Striking a Balance

Now in its sixth edition, *Striking a Balance* clearly illustrates how to create a comprehensive early literacy program that places direct skills instruction within the context of rich and varied reading and writing experiences.

Text discussions, dynamic activities, and valuable appendices provide a variety of effective instructional resources, selected based on research and teacher testimonials. The sixth edition incorporates recent updates to national and state standards, as well as expanded sections on working with English language learners and students with special needs, while maintaining the book’s essential features: classroom vignettes, discussion questions, field-based activities, a student website, and study guide.

An essential resource for early literacy instructors, this textbook’s practical approach fundamentally demonstrates how children develop authentic literacy skills through a combination of direct strategy instruction and motivating contexts.

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Striking a Balance

A Comprehensive Approach to Early Literacy

Sixth Edition

Nancy Lee Cecil, Albert S. Lozano, and Mae Chaplin
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Focus Questions

What are the fundamental processes of reading?
Why is it important for teachers in the field to understand all aspects of the reading process?
How is reading defined by researchers and practitioners in the field?

In the Classroom

Although this vignette is titled “In the Classroom,” in actuality the learning-to-read process begins long before 4-year-old Lydia ever enters school. She has developed certain concepts about the function of print from the numerous signs in her urban environment and by observing how readers in her home interact with books, magazines, newspapers, and other reading material. For example, when she sees her older brother scan the fast-food menu and then order a hamburger and fries, she is discovering that those black squiggles carry meaning. When she asks her mother to write her name and her mother sounds it out in front of her, she observes that words are composed of a string of letters and that those letters are composed of sounds that hold meaning.
When she snuggles in her grandma's lap and “reads” the fairy tale she has memorized after hearing it nearly a hundred times, Lydia demonstrates her understanding that many words together can tell a story. She asks for a second story and Grandma complies. She puts a chubby finger on the words as Grandma says them. Lydia is again revealing her understanding of the matching of spoken and written word.

Lydia knows a lot about reading, but can she actually read?

**What Is Reading?**

At first glance, it would hardly seem worth the trouble to answer the basic question of what reading is because, in a sense, everybody knows perfectly well what it is: Most people do it in one form or another every single day! Reading is

- devouring a book from cover to cover
- exploring the repair manual so you can fix your (car, computer, dishwasher)
- looking at a tweet
- following a blog
- responding to emails from a colleague

But true definitions underlie all intellectual endeavors. Definitions contain assumptions that determine future educational activities. In other words, what teachers do to teach beginning reading will be determined, in large part, by what they believe reading is.

To define reading, we must know exactly what is involved in this activity that sets it apart from other similar activities. It is not enough, for example, to define reading as “a thought-getting process,” because we can get thoughts just as easily from a lecture, a conversation, or a film. To put it another way, there are many similarities between reading a printed page (whether the printed page appears on paper or on an electronic screen) of difficult text and hearing the same text read to us by another person. The issue of comprehension is paramount for both reader and listener.

No one would deny that a major purpose of reading is to get information or enjoyment of some sort from the written words. But since we get information in the same way from spoken words, the purpose of getting information does not define reading in a way that distinguishes it from engaging in conversation. As soon as we understand this point, the problem of definition begins to resolve itself. If we see that meaning is a function of the relationship between the language and the receiver, we might then ask how the written words (which we read) are related to the spoken words (which we hear). If a language composed of sounds carries the meanings, then what is writing? Writing is a device, or a code, for representing the sounds of a language in visual form. The written words of a language are, in fact, just symbols for the spoken words, which are sounds.

So reading, then, becomes the process of turning these printed symbols back into sounds again whether or not audible vocalization of the sounds actually occurs. The moment we
say this, however, some reasonable soul is bound to ask, anxiously, “But what about meaning? Can we propose to define reading as just deciphering the words without regard to the meaning?”

The answer is yes, but only partly. **Reading** is, first of all, the mechanical skill of turning the printed symbols into the sounds of our language. Of course, the reason we turn the printed words into sound – in other words, the reason we **read** – is to get at the meaning. We decode the printed symbols to get what the author is attempting to **say**, and then, more importantly, we make some meaningful connection to the world as we know it (Pearson, 1993).

But there is even more to it than that. Reading entails both reconstructing an author’s message and constructing one’s own meaning using the words on the page as a stimulus. We can think of it as a transaction, or an exchange, among the reader, the text, and the purposes and context of the reading situation. A reader’s reconstruction of the ideas and information intended by the author is somewhat like a listener’s reconstruction of ideas from the combination of sounds a speaker makes. An artist creates a masterpiece that mean one thing to him and a host of different things to different admirers of his piece. Likewise, the reader, like the listener, may create meanings that are different from those intended by the author. What a reader understands from the reconstructed and constructed meanings depends on that reader’s prior knowledge, prior experiences, maturity, and proficiency in using language in differing social contexts (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008).

In addition to these traditional descriptions of what reading is, other considerations arise from the ubiquitous new technologies of the twenty-first century. Educators now talk about **new literacies** (Kist, 2005; Kress, 2003) that consist of ways not only to read and write but also to view and visually represent texts in new and exciting ways – especially texts related to technology. These texts are often in electronic rather than conventional printed paper format and can be viewed on many devices, such as personal computers, iPads, mobile devices, tablets/e-readers, and interactive whiteboards. They may also use a variety of enhancements, including video and/or audio clips, computer graphics, and digital photos. This type of reading and writing has many unique characteristics, including the way it is organized and discrete features that allow students to interact with the text. Research indicates that traditional and Internet reading do not entail identical skills (Afflerbach & Cho, 2010).

In fact, although research has shown that traditional reading comprehension results are affected by economic inequalities (NCES, 2011, 2013; Reardon, 2011), the achievement gap in reading may be exacerbated for online reading results (Leu et al., 2015; Leu & Maykel, 2016). These new literacies will require students to be proficient in the six language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing) and in accessing and synthesizing information from a variety of sources – especially the Internet; thus, it is imperative that we teach all students how to evaluate the information’s accuracy, relevance, and authenticity (Castek, Bevans-Mangelson, & Goldstone, 2006).
Theories of Reading Acquisition

Two theories regarding how we learn to read are at the heart of the question about how reading should be taught. Each of these theories offers us important insights about how students think about reading.

**Nonstage Theory**

The earlier theory is a nonstage theory, which holds that unskilled and skilled readers essentially use the same strategies to figure out unknown words. This theory, revisited by Goodman in 1997, posits that readers use predictions based on the context of sentences, as well as the letter–sound correspondence, to determine unknown words. They depend mostly, however, on the grammar (syntax) and semantics (underlying meaning) to decipher the message. In this process, the reader uses strategies to sample and select from the information in the text, makes predictions, draws inferences, confirms or rejects, and regresses when necessary to make corrections in reading. Visual and aural features of the words – the graphophonic information – are used as necessary. Such a theory suggests that certain apparent “errors” that students make while reading, such as saying the word *dad* for the key word *father*, offer observers an actual “window into the child’s brain”; such miscues are not errors at all, according to the theory, but merely deviations from text, occurring because the child is trying to make sense of print.

