

1

Skills-Emphasis, Meaning-Emphasis, and Scientifically Based Balanced Reading Instruction

Elementary reading instruction is a topic that has commanded a great deal of attention over the last several decades. A primary reason for this interest is that people are flooded with information and much of that information is in a print version (newspapers, magazines, blog posts, internet sites, etc.). A second reason for the attention is that survival today, in society and in the marketplace, depends heavily upon a literate citizenry. A third and final reason is the international evidence that the rank ordering of American students' academic performance has continually ranked below that of other industrialized nations. This third reason seems to be more related to other nations more rapidly improving the academic performance of their students as compared with American students. This is especially true in reading achievement, especially for the older (12th-grade) students, where performance has largely been stable since 1982.

However, contrary to the opinion of some that reading skills have declined over the past century, the evidence is simply overwhelming that more elementary students read better today than they did at any point in the past and that reported levels of performance on international assessments underestimate the productivity of American schools and teachers (Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013). At the same time, students in some other nations are improving their reading proficiencies at a faster rate than is the case with American students. The task facing American educators is to improve the quality of reading lessons offered in our schools such that virtually all students will attain the proficiencies needed to read almost any text with understanding.

The central message of this text is that we know more about efficient literacy development and more about effective literacy instruction than we ever knew before. In fact, it looks as though we know enough that virtually all students could be reading on grade level, generally by the end of first grade. When the first edition of this book was written, educators were deeply engaged in what were known as the “reading wars.” These reading wars looked to oversimplify reading into two “sides.” For several years, it appeared that those wars were behind us, but now the “reading wars” seem to have reemerged with the ongoing debate surrounding the use of phonics or skills-emphasis and whole-language or meaning-emphasis approaches to teaching reading. Within this debate, researchers, teachers, and parents have begun to become heavily invested in one approach or another. There remain a handful of folks who continue to argue for their favorite approach to teaching children to read. Some generate personal revenues from the products they tout. Others have invested their careers in promoting an approach and so continue their long-standing advocacy for that approach.

Such debates about the “best” way to teach children to read began more than a century ago, just as universal education opportunities became the norm. Once the vast majority of school-age children began attending school, questions about the preferred method for teaching children to read began to emerge and take the spotlight. The rapid development of commercial reading programs in the 1920s provided educators with various approaches to developing children into readers. The development of these multiple alternative approaches led to debates about which commercial programs were the better fit for the children. Once American schools created a substantial market for commercial reading materials, literally hundreds upon hundreds of reading programs were produced and sold to schools. These reading programs fall along a continuum with meaning-emphasis programs on one end and skills-emphasis programs on the other (see Figure 1.1).

On one side of the argument is the *skills emphasis*, also known as the *bottom-up approach*, or most recently as the *simple view of reading* (SVR) or *phonics-based approach*. From a skills-emphasis framework, teachers must explicitly teach the various skills needed to become a reader. Those who have argued that reading requires a skills emphasis believe that meaning making during reading occurs from the bottom up. For them, reading is about the processing of letters and words. Meaning making is sounding out the words, which are listened to by the mind. Indeed, there is a long history of distinguished research establishing that, even when good readers read

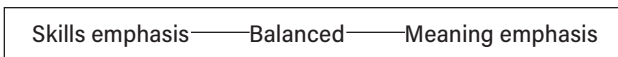


FIGURE 1.1. Our continuum of approaches to reading.

silently, there is something of a speech process involved. Skills-emphasis folks have a long list of specific skills that will need to be taught if they are to be acquired. Extensive instruction and practice, even in isolation, of these various skills, their argument goes, are needed to foster reading development. In skills-emphasis approaches, it is the skills framework that drives the lessons. More importantly, the various skills are taught separately, rather than in a balanced framework that works together. This is most often seen with a main emphasis on only phonics instruction, rather than a more balanced emphasis on skills such as comprehension, motivation, and fluency.

Sometimes, there is even silent speech (i.e., the reader literally says the words to her- or himself quietly). Sometimes the speech processes are not so complete, but, as words are read, information about the sounds of the words is activated in the mind, which seems to help the reader hold in memory the last few words that were read so that their meanings can be integrated to permit comprehension of the text (Carver, 1990; Perfetti, 1985). The idea that reading involves decoding and listening comprehension, with readers listening to what they have decoded in order to understand the meanings conveyed by the text (Gough, 1984), is a simple view of reading on which much of the *science of reading* (SOR) stances are based.

