What is the 'Simple View of Reading'? Henrietta Dombey from the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) takes us through the background to our understanding of how children actually learn to read. In this article she unpicks and questions the thinking behind a diet based on SVR.

What is it?

As a formula, The Simple View of Reading (SVR) presents Reading Comprehension (RC) as the product of Listening Comprehension (LC) and Decoding (D). That is, \( RC = LC \times D \). as demonstrated in the diagram in Figure 1.

The SVR was adopted by the Rose Report and forms a central part of the Primary National Strategy’s view of literacy learning (Rose, 2006; DfES, 2006). But it is not a recent idea. In the 1980s, when the ‘reading wars’ raged, this equation was put forward as an attempt to reconcile the two opposing camps of early literacy teaching – the Whole Language or ‘Real Books’ approach on the one hand and the Phonics view on the other (Gough and Tumner, 1986). These two approaches are often represented as ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’.

Gough and Tumner claimed that the SVR acknowledges the value of the Whole Language approach by positioning reading as a linguistic activity, but also gives Phonics an essential role. However, neither side was happy: those in the Whole Language camp saw insufficient recognition of the complexity of linguistic competence and the reader’s expectation of text, while those in the Phonics camp saw insufficient detail about the processes involved in decoding. Most researchers and professionals now agree that reading involves both, but many consider that the relationship between them is not shown adequately in the SVR equation.
It has nonetheless been used to frame what is now a mandatory approach to the teaching of reading in England’s primary schools (DfES, 2006). With decoding equated with synthetic phonics, it is used to support the idea that synthetic phonics “should be the prime approach used in the teaching of early reading” (DfES, 2006, p. 54).

**English spelling and synthetic phonics**

The complexity and lack of consistency of the relationship between spoken words and their written representations in English poses a very real problem for literacy learners. As we all know well, in such common words as ‘was’ and ‘said’, there is no straightforward one to one match between every phoneme and grapheme (the letter or group of letters representing a phoneme).

The vowels in words such as ‘fast’ and ‘ball’ pose problems. However, many apparently irregular spellings in English follow rime patterns, that is to say that the pronunciation of the vowel is determined by the following consonants. So although the letter ‘a’ represents different phonemes in ‘cast’ and ‘call’, the rime units have the same value in ‘fast’ and ‘fall’, and also ‘past’ and ‘pall’.

Words such as ‘duvet’ and ‘foyer’ retain their French spelling. The letters ‘ed’ on the end of ‘strolled’, ‘jumped’ and ‘landed’ all mark the past tense, but are pronounced in three different ways.

English spelling is governed as much by meaning and word origin as it is by regular phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

Synthetic phonics teaches children to ‘build up’ words, through sounding them out, one grapheme at a time. This works well for languages such as Spanish and Finnish. But it simply does not work for many of the commonest words of English. Given this complexity, the term ‘decoding’, when applied to reading English, must be taken to mean more than synthetic phonics.

**Recent research on decoding**

Meanwhile, there have been significant advances in studies of decoding, which is taken here to refer to the identification of English words, rather than the pseudo words with ‘phonic’ spelling. A number of studies have proposed a ‘dual route’ model of reading (e.g., Castles, 2006). In this model, the straightforward phonological path (‘sounding out’) is supplemented by an additional ‘orthographic’ path for reading English.

This means that to identify many words the reader draws on a repertoire of spelling patterns representing units larger than the individual phoneme. Some argue (e.g. Ziegler and Goswami, 2005) that a range of units of different sizes must be considered, such as the rimes of words (the ‘all’ in ‘call’ and the ‘ast’ in ‘fast’) or even, as with ‘one’ and ‘two’, the whole word. They see identifying words in English as a matter of attending to units of varying grain sizes.

It is instructive to look at what children actually do with text. Brown and Deavers (1999) have shown that children learning to read English do not limit themselves to processing words one grapheme at a
time, but instead adopt ‘flexible unit’ size strategies, complementing synthetic phonics with attention to rimes, syllables and whole word patterns, the very units of varying grain size’ that Ziegler and Goswami (2005) have written about.

There is now a large body of research to show that children perceive rime units more readily than individual phonemes and, by means of analogy, can make active use of them in identifying words (Goswami and Bryant, 1990).

However these patterns do not always hold. The words ‘most’, ‘host’ and ‘post’ work differently from ‘cost’, ‘lost’ and ‘frost’. And of course some spellings such as ‘wind’ and ‘read’ may be pronounced in two ways. Such words cannot be correctly identified from their spelling patterns alone.

**Morphology and semantic knowledge**

So it is hardly surprising that researchers such as Plaut (2005) have shown that word recognition in English is influenced by morphology and semantics, as well as phonology and orthography. Our knowledge of morphology (units of word meaning) aids our recognition of complex words such as ‘misled’.

