

Reading Is Language: Closing the Oral Language Gap to Unlock Literacy for All Students

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To reach our nation's literacy goals at scale, literacy reform must promote a broader view of the science of reading—one that recognizes early oral language skills as the foundation for both decoding and reading comprehension. This article argues that emphasizing oral language is the next critical step to improving literacy for all students. We begin by examining the limitations of the simple view of reading (SVR) as it has been applied in practice, then introduce the reading is language (RIL) model as a developmental framework that places oral language at the center of literacy. We review evidence that oral language difficulties are prevalent, systematically missed by current screening practices, and responsive to well-designed interventions. We then present school-level implementation data showing that even students who meet word-reading benchmarks can carry hidden language vulnerabilities. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of implications for screening, service delivery, and professional learning supports needed to translate this research into integrated practice.

An Incomplete Science of Reading

Despite widespread adoption of policies and professional learning aligned with reading science, literacy outcomes in the U.S. remain a cause for concern, suggesting that exposure has not yet translated into coherent understanding or integrated practices (Griffith & Fitzpatrick, 2026). In 2024, only 31% of fourth-grade students in the U.S. met reading proficiency standards on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a noted decline from 2019.

The SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) conceptualizes reading comprehension as the product of decoding and language comprehension. While this framework is valuable for understanding individual differences, it does not explain how reading develops over time. In practice, separating decoding from language comprehension has contributed to instructional approaches that treat phonological skills, lexical knowledge, and broader language abilities as independent rather than integrated processes. As a result, its silence on the development of decoding itself has led to implementations that emphasized phonics-based reading instruction despite evidence that language plays a critical role in both learning to decode and understanding texts.

With the SVR as a backdrop, the science of reading is currently witnessing an important shift in how we think about reading and, perhaps more importantly, reading difficulties.

Rather than the well-evidenced focus on the importance of code-related skills and phonics instruction for learning to read, the critical role of oral language skills has come to the forefront. (Snowling & Hulme, 2025). Progress in the application of research to reading instruction needs to reframe literacy as a developmental, language-based, and system-level process; in short, language needs to be placed center stage in the curriculum for reading and more generally in the classroom.

Reframing Reading as a Language Process

The RIL model provides a developmental framework that emphasizes oral language as the foundation for decoding, reading comprehension, and writing (Snowling & Hulme, 2025). Here, oral language refers to a broad range of skills, including vocabulary, grammar, linguistic comprehension, and discourse. According to the model, reading development is wave-like, with waves ebbing and flowing as language guides literacy development, each wave dependent on the one before. In turn, as literacy develops, there are reciprocal connections with language: language skills support the development of decoding and reading comprehension, and reading skills, in turn, facilitate the development of language skills.

Within this view, the status of the oral language system when a child enters school is

critical because it forms the basis for the development of code-related skills, such as letter knowledge and phoneme awareness, which, in turn, are shaped by the home learning environment. Once code-related skills are refined, later waves bring vocabulary and grammar to the service of decoding. This wave causes a ripple effect. Good decoders read more, and print exposure not only boosts reading fluency but also increases lexical knowledge, promoting what is termed “book language” (Nation et al., 2022) as well as knowledge of the world. Therefore, children with preschool language difficulties are at risk of later reading problems in both learning to read words and understanding what is read. Emphasizing that language screening to identify at-risk learners who require language support is critical. Without screening to assess early oral language skills and to align interventions for those with language weaknesses, many children will fail to develop adequate literacy skills. In this view, an entire population of students with developmental language disorder (DLD), affecting approximately 7% of children (Tomblin et al., 1997), will be destined for reading failure. Most current frameworks for multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) focus solely on decoding and do not emphasize the importance of assessing children’s oral language skills and providing suitable interventions to support oral language development in those who need it. Failing to assess oral language early will perpetuate inequalities in literacy, social-emotional development, and long-term academic success.

