

# How Children Learn to Read

How reading develops, how we support language learners,  
and how parents can help at home

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Wednesday 11 March 2026  
14:00-15:30 ISG Cafeteria

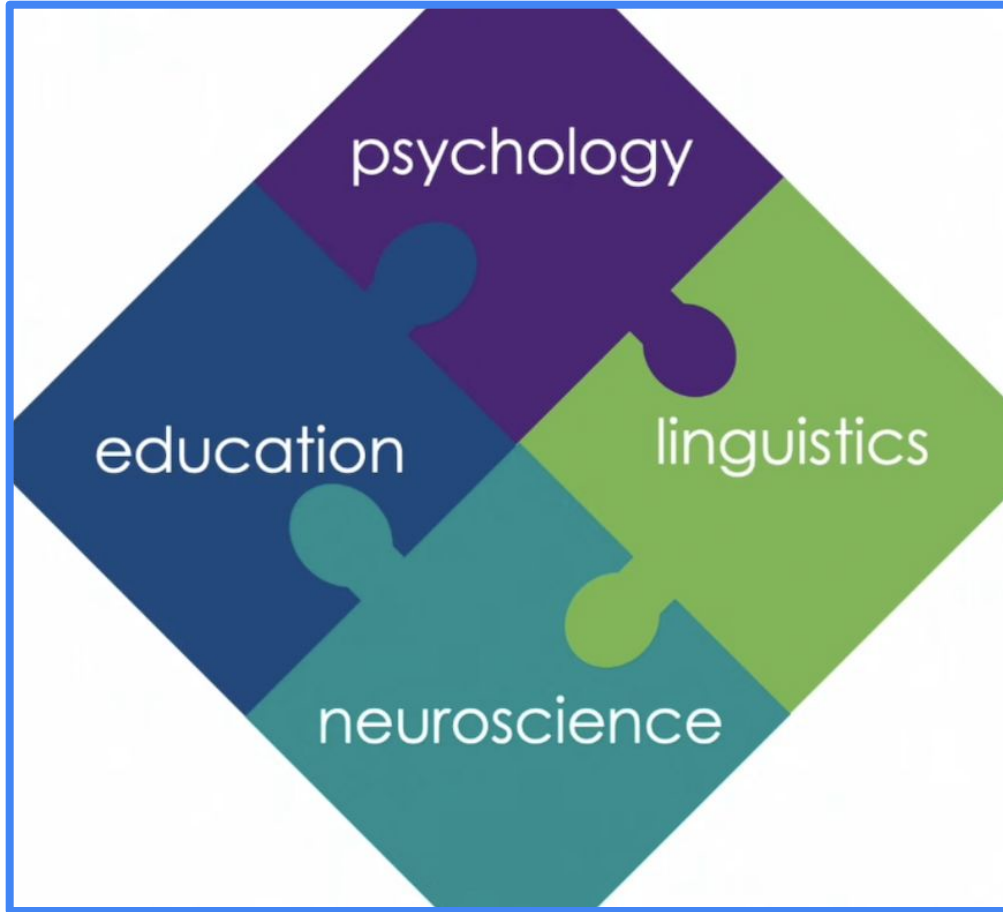


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- *Understand how reading develops*
- *Learn what the Science of Reading says*
- *Recognize how we support reading at school*
- *Understand how EAL learners develop literacy*
- *Learn how families can help at home*

