**Reading Principles, Approaches, Comprehension, and Fluency**

Learning to read involves two processes: First, the child must become able to decode or decipher unfamiliar words and gradually develop a sizable vocabulary. Second, the child must be able to comprehend or attach meaning to those words in sentences, paragraphs, pages, and entire books.

**Principles of Teaching Reading**

The following generalizations about the teaching of reading, drawn from both research and classroom observation of actual practices, have been compiled in an effort to guide all individuals in planning an effective reading program in the elementary grades (Roe et al., 2005). ***The first and second principles*** stress that reading is a complex act involving numerous factors and that reading involves constructing the meaning of a passage represented by printed symbols. All the varied aspects of the reading process should be understood by the teacher, who must also realize that reading does not occur without comprehension of the written passage, no matter how well the child reads orally.

***Principles three and four*** emphasize that there is no one correct way to teach reading and that learning to read is a continuous process. Not only do children learn to read over a period of several years as more sophisticated skills are introduced to them gradually but adolescents and adults also continue to improve their reading ability even after their formal education stops; improvements in reading ability continue to occur primarily because of demands in the workplace. Such continuity serves to illustrate the need for teachers to be acquainted with a variety of reading methods so they may help each classroom learner at assigned reading tasks. The student, whether a native English speaker or an English language learner (ELL), must be given instruction at his or her own level of accomplishment and maturity.

***The fifth and sixth principles*** stress that students should be taught word recognition skills that will allow them to independently unlock the meanings and pronunciations of unfamiliar words and that the teacher should diagnose each student’s reading ability and use that diagnosis as the basis for planning instruction. No one can memorize all the English words that appear in print. Children must therefore be instructed in skills such as phonic and structural analyses so they can figure out new words for themselves when helpful peers or adults are not available. Still, they acquire these strategies, as well as those related to comprehension, at individual rates so the teacher must be continually aware of each student’s performance while preparing lesson plans.

***The seventh and eighth principles*** state that reading and the other five language arts are closely interrelated and that reading is an integral part of all content area instruction. Since there is an exceptionally strong relationship between reading and writing, most educators now advocate teaching reading through a combined reading and writing approach.

***The ninth and tenth*** generalizations emphasize that the student needs to see that reading is an enjoyable pursuit; therefore, the teacher should understand the importance of using complete literature selections in the reading program.

***The final two principles*** point out that reading should be taught in a way that allows every child to become a successful reader and that encouragement of self-monitoring and self-direction of reading is important. Success promotes success and good readers eventually direct their own reading.

**Major Instructional Approaches**

While there is as yet no method guaranteed to teach reading successfully in the elementary school, a classic study in reading instruction found that it was the teacher who was more important in achieving excellence in reading than any method used (Bond & Dysktra, 1967/1997). Four major approaches are presently employed to guide learners to mature reading. Teachers preferring to borrow a few features from each of them, however, are supported by the International Reading Association (1999), which has stressed that no single method can teach all children to read.

**Basal Reader Approach**

This is the most widely used approach in the United States, with estimates indicating that 75 to 85% of elementary classrooms use it daily (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2004). Also known as ***the bottom-up approach*** ***or skills-based approach***, the basal reader approach tends to help students move from the part to the whole by prescribing the acquisition of competencies in a systematic order. The reading process is divided into a series of smaller to larger sub skills that must be taught in a rigid order. The major component of this approach is a collection of graded texts for children in Grades K–8 that comprise the chief source for instruction. These texts contain both narrative and expository selections, organized in unit themes (e.g., American Inventors) with a broad variety of genres that include children’s literature. The teacher’s manual contains lesson plans and developmentally appropriate suggestions and activities involving visual representations. It also often includes reduced-size facsimiles of pages from the student text.

Skills are developed through specific instructional strands (e.g., phonics) that are promoted through assignments in the student practice book or workbook. Sometimes facsimiles of these assignments appear in the teacher’s manual in reduced size, with the correct answers. End-of-unit tests assess skills introduced or reviewed in that particular unit.