**Stage Theory**

A seminal study by Juel (1988) indicated that unskilled and skilled readers use different strategies to unlock or decipher unknown words. Unskilled readers become “stuck” with strategies such as guessing or trying to memorize every new word and therefore are not as successful as learners who have internalized a wide range of helpful strategies. The stage theory holds that children go through three stages in acquiring literacy: During the first stage, the selective cue stage, children might use only the context of surrounding words and illustrations to predict possible meaning for unknown words or might focus on limited components of words to decode them; for example, recognizing only the first and last letters in words. At the second stage, the spelling–sound stage, they listen for known sounds and letters to determine the meaning of new words. When children have arrived at the final stage, called the automatic stage, they have reached the fluent or automatic level of reading. At this sophisticated stage, they almost subconsciously scan every feature of a word and compare it instantaneously to patterns with which they are familiar. Very little mental effort needs to be directed toward decoding unknown words, and most of the reader’s attention can be focused on obtaining personal meaning from text.
Cueing Systems

Perhaps in an attempt to better understand just how literacy happens, some researchers then suggested that four systems make communication possible: (1) the grapho-phonological system, (2) the syntactic system, (3) the semantic system, and (4) the pragmatic system. Skilled readers must use all four systems at once as they read, write, listen, and speak (Clay, 1991). These cueing systems help children create meaning by using language in a way that most English speakers accept as “standard.” Effective teachers of beginning literacy are aware of these systems and model and support students’ use of them in all areas of communication. The four cueing systems are described briefly in the following sections.

The Grapho-Phonological System

There are roughly 44 to 48 sounds (or phonemes) in the English language, and children learn to pronounce these sounds in many different combinations as they begin to speak. Teachers support experimentation with how these sounds correspond to letters (graphemes) by teaching children how to use temporary or experimental spellings to sound out words; modeling how to pronounce words; calling attention to rhyming words and alliterations; and directly teaching other decoding skills, such as showing how to divide words into syllables. For example, by pointing out the rhyme scheme in “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” the teacher shows children how the words are and star have similar ending sounds but different beginning sounds.

The Syntactic (Sound Stream of Language) System

The syntactic system, which includes but is not limited to grammar, governs how a language is structured or how words are combined into sentences. Teachers support this cueing system by showing students how to combine sentences; add affixes to root words; use punctuation and inflectional endings; and write simple, compound, and complex sentences. To begin, a teacher might use the nonsensical group of words, “boy fell the down,” to show students the importance of order in language. Further, a teacher might show students how to combine the two sentences “The boy fell down” and “The boy was not watching where he was going” to become “The boy fell down because he was not watching where he was going.”

The Semantic System

The major components of the semantic system are meaning-making and vocabulary. An even smaller unit of meaning-making is the morpheme, the smallest unit of meaning in
English words, highlighted when we use the s to make cats plural, or the prefix re to make do into redo. Teachers support the semantic system by providing meaningful literature and relevant reading topics; focusing students’ attention on the meanings of words; discussing multiple meanings of words; and introducing synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms. For example, a teacher might explain to students that although they already know the meaning of the word change, in math we use it very differently when we “make change” (a.k.a. polysemantic words). In the intermediate grades, teaching students dictionary skills, in context, also supports this system.

The Pragmatic System

The final cueing system is pragmatics, which addresses the social and cultural functions of language. People use language for differing purposes, and how they speak or write is determined partly by their purposes and intended audience. Teachers can support the use of this cueing system by showing students how different forms of language are appropriate for different situations. For example, a teacher might discuss how playground language differs in form and content from that of a shared experience in class, or how we use different language for describing characteristics of an animal (informational text) and for conducting a pretend dialogue with a prince (elements of a story).

The Reading Process

The act of reading is composed of two basic parts: the global reading process and the reading product. By process we mean a movement toward an end that is accomplished by going through the necessary steps to crack the code and construct meaning from what the author has said. These aspects of the reading process ideally combine to produce the reading product.

Skills Used in the Reading Process

Clearly, the beginning reader has many available options for figuring out unknown words. Some of these – such as random guessing – are more inefficient than others. Learning to read, then, involves sorting through a cafeteria of problem-solving choices and discarding those that are ineffective for the situation, while selecting those that allow for success. To make maximum progress, the beginning reader must acquire three closely related skills at approximately the same time (Clay, 1991):

- using letter–sound relationships
- acquiring a sight vocabulary of immediately recognized words
- gaining meaning from context
Using Letter–Sound Relationships

Some experts believe that the most immediate goal of early reading instruction is teaching children phonics – how to “crack the code” by associating printed letters with the speech sounds they represent and helping them to immediately apply this knowledge to meaningful text. Every word in spoken English can be represented by selecting among only 26 different letter symbols. In general, letters and letter combinations stand for the same speech sounds in thousands of different words. Although there is not a perfect one-to-one correspondence between written/printed letters and the speech sounds they represent, learning to decode depends on a true understanding of the sound–spelling relationship of the English language (Moats, 1995).

For children to become proficient spellers and fluent readers, they must master the helpful skills of “sounding out” words, using their knowledge of the sound–spelling relationship in a real reading context. The child says to herself (very quickly and unconsciously), “I know that this word says baby and this word says bed.” Then, pointing to the b, she asks herself, “I wonder if it makes the /b/ sound every time?” The child is giving herself a brief lesson in phonics; she is also using excellent inductive reasoning, but many children need to have these sound relationships pointed out to them directly. After children have learned two or three sound–spelling correspondences, such as the sounds for b, a, and t, a skilled teacher can then teach the students how to blend these sounds into words. The teacher next demonstrates how to move sequentially from left to right through spellings so that students can sound out or say the sound for each spelling. To be most effective, it seems, phonics should be taught to students formally by teachers trained in how to blend and segment sounds and in the appropriate order to teach phonics skills.

Acquiring a Sight Vocabulary

Many words used frequently in the English language cannot be easily sounded out or decoded, such as the words the, give, come, to, was, could, and once, to name just a few, because they do not follow any phonics rule (Cunningham, 2012). Such words appear so often in English speech and writing that it would seem wasteful for a child to even try to sound out these words each time they are met. Therefore, such words must be taught whole, using what has been called the whole word or look–say method. These words are known as sight words – words that children should recognize about as quickly as they recognize their own names. The repetition of these words many times, in many different ways, fixes them in the child’s memory. With enough repetition, recognition of the words then becomes automatic and instantaneous. When children couple their knowledge of these words with their expanding decoding skills, they will be able to read simple sentences and stories without undue frustration.