The Case for Oral Language in Literacy Reform

Within the last several years, the focus on the science of reading has significantly shifted the educational landscape. Educators, administrators, and families have seen changes in legislation, curriculum, assessment, and professional learning. These shifts have brought much-needed attention to evidence-based practice, helping many schools strengthen their teaching of foundational skills. At the same time, these reforms invite reflection. If many schools are implementing science-of-reading-aligned practices, what are they missing? The answer is oral language.

In most schools, literacy reform has prioritized decoding skills with an emphasis on regular assessments of word recognition skills, which are relatively easy to administer. Student progress in this area should be celebrated, but an exclusive focus on word reading risks neglecting broader language skills at the heart

of literacy development. As the field considers what comes next, literacy reform must recognize oral language as a key foundation of reading, learning, and academic success. The inclusion and emphasis on oral language are not a rejection of current reform efforts but rather a call to deepen them. Professional learning has created meaningful opportunities for educators to engage with research on how to teach children to read, and the SVR has become a widely adopted framework in schools; however, as argued previously, this has also led to some false impressions in practice. Similarly, the National Reading Panel played a significant role in shaping literacy reform, as evidenced by its five core pillars (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension). It could be argued that this five-pillar framing may have caused educators to treat each pillar as a standalone, isolated skill rather than understanding how they work together as integrated cognitive processes. In other words, the graphic simplified and siloed what is actually a complex, interconnected system (Catts, 2022).

In schools, oral language is often discussed as an umbrella term with many components. In education and clinical practice, it is common to distinguish between expressive and receptive language skills (i.e., speaking and listening). However, a great deal of evidence from studies of language development shows that these two broad aspects of language correlate highly with each other. So, in simple terms, we can think of language as a single, unified skill—most children tend to either have generally better or poorer language abilities, rather than having different types of language skills.

In education, language is the medium of instruction. Most of what children learn in school is conveyed by language. If a child has problems understanding what is said, this will have serious consequences for their ability to learn in school. Similarly, teachers rely on children’s expressive language skills to assess what they have understood. More specifically, in the RIL model (Snowling & Hulme, 2025), language skills provide the foundation for the development of both decoding and reading

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comprehension. Then, in the middle school years onward, children increasingly “read to learn,” developing a great deal of knowledge from reading. Without good language skills, students are at risk for reading difficulties. Research has consistently shown that children with weak oral language skills are at increased risk for later reading difficulties, particularly comprehension difficulties, even when word reading appears relatively intact (Catts et al., 2006; Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Language skills are also critical for psycho-social development. Children with poor language skills may struggle to form and maintain friendships (Mok et al., 2014). Furthermore, language skills play an important role in the development of relationships between students and teachers (Justice et al., 2008; Spilt et al., 2015). In summary, language skills form a critical foundation for all aspects of education and beyond.

Identifying Language Risk in Schools

Schools are now far better equipped to identify and respond to word-reading difficulties than language difficulties. In many districts, MTSS, systematic phonics instruction, and strong screening practices have made early reading performance easily accessible. Educators have access to assessment, enabling them to see student progress. Teachers can often recognize when a child is struggling to decode, and professional learning has provided guidance on how to respond. This is important progress. But language difficulties are far more likely to go unrecognized. Unlike decoding, the presence of oral language is less bounded and less obvious in standard classroom assessments. For example, a student may decode adequately while still struggling to understand complex language, follow extended discourse, organize ideas, or make meaning across a text. When those weaknesses go undetected, instructional decisions begin and end with focus on what can be measured rather than what is most necessary to support comprehension.

Current screening efforts primarily identify decoding difficulties, leaving many students

with undetected language difficulties (Adlof & Hogan, 2019). However, approximately 50% of children with DLD also meet the diagnostic criteria for dyslexia as a co-occurring condition (Adlof & Hogan, 2018). So not only are these children present in our classrooms, but they are also typically not recognized. Generally, students who struggle with language comprehension in primary grades are not recognized as at risk because the instructional focus is on word reading, and at least some accomplish this. As language becomes more complex, students may or may not be flagged for other comorbidities such as dyslexia or ADHD. Without a preventive model, identifying conditions is left to chance, underscoring the urgency of systematic prevention. Without systems, educators are left trying to support what they have not been prepared to detect. This challenge becomes even more pressing when one considers the overlap between language and reading disabilities. Although dyslexia and DLD are distinct, they frequently co-occur, and both place students at risk for reading comprehension difficulties for different reasons (Adlof & Hogan, 2018). In practical terms, many students in classrooms present with language weaknesses, word-reading weaknesses, or both. If school systems focus too narrowly on print-based indicators, some of these students may not be identified until later, when academic language demands intensify, and comprehension difficulties become harder to remediate.

