

The Language-Rich School House
A Foundation for Literacy
By John De Mado

The National Reading Panel has identified five components critical to the development of the reading and literacy process:

- **Phonemic Awareness:** The understanding that spoken words are made up of minimal sound segments called *phonemes*.
- **Phonics:** The process of linking the spoken sound to the written symbol and combining them to form words.
- **Fluency:** The capacity to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression without deliberate focus while performing multiple reading tasks such as word recognition and comprehension simultaneously.
- **Comprehension:** Understanding, both implicitly and explicitly, what is read.
- **Vocabulary:** The 'linguistic river' that *floats* comprehension.

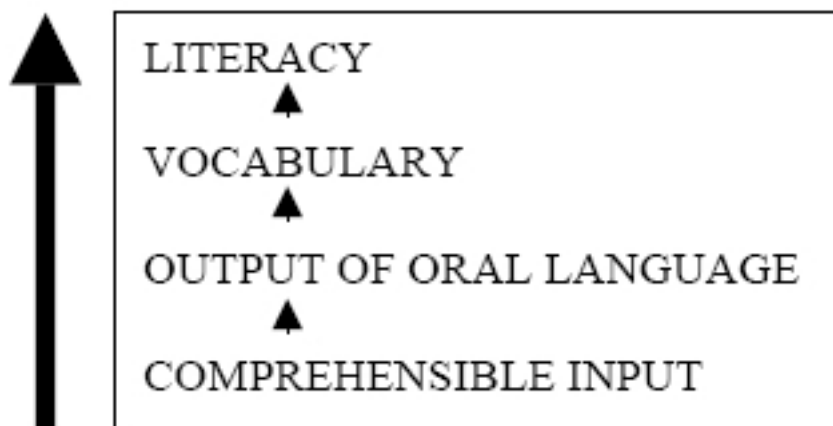
The first 2 components, *Phonemic Awareness* and *Phonics*, deal with the mechanics of the encoding and decoding process. *Fluency* pertains to an individual's silent, as well as oral, delivery of what he/she has decoded. Based on research, it has been hypothesized that there is a direct link between successful readers and their ability to read 'fluently'.

Yet, for those of us charged with transmitting language to students, the fact remains that there are many children who seemingly have mastered the 'codes' of reading, who actually read with a respectable level of fluency, yet have difficulty understanding what they have read. This lack of comprehension is directly manifest in national, state and local test scores and leads many to believe that a 'literacy crisis' is at hand. Therefore, this article will focus on the last 2 components listed by the NRP; comprehension and vocabulary.

The importance of vocabulary to general comprehension can not be understated. Successful listening and reading, both 'receptive' skills, are contingent upon the breadth of one's vocabulary. Although one can glean a great deal from context, without ample lexicon to draw upon, reading becomes drudgery. So much so that many students choose to avoid the activity. Why is vocabulary critical to the reading process? Because, once we go beyond the formulaic mechanics of phonemic awareness and phonics, encoding and decoding, what we find is that readers, just as listeners, do not really understand verbatim all that has been written or stated. Language is much too imprecise an affair to be that transparent. Rather, we *intuit* written or oral messages from one another. We *guess* at the thoughts of our interlocutor. In other words, viewed in the macro, reading is about *guessing at meaning* and the more vocabulary that one owns, the greater the opportunity for guessing appropriately and, consequently, the greater the opportunity for comprehension.

How is vocabulary largely acquired? Some believe that it is imitated. Others believe that it is memorized through the use of lists. Still others believe that it is primarily a byproduct of the reading process itself.

Research tells us that all output of language (that is, speaking and writing) is a direct result of *comprehensible input* or what an individual actually understands. We select vocabulary from what we comprehend, thus implying that vocabulary is not primarily imitated or memorized, but rather *self-selected*. There are infinitely more extralinguistic cues offered to help guarantee comprehension in oral discourse than offered through reading; for example, hand gestures, facial expressions, the physical world in which the discourse unfolds, to mention just a few. Stated another way, the initial point of attack for vocabulary may not be through reading, but rather through listening and speaking. Vocabulary is enhanced in environments where individuals have the opportunity to listen to meaningful discourse, offered in a variety of registers, and underscored by the opportunity for discussion. Perhaps, the following flow chart might best clarify this paragraph.



Language and its usage are subject to the societies in which they evolve. If vocabulary is the basis of literacy, and that same vocabulary is largely acquired through *oral discourse*, it might behoove us to examine the potential that exists for ambient vocabulary acquisition in our students. Consider the following areas of influence:

- society
- technology
- education

Society: American students conduct business almost exclusively in an informal register, a register quite different from the language of the classroom and textbooks. We are generally a society that prefers sound-bites and news capsules to a more expansive usage of language. This, of course, is reflective of a society traveling at hyper speed.

Technology: American students spend a good deal of their time in silence, headsets donned and wired to their personal, microchip-driven devices and video games. Methods of communication, such as e-mail, instant messenger and text messaging, all invite a minimalist's approach to discourse.

Education: Under the weight of high stakes testing, classrooms have fallen silent, defaulting instead to the transmission of those facts destined for assessment. Budgetary concerns atrophy courses that enhance language acquisition such as World Language, Drama, Vocal Music and Public Speaking.

If one totals up the combined impact of the sociological, technological and educational influences on language in America, it could be easily hypothesized that, with the exception of the informal register, students are spending their days essentially in silence, with little opportunity to garner new, varied and substantive vocabulary. Given the thesis proposed herewith, this *devolution of discourse* could speak volumes in explaining what we perceive as a 'literacy crisis' in America.

In combination with the remediations that school districts already have in place to support literacy, the following recommendations are offered herewith to develop a 'language-rich schoolhouse; one which aggressively seeks to expand language and, therefore, literacy:

1. The school house should confirm that vocabulary is fundamental to literacy;
2. The school house should confirm that vocabulary is largely self-selected and is garnered primarily through oral discourse.
3. The school house should confirm that all output of language is a direct result of *comprehensible input*, or what is understood.
4. The school house should confirm that literacy is the responsibility of all staff members. As a result, every teacher in each discipline has the responsibility to develop oral language in the students. *A rising tide raises all boats.*
5. The school house should support, and expand when needed, curricular areas that are directly related to the acquisition of oral language; such as World Languages, Drama, Debate, Public Speaking, Vocal and Instrumental Music, etc.

Where language flourishes, literacy thrives...