As seen detailed in the *Reading Research Quarterly* special issues (discussed later in this chapter), a common term teachers and researchers have begun to use is the *science of reading*. Just as in the debate between the skills versus meaning emphasis, the definition of the SOR varies. Many SOR researchers have taken on a view aligned with the SVR, which defines reading as having two basic components: decoding and comprehension. The SVR supporters have particularly latched onto the idea that all research should be backed by science, but only particular research designs should be considered science (e.g., experiments and quasi-experiments with control groups). Although we agree with the idea that reading practices should be backed by science, we feel that this definition of effective reading instruction is much too limited.

We label the other end of the continuum as the *meaning-emphasis approach*, also labeled as a *top-down approach* or *whole-language approach*. The meaning-emphasis approach to literacy education emphasizes natural development of literacy competence. Immersion in real literature and daily writing is favored over explicit teaching of basic reading skills. Skills instruction, when it occurs, appears in wholly committed whole-language classrooms on an as-needed basis only, and then only in the context of reading and writing, rather than as a focal point of instruction (e.g., Smith & Goodman, 1971). Through extensive reading practice coupled with mostly minimal guidance, children become readers, and in the process they acquire the skills proficiencies they need. In the

meaning-emphasis framework, it is the text that is to be understood that drives the lesson.

Over the past several decades, a growing body of data addressed what meaning-emphasis whole language can do and what it cannot do. To review, we now know that there are many general points of understanding about reading and writing that are promoted by meaning emphasis. Moreover, literature and writing immersion promote the development of important content knowledge and ability in writing. At least in some whole-language classrooms, phonics is taught, and phonics skills develop. Based on existing comparisons between skills-based and whole-language instruction, however, concerns remain, especially with respect to at-risk students, that learning to read words may not be as certain in meaning-emphasis whole-language classrooms as compared with skills-emphasis code-oriented classrooms (Johnston, 2000).

We want to emphasize that this is not a book about the meaning emphasis versus skills instruction debate. Our view is that the whole-language philosophy has had some profound and very positive effects on elementary literacy instruction and that many of the meaning-emphasis whole-language practices should be part of elementary literacy programs. However, other practices should be there as well, and much space in the chapters that follow is devoted to making a case for a balance of decoding and comprehension skills instruction with meaning-emphasis elements of whole language to create an effective and attractive elementary literacy curriculum.

Getting to a balance of meaning-emphasis and skills-emphasis instruction may require an understanding of meaning emphasis, which can be challenging. Those most strongly identified with meaning emphasis have often resisted attempting to define it precisely in terms of curricular practices, arguing that an approach that is “whole” cannot be easily reduced to “parts.” Even so, for many others, including the authors of this book, it is helpful to think in terms of particular instructional practices associated with an educational philosophy.

Between the skills-emphasis approach and meaning emphasis, there is an intermediate position, which includes both in constructing meaning from a text. The case that has been made here is that skilled readers may process every single letter using efficient eye movements that involve fixation on most words. The case has also been made that the reader’s mind is very active in constructing hypotheses about what a text might mean, generating inferences, based on prior knowledge, that are necessary in making meaning, and initiating strategies to locate portions of the text that are especially likely to be informative. Bottom-up and top-down processing clearly interact as part of skilled reading. There cannot be one without the other if skilled reading is to occur (Kintsch, 1998; Rumelhart, 1994). They are in balance.

We do not see reading instruction as just skills emphasis or meaning emphasis, but rather believe that teachers should use research-based practices that support all aspects of reading. We place this book at the center because our balanced approach takes the research evidence on the potential of early and explicit decoding instruction and the evidence on explicit comprehension strategies instruction and blends it with the research evidence on the potential of meaning-emphasis instruction for developing vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation to read. Additionally, we do not feel that the science of reading should be limited to just experimental studies, but rather include a more comprehensive look at reading research (Pressley, 2002). In short, we look at research on both sides of the reading argument and present the research for multiple aspects of reading, not just one or two. The scientific evidence overwhelmingly points to the many, many different subprocesses involved in skilled reading that are all amenable to intervention that improves reading comprehension outcomes (phonemic awareness, phonics knowledge, fluency, morphology, vocabulary, comprehension, and cognitive factors like strategic knowledge and executive skills), and it's those scientifically based instructional practices that are the focus of the book.