Fortunately, it is possible to assess children's language skills in schools quickly and accurately. LanguageScreen (Hulme et al., 2024) is an automated app that runs on a computer, tablet, or phone and allows educators to quickly assess a child's language skills. The assessment consists of four different measures: receptive vocabulary (naming pictures), expressive vocabulary (matching a spoken word to one of four pictures), sentence repetition (repeating sentences of increasing complexity, a sensitive measure of grammatical difficulties), and listening comprehension (answering questions about spoken stories, a measure of both language comprehension and expression). This assessment has been widely used in the UK (with almost one million children assessed) and has now been adapted for wider use.

Evidence for Teaching Language & Building Readers

There is good evidence that language programs delivered in school can improve language, word reading, and reading comprehension skills. These transfer effects from language

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teaching to reading outcomes are exactly what would be predicted from the RIL model (Snowling & Hulme, 2025).

Rogde and colleagues (2019) reported a meta-analysis of 28 randomized controlled trials and 15 quasi-experiments evaluating language interventions. The studies differed markedly in quality, but those with interventions involving small groups demonstrated quite large effects ($d=0.25$). They concluded that high-quality language interventions, especially when delivered to small groups, can have meaningful effects. Many of the studies in this review focused exclusively on vocabulary instruction rather than broader language skills, and these interventions appeared to have little effect on reading comprehension. However, other studies targeting broader oral language skills have shown benefits for reading comprehension (Fricke et al., 2013; Hulme et al., 2025) and for written expression (Esposito et al., 2025).

Gillam et al. (2025) developed a multicomponent intervention—Supporting Knowledge in Language and Literacy (SKILL)—for children in Grades 1 to 4 to promote oral narrative skills using modeling, recasting, and scaffolding. Children who received the intervention performed better on narrative comprehension ($d=.20$), narrative production ($d=.36$), and story structure ($d=.61$); effects were maintained at a five-month follow-up. Notably, the training generalized to written narrative production and, for children in Grades 3 and 4, to reading comprehension, with benefits similar for monolingual children and English language learners.

Similar strategies are embedded in the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI; Fricke et al., 2017), which has been renamed Tel Ted in the U.S. Tel Ted is a 20-week Tier 2 supplementary intervention for children entering school with poor language. It comprises daily activities to promote vocabulary, narrative, and listening comprehension; in the second 10 weeks, training in letter knowledge and phoneme awareness is also included. Tel Ted is delivered in small groups (3-5 students) and to individuals by trained classroom assistants/teacher aides to children selected for low language skills. A series of randomized trials of children receiving the program have all reported positive effects on language ($d=.21$ to $.80$), and the intervention with the largest effect (Fricke et al., 2013) generalized to reading comprehension ($d=.52$; see Snowling et al., 2021 for review). Furthermore, a large effectiveness trial involving 193 schools (West et al., 2021) reported that the program was as effective for English

language learners as for monolinguals and for children from low-SES backgrounds. Importantly, a follow-up study of the children found persistent benefits for their language skills 2 years after the intervention had ceased, as well as improvements in word reading and reading comprehension.

It is clear that well-designed oral language programs improve language and, in turn, support reading comprehension and social-emotional well-being. An important question, however, is how these programs translate into everyday classroom practices. Data from implementation in U.S. schools suggest that patterns observed in controlled trials are evident in real-world settings but also reveal an important complexity. In one elementary school implementing evidence-based literacy instruction and universal oral language screening, systematic implementation of evidence-based code-focused instruction was associated with substantial gains in word reading proficiency on DIBELS 8 in K–2 classrooms. The greatest gains were for those who were within or at benchmark at the beginning of the year (35 % above benchmark, 50% at benchmark, and 15% below benchmark). By the end of the year, 80% of students scored above benchmark, 12% were at benchmark, and 0% remained below benchmark.

