Chapter 11

Approaches to Teaching Reading

History and Research Overview

In a 1958 survey of elementary school teachers, 69% reported using one basal series; 10%, two basal series; and 11% 3 basal series (Staiger, 1958). In a compilation published in 1984, Aukerman, described 165 approaches to beginning reading instruction. The materials ran the gamut from those that presented words as wholes to those that incorporated intensive, systematic phonics. However, the major approach then, as it is now, was the basal reader. At the time of the 1958 survey, there were 16 basals. Today, there are just four. How is it that basals have managed to maintain their dominance? As Dewitz, Jones, & Leahey (2009) explain, basals maintain their dominance by changing with the times and adapting to the latest movements in education.

When skills-management systems were in vogue in the 1970s, skills instruction, worksheet practice, and criterion-referenced tests were at the core of the basal programs. In the 1990s, when literature-based instruction and authentic texts were driving the field, the core programs built the content of reading around selections from the children's literature canon and built instruction around response to literature. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Reading First mandate to use scientifically based research programs, core reading programs have adapted by augmenting the phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, incorporating more work on fluency and providing auxiliary materials for intervention. (p. 102)

Language Experience Approach

One alternative to using basals to teach beginning reading was the language experience approach. The use of experience charts was explained in the Twentieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education published in 1921. In this approach, the teacher discussed an experience with the class, and the students dictated sentences about the experience, which the teacher wrote
on the chalkboard or chart paper (Smith, 1965). The sentences were then used as the class’s reading material. This approach and several adaptations of it are still in widespread use today.

In the 1920s and 30s, there was a movement to build on students’ interests, needs, and purposes (Smith, 1965). Students were encouraged to set their own purposes for reading. As part of this philosophy, experience charts and children’s books chosen by the students were used to teach reading. Although typically used as a supplement to the core reading program, the language experience approach has been used, on a limited basis, as the main approach to teaching beginning reading. A language experience approach has even been commercially produced. Authored by Roach van Allen, Venezky, and Hahn (1974), the program entitled “Language Experiences in Reading,” was based on the following premises:

1. What I think about, I can talk about.
2. What I can say, I can write (or someone can write for me).
3. What I can write, I can read (and others can read, too).
4. I can read what I have written, and I can also read what other people have written for me to read. (Aukerman, 1984, p. 332)

In addition to being used to teach beginning reading, the language experience approach is frequently used to create material for older students and adults who are at the early stages of learning to read and is used as part of the Fernald (1943) approach to teach severely disabled readers. Language experience is also used in Reading Recovery and other early intervention programs. Adapted versions, known as “shared writing,” “interactive writing,” or “sharing the pen” are also used currently.

**Individualized Reading/ Reading Workshop**

In an individualized approach, each child chooses his or her own materials and meets periodically with the teacher to discuss his or her reading. As explained by Olson (1949), individualized reading was based on three principles: seeking, self-selection, and pacing. Children seek out
experiences that meet their needs and are at the appropriate developmental level, chose materials that are of interest to them, and move at their own pace. Even at young ages, children’s interests vary. Self-selection allows them to choose materials that are of interest to them. Championed by Jeannette Veatch (1959) and Lyman Hunt (1960), individualized reading was appealing but failed to garner widespread use because it was difficult to implement and manage.

The basic principles of individualized reading are now being implemented in an approach known as “reading workshop.” Created by Atwell (1987), reading workshop has three major components: preparation time, self-selected reading and responding, and sharing time. Delighted with the increased reading that her middle-schoolers engaged in after self-selection and time to read were implemented, Atwell was dissatisfied because the brief conferences that she held with students did not afford adequate time for her to develop in-depth understanding. Based on the writing workshop model, Atwell initiated the use of dialogue journals so that she could respond in writing to her students’ journal entries and, through the interchange, keep track of and foster their development as readers. Her 1987 text, *In the Middle*, was highly influential and was named as one of 13 studies that made a difference in literacy instruction (Shanhan & Neuman, 1997). “Her full-immersion approach to reading and writing, including minilessons and status reports, has been used in classrooms across the United States” (p. 209).

**Guided Reading**

Through much of the twentieth century, students were grouped according to reading ability. Typically students were divided into three groups, with each group being given materials on their reading level. To provide for varying levels, teachers might use the lower level of a basal series with their lowest readers, the on-grade text for average readers, and a higher-level text for their above-average readers. In a third-grade class, the below-level group might be using a second-grade reader, the average group, the third-grade reader, and the top group the fourth-grade reader. Teachers often used more than one set of basals. Basals incorporated reading lessons that had a
standard format known as the “direct reading activity.” As explained by Betts (1946), the DRA had five steps: readiness, silent reading, discussion, re-reading for new purposes, and follow-up. In the 1980s, in an attempt to have all students exposed to high-quality literature and to build a classroom community, whole-class instruction was adopted. Students all read the same novel or chapter book, or, if using a basal, the same selection. The selection was read aloud to students who couldn’t read it on their own. In time, teachers realized that the below-level readers were being short-changed. In 1996, Fountas and Pinnell published, *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for all Children*, which described guided reading as a way of providing appropriate instruction for small groups of children reading on approximately the same level. Guided reading is an updating of the directed reading activity. Through the use of refined teaching procedures and such devices as running records to make sure that students are being provided with the right level of materials, its planners hoped to avoid some of the problems of past grouping practices, which included round-robin reading, labeling children, and inappropriately grouping children (Ford & Opitz, 2008).

**Research**

In response to Flesch’s (1955) criticism and the space race occasioned by the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957, leaders in the field of reading met in order to resolve the controversy over reading methods. Concluding that the research on beginning reading was vague and contradictory, the group planned the first-grade studies (Graves & Dykstra, 1997). The studies, known as the “Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading” or, more popularly as the “First Grade Studies,” compared the effectiveness of varied approaches to beginning reading instruction. The approaches included: Basal, Basal plus Phonics, Initial Teaching Alphabet (a phonetic alphabet was used to spell words), Linguistic, Language Experience, and Phonic/Linguistic. One of the basic research questions was: “Which of the many approaches in initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of first-
grade?” (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). There was no clearly superior approach. The approaches, which were tried out at multiple sites, achieved superior results in some sites but not in others. No one approach achieved superior results at all sites. Overall, however, non-basal approaches tended to be superior to the basal approaches on measures of word recognition but not comprehension. Basal approaches in that era used a whole word approach. The nonbasals, for the most part, used a decoding approach.

Commenting on the results of the extension of the study into second-grade, Dykstra (1968) concluded that it wasn’t the materials that made the difference; it was the teacher and the learning situation.

One of the most important implications of this study is that future research should center on teacher and learner situation characteristics rather than method and materials. The extensive range among classrooms within any method points out the importance of elements in the learning situation over and above the materials. Furthermore, the persistence of project differences in achievement even after differences in pupil readiness were adjusted statistically indicates that characteristics other than those related to pupils are highly influential in reading success. The elements of the learning situation attributable to teachers, classrooms, schools, and school systems are obviously extremely important. Reading instruction is more likely to improve as a result of improved in-service training programs, and improved school learning climates, rather than minor changes in instructional materials. (p. 66)