevant way to teach vocabulary. Students have to really have that hook and have it makes sense to them. And that's really kinda breaking down that meaning-making and making it culturally relevant and making it interesting and making it something that they care about. Why am I learning this? Why do I care? That's important to students no matter how old they are.

Alright, and then again, that application. So you're going to see lots of different examples of that. We want to see how students are applying that language comprehension as they're learning. So this is a writing example. And what you don't see on this slide is that there has been lots of vocabulary that has been modeled. So a lot of the words that are in this example here, clay sand, hummus, they're all things that are in the classroom. And then this student has also had a sentence frame that has explained to them what they've actually started writing about. So you can see that they have a detailed drawing and they've labeled it and now they're actually doing writing, but that isn't without some scaffolding. And then as students become more and more comprehensive with that and more comfortable with it, you can take those scaffolds away and let them try on their own. And again, if you're just learning about something, making sure that they understand that brave spelling is okay, do your best. Try it. Look around the room, look for some resources. Really show us what you know and don't get caught up on some of the grammar and punctuation at the beginning. That's something you can go back and check later.

Alright, and again, looking for that evidence of vocabulary visible around the room. Here's the lots of different examples. You might see an alphabet with some words that this class has noticed. In the far left bottom, you'll see different vocabulary in the middle example, we see a geometry example that has some very specific words about geometry and that is something that has been taught over time and that students are referencing. The student with the red shirt is looking at specific body parts. And again, they can look at a description, they can look at an image, they can interact with it, and I can't tell exactly, but it looks like the little student there might be writing about it or trying to get some details. Again, really making that reciprocal learning happen for students and having the classroom not just be something that looks like

wallpaper, but something that is co-created with the students. On the very top, you see a primary example. And this was great when I was a first grade teacher, we did a lot of this. Students love to kinda combine that creativity with language learning. Labeling a picture, making sure that people know that, oh, this is a flower, that's a butterfly, this is a spider. These are things that kids are excited about and when they see it, and it's something that is important to them, they're going to have that much more ownership and understanding. So again, going back to that important meaning-making.

And then as you're talking to teachers after you've been in their classroom, really kind of having that reflective stance. So here's a couple of questions that you can think about ahead of time. But as we've gone through, you can use some of those specific questions that I noted about language comprehension. But you want to get the teacher talking and really owning what happens. So a question might be, what are some of the things that you noticed that let you know the lesson was going well? Try and get that teacher talking because you've sat and taken notes of this as a principle, but bring it back to them. Let them interpret. A lot of teachers, they know what, maybe you went really, really well. Maybe there are some things that they were surprised. Even though surprises in learning, those can be things that a teacher and students can learn from. So really getting them to reflect on it. Question number four, I won't read all of these, but as you reflect on your lesson, what are you learning that you might want to carry forward for next time? Then you have that conversation with the teacher. You might say, well, what might you want to do differently? Then really getting them to also talk to you about, okay, has this conversation helped your thinking? Get some feedback as a principal too. Kinda put yourself in a place of vulnerability and feedback as well. Because it's really, teachers work very hard and it's vulnerable to open up your classroom to someone. So acknowledging that is also important.

Alright, and I'm not gonna go through all of these, but you're going to have a link to all of our resources. And so as I was going through this, I've worked in lots of different school districts and people use different things. So here's some different tips for asking better questions, classroom observation tools, instructional rounds protocol. I think we have another one too.

Asking good questions, learning walkthrough and other tools. So there's so many different things. So this is just a couple. But again, principals are busy as I know, and it's sometimes nice to not reinvent the wheel. And I think the most important thing too is to talk with your colleagues and norm on it and think about, okay, where do we want to go as a district in terms of our informal and formal walkthroughs. Most districts have some kind of an adopted observation tool. So obviously use that and if you can align your informal walkthroughs to that, that's always, I think, appreciated just that. Same thing with students. We want to use similar language with adults too. So using that common language is important.

So thank you so much. We have really appreciated spending some time with you talking about language comprehension. And I'd like to thank Eva Boehm and Dr. Debra Peterson for joining. It's been a real privilege to learn and volunteer my time as a principle. Literacy is so important. So thank you all so much.