

Teaching reading: A playbook for developing skilled readers through word recognition and language comprehension
by Douglas Fisher, Nancey Frey, and Diane Lapp

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Premise of the Book

Well-communicated in its first module (*Module 1. How Reading Develops*), the book is premised on the foundational principle that “Every brain needs to be taught to read” (Fisher et al., 2023, p. 4). That is, reading must be taught, strong readers could be nurtured through instruction and practice. With that, the authors shape the book around the reading rope metaphor (Scarborough, 2001) which features reading in two major parts: *Word Recognition* and *Language Comprehension*, each with its associated skills to hone for automatic and strategic reading processes. They further expand the original reading rope by adding two more strands to each part: *alphabetics* and *reading fluency* to the former and *morphological awareness* and *Theory of Mind* (ToM) to the latter to better align with contemporary research on reading. For each module that follows, the reading rope is reintroduced as a visual guiding map for the reader to follow the respective contents of the book.

The authors also alert the reader from the very beginning how the reading rope should be interpreted. For them, it should not be viewed as a discrete list of items to master, and none of its parts or strands has more weight than any other. Rather, they are all synergized skills to be developed in proficient readers to achieve the ultimate goal of comprehension. As the authors contend, “There must be a relentless focus on comprehension, not as a mere collection of ingredients but as a series of chemical reactions” (p. 8).

The Book

Following *Module 1. How reading develops*, the remaining modules are structured in two core parts of the adapted reading rope.

Part 1. *Word recognition* consists of 5 modules. It starts with *Module 2. Phonological awareness*, which looks at phonological and phonemic awareness, discusses the link between phonological awareness, language and reading. Instructional techniques related to syllables, rhymes and sounds follow to develop students’ word, syllable and sound recognition. A variety of classroom practices to heighten students’ phonemic awareness, awareness of individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words are further presented, such as phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation,

phoneme substitution, etc. These opportunities will enhance students' readiness to attune themselves to "how sounds work in words" (Fisher et al., 2023, p. 22).

Module 3 is dedicated to *Alphabetics*, "the representation of spoken sounds by letters" (Fisher et al., 2023, p.38), where the role of letter-sound knowledge in reading is discussed, featuring both visual and auditory representations of the letters. Here the reader can take away Reutzel's principles of learning order, "a hybrid approach" (p. 43) to teaching forms of letters (uppercase and lowercase), a wide array of classroom techniques to engage young learners with alphabetics reading and practice (e.g., Personalise It, Fast-paced Games, Read Alphabetic Books). Examples of specific classroom teachers' alphabetics instruction are also reported.

Module 4. Phonics and Decoding further explores the importance of explicit instruction on the grapheme-phoneme association and spelling patterns in decoding written words. The authors justify that good phonics speeds up reading and support comprehension, necessitating systematic instruction planning, with both decoding and encoding as targets to achieve both acquisition and mastery. Phonics learning and practice through phonics patterns, word sorting, word building, sound walls as well as 'using encoding to support decoding' with dictation examples are also featured in this module.

Module 5 targets *sight word recognition*, an important part of word recognition. The authors first distinguish high-frequency words and sight words, with the former being gradually part of the latter. They further argue that word recognition by sight is critical to develop automaticity and comprehension, since sight words are those that can be read with ease and recognized instantly. In this module, the reader will learn specific procedures for introducing sight words that involve multiple steps such as See and Say, Spell Reading, Arm Tapping and Writing. Heart Words, and Sight Word Practice with Reading Racetrack are further demonstrated, among a plethora of practical ideas for classroom application.

Module 6 concludes the Word Cognition dimension of the adapted reading rope with *Reading fluency*. In this module, the authors start with the key message that fluency is the "bridge between decoding and comprehension" (p. 94) and moves on to define reading fluency and its different manifestations followed by different types such as oral reading fluency (ORF) and prosody. Instructional practices to enhance reading fluency through a wealth of hands-on techniques are presented. Fluency-oriented reading instruction (FORI), Wide FORI to push fluency with the same text and multiple texts respectively and repeated reading for struggling students are additional highlights of the module.

Part 2. *Language Comprehension* in turn addresses background knowledge, morphological awareness, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge and ToM, each in a separate module starting with *Module 7. Background knowledge*. Here practitioners can identify the role of background knowledge, gain actionable instructional techniques for developing background knowledge and activating it to assist students' reading as well as assessing it.

Module 8 defines vocabulary knowledge, types of vocabulary and discusses how to select vocabulary for instruction as well as techniques to develop explicit and incidental vocabulary

acquisition and plan assessment. Practical activities such as word maps, graphic organizers, analysis of semantic features, among others are also presented.