For early readers, one of the most appropriate methods of teaching sight words, as well as general concepts about the written word, is through the use of shared reading with big books.
predictable books
big books
tracking

(see Chapter 3), especially familiar texts and predictable books that have rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, designed to allow children to learn the words by chiming in with their guesses (Clay, 1991). Motivational big books with repeated word patterns are ideal resources for helping children memorize sight words. Big books are those with considerably larger-than-usual format, suitable for reading aloud to a small group of students as they sit cross-legged on the floor. Encouraging tracking—having students point to words as they are read—while using such materials is also valuable. Tracking fosters awareness of printed text as well as understanding of and familiarity with differing grammatical phrases.

Gaining Meaning From Context

When a child is reading for meaning, the context (the surrounding information in the sentence) in which an unknown word is met can often be useful in suggesting what that word might be. At times, only a few words could possibly complete the sentence. For example:

The girl went swimming at the ___________.
The hungry boy walked to the ____________.
The girl ___________ when she won the prize.

In the first example, probably fewer than a dozen words could logically be inserted in the blank space (swimming pool, pool, pond, park, lake, river, ocean, YMCA). If the child possesses rudimentary phonics skills and the word begins with a p, the child can further narrow the possibilities. Some choices would also be less logical than others, depending on what has happened in the story prior to this sentence, allowing students to make an “educated guess” as to what the word might be. When students are shown how to use context to aid them in narrowing the possibilities of an unknown word, they have another strategy at their command.

Authors use a number of devices to provide contextual clues that help readers determine the meaning of new words and difficult concepts. One of these is to incorporate a description/definition in the text (Heilman, 2005).

The [swan] swam in the pond. This [bird] was bigger than any of the other birds in the water.

Other contextual techniques for deciphering unknown words include comparison or contrast and the use of synonyms or antonyms.

The apple was very [small]. No one but the new boy wanted the apple, because it was so [little].

Solving the pronunciation of the unknown word is made easier by (1) the meaning of the complete sentence in which the word occurs and (2) the meaning in the surrounding sentences.
The preceding approaches to figuring out new words (letter–sound relationships, sight vocabulary, and context) are probably not of equal value in learning how to read, although each is necessary to some degree. Research clearly shows that overemphasizing prediction from contextual clues for word recognition can be counterproductive, possibly even delaying the learning process if it is stressed above trying to analyze words by their sound–spelling components (Stanovich, 1992). On the other hand, too little or too much phonics instruction may contribute to the failure to learn to read (Stahl, 2001; Vadasy, Sanders, & Peyton, 2006). These methods will help students decode and “crack the code” but are not equivalent to the ultimate goal of reading – making meaning.

Additionally, it must be kept in mind that individual students may benefit from and rely on one method more than others, although some approaches, such as pure memorization by the form of the word, have limited usefulness beyond the earliest stages of learning how to read. It seems clear that automatic, fluent reading would not be the result if a child had to go through a series of trial-and-error approaches in which all three approaches were tried out every time a new word was encountered! Efficient readers tend to use all three methods of word recognition instantaneously and simultaneously, lending even more support to a balanced approach to reading instruction in which all strategies are employed (Bissex, 2004; Eldredge, 1995).

**Characteristics of the Reading Process**

Those new to the field of literacy will have realized by now that the act of learning to read is a much more complex endeavor than they may have previously believed. The next section will explore some of the fundamental characteristics of the nature of reading to help provide a clearer picture of what is involved in the reading process.

**Reading Is a Holistic Process**

Reading is not the sum total of the discrete skills that we have students practice in order to teach them to read; rather, reading is a holistic process whereby the various subskills, such as decoding, finding the main idea, and locating important details must be integrated to form a smooth, coherent whole. The subskills, though crucial, must be applied to the act of reading by a competent teacher.

If we want children to be thinkers, we must structure our instruction toward active participation in the search for meaning. Students must be given time every school day to read material that is on their own level and that is of interest to them. Students at all grade levels must also be read to. Teachers who read to students and give them the opportunity to discuss and wrestle with ideas and concepts are providing a sophisticated model of the kinds of thinking they must do when reading on their own. Finally, if we want students to become lifelong readers – whether they are reading simply to enjoy a great story or to figure out how
to make a flambé or construct a model plane – we must offer them ample time to read for enjoyment without always insisting on written or oral accountability for everything that has been read (Serafini, 2011/2012).

Reading Is a Constructive Process

We have come to think of reading as the construction of meaning from text. As readers interact with the text, meaning is being constructed in their minds. The meaning does not lie on the page but in the mind of the reader. Readers use what is in their heads and what is on the page and construct a meaning based on a fusing of the two forces.

Teachers must be aware of the constructive nature of the reading process so that they can help students develop the necessary tools to participate in this meaning-building process. This can be accomplished by providing an opportunity for students to display a wide range of thinking about what they are reading. Asking an abundance of open-ended questions – those for which there is no single “right” answer – encourages and validates students who are struggling to make their own meaning from text.

Reading Is a Strategic Process

Good readers use different strategies, depending on their purposes for reading and the difficulty of the material. The purpose of reading may be purely for entertainment, to memorize a poem, or to discover how to put together some object. Thus, different text types (e.g., stories versus informational texts) lead to different ways we engage with texts, depending on the nature of the task (Rosenblatt, 2005).

Teachers need to teach students to set their own purposes for reading and then check to see that their purposes are being met. Teachers can teach students to think about their own thinking (metacognition) by modeling various strategies as they read aloud to students. They can also do this by discussing how reading rate and strategies change according to the type of reading that is being done.

Reading Is an Interactive Process

Finally, we have come to think of reading as a process in which readers interact with the text while tapping into their own experience in order to construct meaning. What readers bring to the activity in terms of prior knowledge of content, structure, and vocabulary determines how well they will be able to derive a rich meaning from the text. We have all had the experience of reading something about which we had little or no background knowledge. When this happens, we soon realize that although we may know most of the words, we cannot make sense of the material. We do not have the content knowledge that we need to construct a valid meaning to take with us from the reading. To illustrate this point, I often ask
my preservice students, who consider themselves “avid readers,” to read the following paragraph from an accounting text:

As suggested by Thomas, all allocation methods must be based upon some concept of a distribution of benefits expected to be received by using an asset over time (its net revenue contribution each period) or else the allocation must be arbitrary and thus meaningless as a measure of a rational concept of income. However, Thomas also suggests . . . that rarely would it be possible to measure either the ex ante or ex post net revenue contributions in the several periods during the use of an asset, because of the many interactions of the production functions or inputs in the production and other operating processes of a firm.

Upon completion of the preceding paragraph, a quiz reveals that my students with little background in accounting have achieved minimal comprehension of the paragraph and admit that if this were their daily reading fare, they would soon dislike the reading process.

As teachers, we must provide activities that activate, access, and build on the knowledge of the students with whom we are working. One way to do this is by showing video excerpts or pictures or by reading short informative passages about the study topic. Another way is to simply brainstorm with the group to elicit what the children know about the topic. For example, if the selection to be read is about koala bears, the teacher asks the students to raise their hands and tell the group anything they know about the animals – information the teacher writes on the board. What one student contributes often triggers a response in other students. This process helps bring to the surface everything the students know about the topic and also provides information for those who may know little or nothing about it. The students are now able to attach new information to known information. They are ready for the active search for meaning.

