LSHSS

Clinical Forum

Prologue

The Case for the Narrow View of Reading

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In a recent article in *The ASHA Leader* (Kamhi, 2007a), I argued that the broad view of reading was largely responsible for the persistently high levels of reading failure experienced in schools today because it conflates word recognition and comprehension. My solution was to embrace the narrow view of reading, which restricts reading to word recognition alone. At the 2007 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) conference in Boston, the main contributors to this forum (Hugh Catts, Cheryl Scott, Barbara Ehren, Anthony Bashir, and Gerry Wallach) responded to this proposed solution. The articles in this issue of *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* are expanded versions of those responses. After reiterating the arguments in support of the narrow view of reading, I will provide a brief summary of the main points of the five responses.

The Case for the Narrow View of Reading[1]

The persistence of reading difficulties throughout the school years has been well documented in the literature. Although some progress has been made—reading levels were lower in the early 1970s than they are today, and the gap between Hispanic, African American, and mainstream children has decreased over the last 13 years—the proportion of children who are reading below the basic level has hovered around 35% in the last 25 years (range = 36%–40%), and 70% of these children (range = 69%–71%) never attain a proficient reading level (National Assessment of Education Progress [NAEP], 2007). In addition, almost three out of four students who experience reading failure in third grade will continue to have reading problems in ninth grade (Lyon, 1998).

There has been no shortage of explanations for the consistently high levels of reading failure. Lyon (1998), for example, attributed the lack of progress to three factors: (a) late identification—at-risk children were often not identified until third grade because they did not have the necessary discrepancy between reading and IQ/age, (b) inadequate instruction and/or ineffective interventions, and (c) decreased motivation. Other contributing factors are an insufficient number of well-trained teachers; schools that are not conducive to learning; and the large number of disadvantaged, English language learners and students with language learning disabilities in our nation's schools. The respective solutions to these problems can be found in the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education). These include universal screening to identify all kindergarten and first-grade children who are at risk for reading failure, high-stakes assessment to hold schools accountable for minimal standards of reading proficiency, better trained teachers and support personnel, and the use of evidenced-based instructional and remediation approaches. The use of a response-to-intervention service delivery model has also been advocated by many researchers and policymakers (e.g., Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004).

These solutions have had some impact on the levels of reading achievement, but as long as the broad view of reading is reflected in high-stakes assessment and instruction, efforts to dramatically improve reading levels in this country will be as unsuccessful as

[1]This section is based on "Knowledge Deficits: The True Crisis in Education" that appeared in *The ASHA Leader* (Kamhi, 2007a).

ABSTRACT: **Purpose:** This prologue reiterates the case for the narrow view of reading as a solution to the persistently high levels of reading failure that occurs in our schools and provides a brief summary of the 5 response articles.
Method: The arguments that support the narrow view of reading are presented and the respondents are introduced.
Conclusion: Although the contributors to this clinical forum may have different views, we all are working toward a common goal: improving the literacy levels of children in our schools.

KEY WORDS: reading, definition, assessment

previous efforts over the last 25–30 years. The broad view of reading is familiar to most people and is accepted by almost everyone. Reading according to this view consists of two basic components—word recognition and comprehension. This view of reading is referred to as broad because it emphasizes the importance of higher level thinking as well as word recognition processes (Perfetti, 1986). *Thinking guided by print* is a succinct way to define reading according to the broad view.

The fundamental problem with the broad view of reading is that it conflates two very different abilities—word recognition (word-level reading) and comprehension. Word recognition involves a well-defined scope of knowledge (e.g., letters, sounds, words) and processes (decoding) that can be systematically taught. This makes it possible not only to accurately measure decoding skills, but also to develop systematic instructional programs and interventions to teach basic word recognition skills to all students except those with the most severe disabilities (cf. National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000), and even some of these students can be taught to read with intensive phonic programs (cf. Torgesen, Al Otaiba, & Grek, 2005).

Comprehension, in contrast, is not a skill with a well-defined scope of knowledge; it is a complex of higher level mental processes that includes thinking, reasoning, imagining, and interpreting. Unlike decoding, which can be reliably measured, quantified, and reduced to a single number or two (e.g., accuracy and fluency), general comprehension ability cannot be easily quantified. Not only are there different levels of understanding (e.g., literal, analytic, creative), but comprehension depends on thinking and reasoning processes that are domain and content specific rather than domain general (cf. Kintsch, 1998). This is why the best predictor of comprehension is familiarity with content knowledge domains (Hirsch, 2006; Willingham, 2006). Familiarity with the content of a passage is in fact so important that poor decoders do better than good decoders when they have more knowledge of a topic (Moravcsik & Kintsch, 1993; Recht & Leslie, 1988; Yekovich, Walker, Ogle, & Thompson, 1990). The domain specificity of comprehension raises serious questions about the meaning of domain-general measures of comprehension, especially those that reduce comprehension ability to one score or level.