Yetta Goodman and colleagues have much to tell us from decades of observational studies of children in ordinary classrooms, tackling normal classroom texts. They have shown that, to identify problem words, children learning to read supplement the information from the letters with semantic (meaning) and syntactic (grammar) cues from the surrounding text (Goodman et al., 2005). We should emphasise that this is not random guessing.

Over thirty years ago, Rumelhart conceptualised the act of reading written texts as “simultaneous, multi-level interactive processing” (1976). In a dynamic and robust mediation between the ‘top-down’ whole language advocates and the ‘bottom-up’ proponents of synthetic phonics, Rumelhart argues that, for both experienced readers and novices, important influences operate in both directions. Semantic knowledge aids identification of words and letters, while through perception of letters and words, the reader builds expectations about meaning.

**Making sense of written language**

Written language differs in a number of important respects from spoken language. The vocabulary and syntax (Crystal and Davy, 1969), the larger structures (Tannen, 1982) and the use of cohesive devices (Halliday and Hassan, 1976), which knit it into a textured whole, combine to make written language markedly distinct from spoken. Even a story written for young children, such as Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1970) differs in all these respects from the language spoken between parent and child.

Researchers have noted that the processes for making sense of these two forms of language also differ in some important ways (e.g. Kintsch, 1998). The continuing presence of the text on page or screen allows the reader to move around and to vary the reading pace. This makes it possible to repair error and uncertainty, relate what is being read to knowledge gained elsewhere, in a more measured and careful way than speech allows. Readers can apply comprehension strategies not available to listeners. But the SVR takes no account of these different procedures.
Reading is not simply a matter of matching written words to words we already know in speech. We can tell this is true for children when they mispronounce a word in speech that they have encountered in print. My son at seven said he had run right round the block and was absolutely ravenous, which he pronounced like the bird ‘raven’ with the addition of the suffix ‘ous’.

The model does not take account of learners who come to reading English with superior listening comprehension in another language and perhaps already fluent in reading it. It is not clear how this knowledge is supposed to affect the equation, whether, for example LC refers to comprehension in English only.

**Assessing Reading Comprehension**

The extent to which batteries of ‘objective’ questions posed on short passages can assess a child’s capacity to make sense of more demanding texts such as a long story or a detailed account of global warming has been called into question (e.g. Paris and Stahl, 2005). These kinds of texts require more than decoding and listening comprehension. They need skilled reading.

**Re-interpreting the equation**

There is much more to word identification than synthetic phonics and much more to text comprehension than understanding spoken language. We need to interpret the terms of the equation with care and recognise its limitations.

- Decoding must be seen to denote the identification of words typical of English texts, including irregular words such as ‘said’ and ‘island’. It should not be equated with synthetic phonics, but should involve ‘flexible unit size strategies’ (Brown and Deavers, 1999), morphology and semantics.
- Listening Comprehension should be taken to include comprehension of written text.
- Reading comprehension should be thought of in more complex ways than standardised comprehension tests imply.
- The two aspects of learning to read should not be conceptualised as rigidly separated. Instead we should see reading as a multi-level interactive process (Rumelhart, 1976).

The difference between spoken and written language, and between the processes involved in listening and reading, coupled with the overlap between decoding and comprehension indicate that to teach children to read English effectively, we need to do more than teach them synthetic phonics and careful listening.

**Classroom implications**

Currently the SVR frames and justifies the heavy emphasis given to synthetic phonics in England’s official view of the teaching of reading to young children (DFES, 2006). But in so doing it neglects much of what we now know about language, spelling and the processes of making sense of spoken and written language.

We need to recognise that the complexity of English orthography makes learning to read in English particularly challenging. So we need to:
• encourage children to use rime and other sources of information to identify words;
• help them adopt ‘flexible unit size’ strategies;
• alert them to the morphological and orthographic patterning of English words;
• familiarise them with the language of books;
• teach them to make the most of the opportunities written text offers to the reader to search for meaning in a focused and flexible way.

All this needs to be done in a rich environment of meaning-making, where children are helped to draw on their developing understanding of a text to aid in the identification of its words, and to look at those words in close detail to refine their comprehension.

We also need to ensure that children are helped to see the rewards in terms of the construction of interesting meaning that can come from reading. To this end we must ensure that, as we teach children to read, a simplistic equation does not obscure the need for attention to such essential matters as enjoyment, engagement and perseverance.

Among its many activities, the United Kingdom Literacy Association is currently engaged in Building Communities of Readers (Cremin et al., 2009). This research project involves primary schools in five LAs working to develop the range of children’s reading, addressing concerns that the Simple View of Reading puts at serious risk.

References


Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Collins, F., Powell, S. and Safford, K. Teachers as readers: building communities of readers. Literacy 43, 1, pp. 11-19