Reading and Writing Are Synergistic Processes

Reading and writing have long been considered related activities. They have been treated by educators as essential ingredients of the literacy “pie” (Langer & Flihan, 2000). In fact, the image of a pie, with its separate slices, is an apt illustration of how the various similar and yet discrete aspects of literacy relate. Both reading and writing are meaning-making activities. When one engages in either reading or writing, meaning is in a constant state of becoming; likewise, language, syntax, and sentence structure are all involved as the text is coming to be in the head of the reader or the text is coming to be on the paper of the writer. Finally, most current research on reading and writing processes indicates that reading and writing are related activities of language and thought that are shaped by usage (Shanahan, 2008). That is, the structures and strategies that readers and writers use to organize, remember, and present their ideas are for the most part identical in reading and writing; however, the structure of the message and the strategies used to deliver it can be somewhat different depending on the purpose of the reader or writer.
The Reading Process and Learners Who Are Diverse

In preparing to teach, new teachers must first and foremost consider the heterogeneous garden of learners before them. Students come to class from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, economic, and linguistic backgrounds. They may offer a variety of challenges, such as autism, hearing and/or visual impairments, emotional disturbances, language impairments, learning disabilities, and orthopedic impairments. Students bring to their schools rich experiences to share and high expectations to be met by their teachers. Their own humor, folktales, dances, music, family traditions, and ways of looking at the world can enrich the learning experiences of all students and their teachers. All students can learn to celebrate diversity when their teachers model and promote acceptance of differences and are responsive to the positive qualities that make each learner unique.

Diversity can play a role in the process of assessing to determine special education services for children who require them. For example, teachers must be aware of the child’s first language but also of the child’s home language. How will the teacher gather assessment information about a child who speaks three languages but is just learning English?

In the past, children with disabilities were often inappropriately placed in separate and/or special classes based on the result of standard assessments given in English. When working with students who are English learners, teachers must be sure that the assessment used is measuring the disability, if present, and not the child’s English language skills. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) states that assessment must be provided in the child’s home language and that for all children with disabilities, the teacher must adapt content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to meet each child’s specific needs (Sec. 300.26[b][3][ii]). The current text proposes many strategies to address these diverse needs to ensure that all children have access to the reading process (Cohen & Spenciner, 2008).

The Reading Product

The reading product should always be meaningful because it is some form of communication—the reader’s transaction with the writer’s printed ideas (Rosenblatt, 2005). A wealth of knowledge is available to people today because we are able to read what others have written in the past. Americans can read about events and accomplishments that have occurred at other times in other parts of the globe. Knowledge of great discoveries does not have to be laboriously passed from person to person by word of mouth; such knowledge is freely available to all who read.

As well as being a means of communicating generally, reading is a means of communicating specifically with friends and acquaintances who may or may not be nearby. A note read by a child can tell him his mother has gone shopping, or it can inform a babysitter whom to call in an emergency. An email from a teacher can alert parents to events and issues.
Reading can be a way of sharing another person’s insights, joys, sorrows, or creative undertakings. Being able to read can make it possible for a person to vicariously visit places she has never visited before, to take advantage of bargains and discounts, or to avoid disaster by heeding warning signs. It is difficult to imagine what life would be like without this vital means of communication!

The rich form of communication described here depends on comprehension, which is affected by all aspects of the reading process. Being able to decipher the code and put sounds to the symbols is essential, but comprehension involves much more than turning the symbols into the appropriate sounds; the reader must derive meaning from these symbols and in some way connect them to experiences or impressions from his own life. Many teachers are familiar with students reading a passage and pronouncing all the words beautifully but having no idea what they have just read (word barking), or students knowing a common definition of a word but being unaware of the word’s meaning in a content area.

Teachers who understand that all aspects of the reading process have an effect on the comprehension of written material will be better able to survey students’ reading progress and, as a result, create sound instructional programs based on their needs. Poor performance related to any aspect of the reading process may result in a less-than-satisfactory reading ability or an inability to learn to read at all. The following conditions suggest that a child is at risk for poor performance in reading:

1. The child does not see the symbols or letters on the page; he may not be able to recognize them.
2. The child has developed confusions or incorrect associations between a number of sounds and letters; incorrect recognition of words will result, and comprehension will be lessened.
3. The child has little experience with or knowledge of the topic about which she is reading; she will have less comprehension of the passage than one who has had a rich background in the topic.

The bottom line for teachers, then, is to ensure that students are given an abundance of explicit, or direct, instruction on the graphic symbols or letters that represent the sounds of our language so that they can begin to build a strong association between the letters and the sounds they make. Additionally, to achieve the greatest transaction between author and reader, any decoded message must have some connection to the child’s life and experiences. Therefore, the teacher must determine whether students have the necessary background information and knowledge to understand any given material; if this is not the case, the teacher must provide the background by other means, such as discussion, pictures, or video excerpts, to ensure adequate processing. Finally, the effective teacher must be sure to provide an abundance of literature of all genres, representing diverse cultures and appealing to a wide variety of interests. These books should span all ability levels in the classroom. Then she must be sure to allow time for students to read and respond to these books in myriad ways.
Summary
Learning to read is a complicated, rather miraculous process, and for most children, it does not happen without at least some explicit instruction. Because few of us as adults can accurately remember how we managed to accomplish this feat, we are hard-pressed to provide any earthshaking insights into how it is done. Understanding how children learn to read is further complicated by the fact that whenever we observe a teacher instructing a child in reading, we are seeing only one tiny piece of an ongoing process, and even then we cannot see what is really taking place within the reader. Moreover, if we were to watch a particular child as she reads silently, all we can do is try to guess what is going on in her brain from the behaviors she is showing us at the moment; however, if we were to be a fly on the wall in a classroom where this same first-grader was struggling with her burgeoning reading ability over several months, we might get a better overview of the child’s perspective of this intricate process. We could listen to and observe the set of strategies she uses to read aloud and how she responds to what she has read, observe how the teacher facilitates the process, and watch as literacy blossoms.

What we do know is that the act of learning to read does not always occur naturally; it may be arduous and time-consuming or quick and immediately gratifying, and we know that it will not be exactly the same for any two youngsters. For some children, much learning about how to read has occurred before they enter school, through supportive interactions in a literate environment where they have been frequently read to and where evidence of the importance of print is everywhere. But it would be wrong to assume such exposure is enough.

Although some children learn to read at home prior to direct school instruction, many children with the same exposure do not. Sometimes formal instruction is needed for children to put together the observations they have made through their experiences with print. For children who have had few experiences with print, exposure to a print-rich environment in school is not enough. Most children require explicit instruction in letter–sound relationships in order to figure out unknown words, they must build a basic sight vocabulary of words they recognize immediately, and they must decide on a method of extracting meaning from unknown words through context and other clues. Equally important, they need to understand how to construct meaning by connecting an author’s message to their own experiences. They need to be able to strategize how they will adjust their reading and thinking to the demands of the task at hand. Finally, they need to be supported in their use of the four cueing systems that make communication possible and will allow them to create meaning through socially shared situations.