However, when oral language was screened alongside word reading, a different pattern emerged. In a sample of first-grade students, all students demonstrated well above or above the benchmark on the middle-of-the-year reading composite. Despite strong decoding outcomes, several students demonstrated below-benchmark oral language skills. These students would not have been identified on the word reading measures alone.

While it is notable that 19% of even the strongest decoders in Grade 1 screened at risk in oral language, the broader and more important pattern emerges when examining oral language development across the full cohort of first-grade students over time. Tracking 61 students from the spring of kindergarten through the spring of Grade 1 revealed a substantial proportion of progress following the introduction of universal Tier 1 oral language supports. The proportion of students meeting benchmark expectations increased from 47% to 78% following this implementation.

Despite these gains, a considerable proportion of students continued to demonstrate language vulnerability, including a smaller group with significant language needs. At the beginning of Grade 1, 39% of students exhibited

some level of language risk, including 8% who remained well below benchmark. These patterns were not confined to English language learners but were evident across the broader student population. The end-of-year data demonstrates a continued risk reduction for those with language vulnerabilities. However, a subset of learners (5%) continued to demonstrate persistent language needs, suggesting the need for more intensive support beyond Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction.

The persistence of language vulnerability, even as decoding and early language outcomes improve, highlights the importance of systematic screening for the identification of risk at six-month intervals. Students with ongoing language risk may include those with language-based learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia and DLD), whose needs are unlikely to be detected through word-reading measures alone. Without direct and repeated assessment of oral language, these students may remain unidentified until later grades, when comprehension demands increase and intervention becomes more difficult.

These findings point to a critical implication for literacy systems: Improving outcomes is not solely about implementing effective programs, but also about educators' knowledge and tools to respond to patterns in student development. It is significant for school leaders to recognize that students showing advanced to average word-reading abilities are still susceptible to language vulnerabilities. These hidden vulnerabilities become visible when schools screen early for language weaknesses in addition to reading weaknesses. In summary, addressing gaps in oral language development requires a decisive leadership move to invest in educators' knowledge and recalibrate MTSS to address both sides of the simple view of reading.

Recent evidence suggests that although literacy policies and professional learning are increasingly aligned with the findings from the science of reading, this has not led to an integrated understanding of instruction (Griffith & Fitzpatrick, 2026). At the same time, policy has not kept pace with contemporary science, particularly in recognizing the language-based and developmental nature of reading (Odegard et al., 2025). Together, these findings suggest that the central challenge is not adoption, but the translation of research into coherent, integrated practice grounded in a developmental model of reading.

Educators need preparation within an oral language developmental framework, including how language weaknesses manifest and

how to support students with these weaknesses through instruction. The expectation that educators will "figure it out" without aligned tools and systems is neither realistic nor equitable. Given that literacy reform has been less focused on sentence comprehension, narrative organization, inferencing, and expressive precision, teachers need tools to support vocabulary, syntax, and discourse—not as isolated skills, but as an integrative pathway to comprehension. A preventative literacy model must extend beyond word-reading indicators to include systematic attention to oral language development. That does not mean replacing current literacy efforts; it means completing them. How we lead the future of literacy reform should not be framed as a choice between foundational reading skills and oral language. Children need both. The question is whether our systems, assessments, and professional learning reflect that reality.

