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Chapter 6a. Language Arts

James R. Squire

Reading, writing, and oral language are the bedrock subjects of the curriculum, for they develop the competencies on which virtually all subsequent instruction and learning depends. Together with literature, which introduces young people to the ideas and values of their own and other cultures, these subjects constitute a segment of the curriculum that occupies from about 60 percent of school time at the primary school level to about 17 percent of school time at the secondary level. Unless boys and girls develop competence in using language, they will be handicapped throughout schooling and life.

The 12 practices identified in this chapter deal with the language arts as a whole, including the three major components of reading, writing, and oral language. A separate sub-chapter by Carolyn Dunkle Perry follows that deals with specific practices relating only to oral language.

For almost all of this century, teaching strategies and learning practices that are effective in the language arts have been vigorously researched. Yet, over these decades, the profession has continuously debated the desirability of various approaches. Disagreements have focused on the need for carefully controlled instruction versus the benefits of more open-ended, creative, and exploratory approaches. Many maintain that learners must be taught the needed skills and strategies; others, that learners will develop the needed competencies as they are engaged in meaningful language activities. Yet it seems clear that learners reap benefits from both kinds of teaching and that the most desirable overall approach combines instruction on key skills and strategies within a rich learning environment that stimulates reading, writing, and talking.

A review of the literature related to teaching and learning of the language arts also makes clear the interrelationships between many of the practices discussed in the following pages. Research points to the positive connection between extensive reading and improved reading comprehension. Providing opportunities for students to discuss what they have read—to become active participants in making meaning from written text—has also been proven to help students' reading skills to grow. This second approach also has positive effects on the first, since students who are provided with time and opportunity to share their thoughts about reading tend to read more.

The teaching of strategies to help students comprehend what they are reading is another approach that results in more than one positive outcome. Students not only understand more of what they are reading; again, they tend to read more. This linkage has a commonsense base. As reading becomes easier and more understandable, it becomes more enjoyable and students are likely to do more of it.

Similar relationships can be found between many of the 12 research-based approaches discussed in this section on the language arts. Instruction that effectively integrates them in the daily life of the classroom will be a strong force both for improving the reading and writing skills of students and for encouraging them to make reading part of their lives outside as well as inside school.

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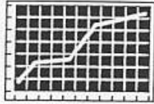
6a.1. Extensive Reading: Extensive reading of material of many kinds, both in school and outside, results in substantial growth in the vocabulary, comprehension abilities, and information base of students.



Research findings:

Research has demonstrated that time spent reading, both inside and outside of school, is essential to developing cognitive abilities such as comprehension and vocabulary. Reading of many different types of material also has benefits, since students then see words in a variety of contexts. The meanings of these words are then more readily accessible during future reading. Students with both low- and high-level literacy skills benefit from time spent reading, with vocabulary learned from context and comprehension improved if the difficulty of the material presented is appropriate to the current reading level.

Yet recent studies demonstrate that most children spend no more than a few minutes a day reading in school or outside, on either assigned or independent reading. In addition, students with low reading skill levels are found to spend even less classroom time reading and more working on skill-based approaches.

Research has also found that an increase in the amount and breadth of independent reading, when paired with the presentation of strategies for improving comprehension, is associated with instruction that provides opportunities for students to discuss and share what they read.

In the classroom:

Young people need large blocks of time within the school day to read, with time for text reading considered an essential aspect of comprehension instruction. Students should be helped to select material that is of a suitable level of difficulty, so that the text can be comprehended but the reading activity will also result in new learning.

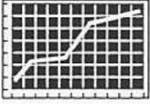
An atmosphere that encourages reading outside as well as inside the classroom can be provided by teachers who schedule time for students to talk to each other about the books they have read, to engage in shared reading, and to give personal reactions and interpretations of text.