Because we care about them, we give children affection, attention, exercise, and nutritious things to eat; we try to teach them to be polite, good-natured, thoughtful, and fair. We do these things because we believe it is the best way to start them on their way to healthy, happy lives. We must do as much with reading. When a child has learned how to construct his own meaning from text, he soon enters into a considerably richer world – one where he is able to communicate with all sorts of people he may never even meet. He is able to
A Child Learns to Read

Questions for Journal Writing and Discussion

1. What is your definition of reading? How do you think your understanding of reading will affect the methods you choose to teach your students to read?
2. How would you explain the difference between “reading process” and “reading product” to a parent or any person who is not in the education profession? Why might it be important to distinguish between the two concepts?
3. What are your memories of learning to read? Write a list of everything you can recall about initial instruction, favorite books, successes, difficulties, and how you managed to “crack the code.” Solicit help from parents, older siblings, and relatives to help reconstruct your early literacy experiences. Why might such memories be important to your teaching?

Suggestions for Projects and Field Activities

1. Try to teach recognition of two words – they and elephant – to a child who has not yet learned to read and write. Record and compare the difficulties the child encounters with the two words. Which word was easier for the child to remember? Why do you think this was so? What strategies do you feel were most successful in helping the child to remember the words?
2. Talk to two first-grade students. Ask the students what reading is and what kinds of things they think they must do to read successfully. Administer “An Early Reader’s View of the Reading Process” (found in Appendix E) to one of the students. What new insights did you gain about how this child views the reading process? Share this information with your college class.
3. Observe a child who is in the early stages of learning to read. Ask the child to read several sentences aloud. What are some difficulties the child encounters? What do you think the child needs to know to be more successful? Make two columns on a sheet of paper, one labeled “Practice” and the other “Explicit Instruction.” Try to determine what skills would best be developed through each of these modes.
Focus Questions

What is the history of reading instruction in the United States?
What are the key issues in phonics and whole language instruction?
How can classroom teachers combine the elements of both approaches to create a rich and balanced, comprehensive literacy program for all learners?
How can a balanced, comprehensive literacy program address the goals of standards, including the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts?
What role do speaking and listening activities play in a balanced, comprehensive literacy program?

In the Classroom

Ms. Johnson, a first-grade teacher in Illinois, uses a holistic approach to literacy instruction with her beginning readers. Her students spend much of the school day sharing quality children’s literature and tend to remember many new words after being engaged with them numerous times through print that is displayed everywhere in the classroom. Ms. Johnson’s students leave her classroom at the end of a year with a deep appreciation for reading
and writing. By contrast, Mr. Ruiz, down the hall, teaches his young learners the names and sounds of each letter of the alphabet. The students spend many hours practicing these sounds so they can immediately sound out unfamiliar words. Mr. Ruiz explains that his pupils love to read because they are empowered by their ability to figure out many words quickly. The two colleagues spend the year comparing notes on beginning reading and discussing which approach is more effective for their students; finally, they agree to disagree. The same practices and discussions are occurring in schools across the country.

**Introduction**

This is an exciting time to be a teacher of literacy. We now have more conclusive evidence about what can be considered “effective literacy instruction” than at any other time in history. Over the last 30 years, national panels in the United States have completed a greater number of reports about best practices in reading than have been produced in any prior decade (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Roskos & Nue, 2014). Moreover, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been developed to provide a clear, understandable, and consistent road map to help teachers address what students at each grade level are expected to know and be able to do (IRA, 2012). Most states have adopted the standards or modified their state standards to reflect some of the goals reflected in the CCSS.

This body of knowledge did not evolve without challenges. For years, people debated the relative effectiveness of various reading methodologies. A look into the history of reading instruction in the United States will help to shed light on where we have been and where we are now.

**The History of Early Literacy**

Much of the history of early literacy has involved ongoing discussions about two issues: the use of a skills-based versus a more holistic approach to early literacy instruction and the best way to standardize instruction.

**Skills-Based versus Holistic Approach**

Few educational issues have engendered as much dialogue as the ongoing discussions over a skills-based versus a more holistic approach to early literacy instruction. Such dialogues have quite a history. As long ago as 1844, Horace Mann, considered the “father of public education,” wrote a report criticizing schools that implored teachers to adopt a rigid decoding approach to teaching reading.

For decades afterward, popular thinking among educators appeared to move back and forth between a skills-based approach, akin to phonics instruction, and a holistic approach that was more meaning-centered,
as stressed in the whole language philosophy. By the 1950s, a strong skills-based (or phonics) movement gained momentum. This was due in part to the publication of a widely circulated book called *Why Johnny Can’t Read* (Flesch, 1955), in which Flesch took teachers to task for abandoning traditional phonics instruction in favor of the then popular look–say method, which was more meaning based and required students to use the context alone to figure out words they did not know. Flesch claimed the reason students were doing so poorly in reading and writing was that they had not been taught that every letter of the alphabet had at least one corresponding sound. Once that was understood, he contended, every child could easily read and spell every word by simply sounding it out.

In the 1960s, however, a movement came along de-emphasizing decoding and discouraging overreliance on the use of basal readers, the set of leveled textbooks most commonly used to teach reading. Teachers had begun noticing that although students were proficient at decoding, they did not seem to understand what they were reading, nor did they seem to enjoy the activity. The “new” movement, christened the whole language philosophy by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1978, stressed a pedagogy that moved from a narrow focus on isolated subskills to one that encouraged teachers to look at reading more holistically, as a part of the total communication process (Beck & Juel, 1995).

When the whole language movement was predominant in American schools in the 1980s, many educators assumed that learning to read was a “natural” process, much like learning to talk – a set of skills that most children acquire with no direct tutoring and with apparent ease, if not joy. The concomitant practice, therefore, was to create a literacy-rich environment in early childhood classrooms, filled with plenty of signs, books, posters, captions, and language play. Some extreme proponents of whole language expected that reading would simply flourish in a natural way, in the same way that children learned to speak by being spoken to and having their first words and phrases elaborated upon. In truth, some children do learn to read in this way – with plenty of print-rich stimulation but no direct instruction. The downside of this approach to learning to read is that many children were not always successful at cracking the code and often needed more direct instruction. While many whole language teachers provided direct instruction via explicit minilessons on phonics components that were lacking, others did not.