Does that mean that it will do no good to target educational efforts at either skills-emphasis or meaning-emphasis approaches alone? Not necessarily. In fact, there will be quite a bit of evidence considered in subsequent chapters that makes clear that targeting letter- and word-level processes sometimes can improve reading achievement, as can targeting comprehension strategies. Instruction of particular components can help on the road to skilled reading, which involves bottom-up and top-down thinking in balanced interaction.

REVIEWS OF SCIENTIFIC-BACKED BALANCED READING INSTRUCTION

Over the past several decades, there have been several reports that have reviewed the reading research and provided states, districts, and teachers with guidance on reading instruction. These reports had a goal of sharing the reading research and providing support for reading instruction within the classroom. Below you will find a brief summary of each of these reports.

Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson et al., 1985)

One of the first reports on reading instruction, Anderson et al. (1985), summarized the complex nature of reading in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. The report put together an overview of the reading research and provided guidance based on the research for reading instruction. Specifically,

Anderson and his colleagues presented reading as having five principles that concluded that skilled reading is constructive, fluent, strategic, motivated, and a lifelong pursuit. Anderson et al. (1985) defined reading as “the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information” (p. 7). Using the analogy of an orchestra, Anderson and his colleagues compare skilled reading to that of a finely tuned orchestra, stating that, just like an orchestra, reading is a holistic act that must be practiced over time and can have multiple interpretations based on a reader’s background knowledge and the context of the reading.

Anderson et al. (1985) went on to emphasize the importance of the classroom environment, stating that teachers need to emphasize reading and writing in the classroom with less emphasis on worksheets and standardized test scores (something even today’s teachers would most likely support). For instruction, the Nation of Readers report suggested that teachers teach phonics instruction as a way to help students identify words, teach comprehension strategies as a way to help students understand the text, and include discussions of the text that promote students using their background knowledge to grasp an understanding. This comprehensive approach to teaching reading should be done in a stimulating environment that includes texts that students find interesting.

Though the research reviewed by Anderson et al. (1985) is now several decades old, the overall concepts are still true in today’s classrooms based on more recent literature and align with the focus of this book. Skilled readers are strong in all aspects of reading and have learned how to integrate the necessary skills to grasp an understanding of a text.

Beginning to Read (Adams, 1990)

Adams’s book (1990) laid out what the research tells us about the role played by phonemic segmentation, letter–sound relationships, and orthographic learning in acquiring decoding proficiency. She comes down on the side of skills-emphasis instruction but, like Chall (1983), with some reservations. For instance, she points to a central role for motivation in acquiring decoding proficiency:

The goal of teaching phonics is to develop students’ ability to read connected text independently. For students, however, the strongest functional connection between these two skills may run in the reverse direction. It is only the nature of reading that can make the content of phonic lessons seem sensible; it is only the prospect of reading that can make them seem worthwhile. And, certainly, we hope that such instruction will seem both sensible and worthwhile to students. (p. 272)

She also notes that decoding instruction should play only a small role in reading lessons:

The extra phonic calories do not enhance growth. They are kept as unnecessary and burdensome tissue or quickly flushed as waste. Worse still, the child may become groggily sated before getting to the other necessary and complementary items on the menu. (p. 51)

In addition, Adams notes that some meaning-based instructional practices provide strong evidence of fostering specific skills development:

The evidence that inventive spelling activity simultaneously develops phonemic awareness and promotes understanding of the alphabetic principle is extremely promising, especially in view of the difficulty with which children are found to acquire these insights through other methods of teaching. (p. 387)

She writes that “the strongest implication of the theory toward developing solid word recognition skills is that children should read lots and often” (p. 135), and, after reviewing major and competing commercial core reading materials, Adams (1990) concludes that there is no consistency across the materials, even in terms of how many letter–sound relationships should be taught, much less when each should be taught and what method of instruction should be used.