Reading levels have replaced grade designations in the basal series in an effort to place students at the reading level most appropriate for them, especially for ELLs and at-risk students. The predominant group reading strategy is the directed reading activity (DRA). In the early grades word analysis skills and vocabulary items are precisely controlled to present a decodable text. Other aids include big books (enlarged copies of some narrative selections) as well as picture and word cards.

The typical procedure for teaching a lesson in the basal reader is the directed reading activity (DRA), which generally follows these steps:

(1) preparation by the teacher for reading, involving motivation and the introduction of new vocabulary and/or concepts;

(2) guided silent reading by students as the teacher provides questions and statements to direct them;

(3) comprehension development by the teacher and discussion by students that facilitate increased understanding of the plot, characters, or concepts;

(4) oral reading by students after they have read the material silently (step 2) and can read the answers to questions asked by the teacher (Ruddell [2006s] terms this step “purposeful rereading”); and

(5) follow-up practice or activities by students in workbooks that review vocabulary and comprehension. Enrichment activities that involve relating the story or selection to art, music, drama, or writing may also occur after certain selections.

A viable alternative to the DRA is the directed reading-thinking activity (DR-TA) approach. Developed by Stauffer (1975) and designed for group comprehension instruction, its primary goal is to develop critical readers. It demands that children become actively involved in the reading process by asking questions about the story, by processing the information as they read the story, and by receiving feedback about their original questions. There are two key phases to the DR-TA approach. The first is directing students’ thinking processes throughout the story; the second is promoting skills development based on students’ needs (as revealed in the first phase) as well as follow-up or extension activities (Ruddell, 2006). There are four major differences between the DRA and the DR-TA approaches:

1. The DRA approach is “materials oriented” and “teacher-manual oriented” with specific guidelines, questions, and instructional materials. The DR-TA approach has few explicit guidelines, giving the teacher considerable flexibility as well as sole responsibility for lesson development. It can be used in teaching other curricular areas that require reading, unlike the DRA approach, which is primarily concerned with basal reader programs.

2. The teacher’s role in the DRA approach is to ask the students to supply answers to questions found in the manual; most of those queries are at the literal level of comprehension, which requires convergent thinking. In the DR-TA approach, however, the teacher asks questions that require a higher level of thinking known as divergent thinking. By so doing, he or she promotes comprehension skills that make reading a dynamic activity that goes far beyond responding to factual questions.

3. In the DRA approach, new vocabulary is introduced before the children open their books. In the DR-TA approach there is no preteaching of vocabulary. Instead, each student must make use of decoding skills to unlock new words as these appear in the story selection, just as she or he would do during similar situations outside the classroom.

4. In the DRA approach, the manual details which comprehension skills will be taught and when they will be presented. In the DR-TA approach, however, there is no such prescription, and therefore, the teacher must develop the art of good questioning as well as the ability to accept alternative answers to certain questions.

Literature-Based Approach

The literature-based approach has been defined as instructing children to read by using both fiction and nonfiction literature, written for purposes other than text use for teaching reading (Harp & Brewer, 2005). It is known as the top-down approach, going from the whole to the part.

Its advocates believe that reading materials should be unabridged pieces of literature and that instruction in strategies and skills should be presented in the context of real reading and only on an as-needed basis. There is no prereading vocabulary study. While the focus is on constructing meaning or understanding what is read, there are no comprehension worksheets. Children are offered choices in their literature selections, which cover a wide range of genres, including multicultural books. Finally, students are encouraged to discuss the interpretations of their reading with classmates and adults.

To implement this highly individualistic approach, the teacher must be knowledgeable about children’s literature and able to incorporate skills development when it is needed. He or she must also have available class or group sets of core literature books so that several students are reading and responding to the same book at any given time.