# What Is The Science of Reading?



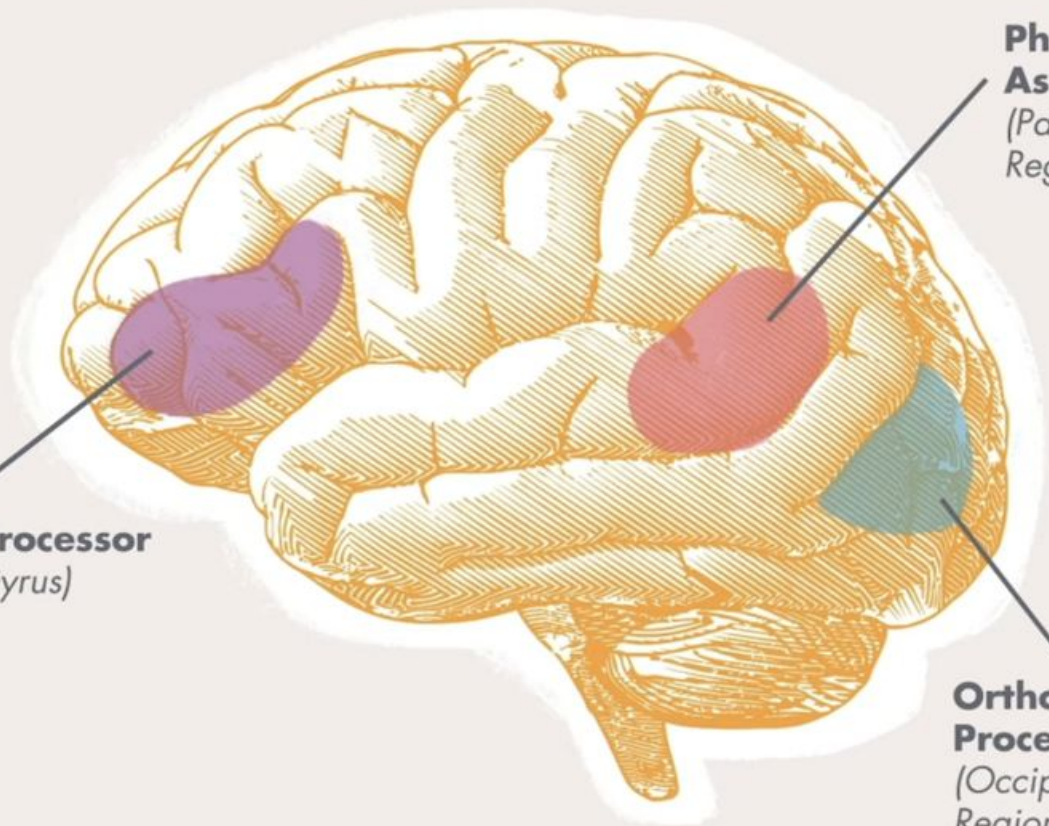
# The Reading Brain

**Phonological Processor**  
*(Inferior Frontal Gyrus)*

**Phonological Assembly**  
*(Parieto-Temporal Region)*

**Orthographic Processor**  
*(Occipito-Temporal Region)*

*Left Hemisphere*



# What is Reading?

## Reading is not natural like speaking. The brain must:

- Connect sounds to letters **C /c/**
- Blend sounds into words **c-a-t**
- Recognize words automatically **cat**