School resources can be allocated to encourage reading of many types by students. Books in classrooms and in the school library should be of different types and cover a variety of topics. In addition, school time should be organized to encourage reading activities not only in language arts but in other subject areas such as social studies and science. To help teachers decide what balance of activities is appropriate, schools need to be explicit about the dimensions of cognitive growth that are to be considered essential aspects of the educational program. These might include language concepts and the ability to analyze, synthesize, and make informed judgments based on valid criteria, all skills strengthened by reading and discussing what was read.

References:

Allington 1994; Anderson et al. 1985; Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Fielding and Pearson 1994; Guthrie et al. 1995; LaBrant 1961; Nagy, Anderson, and Herman 1987.

6a.2. Interactive Learning: Learning in which children and young people are interactive produces far more effective growth than instruction in which they are passive.



Research findings:

John Dewey emphasized that we learn from experience, and that activities become experience only as we think about and act upon them. Vgotsky, Piaget, and Britton reported similar observations. Reading, characterized as "highly interactive and reciprocal," fits well within this context. Part of the experience involves the reader-author connection, but research also stresses the importance of student-student and student-teacher interaction; discussing what has been read adds another dimension to the experience and expands the reader's understanding.

Research in strategic teaching and learning is becoming increasingly specific about what can be learned through cooperative activity or interactive processes. It demonstrates that such social processes, when compared with individual study, can stimulate greater growth for learners. In the area of the language arts, this can result in both an expanded vocabulary and higher levels of comprehension.

In addition, social time spent talking about reading—sharing, asking questions, explaining—has been demonstrated to increase the amount of reading students do, and so contributes in an additional way to improving reading skills.

In the classroom:

Language learning comes not from the activity itself but from thinking about, writing about, or talking about the activity. As the great linguist C.C. Fries observed, "There is no language save for the speaker active in expression." Readers and writers must be encouraged to think about and discuss what they are reading, writing, and doing if they are to learn. Talking about ideas also helps young people think through the ideas. When Purves stressed that "it takes two to read a book," he was referring to research which indicates that learning from reading comes from writing about and talking about what is read. Hence, classrooms in which young people are active in using language are essential in teaching the language arts.

The sharing opportunities can take many forms: reading partners, cooperative learning groups, reading journals passed back and forth between student and teacher, whole-class discussions, or presentation of reports. What is more important than the type of activity is that students are actively rather than passively engaged.

When time is provided to discuss reading done outside as well as inside class, students are also encouraged to read more and to read more widely than would be possible in the time available in class.

References:

Britton 1970; Dewey 1933; Dole et al. 1991; Goodman, Hood, and Goodman 1991; Johnson, Johnson, and Holobec 1991; Piaget 1959; Pressley et al. 1990; Purves and Beach 1972; Vgotsky 1978.

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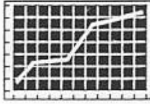
6a.3. Extension of Background Knowledge: Reading comprehension is enhanced when readers extend their experience and background knowledge and develop their sensitivity to increasingly difficult concepts and complex patterns of language.



Research findings:

Recent research emphasizes the significance of background knowledge in reading comprehension. The more a reader knows about a topic, the better his or her comprehension of newly encountered writing about the topic, and the less that has to be "filled in" by someone who may be unclear about the intent of the author. Background knowledge combines with basic skills such as vocabulary in order to make the text understandable. Thus, students who have low basic skills but high background knowledge about the topic being discussed may be able to understand what the author intended even if the words used are difficult.

In the process of comprehending the text, the reader gains more background knowledge to be used in understanding future texts. A reader's background knowledge can include either general issues related to the text or subject-matter knowledge relevant to the text. The combination of background knowledge available allows a reader to make inferences about meanings in a text, and thus to comprehend it. Extensive reading, another of the research-based factors shown to improve reading comprehension and vocabulary, is an important factor in increasing the bank of background knowledge available to a reader.

