

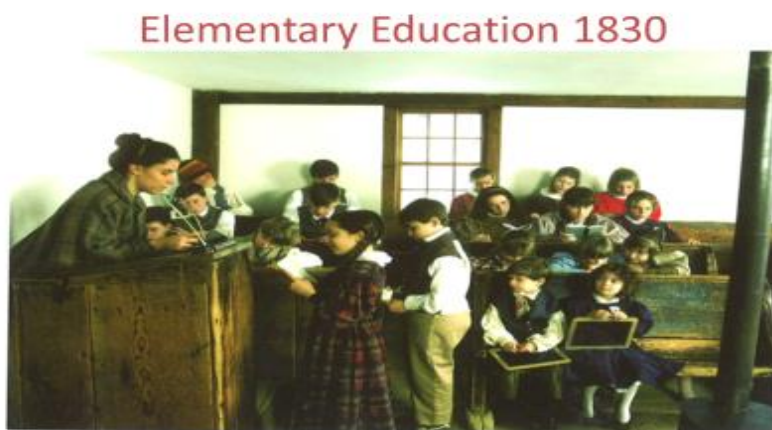
# Dyslexia and the Simple View of Reading – presented by Sir Jim Rose

## Commissioned by Helen Arkell and Patoss for The Dyslexia SpLD Trust

If 'Oscars' were to be awarded for the big ideas that have most benefited mankind one should certainly go to whoever it was that invented the alphabet. Moreover, the story of how the sounds of speech became written symbols ought to be told to children as living history.

There is no scope, however, to expand on all of that in this brief presentation save to say that every child needs and deserves to be taught how the alphabet works for reading and spelling. Further, we should travel in the faith that every child, whether dyslexic or not, is capable of learning to read.

In response to the historian's question: 'Where does the future come from? We might well answer: 'It comes from the past'. Ever since schools were invented, our goals have sought to gift all children with the power of reading.



Despite the recent tedious debate about the value of the term dyslexia, there are some children and adults who fail to learn to read even though they can learn other equally, if not more, challenging things very well. They *may* have received the same high quality teaching of reading as their peers who have become fluent readers but as one dedicated teacher of beginner readers once said, 'These children just don't get it'.

So what is it that these children 'just don't get' which marks them out as dyslexic?

For researchers of dyslexia, the answer to that question must be: 'We are still working on it'. Although we know more than ever before about how beginners learn to read, and the specific learning difficulties associated with dyslexia we have yet to fathom the depth of

neurological and cognitive knowledge we need to secure success for all - nevertheless we can and must make the best of what we have.

Given what we know, one promising approach suggests that dyslexia is a **word processing** problem. Some years ago an insightful construct called the 'Simple View of Reading' (SVR) was proposed by two researchers - Gough and Tunmer (1986). Since then variations of the SVR have been explored.

The Simple View of Reading (SRV) acknowledges that while reading is a complex activity it can be represented as two inter-dependent processes, notably, **word recognition processes** and **language comprehension processes**.

What follows homes in on the core structure of the (SVR) in order to establish the important principle that teachers, and those who train them, need to be crystal clear about which of the two processes – word recognition and language comprehension - they are seeking to advance at any given time in their approach to reading instruction.

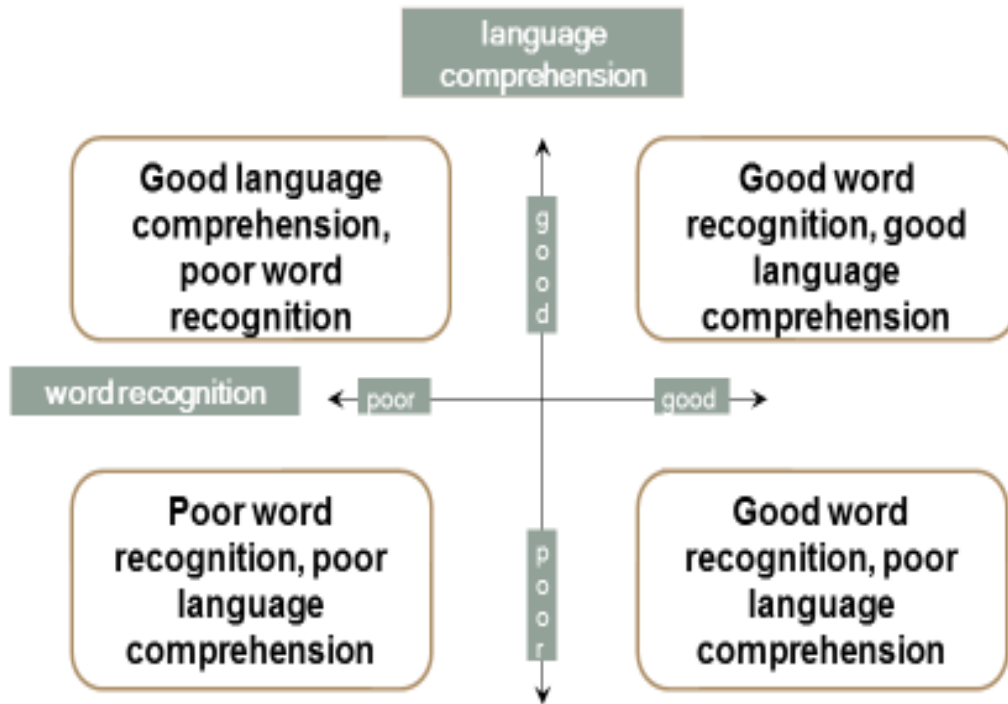
Professor Emeritus Morag Stuart helpfully explains the SVR thus:

“The Simple View proposes that there are two sets of abilities that contribute to reading: word recognition abilities (the ability to read and understand the words on the page) and language comprehension ability (the ability to understand language we hear and language we read). These two sets of abilities are seen as continuous dimensions: people can vary independently on each. It is a fully interactive model but one which delineates clearly the two different dimensions of reading and thus better allows teachers to specify their teaching objectives and engage children in relevant activities to foster development towards achieving those objectives: **the separation is in the teacher’s mind, for pedagogic purposes, not in the child’s mind.**

That is, it provides a clearer framework for teachers to focus their teaching towards learning objectives for children. Clear differentiation - within the mind of the teacher - between the two dimensions provides a conceptual framework that (a) encourages teachers not necessarily to expect that the children they teach will show equal performance or progress in each dimension; (b) offers the possibility of separately assessing performance and progress in each dimension, to identify learning needs and guide further teaching; (c) makes explicit to teachers that different kinds of teaching are needed to develop word recognition skills from those that are needed to foster the comprehension of written and spoken language; and (d) emphasizes the need for teachers to be taught about and to understand the cognitive processes involved in the development of both accurate word recognition skills and of language comprehension.

It also makes apparent the fact that children can experience various degrees of ease or difficulty in developing either word recognition or language comprehension or both, and invites teachers therefore to consider children’s progress and ability in each of the two dimensions.’

# The Simple View of Reading



Two dimensions of reading → four possible outcomes

The SVR suggests that dyslexic children fall largely within the left hand side of the diagram. Because an overwhelming body of research and proven practice now show that phonic knowledge is essential to developing word recognition skills, schools must make sure that this dimension of reading is taught thoroughly on a regular and systematic basis to beginner readers while recognising that dyslexic children are likely to need considerably more time to benefit from skilled teaching of phonics than their typically developing peers.

There is, of course, much more to be said about the effective teaching of children with dyslexia which might be covered in further presentations. Meanwhile the following points, drawn from an interview of Professor Maryanne Wolf, another renowned expert on the reading brain, invite reflection on the issues concerning provision for dyslexic children:-

**Phoneme awareness, or knowing the sounds that correspond with letters and words, is the No. 1 deficiency in the dyslexic brain.**

Our language is made up of 44 sounds called phonemes. English is trickier because we have phonemes that can be expressed in different letters, and we have letters that can stand for different phonemes. It's an irregular language, and that adds to the complexity, but the underlying issue for many, but not all, children is problems in the basic representation of those phonemes. There are multiple areas of the brain contributing to our ability to represent phonemes - many dyslexic children have issues with developing phonemes, as well as knowing which sounds are assigned to which letters.

**Fluency, or getting the reading circuit to work together quickly, is the second-biggest issue.** Children can have perfectly represented phonemes, but can't get the phonemes together with the letters, because there's a speed-of-processing issue. Part of that may well be because the right hemisphere is taking a longer time and trying to do what the left hemisphere usually does, in getting that circuit to work very fast together. That can mean not just the phonemes aren't represented very well. It might also mean that letters aren't getting represented very well, and that the circuit is not becoming automatic.

**Comprehension is the third but no less crucial issue to reading.** After making letters and sounds work together, and getting the whole circuit to work in time, then words have to be connected to meanings and functions of grammar. It takes explicit work to get the visual representation, meaning, sound and grammatical function all working together, and that's what dyslexic children must do. Often this kind of dyslexia doesn't show itself until the child is older, third grade and up, when a child switches from learning to read to reading to learn. Some children can read words, but read them laboriously. By fourth grade they're a major failure and have never become fluent. Many of these children are bright and have compensated up to this point by memorizing words, but have never learned to read fast enough to comprehend what they're reading.

Understanding that these developments are nothing more than brain differences that can be aided with systematic and explicit instruction, is a large but necessary step for everyone involved: students, parents and teachers. When children find they're unable to read or read with much difficulty, they often believe that it's the result of a bad or broken brain. Some teachers may also unwittingly hold beliefs that reading happens for all children by a kind of osmosis.

Wolf insists that three decades of research has shown that neither are true, but keeping the truth about dyslexia hidden or misunderstood only hurts the students, their parents and the educators trying desperately to help them.

**“Dyslexia is a different brain organization that needs different teaching methods. It is never the fault of the child, but rather the responsibility of us who teach to find methods that work for that child.”**

In summary, it is proven practice underpinned by high quality research that must be made explicit in teaching children to read successfully and overcome dyslexia.

Emeritus Professor Morag Stuart is co-author with Professor Rhona Stainthorp of ‘Reading Development and Teaching’ (Sage Publishers 2015)

Professor Wolf is the author of the highly acclaimed book - ‘Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain’ (Icon Books 2007)

**Jim Rose**  
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