- Understand language

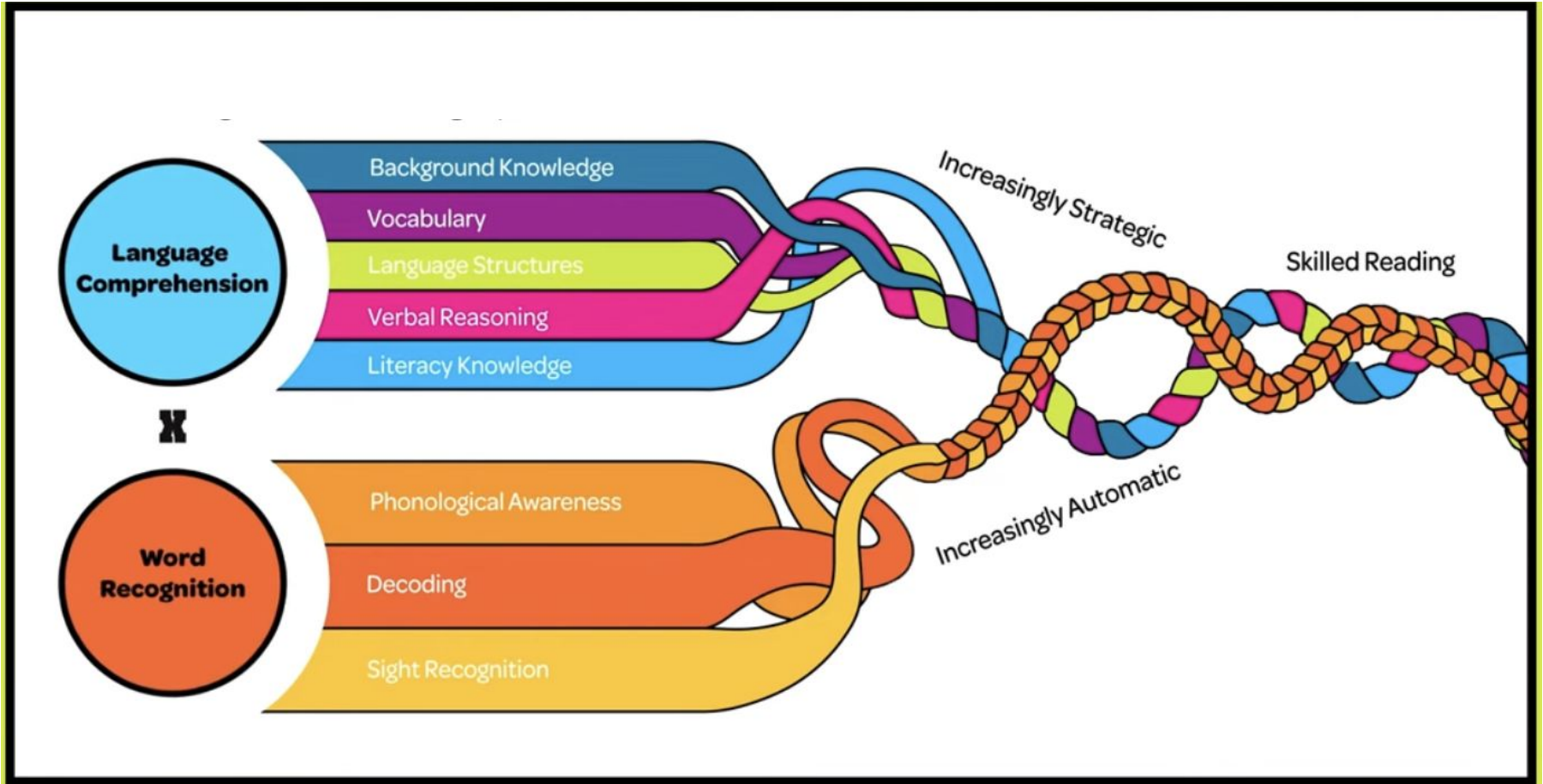


- Think about meaning



**Word Recognition × Language Comprehension = Reading**

# Reading is Complicated!



# PART 1: WORD RECOGNITION

# What are the stages of initial reading development? Awareness

**Phonological awareness** = Playing with larger parts of sound:

- Rhyming (cat/hat)
- Syllables (bas-ket)
- Beginning sounds

**Phonemic awareness** = Hearing and manipulating individual sounds (phonemes):

- **Identify** first sounds (sun → /s/)
- **Blend** sounds ( /m/ /a/ /p/ → map )
- **Segment** sounds (dog → /d/ /o/ /g/)
- **Manipulate** sounds (cat → change /c/ to /h/ → hat)

- **Oral** (no letters yet)
- **A strong predictor of reading success**

# What are the stages of initial reading development?

## Phonics (Reading and Spelling)

Connecting Sounds to Letters- children connect the sounds they can hear to written letters.

- ◆ Letter-sound correspondence c=/c/ ck=/K/ ph=/f/
- ◆ Blending (for reading)

Look at letters → say sounds → blend c-a-t → cat

- ◆ Segmenting (for spelling)

Hear a word → break into sounds → write letters dog → /d/ /o/ /g/

### Why segmenting matters:

- Spelling strengthens reading
- Writing reinforces sound–symbol connections
- It deepens phonemic awareness

Reading and spelling grow together — they use the same sound–symbol knowledge.

I'm going to say sounds slowly. You blend them into a word.

- Was it automatic?
- Did you have to hold the sounds in your memory?

This is what early readers do all day.

It requires working memory and practice.

# You try it! Segmenting

I'll say a word. You break it into sounds.

- Count the sounds on your fingers
- Say each sound separately

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Was that harder?

Segmenting is often harder than blending.

