

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

What Should We Do About Reading Instruction?

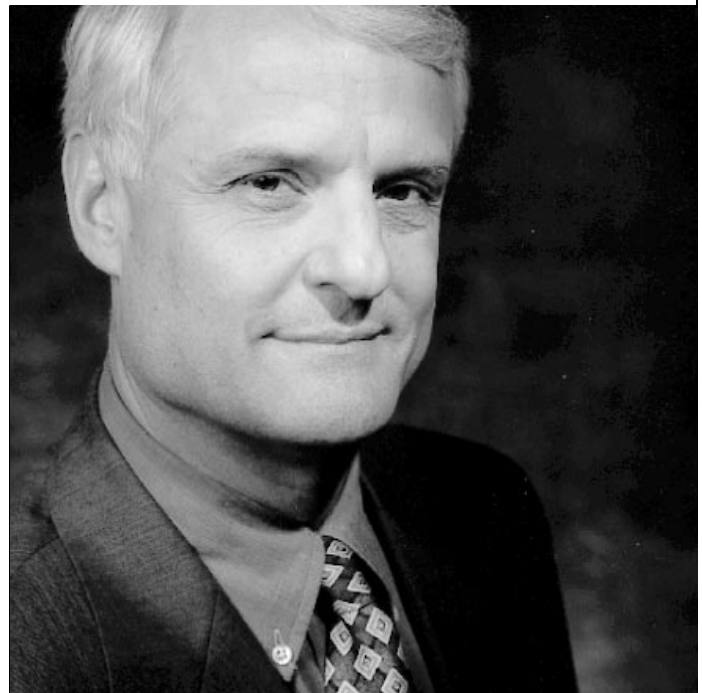
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As teachers face the challenges of mandated reading assessment and the public's demand for more effective reading instruction for a growing diverse student population, they are faced with questions: What should we do about reading instruction? Do we teach literature? Do we teach phonics? How do we teach them? To help answer these and other questions about reading instruction, we can begin by first answering the question: What do we know now about reading instruction? Once we've answered this question, we can think about what might be the best approach for reading instruction.

Researchers have come to several conclusions about reading instruction.

1. Early reading and writing experiences at school can lead children to early success in reading (Adams, 1990; Hiebert and Taylor, 1995; Juel, 1994; IRA-NAEYC, 1998; National Academy of Sciences, 1998).

Emergent-literacy research points out the importance of children reading, being read to, learning letters and the sounds they represent, and writing in helping them to become successful readers. Pattern books and decodable stories provide support for these early reading attempts. This same type of support is needed when encouraging children in their early writing efforts. Pattern writing, word walls, and temporary spelling attempts are instructional strategies that assist children as they begin to write. As children listen to and read



stories, they gradually learn the important characteristics of any story—setting, characters, and story line. As they recognize these elements in their reading, they begin to incorporate them into the stories they write. It is these same story features that children will use to better understand stories they read. All of which suggests that reading and writing are reciprocal acts that strengthen and support each other.

While many children come to school with many of these early literacy experiences in hand, many others do not. Language and literacy instruction in their early school

years for these children becomes especially important. Frequent opportunities for children to talk about their observations and thoughts are just as important as learning their letters and sounds. The classroom environment plays an important role in the success of at-risk children. Acceptance, encouragement, and support throughout the school day will help provide the learning scaffold that many of these children find only in their classrooms.

2. Phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling development reflect and support one another as children learn to read (Adams, 1990; Ball and Blachman, 1991; Beers and Beers, 1992; Ehri, 1995; Cunningham and Cunningham, 1992; Strickland, 1995).

As children become aware of the sounds in spoken words (phonemic awareness) and the letters that correspond to those sounds in written words (phonics), it helps them learn words. Sometimes, the similarities in the letter-sound patterns support young readers. Knowing the beginning sound in *ball* and *bat* can help a young reader with the beginning part of *basket* and *bottle*. Instruction on initial consonants highlights these similarities for students. Other times the differences in letter-sound patterns help, as with *sick* and *stick*. Onset and rime activities (*p-an*, *m-an*, *f-an*) as well as instruction with word families (pick, sick, etc.) let young readers become aware of common spelling patterns that occur in many words. Learning and recognizing spelling patterns in words helps them learn and remember more and more words as they develop into fluent readers.

Invented spelling has a place in the classroom because it reflects a child's understanding of the relationship between phonics and spelling. Children who spell *truck* as CHRUK because they hear the /ch/ sound will come to realize that *tr* begins the spelling of *truck*. In time, students will learn that words that do begin with *chr* (*chrome*, *chronicle*) do not begin with the /ch/. Not only does invented spelling give us insight into children's developing knowledge of phonics, it may provide

opportunities for children to find spelling patterns in less familiar words as they compare their invented spelling to the correct spelling of these words.