Module 9. Morphological awareness is an important follow-up on vocabulary in the previous module. It links morphological awareness, affixational knowledge and reading, highlighting morphological awareness as a “critical tool used by readers to analyze unknown or unfamiliar words” (p. 163). This is how learners could derive word meaning from the different elements (base word, affixes, morphemes) that constitute a word, with instructional guides on how to foster morphological awareness in readers.

Text and language structures are addressed in *Module 10* where the reader can grasp accessible knowledge about how the structure of a text, its grammar and syntax play a role in tackling text or sentence meaning. Cloze and maze procedures to measure students’ language structure knowledge, as well as usable techniques for sentence combining, sentence construction for students to apply language structure knowledge are further presented.

In *Module 11. Literacy and text knowledge*, the reader will get to understand what is meant by literacy, what text knowledge involves and their role in text comprehension. Then (digital) print concepts, text structures, text types, text features and text genres are brought into the fore. Print referencing is featured in four domains of print organization, print meaning, letters and words, and classroom examples of integrating print concepts and text navigation are given. The module continues with modeling to foster students’ awareness and noticing of text features and structures as well how texts work. It concludes with genre studies showcasing how teachers can explore genres in their instruction.

Module 12 looks at *Verbal reasoning*, an underexplored aspect in reading instruction. The module first justifies the necessity to develop reasoning skills and infer text meaning and logic in text comprehension. Literary devices (e.g., metaphor, flashback, and irony), with specific questions and retelling with a sample retelling rubric to guide students through utilizing verbal reasoning are presented. Next, instructional ideas for using questions to foster verbal reasoning, through the QAR (question-answer relationship) model (Raphael et al., 2006) and “questioning the author (QtA)” are illustrated. Through these, students practice identifying where the information comes from, from or beyond the text, seek evidence and make inferences from it. Finally, the module showcases how “sequential art” could be a tool for teaching inferencing.

Module 13. Theory of mind (ToM) is a refreshing component that concludes the playbook. The authors define ToM as “the social reasoning” needed to understand a text (p. 249) and justifies the role of ToM instruction in developing reading. The relationship between point of view and perspective taking and comprehension is further discussed. A variety of classroom activities follow to encourage ToM application, and these are Interactive Read-alouds, Accountable Talk, Character Maps, Reading Across Texts, each with clear steps /prompts to guide practitioners; examples of teacher implementation are also given.

Reviewer Commentary

The playbook has numerous strengths. Firstly, the authors have professionally and skillfully tackled the daunting, quite often hidden task of teaching reading in the form of a lively playbook, which is both comprehensive and nuanced, practical yet well-informed by contemporary research findings. Next, the logical progression from *why*, *what* to *how* throughout each module is another appeal that pleases practitioners. Also abundant are opportunities to understand the different skills under *Word recognition* and *Language comprehension*, and take away hands-on and ready-to-use techniques for classroom instruction. What matters more is that the authors have convinced the reader that it is both vital and possible to train strong readers through quality instruction and practice.

In addition, the book is written in simple, easy-to understand language, guided through the visual reading rope that perfectly renders it practitioner-friendly. As it is meant to be a playbook, built-in interactive features allow the reader to engage with the content, reflect on it and derive messages from it as well as give advice to others. Effective print, with appropriate typefaces, (sub)headings, visual representations, take-away boxes, footers, appendices and index further facilitate navigation and understanding. Together with accompanying downloadable materials in each module, all have made the playbook an encyclopedia for reading instruction that pre-service teachers, in-service teachers as well as teacher educators should acquire.

However, the book has some shortcomings that the reader might need to attend to. While extensive reading (ER) has demonstrated its role in developing fluent readers (see Nakanishi, 2015; Nation & Waring, 2019), it has yet to be sufficiently featured in the playbook. Following this, available technological affordances and/or corpus-based learning suitable for young learners, if properly twisted into the different sections of the playbook, would make it more modern and up to date.

Next, the name *Language Comprehension* (one core part of the reading rope) might incline the reader to think of the sole linguistic dimension of the reading text, while here it denotes skills learners need to develop for text comprehension and text interpretation. It would be useful to explain why it is named this way to avoid confusion.

In terms of the *Contents* of the book, the different but overlapping colours for different modules might also be confusing. For example, *Module 1*, *Module 3*, *Module 8* and *Module 13* share the same colour *green*, and a group of others *red*, but are these modules connected in any form or are colour choices just the authors' random highlights?

Despite these drawbacks, the playbook stands out as an invaluable resource for classroom reading instruction and teacher training.

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