Science offers compelling reasons why so many young children failed to learn to read using a purely whole language philosophy. The National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) has studied normal reading development and reading difficulties in children for 35 years. NICHD-supported researchers have studied more than 10,000 children, published more than 2,500 articles, and written more than 50 books that present the results of 20 large-scale longitudinal studies and more than 1,500 smaller-scale experimental and cross-sectional studies. Some children were studied for 15 years, others for at least five years (Fletcher & Lyon, 2002).
In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) added another scientific voice to the discussion. They issued a report in response to a congressional mandate to help parents, teachers, and policy makers identify key skills and methods essential for reading achievement. The panel was charged with reviewing research in reading instruction, focusing on the foundational years between kindergarten and third grade, and identifying methods that were consistently associated with reading success. In addition to identifying effective practices, the panel identified five essential components of early reading success, tagged “the Fabulous Five”:

1. **phonemic awareness**: the ability to hear and identify sounds in spoken words
2. **phonics**: the relationship between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language
3. **fluency**: the capacity to read text accurately, quickly, and with expression
4. **vocabulary acquisition**: the words children must know to communicate effectively
5. **comprehension**: the ability to understand and gain meaning from what has been read

*(Note: The state of Florida added oral language to the five components, changing from “the Fabulous Five” to “the Sensational Six.”)*

The work of the NRP challenged educators to consider the evidence of effectiveness when teaching the five components as they make decisions about the content and structure of programs designed to promote early literacy. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act mandated that all students show progress in the five components identified by the NRP.

Some leading literacy experts, however, believe that the NRP missed an important opportunity to clarify and enumerate the kind of instructional conditions that lead to effective reading development. When the panel failed to discuss the lack of relationship between phonics instruction and reading comprehension beyond first grade (Allington, 2004; Garan, 2004; Krashen, 2004), they may have overemphasized the importance of systematic and explicit phonics instruction to the exclusion of providing ample opportunities for students to practice comprehension strategies through extensive reading.

The results of such in-depth research-based approaches have impacted the way we teach beginning reading. We know from research that reading is a language-based activity. We also know that reading does not always develop naturally, and for many children, specific decoding, word recognition, and comprehension strategies must be taught explicitly and systematically. The evidence also strongly suggests that teachers can foster reading development by providing young children with explicit instruction in concepts about print, age-appropriate vocabulary, the structure of the English language, phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling skills. Indeed, the scientific research suggesting that learning how to read is not a natural process is so overwhelming that it caused Keith Stanovich (1994) to write, “That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well-established connections in all of behavior science” (pp. 285–286). Note that, in this scenario, the teacher is key and must plan effective instruction.
Although the reforms described here mandate “scientifically based” reading instruction, scientific research does support the importance of extensive reading (Krashen, 2004), together with an instructional emphasis on reading comprehension (Pressley, Duke, & Bolling, 2004), to maximize reading comprehension development.

**Standards-Based Education**

Besides the controversy surrounding the best ways to teach literacy, educators have extensively discussed the best ways to standardize instruction and determine what students should be required to know at any given grade level. Standards are broad curricular goals containing specific grade-level targets or benchmarks. Standards-based education reform in the United States began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Education reform in the United States since the 1980s has been largely driven by the setting of academic standards for what students should know and be able to do. These standards can then be used to guide all other system components. The standards-based education (SBE) reform movement calls for clear, measurable standards for all students. Rather than norm-referenced rankings, a standards-based system measures each student against the concrete standard. Curriculum, assessments, and professional development are aligned to the standards.

A nationwide set of standards, now adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, has been in the works since at least 2008. Around that time, a task force composed of governors, corporate chief executive officers, and experts in higher education was formed to create uniform standards for all states to ensure that students in the United States would have an internationally competitive educational system. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, headed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGACBP) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2010), has had input from teachers, civil rights groups, English learners, and the College Board, among others. The group’s efforts led to the Common Core State Standards, which lay out what every student should know and be able to do by each grade level (Kendall, 2011) to ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy by no later than the end of high school.

The CCSS apply to English language arts, math, history, social studies, and science. The standards for English language arts are composed of strands, anchor standards, and grade-level standards. The strands consist of language, reading, writing, and speaking and listening. The anchor standards are organized to complement grade-specific standards. The domains for the grade-level standards are (1) Reading: Literature, (2) Reading: Informational Text, (3) Reading: Foundation Skills, (4) Writing, (5) Speaking and Listening, and (6) Language (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). As students move through their academic career, they are expected to meet each year’s specific grade-level standards, retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in previous grades, and proceed steadily toward
meeting the more general expectations described by the anchor standards (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012).

Literacy practitioners know that the process of becoming literate requires more than phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. At its core, reading is a meaning-making endeavor. As an alternative to skills-based instruction, which emphasizes skills out of context – to the detriment of meaning, purpose, and enjoyment – the present text supports a more balanced, comprehensive approach to literacy instruction. The CCSS for English language arts have taken a step toward more intensive teaching of meaning-making, or critical thinking, in literacy. The key shifts in focus have been summarized in the following way (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010, www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/):

- regular practice with close reading of complex texts and their discipline-specific academic language (e.g., having students becoming familiar with content-area words not common in normal conversation, such as conversion or differ)
- reading, writing, and speaking supported by evidence from both narrative and informational text
- encouraging students to gain knowledge through the reading of much more factual text

In addition, the CCSS suggest that teachers use half informational text and half narrative text until the fifth grade, although some educators fear that self-expression and study of literary forms such as poetry may be neglected using these guidelines (Esolen, Highfill, & Stotsky, 2014).

Approaches to Teaching Reading

Parents and caregivers of children in schools, other interested citizens, and many new to the field of education may read about the different approaches used to teach reading and form an opinion without understanding the underlying concepts. Many are not quite sure what is meant by terms such as phonics, holistic, balanced, and comprehensive. It may be helpful to further explore these concepts.

Comprehensive literacy instruction is a complex concept. We all know how difficult it is to maintain a balanced diet in our fast-food society; so it is with a balanced approach to literacy. Balanced literacy instruction must take into account many continua, including authenticity of instruction – how many real-life applications are included – and the teacher’s level of assistance, as dictated by students’ needs. Balance in curricular control takes into account how much input the students and others are granted in deciding on the curriculum. Balance in classroom talk considers how much of the talk is teacher directed. Balance also needs to be considered when selecting materials: for example, the amount of fiction versus nonfiction text that is used and the blend of predictable and decodable texts. Advocates of balanced instruction recognize that effective literacy instruction is multifaceted, rather than based on one position (e.g., phonics) or another, and that it
addresses all of the criteria mentioned. Figure 2.1 compares three views of literacy instruction: (1) a heavily phonics, or transmission, approach; (2) a transactional, or more holistic, approach that employs many of the elements of the whole language philosophy; and (3) a comprehensive approach that combines the important facets of both approaches.