What Adams’s book did, however, was move developing decoding proficiencies back into mainstream conversations, something seen as addressing a weakness of the then prominent whole-language approach (and its derivatives). However, the greatest contribution of Adams’s book may have been that it began moving the skills-emphasis proponents away from an intense concentration on skills development in isolation (e.g., Flesch, 1955) toward a better balanced discussion of the potential roles of both skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis approaches, which could and should when joined together provide the most powerful reading lessons possible.

The National Research Council

The National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies formed a committee of distinguished scholars to review the research on beginning reading. Catherine Snow of Harvard University chaired this committee and served as senior author of the committee’s final report. That report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), synthesized the available research on skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis programs and concluded that a “balanced” approach that combined the best of our skills-emphasis knowledge about phonemic segmentation and phonics with the best of our meaning-emphasis knowledge on

vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation would make for a powerful hybrid approach to developing early literacy proficiencies. They concluded by noting that three factors interfered with the initial acquisition of reading proficiency: (1) problems understanding the alphabetic principle, (2) failure to acquire the verbal knowledge necessary for comprehension, and (3) the absence or loss of motivation to read.

The authors also noted that high-quality lessons in high-motivation classrooms were more likely to be the solution than adhering to any particular approach to teaching children to read. They noted that, in low-achieving schools, both the amount and the use of instructional time needed to be addressed, as did lower levels of student engagement, more frequent external interruptions, and less friendly classroom environments (Snow et al., 1998, p. 129). In other words, their view of the problems that some children had in initial stages of reading acquisition were much broader than the simple question of which reading program the teacher used.

Almost as soon as the NRC report was released, the criticisms began (Snow, 2001), with skills-emphasis proponent Louisa Cook Moats (2000) arguing that the report did not go far enough in addressing systematic phonics and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development division head and presidential education advisor G. Reid Lyon suggesting that the conclusions were too ambiguous (Lyon, 1998). Snow (2001) noted:

These worries may have strengthened calls for the establishment, in a time period overlapping with the final meetings of the committee, of a federally mandated panel designed to review rigorously the research base on the effectiveness of different instructional techniques. (p. 240)

Thus, shortly after the NRC report was released, congressional action created the NRP to rigorously examine the experimental evidence on skills-emphasis approaches.

The National Reading Panel

The federally funded National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) conducted meta-analyses on aspects of beginning reading where there were a sufficient number of experimental studies. The three aspects of beginning reading where they found a sufficient supply of experimental studies were phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. They reported that phonemic awareness was an essential early literacy proficiency and that it could and should be developed by teachers. They also reported that the meta-analyses indicated that 10 minutes of explicit phonics instruction daily in kindergarten and first grade produced a moderate positive effect size on later decoding but a trivial effect on later comprehension. Increasing the number of minutes did

not improve these outcomes. The NRP also reported no positive effects for code-emphasis instruction in grades 2 through 9, even though most of the studies had been conducted with older struggling readers. The NRP also identified repeated readings as an effective strategy for fostering reading fluency.

Alongside the ponderous NRP report was an easily accessible, “plain-language” summary that was much more widely read (Armbruster et al., 2001). This document was much shorter and ignored discussions of the study designs while offering what was supposed to be practical findings for practitioners. One member of the NRP wrote about the summary, noting that it “provides helpful information about instruction and is written in a teacher-friendly way. Sometimes it makes points that are identical to those from the NRP study. Other suggestions are not actually from the NRP report, but are consistent with it” (Shanahan, 2003, p. 647). Shanahan also notes that some recommendations in the summary do not match what the NRP reported. Nonetheless, this summary was widely distributed to states, schools, and colleges of education for dissemination as a reliable summary of the NRP research about beginning reading lessons.

The panel offered some very strong conclusions based on its review of the literature, with the most visible ones being the following:

1. Phonemic awareness instruction is effective in promoting early reading (e.g., word reading, comprehension) and spelling skills. The panel concluded that phonemic awareness instruction is effective with first graders and kindergarten students as well as with students with disabilities who lack phonemic awareness, especially phonemic segmentation, in the later elementary grades.

