



## Chapter 2

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# A Quest for Balance

## Moving Forward

### Key Concepts

- Since its very beginning, reading instruction in the United States has moved between skills-based and holistic approaches.
- Phonics instruction centers on the sound–symbol relationship of words in our language. Using this model, the teacher directly transmits information about how sounds and letters correspond.
- A 1997 national panel of literacy experts, in a meta-analysis of approximately 100,000 research studies, found that programs that focus too much on teaching letter–sound relationships and not enough on putting them to use are unlikely to be effective; this supports the conclusion that a more balanced, comprehensive program of instruction is the optimal path.
- In 2000, the National Reading Panel identified five skill areas as essential to early reading success: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension.
- The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been adopted by the majority of states. The standards for the English Language Arts focus intently on critical thinking and ask students to provide evidence to support reading, writing, and speaking. The standards also encourage students to gain knowledge through much more interaction with factual texts.
- A holistic stance to reading instruction integrates the language arts skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing; it tends to be a collaborative approach in which the student and teacher negotiate meaning.
- A comprehensive program that balances both skills-based instruction with a holistic exploration of literature through the six language arts appears to be a superior approach to the teaching of early literacy. Many outstanding practitioners have adopted this interface approach.

- Strong teachers tend to see frequent movements in literacy instruction as a positive spiraling—where much is learned with every new innovation—as opposed to a negative “swinging of the pendulum.”
- Today’s literacy teachers need to be aware of the standards for their state and the grade level they teach, and then to employ a wide range of instruction strategies, materials, and methods to ensure that all students meet the established goals.

## Essential Vocabulary

authentic assessment  
 basal reader  
 constructivist model of learning  
 decodable texts  
 experimental spelling  
 holistic approach  
 look–say method  
 portfolio  
 skills-based approach  
 standards  
 transactional model  
 transmission model  
 whole language philosophy

## In-Class Discussions and Activities

1. After your students have read Chapter 2, divide them in two groups. Have one group consider the merits of a literacy program that is totally meaning based for early literacy, while the other considers a wholly skills-based approach. Ask members of each group to make a strong case for the importance of their approach and present it to the other group of students. Finally, use Figure 2.1 (p. 21) to point out how a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction combines the best of both practices.
2. Bring in a current article about literacy instruction from a local newspaper, popular magazine, or website. Divide students into small groups and have them prepare a critique about the accuracy of the article’s content based on what they have learned from this chapter about a comprehensive literacy program.
3. To assist students in realizing the benefits of providing a comprehensive literacy program for young readers, write the following two objectives on the board: “The children are learning how to read” and “The children enjoy reading.” Have students brainstorm activities they recall from both skills-based and meaning-based programs as outlined in the text. Have them decide which activities would best foster each of

the objectives and then make summarizing statements about the two approaches based on this activity.

4. Have students research the Common Core Standards or the standards used in your state. Ask students to interview teachers in their field placements to determine how these standards affect the way they teach literacy.

## Test Questions

### *Multiple Choice*

1. Which of the following is the best definition of phonics instruction?
  - a. A method emphasizing worksheets and rote activities
  - b. An instructional model requiring that generalizations about letters and sounds in the English language be memorized
  - c. A transactional, collaborative model of instruction
  - d. Explicit instruction and systematic teaching of the relationships between letters and sounds
2. In what way has current instruction in phonics changed?
  - a. Phonics today is taught in as streamlined a manner as possible, so students can soon turn their attention to more enjoyable reading tasks.
  - b. Phonics instruction often takes place through the exclusive use of computer games and activities.
  - c. Phonics is taught incidentally, as it is encountered in quality literature.
  - d. Phonics is taught efficiently, through the use of drills, worksheets, and the memorization of phonic rules and generalizations.
3. The results of the First-Grade Studies support a conclusion that the most important factor in beginning literacy instruction may be which of the following?
  - a. The number of students in the class
  - b. The commitment and competence of the teacher
  - c. The method of instruction used
  - d. The amount of time spent on literacy instruction
4. Why are decodable texts advocated for early phonics instruction?
  - a. They incorporate the exact phonic element that students are learning, thereby providing immediate reinforcement.
  - b. They provide interesting stories for discussion and later creative writing.
  - c. The language patterns provide important fluency development for students for whom English is a second language.
  - d. Their inherent rhyme, rhythm, and repetition make them motivational for young learners.
5. Whole language was often associated with which of the following models of learning?