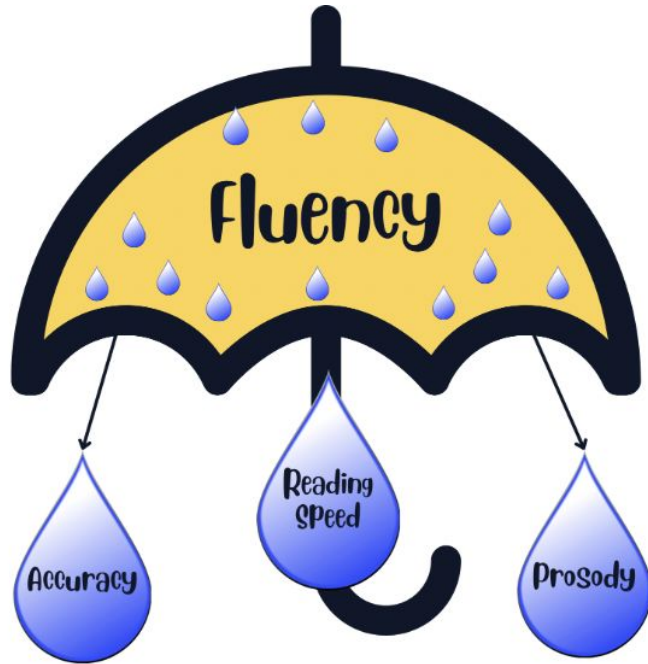
English has complex sound structures.

Children must: Hear each sound clearly- Hold them in order- Match them to letters- Write them down

**This is why spelling mistakes are normal in early development.**

# What are the stages of initial reading development? Fluency

Frees up brain space for comprehension and builds confidence.



Fluency develops through:

- Repeated reading,
- Listening to models,
- Reading aloud

I  
I can  
I can jump  
I can jump so  
I can jump so high!

**Teh smrat dgo qickly jmpus ovre teh snwoy fenc,  
but teh cta wlaked slyly alnog teh gaden paht.  
Evrey wrod needd to be dceoded befere this  
sentecne makes sense.**

***(Take 10 seconds to read aloud)***

- Were you able to understand the meaning?
- How much mental energy did decoding take?

**Slow, effortful reading drains cognitive resources.**

**The smart dog quickly jumps over the snowy fence, but the cat walked slyly along the garden path. Every word needs to be decoded before this sentence makes sense.**

How much easier was comprehension?

Could you think about the meaning instead of decoding words?

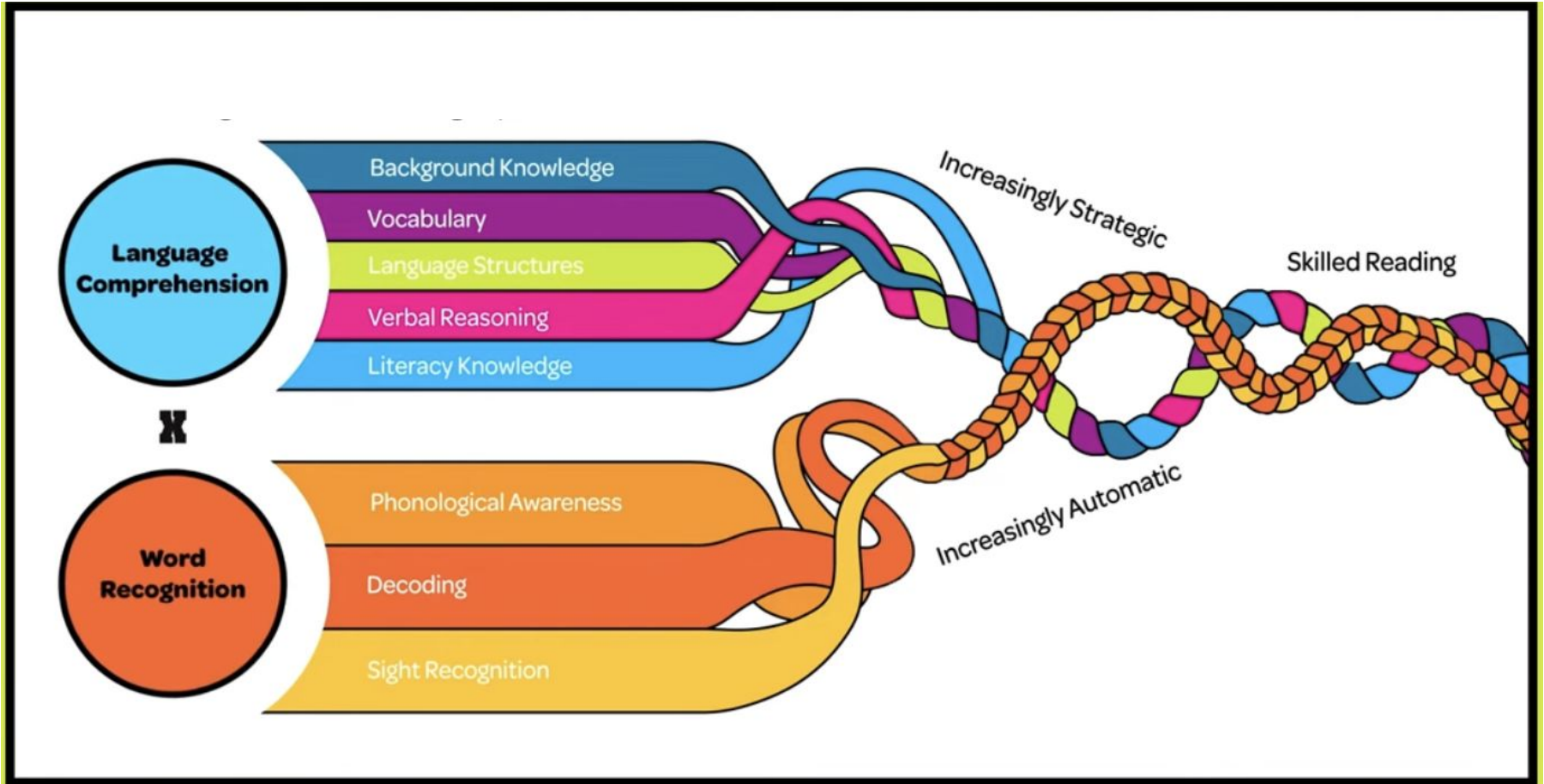
**Fluency allows the brain to focus on meaning instead of decoding.**