Improving long-term literacy outcomes, therefore, depends not only on programs and policies but on educators and leaders who bring these systems to life. Investing in their knowledge and capacity to build and sustain system-level change is essential to improving children's access to comprehension, learning, and long-term opportunity. ■

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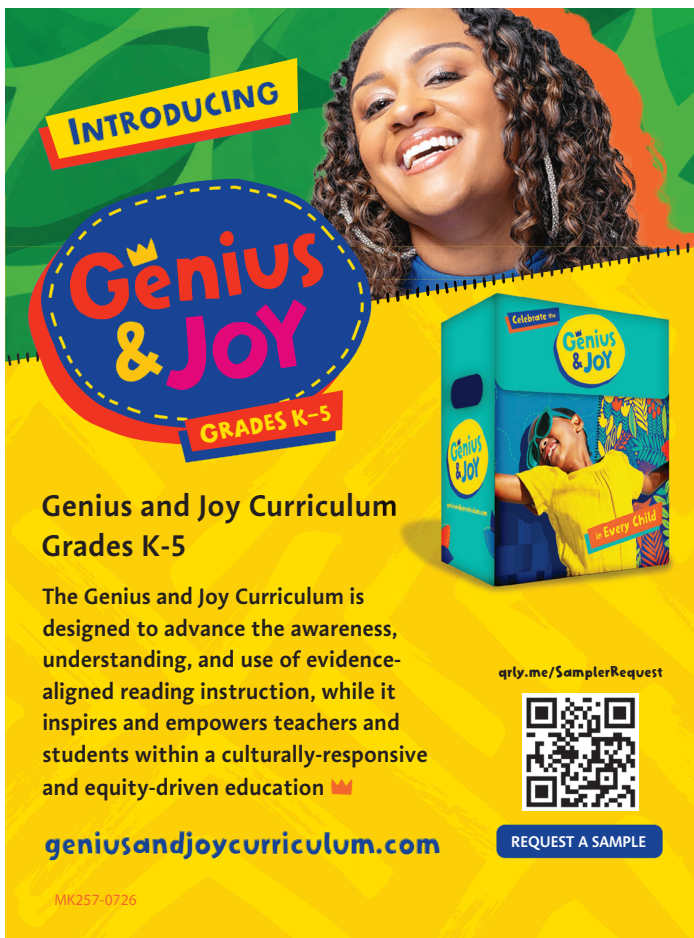
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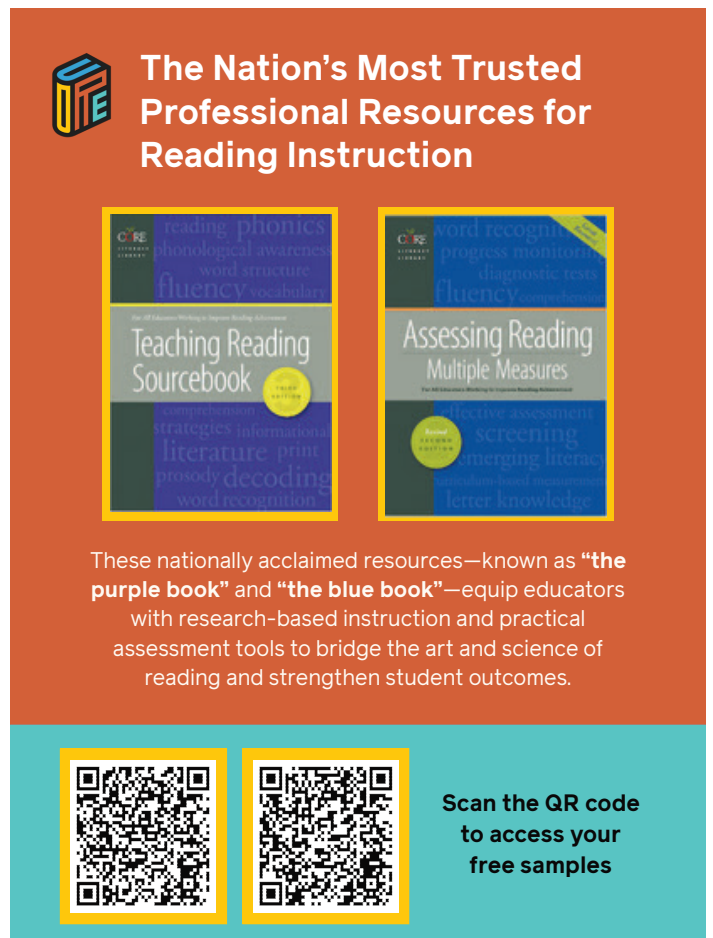
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