The Broad View and Reading Assessment

If it is problematic to reduce comprehension to one score or level, it is beyond problematic to reduce reading ability (decoding and comprehension) to a specific standard score or grade level. Yet this is exactly what the broad view of reading causes many high-stakes reading assessments to do. The reduction of reading ability to one number not only obscures differences that may exist in a student's word recognition and comprehension abilities, but it also masks the developmental changes that occur in reading ability throughout the school years. Because children are first learning to read in the early elementary grades, a measure of reading during these grades is essentially an assessment of word-level reading. Comprehension, if measured at all, is a small component of an overall reading score in first and second grade. In the third and fourth grades, as the variability in decoding skills decreases and children begin to read to learn, comprehension abilities begin to account for more of the variance in children's reading levels. By late elementary school and beyond, comprehension ability accounts for almost all of the variability in reading levels. Lack of reading proficiency in the early elementary school years thus reflects difficulty learning to decode, whereas lack of reading proficiency in later school years reflects difficulty understanding and interpreting words, sentences, and texts.

The NAEP is an example of a reading measure that obscures differences in decoding and comprehension and reduces reading to one standard score. According to the NAEP, basic reading level for a fourth-grade student involves the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the overall meaning of what is read, make relatively obvious connections between the text and the child's own experiences, and extend the ideas in the text by making simple references. Students who are not able to do these things would be considered to be reading below a basic level, even though their decoding abilities might be fine.

Misconceptions about students' reading abilities are another serious consequence of reading assessments that are based on the broad view of reading. I learned this from an experience I had about 10 years ago while tutoring 3 sixth-grade low-achieving boys at my neighborhood school in Memphis. I was told by their teacher that they were all reading at the first- or second-grade level and were also struggling in math. In my second or third session, we were talking about the latest NBA playoff games and a disagreement arose over how many points some player scored. I happened to have a copy of *USA Today* with me, so I got out the sports section to check the box score. To my surprise, one of the boys started reading the article. He had difficulty with some of the longer words and unfamiliar player names, but this was to be expected for an 11- to 12-year-old child. The other kids read just as well as he did. When I told their teacher that the students were reading *USA Today,* she was equally surprised. She had assumed just as I had that the students could not decode words above a first- or second-grade level. It was very upsetting to think about the impact that this mischaracterization had on these 3 boys throughout elementary school. I wondered how many other students were similarly mischaracterized and what could be done to ensure that teachers and other educators differentiated between word-level reading proficiency and comprehension ability. It would be several years before I found the answer to these questions in the narrow view of reading.

The Broad View and Reading Instruction

The broad view of reading influences instruction as well as assessment. It is generally accepted that early intervention for reading failure is more effective than later intervention, but the reason for this may not be clear. The effectiveness of early reading instruction is not because young children are better learners than older children, or that the instruction for older children is somehow deficient. As I noted earlier, word recognition involves a well-defined scope of knowledge (e.g., letters, sounds, words) and processes (decoding) that can be systematically taught. Domain-general comprehension, in contrast, is not easy to teach because it involves domain-specific thinking and reasoning processes. This is not to say that domain-general comprehension cannot be taught, or that one should not try to teach it (Kamhi, 2007b). Hirsch (2006), for example, found that children who received his core knowledge curriculum beginning in first grade did not show noticeable improvements in domain-general comprehension until sixth grade. In other words, it took 5 years of content-specific instruction to make a difference in

domain-general comprehension. It is unlikely that school districts throughout the country will embrace the kind of core knowledge-based curriculum necessary to improve domain-general comprehension. Most federal initiatives to mandate curriculum changes are met with resistance at state and local levels, as the response to No Child Left Behind has shown.

How the Narrow View of Reading Solves the Reading Crisis

My solution to the reading crisis is no more likely to be fully embraced than No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), Hirsch's (2006) core curriculum, or any other solution, but unlike these attempts to solve the problem, mine costs nothing and requires no teacher training, new assessment instruments, better instructional programs, or any other financial or personal investment of time or money. It simply requires rejecting the broad view of reading and embracing the narrow view of reading. Unlike the broad view of reading, which conflates reading and comprehension, the narrow view restricts the scope of reading to word recognition alone. By limiting reading to word recognition, the focus is now on a skill that can be taught to all students except those with the most severe disabilities. By embracing the narrow view, we can eliminate our nation's obsession with something that cannot be easily taught—domain-general comprehension and reasoning. Comprehension and reasoning will remain important educational goals, but they will be taught in domain-specific content areas and called by their rightful names (American/European history, biology/chemistry, geometry/algebra, contemporary fiction/drama), just like they are in colleges and universities.

If state and national assessments distinguish between word-level reading and content knowledge acquisition, the reading crisis will be over. Reading proficiency levels should reach 90%, at a minimum. Anything less will not be acceptable given the numerous research-supported instructional programs that have been shown to effectively teach word-level reading (NRP, 2000; Simmons et al., 2007). It goes without saying that teachers who administer these programs need to be well trained in the language bases of reading and instructional design (Moats, 2004).