**The faster, smoother, and more automatic the reading, the more mental energy is available for thinking, predicting, and enjoying the story.**

# **PART 2:**

# **Language Comprehension**

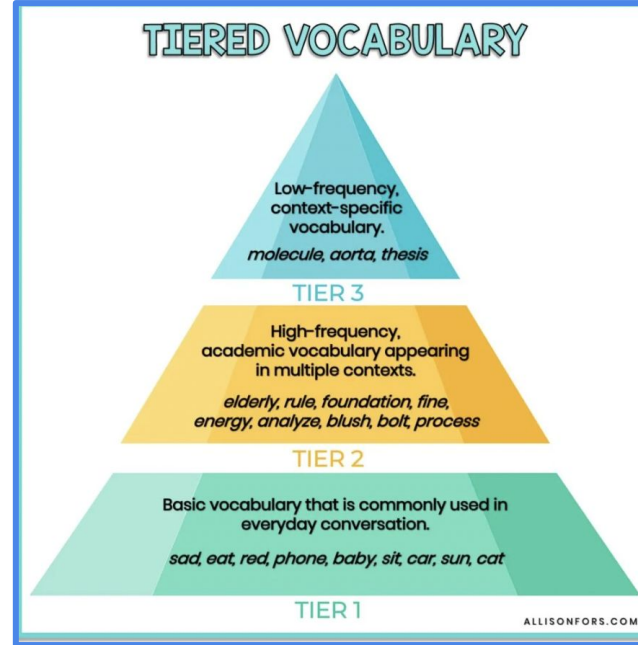
# Reading is Complicated!



## Children must understand words to understand text.

Vocabulary grows through:

- Conversations
- Read-alouds- model
- Direct instruction
- Wide reading- variety of topics



**Strong oral language = stronger reading comprehension**

**The Sumerians, one of the earliest civilizations in Mesopotamia, built impressive ziggurats as religious structures. They invented cuneiform, a system of writing, and developed advanced irrigation techniques to manage the river water for farming. Each city-state had its own ruler and laws, showing how society was organized.**

*Which words did you understand immediately?*

*Which words slowed you down?*

**Fluency isn't just about reading quickly—it's also about knowing words.  
Vocabulary knowledge frees the brain to focus on meaning and higher-level thinking.**

- Tier 1 – Basic everyday words

Simple, familiar words (kids usually know these)

