

## **Integrated Reading Theory and the Role of Successive Approximation**

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A discussion between colleagues initially on the AAACE-NLA and later on the NIFL-Content Standards list points to the pragmatic usefulness of the four-part approach to reading instruction of alphabets, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension as advocated in the Partnership for Reading's **Put Reading First** report. (I make a distinction between literacy and reading wherein the latter is a subset of the former—discussion for another day). In combination these components draw upon and draw out a range of analytic and synthetic skill development leading toward the acquisition of knowledge. I take no issue with Tom Sticht's technical critique of the "components" of the reading process. If I were doing a formal research paper I would look most discriminatingly on the findings of the report and would be seeking to discern the difference between what is important, what is unimportant, and what may be inaccurate about the report. Whatever flaws there may be in this four-point definition, it does offer the important advantage of significant practical utility in discussions with volunteer tutors in explaining the various components of the balanced reading approach.

I've discussed some of this in various listserv notes. What I want to emphasize here is the importance of both stimulus-response behaviorist and intuitive-inferential constructivist approaches in learning to read as a both/and rather than an either/or phenomenon. As in learning anything complex, mastering the basics in this case, of how print literacy works, is indispensable. In this respect, an emphasis on the regularities of written English is a proper focus of initial instruction, while introducing the exceptions later. Otherwise, phonics can only be taught episodically based on need as it arises.

This approach very well may be effective with many learners, which strong phonemic advocates sometimes deny even as many whole language advocates tend to downplay the viability of systematic phonics for some (more than a few, I would argue). Even still, a program that focused only on phonemic instruction, or one that required phonemic mastery before moving on to other aspects of the reading process (including the utilization of whole language and balanced methodologies), would, in my estimation, be extremely short sighted. Thus, for example, a dismissive approach to sight word instruction is unwarranted, even as I grant the obvious point that sight word instruction alone is unsatisfactory. Both phonemic awareness and sight word instruction build on stimulus-response behaviorist mechanisms that draw schematically on different aspects of print language. In schematic terms, both individual sounds (and syllables) and words represent isolated chunks of information that individuals can process whole, as both are separate and real parts of print-based language mastery.

Where I think some phonemic advocates get it wrong is in viewing the phonic unit (the letter or blend) as the underlying basis for mastering written language. No doubt the written code is based on the alphabetic principle. Still, what has to be considered is the highly symbolic nature of the alphabetic principle in which there is no relationship between

the sound and the meaning of what is being signified. Stimulus-response exercises can, and often do help in developing some level of automaticity without which fluent reading cannot occur. Nonetheless, this type of approach is extremely limited in itself in the development of reading, which also requires much practice in fluency at the level of instruction that is appropriate for an individual's current reading ability. In a comprehensive reading program sight words, which can easily be incorporated at least into short term memory also facilitate automaticity in which the unit of focus here is the whole word rather than the individual sounds (mastered through segmentation and bending). It would be folly, indeed, to eliminate this approach to reading instruction, which, as I gather, some phonemic purists are arguing because sight word instruction interferes with the more "fundamental" need of mastering the sight-sound code.

The alphabetic principle, notwithstanding, I don't think this is the way the mind works, and in this respect, Frank Smith's discussion of schema theory should be carefully considered. One needs to make a careful distinction between the alphabetic principle without which we cannot have a written language system as we know it, and the ways in which print-based literacy is mastered. Both phonemic-based and sight word instruction contribute toward automaticity, although in different ways. In a more indirect manner, so do various scaffolding approaches to fluency (such as assisted reading methodologies) and work on comprehension and meaning-making and the role of world knowledge in facilitating the reading of texts at higher levels than "typically" accessible on based on reading levels alone as an abstract principle.

Mastery, then, requires a combination of much explicit practice and skill development focus of a variety of types (stimulus-response behaviorism) and inference-making scaffolding support in all areas of language development. Effective reading pedagogy includes phonemic awareness, but extends to fluency, vocabulary development, comprehension, meaning making, and unconscious assimilation over time, in which, in the scheme of things, learning to read is as much caught as specifically taught. How these factors apply with specific individuals is variable, though one might reasonably conclude that a balanced, or integrated perspective attuned to specific learning styles and needs, is, practically speaking, the best that we can do.

While full mastery often remains elusive, successive approximation throughout the entire leaning-teaching process has much merit as a symbolic representation of "the best that we can do" at any given time in place. Keeping students as fully engaged as possible at the nexus of their learning curves through methodologies, approaches, materials, and support systems that draw out as much as reasonably can be accomplished is the nearer term objective in an educational climate in which at some significant way learning is always happening. Throughout the effort of learning and teaching certain principles and approaches may emerge as more salient than others. However, if we move too far beyond an experimental inquiry approach we may find ourselves within the realm of dogma rather than at the cutting edge of science and practice. Solid and durable knowledge about adult reading pedagogy remains somewhat rudimentary even as we know more than a little and can come to know a great deal more.