Systematic phonics instruction improves reading and spelling and, to a lesser extent, comprehension. However, the panel found that systematic phonics only had positive effects when provided in kindergarten and grade 1. That is, code-emphasis reading lessons in grades 2 through 8 did not produce the same positive effects found for early phonics, or code-emphasis, lessons. Even though Chall (1983) had concluded that synthetic phonics (i.e., instruction teaching students explicitly to convert letters into sounds and blend the sounds) is more effective than other forms of systematic phonics instruction, the panel reported no statistically significant advantage for synthetic phonics instruction over other phonics approaches.

2. Guided oral reading (i.e., a teacher listening as a student reads, providing instruction as needed) and repeated reading of texts increase reading fluency during the elementary years. However, more recent research (Kuhn et al., 2006; Schwanenflugel et al., 2009) found that wide reading produced fluency gains faster than did repeated readings.

3. A variety of methods of vocabulary instruction make sense, with vocabulary instruction positively impacting reading comprehension.

4. Comprehension-strategies instruction improves comprehension, with a number of strategies positively affecting understanding of a text, including teaching students to be aware of whether they are comprehending and to deal with miscomprehension when it occurs (e.g., by rereading); using graphic and semantic organizers to represent text; teaching students to attend to story structure (e.g., “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” and “why” information) as they read; question generation and question answering during reading; and summarization. Teaching students to use a small repertoire of effective strategies (e.g., predicting upcoming text content, seeking clarification when confused, asking questions, constructing mental images representing text content, and summarization) was especially strongly endorsed by the NRP. Both direct explanation (Duffy, 2014; Duffy et al., 1987) approaches—starting with teacher modeling and explanation of strategies followed by scaffolding teacher practice of the strategies—and transactional-strategies instruction (i.e., direct explanation with an emphasis on teacher–student and student–student discussions and interpretations of the text during practice of strategies; Brown et al., 1996; Pressley et al., 1992) were supported by the panel.

5. Teacher inservice can change teachers’ instruction of reading, with an impact on student achievement, although much more research is needed to identify particular inservice approaches that are helpful.

6. Computer technology has great potential for improving beginning reading achievement, with promising approaches for promoting word recognition, vocabulary development, and comprehension already enjoying some support. However, to date, large-scale studies fail to demonstrate the potential benefits (Cheung & Slavin, 2012; Dynarski, 2007).

However, the NRP also had its critics, as Cunningham (2001) argued, “What are we to make of a report that so boldly lays claim to what science, rigor, and objectivity are in reading research, and first denigrates, then ignores, the preponderance of research literature in our field?” (p. 327). His comments were targeting the choice the NRP made to review only the evidence from experimental studies employing random assignment to treatment or control conditions or quasi-experimental studies with matched treatment and control groups. He pointed out that the very sort of evidence (correlational) used to require warning labels on tobacco products was wholly ignored by the NRP. With such limited standards for inclusion of research, the NRP ignored critical reading research (e.g., Pressley et al., 2003), which led to reading programs like Reading First, discussed

in the next section, to be much less research based had the NRP reviewed the broader array of research available (Pressley & Fingeret, 2007). Others criticized the methodology, arguing that using the same set of studies but a different analytical scheme produced “conclusions” different from those the NRP drew (Camilli et al., 2006; Hammill & Swanson, 2006). For instance, Hammill and Swanson (2006), completed a meta-analysis of phonics instruction. The results suggested that the NRP “overestimated the benefits of phonics instruction relative to other approaches” (p. 25). Additionally, Hammill and Swanson (2006) argued that their reanalysis demonstrated that “for all practical purposes, phonics and nonphonics methods are about equally successful in teaching children to read” (p. 25).

The NRP Report and the Reading First Program

Ultimately, the promotional funding to disseminate the plain-language version of the report of the NRP meant that the original report and its recommendations were both largely neglected. Incorporation of the NRP five pillars of reading into the implementation of the Reading First program under the No Child Left Behind Act meant that the NRP report had substantial effects on the design of reading lessons in this nation (Brenner et al., 2009). American primary-grade teachers were flooded with new commercial products with a skills-emphasis focus, including commercial curricula focused on both fostering and assessing phonemic awareness, phonics skills development, and oral reading fluency.