In the classroom:

Each reading experience both benefits from and enhances background knowledge; new words and meanings are added to background knowledge through reading. Schools and teachers can help with the critical need to expand background knowledge by providing time for students to read and a supply of books that are both interesting and varied.

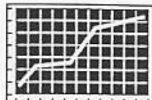
Teachers can also supply background knowledge in other ways: pre-teaching vocabulary before it is presented in text, enriching background knowledge through previews or by highlighting background knowledge that students are known to have, or assessing students' present level of background knowledge and then selecting additional resources that can help to fill gaps in areas that would hinder comprehension.

Methods of linking background knowledge to the text might include using advance organizers; providing students with objectives or purposes for the text; and using pretests or prequestioning. Direct instruction in how to use background knowledge to make inferences about unfamiliar text may also help students. For example, having students predict what will happen in a story requires them to draw on both their understanding of the text and their background knowledge.

References:

Anderson and Pearson 1984; McCabe and Peterson 1991; Nagy 1988; Strickland 1962; Tierney and Cunningham 1984.

6a.4. Instruction in Strategic Reading and Writing: Activities that enable students to apply meaning-making skills and strategies such as summarizing, questioning, and interpreting contribute to improved reading comprehension and written composition.



Research findings:

Research on strategic reading and writing has been a primary focus of studies during recent years as cognitive psychologists (those concerned about the development of thinking abilities) have turned their attention to the learning of language. Studies of good and poor readers have provided especially important insights. Specifically, good readers spontaneously use a wide range of strategies when unfamiliar text or tasks are encountered, while poor readers are unlikely to do so. A number of cognitive strategies useful to readers and writers have been developed and can be taught to students.

In the classroom:

Teachers should become familiar with the variety of cognitive strategies that students can use to improve their reading comprehension and writing ability. Strategies that have been identified include using background knowledge, previewing, setting goals, determining importance, evaluating content, generating questions, predicting, and summarizing as well as many others. These strategies may take place before, during, or after an event of reading or writing, and can be applied over a number of subject areas. The challenge for teachers is getting students to understand and apply the strategies during reading and writing.

Modeling of the strategy for students is an important component of instruction. Other important components are explaining how the strategy will help with learning, selecting strategies appropriate to the learner and the context, and providing feedback and encouragement as the student learns to use them. Group activities can be used to introduce and implement cognitive strategies. For example, students in a group may develop predictions about a story after having read part of it, identify strategies they each used to understand unfamiliar words, and develop a group summary of the story.

The most significant learning occurs after the act of reading, as the individual thinks about the ideas themselves and the ways in which they are presented. Thus, strategies that focus on this aspect of the reading-writing process are critical. Teachers' conferences with their students offer an effective way to encourage young people to reflect on what they have been reading or writing, as do other instructional strategies that help readers elaborate on the ideas they are reading or writing about, and thus promote higher thought processes and the ability to think more critically. Children consistently demonstrate improved understanding after engaging in such activities.

References:

Cazden 1991; Flood and Lapp 1991; Freedman 1987; Haller, Child, and Walberg 1988; Hill 1991; McLain 1991; Palincsar and Brown 1985; Paris, Wasik, and Turner 1991; Wittrock 1990.

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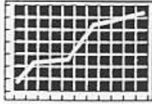
6a.5. Interrelated Activities: Organizing instruction into broad, thematically based clusters of work through which reading, writing, and speaking activities are interrelated promotes understanding of the connections among activities and ideas.



Research findings:

Although individuals have long advocated interrelating reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the classroom, research demonstrating the power of such approaches has begun to appear only during the last decade: first, with respect to preschool and early language development; more recently, with respect to teaching in the upper grades.

In the classroom:

Thematic instruction provides an ideal framework for the classroom teacher who wants students to make the connection between reading, writing, and speaking. Activities designed around a unifying theme build on each other rather than remaining as fragmented disciplines. A connection of ideas as well as of related skills provides opportunities for reinforcement. For example, students who are learning to identify the main points in a story can, as a prewriting strategy, develop main points for their own stories.