**Phonics Instruction and the Transmission Model**

The term *phonics* is much used but not always entirely understood – especially by those not directly involved in literacy education. From as early as the Greek and Phoenician civilizations 3,000 years ago, most approaches to early literacy instruction in alphabetic languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHONICS</th>
<th>HOLISTIC</th>
<th>A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Skills-Based, Transmission Model)</td>
<td>(Meaning-Based, Transactional Model)</td>
<td>(An Interface Between the Best of Both Stances)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasis on product</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emphasis on process</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emphasis on process and product</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language broken into bite-sized pieces (letters and words)</td>
<td>Language is kept whole in connected text</td>
<td>Direct, explicit phonics instruction completed by end of primary grades</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills in sequence taught directly</td>
<td>Phonics often taught incidentally</td>
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<td>Phonics taught up to third and fourth grades</td>
<td>Strategies modeled in context</td>
<td>Phonics based on internal structure of words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word families used for memorization</td>
<td>Real literature used; often no basal text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher makes curricular decisions</td>
<td>Literature study groups</td>
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<td>Traditional basal texts with controlled vocabulary</td>
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<td>Shared and guided reading for instruction</td>
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<td>Discussion questions from teacher or basal text</td>
<td>Paired reading</td>
<td>Emphasis on spelling as a key to phonics</td>
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<td>Sight words memorized by children</td>
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<td>Writing topics chosen by children</td>
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<td>Writing topics chosen by teacher</td>
<td>Writing workshop</td>
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<td>Workbooks used for response to basal text</td>
<td>Discussion questions come from children</td>
<td>Journals for personal writing and literature response; logs for content areas</td>
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<td>Children encouraged to “invent” spelling</td>
<td>Writing as experimentation with sound-letter relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth is quantitatively measured (formal assessment)</td>
<td>Growth is observable (informal assessment)</td>
<td>Experimental spelling and instruction in correct spelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.1** A comparison of three views of literacy instruction.
have included letter sequences and how such sequences corresponded to speech patterns (Mathews, 1966). Such methods, focusing on sound-symbol relationships, are what educators generally refer to as phonics.

Phonics instruction has sometimes been associated with the transmission model of instruction. In other words, when using this model in its strictest sense, teachers assume the responsibility of directly “transmitting” information, such as the knowledge of letter sounds and symbols, to their students through explicit instruction and systematic teaching of the code that is the foundation of the English alphabet. Other approaches using transmission include rote instruction of sight words and memorization of lists of word families, such as words containing “oi”: voice, noise, moist, and so forth. Such instruction is also frequently called skills-based, as its emphasis is on presenting the smallest parts of our language – the letters and sounds – in isolation, often long before showing children the whole picture of how enjoyable the reading act can be.

Over the years, phonics instruction has been perceived negatively because of additional unfortunate practices that included more drills on isolated skills than were necessary and worksheets unrelated to real reading (see Figure 2.2), often to the distress of children who were already proficient readers. Phonics instruction has also been criticized when it has focused on the teaching of a litany of abstract rules, too many of which have limited application in our language and are lost on very young children who can memorize the rules but have little idea what they actually mean.

The Positive Role of Phonics Instruction

Researchers and educators seeking a balance have long been interested in the positive role that the appropriate amount of phonics instruction can play in early literacy. Many studies have been conducted to determine the value of direct instruction in the sounds and letters of the English alphabet when integrated into a total, literature-rich program.

Figure 2.2 An early workbook activity.
In a project funded by the U.S. Office of Education Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction, two prominent researchers, Bond and Dykstra (1967), published the results of a landmark research study involving first-grade classrooms and the literacy methods employed by the teachers. In many ways, this study was the first of its kind to support the notion that a balance between phonics and a meaning-based approach may represent ideal literacy instruction. The results of the study suggested that approaches to reading that included, but were not limited to, a form of systematic phonics instruction were somewhat more effective at producing high word recognition performance in learners than other methods used in the study. The data from the study also indicated that emphasizing meaning and a connection to children’s lives produced greater gains in reading achievement. In addition, writing instruction was found to promote literacy acquisition, or the ability to read, write, and speak. Perhaps the most unexpected finding of the study, however, was that the crucial factor in teaching a child to read was not the method that was used but that instruction was delivered by a committed and competent teacher.

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a report by the Commission on Reading in the 1980s, phonics instruction was still being advocated:

> The purpose of phonics instruction is to teach children the alphabetic principle and to help young readers recognize patterns in the English language. The ultimate goal is for these two processes to become operating principles so that young readers consistently use information about the relationship between letters and sounds to assist in the identification of known words and to independently figure out unknown words.

*(Anderson, Hilbert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 73)*

The commission continued by stating that children then need to immediately practice reading the new words they have encountered in meaningful context (Anderson et al., 1985). The work of these researchers suggests that the transmitting of phonics could be followed by use of a transactional instructional strategy, using student-centered group discussion of the reading material. This report also seemed to offer an early nod toward a balanced, comprehensive approach in literacy instruction.

Leading educators advocate a “less is more” approach suggesting that teachers offer small doses of direct, systematically taught phonics instruction in the primary grades only to children who need this structure to make sense of print. Many students come to school with a wide repertoire of word-unlocking skills gained from much experience with and exposure to print. Such educators urge teachers to teach a wide range of comprehension strategies, limiting the teaching of phonics generalizations to those that are the most useful and consistent. Instead of having students memorize phonics generalizations, teachers are encouraged to help students discover the recurring spelling patterns in English words. They also encourage teachers to share an abundance of quality children’s literature. Under the CCSS as well as many state standards, teachers are being urged to encourage young children to listen critically to more challenging texts than previously, and to begin to read and respond to more difficult texts, both informational and narrative, starting in the second grade,
although the foundational skills in the earlier grades provide much scaffolding to allow them to do so (IRA, 2012). We know now that balance in the teaching of reading is possible only when the teaching of skills does not become an end in itself, but rather a means to an end: reading for personal meaning, acquisition of information, and enjoyment.

Holistic Instruction and the Transactional Model

There have been many terms for and definitions given to holistic approaches throughout the literature on literacy, without a consensus about what such terms actually encompass. Whole language, the most recent manifestation of a holistic, meaning-based approach, was not an approach or a practice at all, but rather a perspective or philosophical stance. Whole language teachers were focused not on transmitting knowledge to their students but rather on negotiating with students about their individual ideas concerning what they were reading and writing. Reading was offered not in stilted basal readers but in high-quality children’s literature. Whole language teachers believed, too, that reading occurs in the brain of the child rather than on the page, as proponents of skills-based instruction seem to suggest. Indeed, whole language as a transactional, child-centered model elevates students to “collaborators in the quest for knowledge” (Goodman, 1986).

Later, this whole language philosophy began to be recognized as a holistic way of teaching that, unlike phonics (which teaches the sounds of letters and words and then introduces stories), would first get students interested in great literature and then proceed to the parts. Goodman (1986), often considered the father of the whole language movement, argued that skilled reading involves gaining meaning from the context of whole passages rather than simply reading words as individual entities. Readers, according to this view, sample just enough text to get meaning from a passage.

Holistic instruction has also often been associated with the constructivist model of learning (Au, 1997). This perspective encourages students to “actively construct their own understandings of text material” through experimentation with words. With this model, the teacher continually observes how each child thinks about reading by listening to the child’s oral reading. For example, José makes wild guesses about words based solely on the way they look and sound; this practice tells the teacher that José thinks reading is little more than word-calling. Brea, on the other hand, constantly rereads sentences in a story saying, “That doesn’t make sense!” revealing that she sees reading as meaningful but may need help in acquiring specific decoding skills.