The benefits of the narrow view of reading are far reaching. Reading assessments will be simplified because they will only measure word-level reading. Separate measures will assess and hopefully differentiate domain-general comprehension abilities from domain-specific comprehension. The narrow view makes it possible to develop a universal criterion-level reading assessment that can be used to ensure that all students achieve a basic level of reading proficiency. When we are told that a child is reading at the first-grade level, we will know that the child's word-level reading is at the first-grade level. The narrow view thus prevents anyone from mischaracterizing reading ability like I did in my tutoring experience back in Memphis.

There are many other benefits of the narrow view of reading. Teachers benefit by being able to teach their content areas without having to worry about how their students perform on conflated measures of reading. Special educators and reading specialists benefit from the differential diagnosis of specific reading disabilities (i.e., dyslexia) and specific content area learning problems. Note that the narrow view is consistent with current definitions of dyslexia (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). Students benefit from the differentiated assessment of reading and content area learning. Those with dyslexia will receive empirically validated interventions that are designed to improve word-level reading and spelling, whereas those who read proficiently will receive instruction that targets specific content area learning problems. Students with both reading and knowledge-based deficiencies should, of course, receive instruction in both areas.

Perhaps the most important benefit of the narrow view of reading is that it will focus attention on the true crisis in American education: knowledge deficits. As a recent report has shown (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007), teachers currently spend too much time on basic math and reading skills and not enough time on content areas like science and social studies. Knowledge acquisition should be the primary goal of education for all students. Reading, we need to remember, is just one way to acquire knowledge; there are many others. Our educational debates need to focus on the best way to assess and teach content knowledge to the diverse students in our nation's schools.

The Five Responses

In the first response, Hugh Catts shows how the narrow view of reading promotes a broad view of comprehension by focusing attention on the complexities of comprehension and the challenges involved in assessing and improving comprehension abilities. He agrees that reading comprehension is dependent on knowledge, but makes the important point that it takes more than knowledge to truly understand a text. Drawing on research from cognitive science, Catts provides evidence of the importance of constructing coherent text representations or situation models for successful comprehension. One of the main points he makes is that the focus on teaching reading comprehension has replaced the teaching of content knowledge. He argues that the balance needs to be shifted in favor of teaching content knowledge. Only limited instruction needs to be provided to teach reading comprehension as a distinct skill, and this is where instruction in reading strategies would be appropriate. In the final section of his article, Catts discusses the important role that speech-language pathologists (SLPs) have in ensuring that children have the basic language skills (vocabulary, grammar, narrative) needed to understand texts.

In the second response, Cheryl Scott makes the case for the importance of the sentence in comprehension. The word *sentence* does not even appear in the NRP's recommendations for best practice instruction. As Scott notes, if a reader cannot parse the types of complex sentences that are often encountered in academic texts, no amount of comprehension strategy instruction will help. Comprehension of complex sentences might be amenable to treatment that impacts reading comprehension, but most likely not in the form of isolated drill-like exercises that are devoid of the content contexts where complexity is found. This is one more reason, then, that it is difficult to teach domain-general comprehension.

Barbara Ehren, the third respondent, raises a number of practical concerns about the impact that the narrow view of reading would have on instruction and services for struggling students. Chief among these concerns is that the narrow view implies that once students can recognize words, reading development is complete. She cites evidence that there is much to learn about reading past fourth grade, especially as it relates to specific academic disciplines. Ehren believes strongly in the benefits of strategy-based instruction

and argues that a serious consequence of the narrow view of reading is that this instruction would have to be provided by content area teachers alone. Struggling students may need more explicit and intensive instruction than content teachers can provide. She reminds readers that she has consistently advocated that SLPs should provide curriculum-relevant therapy while not trying to teach curriculum. She concludes by expressing the hope that literacy standards will be integrated with curriculum standards for each academic discipline.

In the fourth response, Anthony Bashir and Pamela Hook remind us about the complexity of the reading process and the importance of reading fluency. They argue that no single factor can account for the range of challenges that are faced by struggling readers. This is why it is important to understand the full range of cognitive, conceptual, language, affective, and motivational factors that influence the development of reading fluency and comprehension. The article concludes with specific suggestions to improve reading fluency.

In the final response, Gerry Wallach and her colleagues, Stephen Charlton and Julie Christie, provide many practical suggestions for clinicians who wish to provide curriculum-relevant language-based intervention for school-age students with language learning disabilities. Examples are provided that show how SLPs can integrate content and structure knowledge in social studies and sciences courses. Wallach and her colleagues try to find that delicate balance between the broad and narrow view, the content–structure knowledge connection, and the fundamental and derived literacies in spoken and written language. They conclude by challenging all of us to push the envelope of traditionalism in language intervention by continuing to look for better ways to meet our students' needs.

I hope your appetite has been whetted by this introduction to the clinical forum. As you read through the five responses, keep in mind that although we may have different views, we all are working toward a common goal: improving the literacy levels of children in our schools.

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