When concepts are developed over a period of time so that one day's reading prepares students for discussion or writing, and the discussion of that writing in turn leads to more reading and writing, young people are more likely to grasp the connections among ideas and to develop and understand broad generalizations. If each day's reading, writing, and discussion relates to that done on earlier days and foreshadows upcoming activities, students will begin to see precedents as well as consequences and transitions from one version to another.

Skills development can also be an important outcome of this integrated approach. The spelling and structure of beginning writers improve as more experience with reading is provided. As they begin to write and realize that the purpose of writing is to convey an idea, they understand better that authors are creating messages for them.

References:

Allington 1994; Chall and Jacobs 1995; Freedman and McLeod 1988; Goodman, Hood, and Goodman 1991; Harste and Short 1988; Hartman 1995; Maguire 1994; Moffett and Wagner 1983; Pressley et al. 1990; Shaughnessy 1977.

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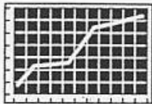
6a.6. Teaching Critical Reading/Writing Skills: The teaching of critical skills such as word attack or grammar in reading and writing helps students develop competence in such skills within a reasonable period of time. Such instruction may be embedded in the total context of language learning or may be presented directly by the teacher.



Research findings:

Research has consistently demonstrated that many children will not automatically acquire all the basic skills needed for reading and writing and so may have to be taught some of them through direct instruction. Thus, poor readers, who read less and so have fewer opportunities to successfully practice skills such as word identification, remain poor decoders unless they receive specific skills instruction.

However, research has also pointed to the need for a balance between instruction in basic skills and instruction in context even for poor readers or writers. For example, when instruction for children with reading problems provides skills-based instruction to the exclusion of ample opportunities to read for meaning, the development of both vocabulary and reading comprehension skills suffer.

In the classroom:

There are many effective ways to teach reading and writing skills to young people. The skills may be embedded in a total language context or taught directly by the teacher. If taught directly, however, such instruction must include not only time for young people to learn skills, but ample experience in applying them. For example, if children are taught the sounds of words, opportunities to identify the words in a meaningful context should also be available.

References:

Adams 1990; Allington 1994; Chall 1967, 1983; Clay 1991; Farrell 1991; Indrisiano and Paratore 1991; Lyons, Pinnell, and Deford 1993; Palincsar and Brown 1985; Rosenshine and Stevens 1984.

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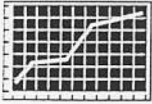
6a.7. Discussion and Analysis: Instruction that emphasizes discussion and analysis rather than rote memory contributes most effectively to development of students' thinking abilities.



Research findings:

Research has consistently demonstrated that most young people will reach their potential in developing higher thought processes only if these processes are taught and practiced. Ability to recall information may also improve as the student creates a context in which to remember facts.

In the classroom:

Teachers should avoid excessive reliance on questions that require no more than recall of information. Frequent use of true-false, multiple-choice, and short-answer questions may teach students to respond quickly to certain kinds of tests, but it does not help them think while they read. Instead, guided questions that focus on skills such as developing inferences or analyzing the content should predominate. In order to help students think through more complex ideas and practice building thought-frameworks of written material, opportunities for reading and then discussing relatively long selections should be provided.

Writing and reading are so closely related that they are most effectively taught together. This instruction can also be structured so that a primary focus is on higher-order skills. For example, the process of composing can be presented to students as a way to construct and communicate their own ideas, while the process of reading comprehension helps them to reconstruct the ideas first communicated by another. Reading/writing assignments in which this theme of communication predominates provide a framework for discussion and analytic thinking.

References:

Armbruster, Anderson, and Ostertag 1987; Chall 1983; Jensen 1984; Pearson 1985; Tierney and Shanahan 1991.

