There's No Such Thing as a Reading Test

BY E. D. HIRSCH, JR., AND ROBERT PONDISCIO

It is among the most common of nightmares. You dream of taking a test for which you are completely unprepared—you've never studied the material or even attended the course. For millions of American schoolchildren, it is a nightmare from which they cannot wake, a trial visited upon them each year when the law requires them to take reading tests with little preparation. Sure, formally preparing for reading tests has become more than just a ritual for schools. It is practically their raison d'être! Yet students are not prepared in the way they need to be.

Schools and teachers may indeed be making a Herculean effort to raise reading scores, but for the most part these efforts do little to improve reading achievement and prepare children for college, a career, and a lifetime of productive, engaged citizenship. This wasted effort is not because our teachers are of low quality. Rather, too many of our schools have fundamental misconceptions about reading comprehension—how it works, how to improve it, and how to test it.

Reading, like riding a bike, is typically thought of as a skill we acquire as children and generally never lose. When you think about your ability to read—if you think about it at all—the chances are good that you perceive it as not just a skill, but a readily transferable skill. Once you learn how to read, you can competently read a novel, a newspaper article, or the latest memo from your bank. Reading is reading is reading. Either you can do it, or you cannot.

As explained in the articles on pages 3 and 30, this view of reading is only partially correct. The ability to translate written symbols into sounds, commonly called "decoding," is indeed a skill that can be taught and mastered. This explains why you are able to "read" nonsense words such as "rigfap" or "churbit." But to be fully literate is to have the communicative power of language at your command—to read, write, listen, and speak with *understanding*.

Cognitive scientists describe comprehension as domain specific. If a baseball fan reads "A-Rod hit into a 6-4-3 double play to end the game," he needs not another word to understand that the New York Yankees lost when Alex Rodriguez came up to bat with a man on first base and one out and then hit a ground ball to the shortstop, who threw to the second baseman, who relayed to first in time to catch Rodriguez for the final out. If you've never heard of A-Rod or a 6-4-3 double play and cannot reconstruct the game situation in your mind's eye, you are not a poor reader. You merely lack the domain-specific vocabulary and knowledge of baseball needed to fill in the gaps. Even simple texts, like those on reading tests, are riddled with gaps—domain knowledge and vocabulary that the writer assumes the reader knows.

Think of reading as a two-lock box, requiring two keys to open. The first key is decoding skills. The second key is vocabulary sufficient to understand what is being decoded. Reading comprehension tests are basically vocabulary tests. The verbal portion of the SAT is essentially a vocabulary test. The verbal section of the Armed Forces Qualification Test—which predicts income level, job performance, and much else—is chiefly a vocabulary test. So, to lift us out of our low performance compared with other nations, narrow the achievement gap between groups, and offer low-income students a way out of poverty, all we need to do is greatly increase students' vocabularies. That's it.

Sounds great, but it is misleadingly facile, since vocabulary size is increased only trivially by explicit word study, and most word learning is slow and imperceptible. But, as Marilyn Jager Adams has shown (see page 3), it is much faster when teachers stay on a topic long enough to inculcate new knowledge, thereby creating a familiar context for learning new words. As a result, *the only road to a large vocabulary is the gradual, cumulative acquisition of knowledge*. Our minds are so formed that we can rarely know things without knowing the words for them, nor can we know words without knowing the

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attributes of the things referred to. So there's just one reliable way to increase the vocabulary size of all students in a class: offer them a coherent, cumulative education starting in the earliest years (i.e., no later than kindergarten).

Today, *we test our children's reading ability without regard to whether we have given them the vocabulary and knowledge they need to be successful*. Consider a reasonable, simple, even elegant alternative: tying the content of reading tests to specific curricular content. Here's how it would work. Let's say a state (or the nation) adopted a specific, content-rich, grade-by-grade core curriculum. And let's say the fourth-grade science curriculum included the circulatory system, atoms and molecules, electricity, and the earth's geologic layers and weather. The reading test should include not just the fiction and poetry that were part of the English language arts curriculum, but also nonfiction readings on the specific science topics addressed in the science curriculum. And other passages on the reading test would be taken from topics specified in the core curriculum in other subjects.

The benefits of such curriculum-based reading tests would be many: Tests would be fairer and offer a better reflection of how well a student had learned the particular year's curriculum. Tests would also exhibit "consequential validity," meaning they would actually improve education. Instead of wasting hours on mind-numbing test prep and reading-strategy lessons of limited value, the best test-preparation strategy would be learning the material in the curriculum.

By contrast, let's imagine what it is like to be a fourth-grade boy in a struggling South Bronx elementary school, sitting for a high-stakes reading test. Because his school has large numbers of students below grade level, it has drastically cut back on science, social studies, art, music—even gym and recess—to focus on reading and math. He has spent much of the year practicing reading-comprehension strategies.

The test begins, and the very first passage concerns the customs of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. He does not know what a custom is; nor does he know who the Dutch were, or even what a colony is. He has never heard of Amsterdam, old or new. Certainly it has never come up in class. Without relevant vocabulary and knowledge, he struggles. Extra drilling in comprehension strategies would not help—he needs someone to teach him about New Amsterdam.

His low score comes in and the finger-pointing that plagues American education begins. But do not blame the tests. Taxpayers are entitled to know if the schools they support are any good, and reading tests, all things considered, are quite reliable. Do not blame the test writers. Since no state has adopted a common core curriculum, they have no idea what topics are being taught in school; their job is done when tests show certain technical characteristics. It is unfair to blame teachers, because they are mainly operating to the best of their abilities using the ineffective methods in which they were trained. And let's not blame the parents of our struggling young man in the South Bronx. Is it unreasonable for them to assume that a child who dutifully goes to school every day will gain access to the same rich, enabling vocabulary and knowledge that more affluent children take for granted? This boy's parents did not decide to minimize social studies and science instruction, thereby minimizing the chances that he would have the vocabulary and knowledge needed to comprehend the passages on the reading test.

Teaching skills, vocabulary, and knowledge is what schools are supposed to do. The only unreasonable thing is our refusal to see reading for what it really is, and to teach and test accordingly. ❑