In transactional, holistic approaches, quality children’s literature is more commonly used for instruction than basals are. Literature often takes the form of predictable books. The stories are often read to students using big books. The intent of this exposure to quality literature is not only to increase children’s motivation to read but also, through its superior story structure, to provide an excellent model for children’s own writing. Students are
encouraged to write about topics of their own choosing by using temporary writing or experimental, or temporary, spelling – a kind of sounding out of new words that is now one of the language arts grade-level standards for the CCSS. For example, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2.e requires students to “Spell untaught words phonetically, drawing on phonoemic awareness and spelling conventions” (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010, p. 26). This experimentation with words is supposed to help children learn to decipher the sound and letter relationships of the English language.

Free choice in activities emphasizing reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing, together with ongoing authentic assessment, are important aspects of a transactional, holistic approach to literacy. Authentic, ongoing assessment includes observation and analysis of oral reading to determine how students are thinking about reading, what strategies they are employing, and which ones might need to be taught. Such assessment practices are considered superior to standardized tests because they are individualized and can be interpreted by a teacher who can see the performance in light of all the child’s strengths and needs. Authentic assessment sometimes includes a portfolio that contains many samples of the work the child has done over time, selected in tandem with the student (Clay, 1990).

Finally, listening and speaking activities and assessments can be used to help teachers develop their students’ abilities as they progress from speaking more informally with their peers to engaging in extended academic discussions. Teachers can support such literacy development by modeling academic language to students, explicitly teaching the language forms and functions necessary for academic discussions across academic content areas, and showing students how the use of specific language can help make discussion topics clear to the listener without the use of hand gestures or visuals (Gibbons, 2009). By helping young students learn how to use specific language in academic discussions, teachers are also preparing them to write academically as well (Gibbons, 2009).

A Quest for Balance: A Comprehensive Approach

A comprehensive approach to literacy includes the best elements of a transactional (holistic) and a transmissive (phonics) approach to literacy instruction. Both of these approaches have much to offer for the beginning teacher of young children. The authors of this book believe that the two can be used together to create a dynamic, synergistic program. Research supports the notion that instruction from a committed teacher who can integrate a program of explicit, systematic phonics into a curriculum rich with quality literature, easily decodable text, a variety of leveled texts, and meaningful writing experiences will result in children who not only know how to read but also do so willingly, beyond the classroom doors (Tompkins, 2017). Most reading educators and classroom teachers have long agreed that instruction in phonics is vital in learning how to decode automatically and that
incorporating the basic elements of a holistic, meaning-based program with such instruction will increase children’s enthusiasm toward reading (Wink, 2011).

Effective teachers tend to see new movement in literacy, such as the trend toward a comprehensive approach, not as a pendulum swing but as a positive spiral in which they acquire exciting new research-based information about implementing best literacy practices each time the focus shifts. Echoing this belief, Goodman (1997) muses, “When people talk to me about cycles and pendulum swings, it helps me remember that progress is rarely in a straight line and that knowledge takes a long time to be accommodated, absorbed, and put to work” (p. 596).

Adding support to the comprehensive approach to literacy is the fact that current thinking on phonics instruction is not as extreme as once perceived. Most phonics proponents today support streamlined phonics, in which children are helped to become independent, automatic decoders but are not inadvertently discouraged from reading by an overabundance of worksheets, drills, and abstract rules with little application. Current thinking suggests that efficient phonics instruction that is systematic and explicit gets children decoding quickly so that they can soon turn their attention to more important and enjoyable reading tasks (Wink, 2011). Indeed, it appears that the question is now not whether to teach phonics but how best to teach phonics, within a literature-rich classroom that also stresses background knowledge, comprehension strategies, and an enormous amount of reading (Combs, 2010; Jalongo, 2014). The CCSS underscore this notion, with a strong emphasis on rigorous reading and thoughtful, evidence-based writing, with the underlying skills taught as a means to an end.

Stahl (1992) offers nine guidelines for “exemplary phonics instruction” to be used in tandem with other more holistic, meaning-based methods. He urges that such balanced instruction should do the following:

- build on a child’s rich background in how print functions
- build on a foundation of sound awareness (phonemics)
- be clear and direct
- be integrated into a total reading program
- focus on reading words rather than memorizing rules
- include the study of beginning sounds and ending sounds
- include practice with sound-symbol relationships through writing
- develop word recognition strategies by focusing on the internal structure of words
- develop automatic word recognition skills quickly so that children can devote their attention to meaning and enjoyment, not individual words

There is even more reason to believe that current thinking on reading instruction has evolved from the philosophy first articulated by Goodman in the 1960s. The CCSS do not give teachers the specific instructional strategies to help students meet the standards (Allen, 2012), but rather rely on the expertise of each teacher to select these strategies according to the needs of their students. This book offers a variety of strategies with the goal of
addressing standards for English language arts. Toward that end, it advocates a comprehensive program of broad early literacy curricula that would include phonemic awareness, phonics and word study, rich literature-based activities, a variety of comprehension strategies, and multiple, varied writing opportunities. Specifically, such a comprehensive perspective would include the following (Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Madda, 2007):

- a wide range of reading materials, both informational and story-based, in a variety of genres, on many developmental levels in English and the other languages and cultures of the students in the class
- direct teaching of concepts relating to print
- explicit instruction in the concept that words are a series of speech sounds
- cueing systems, including graphophonics, semantics, and syntax
- explicit instruction in the strategies that skilled readers use
- critical-thinking strategies
- a flow of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing activities
- vocabulary development
- extensive opportunities to write for many different purposes in many different genres
- instruction in strategies that good writers use
- reading fluency through encouragement of wide reading at each student’s independent reading level
- thorough and ongoing assessment to ensure that instruction is compatible with individual needs

A comparison of three views of literacy instruction (refer back to Figure 2.1) shows how a comprehensive program might be a selection of the best elements of both educational philosophies used to create Ms. Ramon’s first-grade program (outlined in depth in Chapter 15).

On a personal note, through visits to hundreds of primary-grade classrooms over the past few years, I (author Nancy Lee Cecil) have observed that many extraordinary teachers in the field now use and have always used phonics skills instruction within a transactional framework. With certain groups of students, such teachers stress one approach more than others, and for some students, they find it is best to use one approach exclusively. These dedicated professionals believe that this long-standing pedagogical dialogue will cease only when teachers are treated as knowledgeable authorities regarding their students. They must be allowed to decide, based on the individual needs in their classroom, which instructional methods are most appropriate (Bialostok, 1997).

**Balance and Teaching to Standards**

As discussed earlier, the standards movement has also had an impact on education. In most school districts, today’s teachers are asked to teach to standards set by their state or district. Teachers often ask how addressing standards, including the CCSS, can lead to a