- a. The reductionist model
  - b. The transmission model
  - c. The constructivist model
  - d. The cognitive model
6. Which of the following are attributes associated with an exclusive use of a skills-based approach to literacy instruction?
- a. Language is broken down into bite-sized pieces.
  - b. Skills in sequence are taught directly.
  - c. Worksheets are used for reinforcement of skills.
  - d. Growth is quantitatively measured.
7. Which of the following are attributes associated with an exclusive use of a holistic approach to literacy instruction?
- a. Decodable texts are used.
  - b. Word families are memorized.
  - c. Literature study groups are used for discussion.
  - d. Worksheets are used to respond to basal texts.
8. Which of the following are attributes of a comprehensive approach to early literacy instruction?
- a. An emphasis on product
  - b. An emphasis on process
  - c. An emphasis on product and process
  - d. Children make all curricular decisions
9. Which of the following is an accurate statement regarding the choice of methods for early literacy instruction?
- a. With certain groups of students, one method may be used more than others; some students will use one approach exclusively.
  - b. Phonics instruction should be used exclusively in the first few years of instruction.
  - c. As long as the teacher is competent, the approach used is unimportant.
  - d. As long as students are exposed to quality literature, they will want to read, and thus learn quickly, regardless of the method used.
10. The goal of standards development is to do which of the following?
- a. Enable teachers to use a cookbook approach toward literacy teaching
  - b. Make the selection of textbooks easier
  - c. Enable teachers to work through the basal stories and workbook pages
  - d. Enable school systems to set clear targets for their students

## ***Fill in the Blanks***

1. A widely circulated book in the 1950s called \_\_\_\_\_ took teachers to task for abandoning traditional phonics instruction in favor of the then-popular look–say model.
2. Methods focusing on sound–symbol relationships are what educators generally refer to as \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Phonics instruction has sometimes been associated with the \_\_\_\_\_ of instruction.
4. Specifically designed books called \_\_\_\_\_ provide immediate reinforcement for the instruction of specific phonics elements.
5. Holistic instruction, which involves negotiating with students about their ideas concerning what they’re reading and writing, is often called a \_\_\_\_\_ of literacy instruction.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ is an approach to literacy instruction that emphasizes having students construct their own meanings from text materials and personal experimentation with print.
7. A balanced literacy program is one that \_\_\_\_\_ both the skills-based and holistic approaches to early literacy instruction.
8. Broad curricular goals containing specific grade-level targets, or benchmarks, are called \_\_\_\_\_.
9. The Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts encourages teachers to use much more \_\_\_\_\_ text for literacy instruction.

## ***Essay Questions***

1. Why do you think it may be helpful for beginning teachers to understand the history of reading instruction in the United States? What do you consider to be the most critical instructional mistakes that were made in the past?
2. React to the often-heard statement, “In education, the pendulum constantly swings back and forth from a holistic approach to a skills-based approach to early literacy instruction.” What do you think is the impetus for such change when it occurs? Would you characterize the cyclical changes as “swings” or “spirals” toward progressively better literacy instruction? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Explain what you think would be the most vital components of a balanced, comprehensive early literacy program containing elements from both a skills-based and a holistic approach.
4. The Common Core State Standards require classroom teachers to use more informational texts, beginning with the early grades. Do you think this is a positive trend? Why or why not?

## **Answers to Test Questions**

### ***Multiple Choice***

1. d
2. a
3. b
4. a
5. c
6. d
7. c
8. c
9. a
10. d

### ***Fill in the Blanks***

1. *Why Johnny Can't Read*
2. phonics
3. transmission model
4. decodable texts
5. transactional model
6. holistic instruction (also whole language)
7. unifies (or balances, combines)
8. standards
9. factual