Once the program has been introduced, four to five children choose to work in independent reading-response groups, based on their choice of books. These groups are given reading prompts (for use in their discussions) that are designed to evaluate the students’ prior knowledge and to generate ideas derived from the text and ideas that go beyond the text to indicate reaction or interpretation. Throughout the reading-response group experience, members maintain journals or individual response logs. When one group has completed its reading and discussion of a book, it may plan and produce a summary activity such as a puppet plan, mural, or readers theater (Ruddell, 2006).

One popular form of the literature-based approach that some teachers use is individualized reading. (Although the term is often misunderstood, it does not mean that group instruction never takes place or that group activities never occur.) Such an approach is clearly needed for three reasons: First, it involves a variety of materials and can occur even in the absence of the teacher. It therefore simulates closely the type of reading method that literate adults use, and it helps students transfer school learning outside of the classroom. Second, it places a heavy emphasis on the personal enjoyment and satisfaction to be gained through reading, thereby establishing life-long reading habits. Finally, the approach helps the teacher meet the differing reading abilities that exist at every grade level, especially among at-risk students or ELLs. Because such differences actually increase as children grow older, the range of reading abilities among students in the sixth grade has been estimated to be a little more than seven years!

Other advantages of this approach include the development of a healthy rapport between child and teacher as instruction is adjusted to the specific needs of each learner and the equally important reduction of comparison and competition among readers. Small groups can be formed as needed for specific purposes when several students encounter similar and temporary problems in one area, such as contextual analysis. The key concepts underlying this approach are self-motivation, self-selection, and self-pacing.

However, the same concepts also relate to a major requirement of the individualized reading approach: a well-stocked library. In addition to the books in the media center, the classroom library should always have at least 100 carefully selected books that cover a wide range of reading abilities and genres and that are changed monthly. Such a collection is both difficult to house in a convenient corner and costly (in terms of either time or money) to gather. Furthermore, it leads to a second important prerequisite of individualized reading: the time-consuming effort by the teacher to select wisely the broad range of books that can then be promoted to allow for the most beneficial student-teacher conferences. Children can be urged to read a variety of subject matter only if the materials are available on those same subjects and written on reading levels and in styles suitable for elementary students.

Other weaknesses of the individualized reading approach include the substantial recordkeeping required of the teacher (even with computer assistance), the stressful requirement that he or she plan a minireading program for each student, the difficulty of interpreting the program to parents who are more familiar with the basal series and accustomed to their features and procedures, and the problem of insufficient skill development due to insufficient time. Finally, some children may lack the self-discipline needed to benefit from this approach; it becomes increasingly difficult to implement as the range of reading abilities, the size of the class, and the number of remedial readers grow.

Nevertheless, those teachers who wish to use individualized reading in their classrooms should become comfortable with the core of the approach: the student-teacher conference. It is held once a week and is generally centered around the book(s) the child has selected for his or her own reading.

Language Experience Approach

The language experience approach (LEA) is founded on the theory that reading and comprehending written language are extensions of listening to and understanding spoken language. The experiences of the children form the basis of reading materials because it is widely believed that everything that students read in early reading instruction should be as relevant to them as possible and certainly the children’s own language is the most meaningful of all to them.

Girls and boys first dictate to the teacher (in groups and then individually) and later themselves write stories about field trips, school activities, and personal experiences outside of school. These stories and other student-produced materials become the texts for learning to read. Many are in the form of charts.

The rationale for the approach has been stated as thus:

I can think about what I have experienced and imagined.

I can talk about what I think about.

What I can talk about, I can express in some other form.

Anything I can record, I can recall through speaking or reading.

I can read what I can write by myself and what other people write for me to read.

A typical procedure for introducing the LEA approach involves the following steps (Tompkins, 2006):

1. The teacher selects a purpose and provides an experience that is stimulating for students of this age and background. Ordinary daily activities such as read-alouds and the care of classroom pets can serve to promote LEA. The experience must always be one of interest to the children and one that they have observed/heard or participated in and comprehend.

2. The teacher and children discuss the experience so they can focus on it, review it in greater detail, generate words, organize ideas, and use vocabulary specific to that subject.

