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## Direct and mediated effects of language and cognitive skills on comprehension of oral narrative texts (listening comprehension) for children



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### ABSTRACT

We investigated component language and cognitive skills of oral language comprehension of narrative texts (i.e., listening comprehension). Using the construction–integration model of text comprehension as an overarching theoretical framework, we examined direct and mediated relations of foundational cognitive skills (working memory and attention), foundational language skills (vocabulary and grammatical knowledge), and higher-order cognitive skills (inference, theory of mind, and comprehension monitoring) to listening comprehension. A total of 201 first grade children in South Korea participated in the study. Structural equation modeling results showed that listening comprehension is directly predicted by working memory, grammatical knowledge, inference, and theory of mind and is indirectly predicted by attention, vocabulary, and comprehension monitoring. The total effects were .46 for working memory, .07 for attention, .30 for vocabulary, .49 for grammatical knowledge, .31 for inference, .52 for theory of mind, and .18 for comprehension monitoring. These results suggest that multiple language and cognitive skills make contributions to listening comprehension, and their contributions are both direct and indirect.

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## Introduction

Successful listening comprehension (i.e., language comprehension at the extended discourse level or comprehension of multiple utterances; Kim & Pilcher, in press; McGee & Richgels, 1996) is critical for literacy acquisition as well as language interactions (Berninger & Abbott, 2010; Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Kim, Wagner, & Lopez, 2012; Tunmer, 1989). Listening comprehension plays a prominent role in reading comprehension, as hypothesized by the simple view of reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990), and has been supported by much empirical evidence (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Johnston & Kirby, 2006; Joshi & Aaron, 2000; Joshi, Tao, Aaron, & Quiroz, 2012; Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009; Kendeou et al., 2005; Tunmer & Greaney, 2010; Vellutino, Tunmer, Jaccard, & Chen, 2007). Listening comprehension becomes increasingly more important in reading comprehension as children's reading proficiency develops (Adlof, Catts, & Little, 2006; Gernsbacher, Varner, & Faust, 1990; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson, 2008; Kim et al., 2012).

Despite its importance, systematic investigation about component skills of listening comprehension has not received much attention until recently. Emerging evidence indicates that listening comprehension is a complex skill, requiring more than an understanding about meanings of individual vocabulary and various combinations of words (Florit, Roch, & Levorato, 2011, 2014; Sénéchal, Ouellette, & Rodney, 2006) and, instead, drawing on higher-order cognitive skills such as inference making (Florit et al., 2011; Kendeou, Bohn-Gettler, White, & van den Broek, 2008; Lepola, Lynch, Laakkonen, Silvén, & Niemi, 2012; Strasser & del Rio, 2014; Tompkins, Guo, & Justice, 2013), theory of mind (Kim, 2015; Kim & Phillips, 2014), and comprehension monitoring (Kim, 2015; Kim & Phillips, 2014; Strasser & del Rio, 2014). Building on these studies, we expand emerging literature in several important unique ways in the current study. First, we included a comprehensive set of language and cognitive skills based on theory and empirical evidence. Many above-noted previous studies included a limited number of focal cognitive skills (e.g., inference making) in a piecemeal manner. Second, recent evidence suggested the roles of higher-order cognitive skills such as theory of mind and comprehension monitoring in listening comprehension (Kim, 2015; Kim & Phillips, 2014; Strasser & del Rio, 2014) in addition to the more established role of inference making (Florit et al., 2011; Kendeou et al., 2008; Lepola et al., 2012; Tompkins et al., 2013). However, to our knowledge, no previous studies have examined whether theory of mind and comprehension monitoring are related to listening comprehension after accounting for inference. Third, many previous studies do not provide information about “structural” relations among these multiple language and cognitive skills (see Kim, 2015, for an exception). Understanding structural relations is important to gain insight about paths of relations (direct and mediated or indirect) of language and cognitive skills to listening comprehension. For instance, despite a statistically significant relation in a bivariate correlation, vocabulary was no longer independently related to comprehension of a wordless picture book after accounting for several cognitive skills such as working memory, attention, and inference making in a multiple regression model (Strasser & del Rio, 2014). Although this result is informative about the unique and independent role of vocabulary, this result is limited in illuminating how vocabulary might be indirectly related to the outcome via its overlapping influence with other cognitive skills. In the current study, we examined how foundational cognitive skills (working memory and attention), foundational oral language skills (vocabulary and grammatical knowledge), and higher-order cognitive skills (inference, theory of mind, and comprehension monitoring) are related to each other and to listening comprehension of narrative texts directly and indirectly.

“Texts” encompass both oral and written texts, and theoretical models of text comprehension do not differentiate oral texts from written texts (Kintsch, 1988). Text comprehension literature has primarily studied adult proficient readers using written texts. However, for developing readers, “reading” comprehension is constrained by processes involved in word reading (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005; for work on reading comprehension, see, e.g., Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004; Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; van den Broek & Espin, 2012; Vellutino et al., 2007). Therefore, in the current study, we use the term *listening comprehension* to specifically refer to comprehension of “oral” or “spoken” narrative texts,

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