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# From Basal Reader to Whole Language: Transition Tactics

**Pamela J. Farris**

Ever since William McGuffey introduced his famous reading series, the basal reader has been relied upon as the prominent means of teaching children to read. As recently as 1980, between 80% and 90% of the nation's elementary teachers used basal readers as the primary instructional method (Koeller, 1981). During the past few years, the whole language approach has become popular and is threatening to unseat the basal from its longtime bastion in reading instruction.

The whole language approach focuses upon the learning process rather than the product. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are taught as closely integrated subjects. Because of their interrelationship, growth in one language arts area leads to growth in one or more of the remaining areas. Thus, the instructional emphasis should be upon integrating the language arts whenever possible (Cooper, Warnicke, and Shipman, 1988).

In addition to emphasizing process over product, the whole language approach emphasizes "empowerment," through which both the teacher and the student have great input as to what will be taught and the materials and activities to be used. Rather than assigning a story from the basal reader along with accompanying skill pages contained in a workbook, the teacher in a whole language program involves students in the

planning of relevant activities designed around their interests, needs, and abilities. Largely, these activities incorporate children's literature and writing. This follows the underlying philosophy of the whole language approach in that children are expected to learn to read and write naturally, just as they learned to listen and speak. Children learn to read by reading and to write by writing.

As school districts move away from the basal reader to whole language, teachers find themselves in a tenuous position — the structure and security of the basal program is set aside for the less structured and unfamiliar whole language approach. The following suggestions will assist in making a smoother transition from the basal to the whole language program.

### **Classroom Management**

In the whole language classroom, the teacher serves as a facilitator of learning. Students are encouraged to pursue their interests, make decisions, and evaluate their learning progress. This is accomplished within a setting of cooperativeness in that both teacher and classmates serve as learning assistants for the students.

Many teachers are uncomfortable in such a classroom environment because their own teaching style is in conflict with the whole language philosophy. This is particularly true of teachers who use direct instruction aimed at skill acquisition. School administrators should not attempt to force such teachers to adopt the whole language philosophy; participation should be voluntary. In view of the fact that effective teaching research strongly supports direct instruction (e.g., Clark and McCarty, 1983; Corno and Snow, 1986; McCormack-Larkin and Kritek, 1983) while research on the whole

language approach is sparse and inconclusive, to coerce a teacher to adopt the whole language approach would be a mistake in terms of faculty morale.

For those teachers who prefer a more structured classroom environment, incorporating whole language activities in addition to the basal program can offer an opportunity to experiment within their own classroom, and determine for themselves the effectiveness and efficiency of the whole language approach.

For those teachers who find the nonthreatening atmosphere of the whole language approach appealing, caution must be given that building trust and cooperation among students requires much support, effort, and guidance on the behalf of the classroom teacher. Students can be allowed to make choices and help each other but ultimately the classroom teacher is held accountable for the learning that takes place.

### **Instructional Strategies: Grades K-3**

A variety of instructional strategies are included in a whole language program for grades K-3. Typically these include shared book experiences, sustained silent reading (SSR), and journal writing.

Shared book experiences are utilized in kindergarten through grade three, and beyond with remedial readers. An entire class is involved in reading a "big book" which contains print large enough for all of the students to see when they are gathered on the floor around the teacher.

The shared book experience was developed by Holdaway (1979) and involves the following seven steps:

1. The teacher briefly introduces the book to the class.
2. The teacher then asks the students to make predictions about what they believe the book is about and what they think will happen in the story.
3. The teacher reads the book to the class, pointing to the text while reading so that the students are able to follow along visually.
4. The teacher may stop reading at preselected points and ask students to verify their original predictions and to make new ones based upon the information gained from the story to that point.
5. The book is then reread with students being encouraged to read along with the teacher.
6. Individual students or pairs of students may volunteer to read the book aloud to the class.
7. The book is read to the class every day for a week.

Sustained silent reading (SSR) allows students to read books of their own choosing for a set period of time each day. The teacher also reads during this time (McCracken and McCracken, 1978), serving a reading model. SSR permits children to practice reading without undue pressure.

In grades two and three, students may incorporate journal writing as part of their whole language experiences. Journal writing includes writing in personal logs on a regular or daily basis as well as academic learning logs in which the students write down their interpretations and reactions to content area text. Both types of journals emphasize content rather than specific writing skills such as spelling and grammar.

### **Instructional Strategies: Grades 4-6**

While some of the instructional strategies appropriate for the primary grades may also be used at the intermediate

level, additional strategies may be added. For instance, SSR and journal writing can continue, with the length of time for SSR being extended and the journal writing going into greater depth and detail. Other instructional strategies which are appropriate for the intermediate grades include discussion groups and dialogue journals.

Discussion groups are utilized in the whole language classroom to develop listening, speaking, and thinking skills. Typically, discussion groups are formed to report upon specific topics within a thematic unit of study. For example, a thematic unit about life in Massachusetts in the 1600's might include discussion groups on the Salem witch trials, whaling, education, and colonial life. After reading about their topic, the students share and discuss their findings within their group before presenting their final report to the class.

Dialogue journals are a form of written conversation about a book between the student and the teacher. At least once every two weeks, students write a letter to the teacher in their notebook or journal about the piece of literature they are currently reading. They may write about thoughts, ideas, feelings and beliefs, in their reaction to the book. What is liked or disliked about the book may also be included. The teacher then writes a response to the student's ideas in the same journal, with the purpose of sharing in the written conversation about the book, rather than correcting technical aspects of students' writing. According to Atwell (1987), dialogue journals permit students to analyze and critique literature as well as to articulate what they like or value.

These instructional strategies can be slowly incorporated in a basal reading program during the transition period or used in addition as supplementary activities should the basal

reader program be retained as the primary instructional program.

## **Evaluation**

Unlike the basal reader program which contains unit skill tests, evaluation in the whole language program relies heavily upon teacher observation, so informal checklists and anecdotal records should be incorporated into the evaluation process. Dated writing samples for each student should be collected and filed on a monthly basis. Likewise, dated records of each student's free reading selections and completed books should be maintained. In addition, each student should have a personal self-evaluation checklist.

Standardized achievement tests continue to be the yardstick by which achievement is determined in most school districts. For those students in a whole language program which utilizes informal evaluation in terms of checklists and anecdotal records, the idea of having to take a time-restricted, computer-scored, objective test can be somewhat traumatic. In order to be fair to students, they must be exposed to similar time-restricted, paper-and-pencil measures prior to the administration of the standardized test battery. While students may still be anxious about taking the standardized achievement battery of tests, the format and rules will not be completely new to them, thus insuring a more accurate measure of their abilities.

## **Conclusions**

These suggestions are designed to assist teachers in making the transition from a basal reading program to a whole language program. Plunging into a whole language program and abandoning the basal program is not advisable. Gradual implementation allows teachers and students to become

confident in using this instructional method.

In order for a successful transition to be made, teachers must be knowledgeable in the fields of language arts and children's literature. In addition, teachers must not only know but trust their students. Without these essential ingredients, the transition to a whole language program will fail.

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### Correction

The correct title of the article by Dr. John H. Warren, which appeared in the summer issue of *Reading Horizons* (Volume 29, #4) on pages 244-256, is "Classroom Oral Reading and Its Need for Restraints."

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