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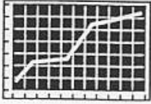
6a.8. Emphasis on the Writing Process: Stressing the processes of composing (planning, drafting, revising, sharing, and publishing) contributes to improved competence in writing.



Research findings:

Extensive research on the composing processes of young people began about 25 years ago and has continued to this day. The research has helped to identify not only the various stages of writing, but also the ways in which attention to process can effectively inform classroom instruction.

Some research is also available about the effects of word processing on composition, but it is often contradictory. Aspects of writing studied included motivation toward writing, frequency of revision, and quality of writing. Results are generally small although in the positive direction.

In the classroom:

The complete process of written composition involves a series of recursive and interlocking stages, each of which should be discussed with students so they understand its value and place in the process. Composing processes may vary with individuals, but long-range improvement in writing competence depends in good measure on students' understanding of the processes in which they engage.

Frequent practice is also necessary if writing is to improve, and such practice requires devoting time to writing in class. Particularly useful are occasional double periods or writing workshops during which the teacher is free to provide guidance to individuals as they engage in the writing process. Also useful are conferences to discuss the processes with individuals or to help students apply a point made during instruction to their work.

Whole class or small group discussion that provides time for students to talk about their work and to ask for feedback from other students can also be used as a way to focus on process. For example, a student may share his/her thoughts about a possible revision from the perspective of his/her original plans for the written piece, as well as where it currently stands.

References:

Bangert-Drowns 1993; Bereiter and Scardanalia 1987; Dyson and Freedman 1991a, 1991b; Emig 1971; Freedman 1987; Graves 1983; Jensen 1993.

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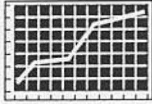
6a.9. Balanced Reading and Writing: Programs that provide balanced attention to both imaginative and informative reading, writing, and speaking promote competence in handling discourse of many kinds.



Research findings:

Beginning with Rosenblatt's definitive study of literary response in 1978 and the work by Britton and his associates in defining the varied modes of writing, researchers have been increasingly concerned about the need for balanced attention to the different modes of reading and writing.

Researchers agree that the writing process as generally presented in classrooms should be considered only a general guide to writing. Different types of writing require variations of the process. Thus, students engaged in producing different styles of writing learn not only new modes but different approaches to developing a finished product. Recent studies indicate that schools are failing to have students practice the skills associated with expository writing.

In the classroom:

The curriculum must help children develop competence in comprehending and composing prose of many kinds. While literary selections can engage children's interest as they begin to read, experience with factual and scientific prose is also important. Similarly, over-emphasis on personal writing to the neglect of informative or factual writing can limit students' overall growth in ability to compose.

This suggests that teachers should provide instruction in a variety of forms as well as variations of the writing process. The differences among the types of writing should be explicitly presented, and students should be given assistance while they practice. The role for the teacher in this process is an active one; extensive guidance will be needed by many students as they attempt to comprehend and demonstrate mastery of the distinctions among the many different types of writing.

Regular opportunities to engage in activities that use different modes of discourse are also important to student growth. For example, the processes involved in responding to literature differ from those used in seeking information from texts and then presenting it to others. These modes must be taught, modeled, and practiced.

References:

Britton et al. 1975; Dyson and Freedman 1991a, 1991b; Olson 1995; Probst 1988; Rosenblatt 1978; Squire 1984; Venezky et al. 1987.

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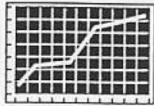
6a.10. Early Intervention: Carefully designed early intervention for children who experience difficulty in learning to read and write can produce significant long-term improvement.



Research findings:

For 50 years, research has pointed to the importance of early intervention to help children who experience difficulty in learning to read and write. Today's studies warn, however, against extensively isolating children for remedial instruction, and suggest new ways in which tutoring and other support activities can be provided without permanently assigning children to "special" classrooms. The need to provide extensive opportunities to read, rather than merely drill and practice of skills in isolation, has been documented as important for students with early reading difficulties.