3. The teacher records the dictation. Whether it is done originally on the board (and later copied) or on chart paper from the start, the teacher does the printing in front of the children. Furthermore, the language of the students is recorded exactly as it is dictated as much as possible so that they see that their thoughts can be written down and stored for later reading. However, the words of children who speak a dialect should be recorded in conventional spelling. When students take turns dictating sentences, some teachers wisely put the child’s initials after his or her contribution to promote pride—and participation.

4. The teacher reads the chart aloud to remind the children what they have written and also to demonstrate how to read with expression. Then the class reads the chart chorally as the teacher moves his or her hand under the words. Next, volunteers are chosen to read parts of the chart aloud. Finally, the class and teacher read the chart chorally.

5. The children examine the text with the teacher’s help. They can match word cards to words on the chart or use sequence sentence strips and match them to the line of the chart. They can participate in writing activities related to the content of the chart.

6. The teacher prepares word cards for each child’s word bank after becoming convinced that that child has learned to read those words by sight. The word bank is the student’s own sight vocabulary collection.

7. The teacher plans skills instruction as needs occur naturally, whether it is as simple as directionality of print or as complicated as punctuation.

Slowly the students begin to write their own experience stories, sometimes in small groups and sometimes individually, choosing at times to illustrate them. They may even decide to read them to their classmates or share them with their family members. Their word banks grow, as the teacher facilitates the development of their sight vocabulary.

The main advantage of the language experience approach is its stress on reading as one part of the language arts process. It also uses the interests and language of the students as the avenue for teaching reading, which makes it both appealing and successful. Still another advantage is its low cost; there is no expensive program to purchase. Finally, skills are presented to the child as they are needed and applied in contextual reading, not in isolation.

On the other hand, the approach has definite limitations. There are no printed content standards of skills to develop, which may lead to a haphazard method of reading instruction. There is a lack of both vocabulary control in general and the systematic repetition of new words in particular. Teachers spend a considerable amount of time preparing charts and worksheets concerned with past experiences as well as on planning activities to motivate future experience stories. Children are apt to become bored rereading the same stories and other passages again and again and may even memorize some of the sentences rather than actually read them.

Briefly, the language experience approach can be used at any elementary grade level by seasoned teachers interested in integrating their writing and reading programs. It has been well received as an appropriate way to present reading to beginning readers in the kindergarten–lower grades and with struggling readers in the intermediate grades, primarily because of the vocabulary and interest levels of the materials. Most important, it has been especially useful with at-risk students and ELLs.

Balanced Approach

A balanced approach combines skills development with literature and language arts activities. The program strikes a balance between the bottom-up (or skills based) approach and the top-down (or literature-based) view, a balance between explicit teacher-directed instruction and student-centered discovery learning, and a balance between authentic forms of assessment and standardized norm-referenced assessment (Harp & Brewer, 2005). The core of the program is literature, but students read a variety of materials, including leveled books—books that an educator has examined and then determined how difficult it would be for children to read based on features such as font size, number of pages, number of illustrations, text structure, and complexity of vocabulary—and basals as well as trade books; skills are taught both directly and indirectly; and literacy is regarded as reading AND writing, which are tools for learning in the content areas.

Furthermore, reading instruction involves word recognition and identification, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; writing instruction involves learning to express meaningful ideas and apply the conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The goal of the balanced approach is to develop life-long readers and writers (Fitzgerald, 1999; Weaver, 1998).

The balanced approach is supported by the International Reading Association (1999) that believes teachers must know a variety of teaching methods as well as ways of combining them successfully. Furthermore, in 2002 in its concern for diverse classrooms, the IRA stated that teachers must be capable of making decisions about how to provide that balance of reading instruction.

**Models of Reading**

Five models of reading view reading as an active, constructive process. Three of these, which are older and have been documented by more research, are the bottom-up (or subskills) model, the top-down (or whole-word) model, and the interactive model that includes both of the others (Weaver, 1994). A fourth and newer model is the transactional model, which elaborates on the interactive. Finally, there is the balanced approach, which many teachers have adopted.

