

Vermont Legislative Research Service

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Definitions

Reading wars

The reading wars have been described as a battle between experts about the best way to teach literacy to young readers. The reading wars have occurred for at least 40 years, and some researchers consider them to go back 250 years. The two different arguments are for either a phonics or whole language approach to teaching children to read.⁶

Phonics

Phonics is a collection of approaches to teaching literacy that focuses on identifying letters, their relationships to on (i)4 (ng)4 (e)3 (l)4 (ps)16 (oblhr)4 (e)13 (nt a 6 (obro)-2 (/EMC 7g4 (ng)4 (e)-1)6 ()]]T

Prominent Methods

Structured Literacy

Structured Literacy (SL) is a method of reading instruction that includes

(a) explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy at multiple levels—phonemes, letter–sound relationships, syllable patterns, morphemes, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and text structure; (b) cumulative practice and ongoing review; (c) a high level of student– teacher interaction; (d) the use of carefully chosen examples and nonexamples; (e) decodable text; and (f) prompt, corrective feedback.¹¹

These components of SL can be approached in numerous ways however Louise Spear-Swerling, child reading education expert, highlights the fundamental aspects of SL instruction in her research. She suggests, teachers using this teaching approach must emphasize specific skills and concepts, teaching them clearly rather than expecting incidental learning to take place.¹² To clarify this further, teachers are expected to make sure skills are taught in a logical order for example, working on the decoding of one syllable words then moving on to two syllable words.¹³ Structured literacy is commonly used for students with dyslexia although the highly explicit nature of this system has been shown to help low-income students as well as at risk learners.¹⁴

When implementing structured literacy, the order in which course content is taught relies on the scope and sequence of what the students have already learned.¹⁵ For example, certain programs will start with sounds exclusively without teaching letters in order to avoid confusion in phoneme manipulation with the presence of letters.¹⁶ Once students master phonemic awareness

more easily identified.¹⁹ With this information teachers can then return to the lesson where the student struggled and provide them with the support they need. The systemic nature of this

to create a balanced reading program. Phonics instruction is never a total reading program."²⁸
The Panel goes on to write

Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached. It is important to evaluate children's reading competence in many ways, not only by their phonics skills but also by their interest in books and their ability to understand information that is read to them."²⁹

Balanced Literacy

Balanced literacy is an approach to teaching reading that straddles between skills-based instruction, such as phonics, and the whole language method.³⁰ Phonics only learning does not teach children to apply words in context while whole language fails to instruct on ways to decode unfamiliar words. By utilizing both approaches, the deficits of one are compensated by the other.³¹ The term "Balanced Learning" was popularized following the publication of *Reading Instruction that Works: A Case for Balanced Teaching* by education psychologist Michael Pressley in 1998. In its adoption, however, balanced literacy has lacked true methodological consensus and thus has become a catchall for most sorts of blended learning approaches.

accuracy in their second language” and enhance development when they collaborate on projects.⁴¹

Reading to Learn vs. Learning to Read

In the 1990s, the idea of “learning to read” and “reading to learn” became more popular in literacy studies. The basis of this theory is that in grades K-3, children are learning to read, and in 4-12 they are reading to learn.⁴² However, after grade 3 in this approach, reading is taken out of context and skills and information are not learned in conjunction, which can make it harder to keep up with reading in later grades and students may be less engaged in the material.⁴³ Data has since emerged showing that “learning to read” and “reading to learn” should happen “simultaneously and continuously, from preschool through middle school.”⁴⁴ Focusing only on reading to learn after grade 3 results in narrow skill development and children who struggle to read who may not have developed strong reading skills by the end of grade 3.⁴⁵ K-3 should focus on learning basic skills, such as “concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics and the alphabetic code, and word analysis strategies,” while comprehension skills like “fluency and automatic word recognition, vocabulary development, comprehension acquisition, and strategy development” are learned and perfected over a lifetime.⁴⁶

In preschools, many teachers often use units and different subjects to help students learn. Dr. Juliet Halladay, a literacy and language development professor at the University of Vermont, recommends teachers implement thematic curricula to simulate learning skills and information at the same time.⁴⁷ Tong et al. explore this idea of thematic learning in a 2014 study incorporating literacy lessons with science instruction for grades K-3 ELs. Tong et al. found that K-3 students who received science-embedded English language instruction not only continued to develop faster than those students who did not receive the intervention in their English oral reading fluency (i.e., expressive and receptive vocabulary knowledge, verbal reasoning, and word meanings) and comprehension skills,

Difference in Socioeconomic Status and Literacy

Nelson et al. find that

which students can both summarize and visualize the text to make predictions, which is a comprehensive approach to understanding the text.⁵³

Dr. Katie Revelle of the University of Vermont advocates for a “comprehensive approach to literacy instruction that includes research-based instructional practices and uses systematic assessments to evaluate and respond to students’ diverse learning needs.”⁵⁴

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is an arm of the Institute of Education Sciences through the U.S. Department of Education that was started in 2002. The goal of the WWC is to assess best methods for literacy in American children, using scientific methods to determine what works and what does not. Their database comprises of many different research methods and papers individuals have conducted and written, showing methods that live up to the WWC standards for literacy and reading education.

Within the report focusing on “foundational skills to support reading for understanding,” the WWC has four recommendations for teaching literacy skills in grades K-3.

1. Teach students academic language skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge.
2. Develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters.
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Massachusetts

Kindergarten Foundational skills in Massachusetts emphasize phonological awareness, and print concepts such as reading left to right and top to bottom.⁵⁹ These concepts are a vital step

This report was completed on April 21, 2021, by Rowan Hawthorne, Aidan Neilly, Hannah Dauray under the supervision of VLRS Director, Professor Anthony "Jack" Gierzynski in response to a request from Vermont State Representative Sarah Austin.

Contact: Professor Anthony "Jack" Gierzynski, 534 Old Mill, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, phone 802-656-7973, email agierzyn@uvm.edu