Example: *river, sun, house, eat*

- Tier 2 – High-frequency academic words

Found in school texts, not everyday conversation

Example: *civilization, structure, develop, resource*

- Tier 3 – Domain-specific words

Specific to a subject or topic

Example *Sumerians, ziggurat, cuneiform, irrigation, city-state*

**The Sumerians, one of the earliest civilizations in Mesopotamia, built impressive ----- as religious structures. They invented-----, a system of writing, and developed advanced -----techniques to manage the river water for farming. Each -----had its own ruler and laws, showing how society was organized.**

***Without (Tier 3) key vocabulary - comprehension is impaired***

The Sumerians, one of the earliest -----in Mesopotamia, built impressive----- as religious----- . They invented -----, a system of writing, and -----advanced ----- to manage the river water for farming. Each ----- had its own ruler and laws, showing how ----- was organized.

***Without Tier 2 and Tier 3 words, comprehension just doesn't happen!***

**Comprehension depends on what you already know.**

**A text about volcanoes is easier if the child**

- **Knows what lava is**
- **Understands geography**



**Knowledge builds knowledge.**

## Example Text: Volcanoes

Volcanoes form when molten rock called magma rises from deep inside the Earth's **layers** and escapes through openings in the **crust**. When pressure builds up, the volcano can erupt, releasing **lava**, **ash**, and gases into the air. Some eruptions are **explosive**, while others **produce** slow-moving lava flows. Over time, cooled lava hardens into rock, building mountains.

## When children lack vocabulary and knowledge:

- Reading feels hard.
- Comprehension breaks down.
- Motivation drops.

## When children build knowledge:

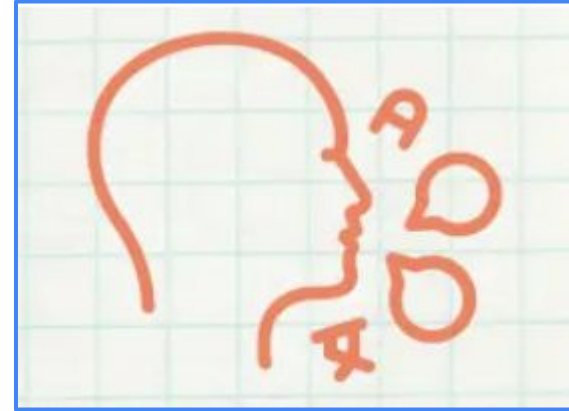
- Comprehension improves.
- Vocabulary grows.
- Reading becomes easier.