The bottom-up model is promoted by educators who view reading as a set of subskills that must be mastered by students and integrated to the extent that children use them automatically. Stepwise, they first must learn to recognize letters, then words, and finally words in context. When they combine a high level of accuracy with speed and proceed to read aloud with good expression, children are exhibiting automaticity (Samuels, 1994). Students therefore should not be taught using a method that considers reading as though it were a single process. Instead, for instructional purposes, it is best to think of reading as a set of interrelated subskills that must be practiced in the context of actual reading. Students can build automaticity only by spending considerable time reading, preferably with meaningful material that is easy and interesting.

This part-to-whole model is involved in the basal reader approach, which has been the dominant method to reading instruction for many years. Controversy, however, has developed regarding which set of skills to teach and in what order, and some teachers’ overemphasis on learning skills as a goal in itself rather than as a means to an end has been criticized.

The top-down model is the whole-to-part model that teaches children to recognize words by sight, without any analysis of letters or sounds. It emphasizes the critical role that the reader’s mind plays in comprehending the text. The child uses three cue systems—graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic—and makes educated guesses about the meaning of the reading passage. The advocates of this approach view reading as a holistic experience and believe that what the reader anticipates profoundly affects how she or he actually perceives the text message. Educators, however, have criticized this approach because they believe that children really need to learn word recognition skills (as discussed in Chapter 7) for processing language to become independent readers.

The interactive model combines the bottom-up and top-down models and views the reading process as an interaction between the readers and the text. It assumes that students are simultaneously processing information from the materials they are reading (i.e., the bottom-up model) and information from their background knowledge (i.e., top-down model). Gove (1983) states that recognition and comprehension of printed words and ideas result from using both types of information.

The interactive model is based on the schema theory (Rumelhart, 1984), which explains how readers receive, store, and use knowledge in the form of schemata (the plural of schema— structures for organizing knowledge in the mind). The objective of this approach is to teach students strategies that will help them develop into independent readers who can monitor their own thinking while reading and link prior knowledge to the new material in their text. Consequently, reading becomes a highly individualized process as each reader’s schemata and the ability to use them are personal and unique. The more prior knowledge that a reader possesses, the more likely he or she is to construct meaning from the printed text.

The transactional model is an elaboration of the interactive model. It takes into consideration the students’ intentions when they read and how those can affect understanding (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997). Developed by Rosenblatt (1978), it implies that each child is engaging in a construction of meaning when he or she is reading, and reading is a process in which social, environmental, and cultural factors affect the reader’s personal interpretation of the printed page.

When reading is viewed as a transaction or event, the stance that the reader takes must be considered: Is he or she eager to obtain information from the printed page (i.e., the efferent stance), or is the reader reading for entertainment or enjoyment (i.e., the aesthetic stance)? Using the latter stance, students can concentrate on thoughts and feelings that a particular book evokes, for example, Bunting’s Night Tree (1994). Children adopt an efferent stance when reading Maestro’s The Story of Money (1995). However, almost every reading experience evokes a balance between aesthetic and efferent reading (Rosenblatt, 1991), and students move back and forth between the two stances, with one exception: Literature should be read primarily for the aesthetic experience.

The balanced approach to reading instruction is the model that most teachers use today. One large-scale survey revealed that 89% of elementary teachers believe in this approach because it combines skills development and literature with “language-rich experiences” (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998, p. 642).

In a balanced approach literature is the core of the program, and readers develop the ability to take both efferent and aesthetic stances in reading. While word recognition skills are taught both directly and indirectly, reading is seen as more than word identification. Similarly, writing is not merely spelling, grammar, and punctuation, although these remain a part of effective writing as writers must be able to express their meaningful ideas clearly. Together with writing, reading constitutes literacy, and students use both as tools for learning in content areas. While there must be a balance between comprehension and word recognition, the latter is viewed as a means to enable comprehension and never as an end in itself. Finally, the goal of a balanced approach is to develop life-long readers and writers (Baumann & Ivey, 1997; Weaver, 1998).