In the classroom:

Early intervention occurs most effectively within the total classroom with special support provided as needed. Pull-out programs that permanently isolate children in order to cater to special needs contribute less to their learning than does mainstream classroom instruction with provision for flexible grouping of students. Moreover, such mainstream grouping gives students with reading difficulties the opportunity to observe and learn from students who have moved to the next stage of development and to benefit from the social aspects of reading.

Pullout programs have often had the additional disadvantage of making less rather than more time for reading instruction available to students with reading problems. Two widely emulated programs—the Reading Recovery program developed by Marie Clay and the Success for All program of Robert Slavin—have been carefully structured to ensure that this does not happen. Both involve early diagnosis and treatment, one-to-one tutoring by certificated teachers, varied use of flexible grouping in the basic classroom, a print-rich environment with opportunities for reading, and personal instruction on word attack skills with students scheduled for special help in addition to rather than as a substitute for regular reading instruction.

Opportunities to read for meaning and to experience success with reading are as important for students having difficulty as for students without problems—perhaps even more important. To address these needs, Reading Recovery uses a series of little books, carefully selected to be both interesting and accessible, that can be read by the students in the program.

References:

Allington 1994; Cazden 1988; Indrisano and Paratore 1991; Lyons, Pinnell, and Deford 1993; Slavin and Madden 1987; Slavin et al. 1992.

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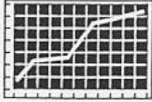
6a.11. Exposure to a Range of Literature: Reading and reflecting on a range of selected literary works can help young people learn about the ideas and values of their own and diverse cultures as well as about the experiences of different groups.



Research findings:

While recent studies of the types of literary works taught in many schools agree that the school curriculum has changed over recent decades, there is no universal agreement about the extent to which it has changed or about whether the changes made are all for the better. Controversy exists about the mix taught, about possible inadequate representation of some minority groups, and about whether efforts to include material from many cultures have resulted in a decline in student knowledge about writers traditionally considered to be important. The degree of change that has actually occurred appears to vary by community.

In the classroom:

The traditional literary canon conveys many of the values on which our country is based. In addition, young people need to understand the values conveyed in the literary heritages of varied cultural groups, with this need increasingly critical because of dramatically changing demographics. Schools should develop curricular programs that contain both traditional and nontraditional literature of high quality.

Although balance in the types of literature taught is important, local communities will continue to resolve, sometimes through controversy, what will be taught locally.

References:

Applebee 1991; Cullinan 1987; Purves 1994; Ravitch and Finn 1987; Stotsky 1995.

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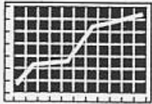
6a.12. Appropriate Assessment: Assessment that focuses on what is being taught in a school's curriculum and on the modes of instruction used in the curriculum promotes learners' growth toward curricular goals.



Research findings:

Studies of assessment have identified a misalignment between many of the assessment instruments and approaches used and instructional goals and programs. For example, while instructional attention in the area of writing has shifted from a focus on specific skills to the processes involved in learning to write, few assessment instruments address this new emphasis. Many reading tests ignore assessment of competence in comprehending longer selections, a task that is receiving increased attention in schools.

In the classroom:

Assessments should measure what teachers teach and what students learn. Such assessments help teachers to discover what is working in the teaching-learning interaction. Too often, assessment instruments focus on content that is not central to a school's program. When school-wide, local, and especially high-stakes state assessments are unrelated to classroom instruction, students' test scores may be low, but the data generated tell little about what should be done to improve instruction. Additional classroom-based assessment may have to be conducted for this purpose.

An alternative scenario may be the one that currently exists in some states. Interest in improving higher-order skills of students is intense, and state assessments are being developed and administered that focus on these skills. In cases such as these, changes in assessment may actually precede changes in instruction and provide direction about new curricular goals.

References:

Farr 1992; Farr and Beck 1991; Geneshi 1994; Johnston 1984.

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