Teaching children how to recognize familiar words and identify unfamiliar words while reading helps them become fluent readers. When they apply word recognition skills (phonics, word structure, or spelling) as they read, students reinforce and strengthen their knowledge about words. Students benefit from instruction that has them analyze words for common letters or letter patterns to help them learn new words. Learning words by analogy is one example of this type of instruction. If students know the words *brick* and *light*, they can use analogy to identify the word *bright* by saying "if *brick* begins with *br* and *light* ends with *ight*, then the word could be *bright*." This strategy coupled with reading the word in a meaningful context (the sun was so bright today) helps to reinforce the value of applying word recognition skills while actually reading. The whole-parts-whole word recognition instructional approach is another technique for using word recognition skills before, during, and after reading text.

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3. Vocabulary and comprehension instruction that activates prior knowledge helps students understand better what they read (Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996; Beck and McKeown, 1983; Buikema and Graves, 1993). For students to fully comprehend a text, they have to determine what they know or need to learn from the text (story, social studies chapter, science article, etc.). They have to check or monitor their thinking as they read by connecting their prior knowledge to what they learn in the text. After the reading, the students have to decide

what they have learned or understood from their reading. This cognitive or thinking activity before, during, and after reading is called strategic reading and is developed through systematic vocabulary and comprehension reading instruction. Vocabulary instruction that activates prior knowledge and helps students monitor their reading promotes reading comprehension. One effective vocabulary strategy that supports reading comprehension is the use of vocab-o-grams. A vocab-o-gram has students connect selected vocabulary to the structure of the text. With a story, for example, students could write the vocabulary under the story heading they believed it belonged (setting, characters, problem, plot, and conclusion). These student-constructed vocab-o-grams help students make predictions about the story, monitor their reading, and organize their ideas after the story is read. Story impression is another vocabulary activity that can be part of a comprehension strategy. Vocabulary is taken from a story and students are asked to write a story that might contain these words. Predictions come from the student-generated story impressions that are used by students to guide their reading of the story. These and other vocabulary strategies not only help students learn meanings of new words but also understand old words in new contexts. They are particularly helpful with vocabulary in other subjects (math, science, social studies, etc.).

Comprehension strategies parallel many vocabulary strategies. K-W-Ls, story maps, think-alouds, and DR-TAs (Directed Reading–Thinking Activities) are just a few of the many comprehension strategies that begin with vocabulary taken from the text to be read. For example, if a K-W-L was being used with a science chapter on weather, students might write under the heading What Do You Know? (K) the following: cold front, wind, temperature, humidity. Under What Do You Want to Find Out? (W): barometric pressure, dew point. These words are all found in the weather chapter. The comprehension strategy creates an organizing structure

to help students determine what they know or don't know about the weather chapter. Story maps function in very much the same way. A story map that looks like a set of ascending steps can be used to help students organize the sequence of actions in a story. What will the students put on the steps? Vocabulary from the story. If the story were "Jack and the Beanstalk," the first step might be Jack and the cow go to town. The last step might be the giant died. Students arrange and rearrange what they put on the steps as they go through the story. Once again, the vocabulary is directly linked to what they know or come to know as a result of their reading.

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4. When teacher observations are linked to skillful reading instruction, students become successful readers and writers (Gunning, 1998; Johnston, 1987; Lipson and Wixson, 1991).

Accurate observations by classroom teachers are valid and more reliable when used to make instructional decisions for their students. Standardized tests and state-mandated tests cannot substitute for the teachers' skill in selecting reading material or deciding on a word recognition lesson that results from working with their students. Only teachers can differentiate their instruction to accommodate the individual differences in their students' reading abilities. Teachers can make suggestions that help students become strategic readers. Informal assessment, writing samples, running records, or portfolios are only a few of the types of data used by teachers to develop a complete picture of a student's performance as a reader and writer.

What is the best approach to reading instruction?

Research suggests that reading instruction that combines word recognition, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction with meaningful reading and writing activities, and is adjusted to meet the needs of students, produces successful readers. So what is the best approach? A combination or balanced approach is the right choice for most students and teachers. A balanced approach adapts to students' instructional needs since it relies on teachers' informed decisions. Here are some hallmarks of balanced reading instruction:

- Students are encouraged to become independent readers.
- A variety of reading material is available for a variety of purposes.
- Learning words and learning about words for reading and writing take place through phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and vocabulary activities.
- Teachers use a range of instructional strategies to develop comprehension, for example, graphic organizers, such as story maps, K-W-L charts, and DR-TAs.
- Students share and discuss what they learn, read, or write through activities such as discussion webs, writing groups, think-pair-share, and paired-reading.
- Teachers encourage students to apply what they learn in new reading and writing activities.
- Teachers make instructional decisions based on an assessment of the needs of students.
- Teachers use appropriate materials to meet the diverse needs of students.

In short, a classroom that develops readers balances a variety of reading instruction with a variety of reading materials to ensure that students become independent readers—readers who are eager to share and write about what they read and learn. Reading success is in the balance. Teachers need to use their skills to maintain this balance and do what they know is best for their students.

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