## This is why:

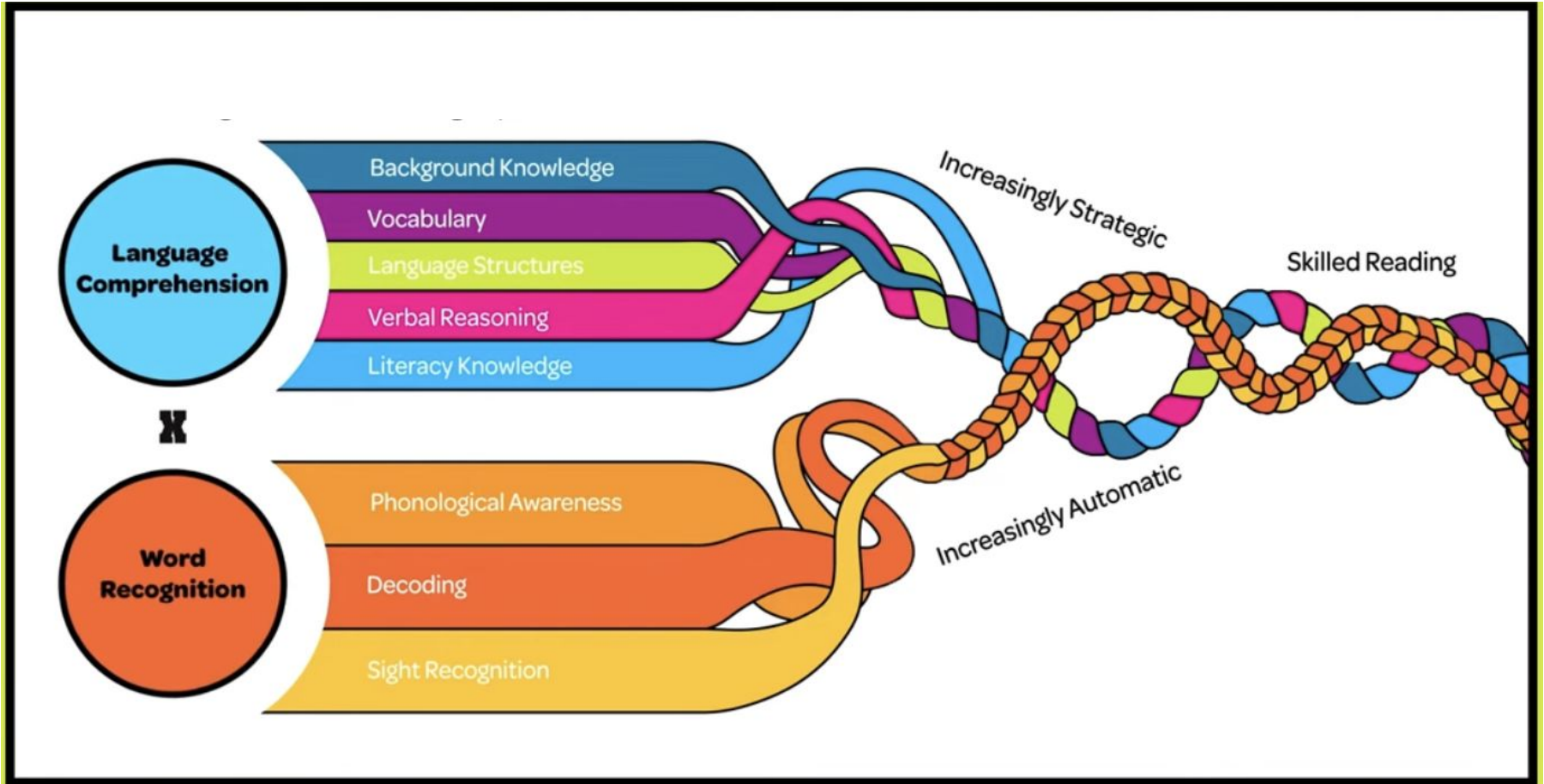
- **Read-alouds matter.**
- **Conversations matter.**
- **Content learning (science, history, geography) matters.**
- **Reading in any language builds knowledge.**

This is especially important in upper primary and academic learning.

- Sentence structure
- Grammar
- Complex sentences
- Text structures (narrative, informational, persuasive)



# Reading is Complicated!



# **PART 3:**

# **English Language Learners**

EAL students follow the **same reading processes** while they are

- Learning a new language (vocabulary + structure)
- Sometimes learning new cultural references (confidence)

**They have to work harder!**

**Strong first-language literacy supports English reading**

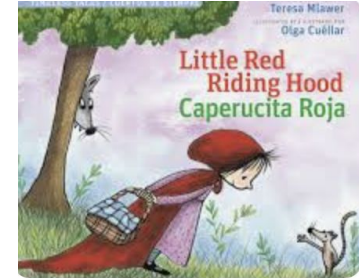


## Use all of a child's languages as resources for learning.

- Discuss a story in home language
- Preview vocabulary in L1
- Read dual-language books
- Compare sounds across languages

### Research shows that:

- It strengthens comprehension
- It builds identity and confidence
- It supports long-term literacy



## Considerations:

- Some sounds do not exist in all languages
- Letter-sound correspondences may differ
- English has complex spelling patterns



## EAL learners benefit from:

- Extra oral language exposure
- Explicit vocabulary teaching
- Visual supports
- Repetition

# **PART 4:**

# **Reading is Hard Work**

# **How Parents Can Help**

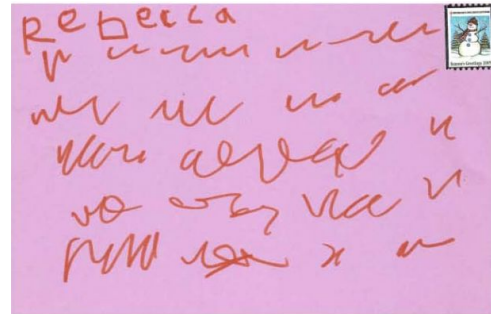
# Know your child...Development is different for everyone, but...



Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
Learn letters and sounds	Read simple sentences	Improve fluency and accuracy	<b>Transition: Learning to Read → Reading to Learn</b>	Read multi-chapter books	Read complex texts across subjects
Blend simple words	Build high-frequency word knowledge	Read longer texts with short paragraphs	Read longer stories and informational texts	Understand themes and key ideas	Analyze ideas and evidence
Read predictable books with picture support	Begin short stories and simple nonfiction	Use strategies to figure out new words	Use reading to learn new content	Build academic vocabulary	Combine information from different texts
			Strengthen comprehension strategies		

# Support Early Reading : building early foundations is key!

- Read aloud daily
- Talk about stories
- Play sound games
- Practice letter sounds
- Encourage writing or marking



# Reading aloud to your child is the single most important thing you can do for their reading growth.

**Read Aloud 15 MINUTES**  
Every child. Every parent. Every day.

**DOES READING ALOUD REALLY MATTER?** YES!

**More than one** in three children enter kindergarten without the skills necessary for lifetime learning.

Research shows that reading aloud is the single most important thing you can do to help a child prepare for reading and learning.

**LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**  
The number of words that a child knows on entering kindergarten is a key predictor of his or her future success.

**LITERACY SKILL BUILDING**  
Vocabulary, Phonics, Fluency with the printed word, Storytelling, Comprehension, Reading aloud builds literacy skills.

**WHY READ ALOUD?**

**INSTILL A LOVE OF READING**  
Your example demonstrates that reading is important, pleasurable and valued.

**BRAIN DEVELOPMENT**  
From birth to age 3, one critical years in the development of language skills.

**KNOWLEDGE GAINED & SHARED**  
Books are a treasure, yes, and they are also information. You and your child can learn something new as you read aloud.

**BONDING**  
Is anything better than sharing a good book?

Reading 15 minutes every day for 5 years:  
**27,375 MINUTES**

**IS 15 MINUTES ENOUGH TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?** YES!

**456.25 HOURS**

Tell a friend at [www.ReadAloud.org](http://www.ReadAloud.org)


- Keep reading aloud!
- Talk about books together- ask questions
- Encourage daily independent reading
- Let children choose books that interest them
- Model reading at home



# The Power of Daily Reading- (including HW)

**More reading = More vocabulary → More knowledge → Stronger comprehension.**

### Why Your Child Can't Skip Their 20 Minutes of Reading Tonight



**James** reads 20 minutes per night, 5 times per week

**Travis** reads only 4 minutes per night ...or not at all

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**In one week:**

James: 100 minutes of reading

Travis: 20 minutes of reading

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**In one month:**

James: 400 minutes of reading

Travis: 80 minutes of reading

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**In one school year (9 months):**

James: 3600 minutes of reading

Travis: 720 minutes of reading


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**By the end of eighth grade:**

James: 28,800 minutes of reading

Travis: 5760 minutes of reading

Which student would you expect to read better?  
 Which student would you expect to know more?  
 Which student would you expect to write better?  
 Which student would you expect to have a better vocabulary?  
 Which student would you expect to be more successful in school and life?  
 How do you think each student will feel about himself as a learner?



### Approximate Words Encountered Per Year

Minutes Reading Per Day	Words Per Year (Approx.)
1 minute	8,000 words
5 minutes	282,000 words
10 minutes	600,000+ words
20 minutes	1.5–1.8 million words



# Red Flags: when to be concerned; early identification matters



## End of Kindergarten:

- Difficulty hearing rhymes
- Struggles to identify first sounds
- Cannot blend simple sounds /c/ /a/ /t/
- Difficulty remembering letter names/sounds



## Grades 1-2

- Slow, labored decoding
- Difficulty segmenting sounds for spelling
- Trouble reading common words after repetition
- Spelling that does not reflect sounds
- General avoidance of reading



## Grades 3+

- Weak fluency (slow, choppy reading)
- Poor comprehension despite effort
- Limited vocabulary growth
- Fatigue during reading tasks

**For all: Limited progress despite instruction and avoidance or anxiety around reading.**

Good readers read more.

Poor readers read less.

  
This widening gap begins early.



- Early decoding instruction matters.
  - Fluency practice matters.
- Daily reading habits matter.

# Key Takeaways

- Reading is learned — it must be taught.
- Reading = decoding + understanding.
- Practice reading every day.
- Home languages strengthen literacy.
- Early support matters — act early if concerns arise.



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# Questions?

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