In the end, the federal evaluation of the Reading First program (Gamse et al., 2009) used a regression discontinuity design to establish that, while reading instruction in Reading First schools did increase the use of practices targeted by the program designers and while reading achievement rose in Reading First schools, improvement was no different from the rise in scores in schools not participating in the Reading First program. Additionally, while a small positive effect on reading pseudowords (nonsense words) was observed, that improvement did not lead to improved performances that were different from the improvements observed in nonparticipating schools on the primary assessment, the Stanford Achievement Test–10, at grades 1, 2, or 3. Gamse et al. (2009) reported, “Controlling for the other variables in the model, the regression coefficient between minutes spent teaching the five dimensions of reading . . . is associated with a 0.09 difference in student test scores. This association is not statistically significant ($p = .056$)” (p. 55).

In sum, while the federal Reading First program did result in more schools and classrooms incorporating more skills-emphasis practices during reading instruction, that outcome did not result in reading performance improvements that were different from the improvements observed in

nonparticipating schools. That result, along with concerns about violations of the federal prohibitions clause and the influence of some entrepreneurs on the design and the approval of Reading First applications (Harkinson, 2008; Schemo, 2007) resulted in Congress defunding the Reading First program.

Pearson (2010) concluded that, while Reading First was reported to have had a positive effect in some states and in some schools, the overall evaluation indicated that the program failed to accomplish its central goal: improving reading achievement. He hypothesized about the reasons the program did or did not have positive effects in some locations but seemed to produce positive effects in others. While the Reading First program did have a general and broad framework for changing reading lessons, the processes that were initiated by the varying educational authorities were complex and differed from site to site. We would argue that the emphasis that the Reading First program placed on implementing a core reading program with fidelity likely also undermined the quest for improved reading achievement. We argue this because it is clear that commercially available core reading programs rarely provide teachers with the information needed to offer research-based instruction (Dewitz et al., 2009). Thus, the skills-emphasis approach, as implemented through the federal Reading First program, did not produce any significant advantage in fostering reading development.

Reading Research Quarterly Special Issues: The Science of Reading

More recently, the reading debate has resurfaced with the use of the term *science of reading* (SOR), with researchers once again debating the best approaches to teaching reading. To attempt to present both sides of the reading argument, the academic journal *Reading Research Quarterly* published two special issues with articles written by experts in the field of reading. Each author was asked to frame their argument with extensive evidence to support the most effective approaches to reading based on previously published research (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020, 2021). One clear aspect from these special issues was the inconsistent definition of the SOR. With the inconsistencies across the articles, the journal editors advocated for a broad interpretation of the SOR. Across the 50 articles (several of which we discuss in other chapters), reading researchers argued that the SOR should include many aspects, not just phonics instruction. For example, the SOR should include aspects such as language comprehension, writing, volume of reading, instruction, and background knowledge just to name a few. In short, the special issue looked to unite reading researchers in the idea that reading instruction should be backed by science.

Within the first special issue, there were several key findings across the articles. These key findings included a focus on what some consider

the main aspect of the SOR—phonics instruction—and the impact we have seen in classroom instruction. Though several authors specifically focus on phonics instruction, a majority of the articles within the first special issue looks to expand the SOR beyond just phonics. These articles encourage researchers and teachers to think of the SOR as including more than just phonics and comprehension (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020). As we write this fifth edition, we couldn't agree more. In the second special issue on the SOR, more authors continue to provide evidence and theories for a more expansive view of the SOR beyond just phonics instruction. Additionally, reading researchers express the importance and data supporting reading multiple texts, increasing reading volume, teaching syntax skills, and teaching reading across content areas. Furthermore, the second special issue brings to light the importance of teaching reading across languages and supporting second language reading development (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2021). This is an area that we also believe is important for teachers to gain more understanding of what the research says about teaching children to read. We encourage anyone wanting to learn more about the SOR to take some time to explore the articles in these special issues.

A BALANCED APPROACH TO READING INSTRUCTION

Our best understanding of the research currently available suggests that there are valid aspects of both skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis approaches to beginning reading. The evidence is quite clear that an early (kindergarten and grade 1), explicit, but modest emphasis on developing phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge (10 minutes per day) leads to readers who can better decode, at least in the short term. At the same time, the research-based advantages of meaning-emphasis approaches include stronger motivation to read and both a better understanding of the reading process and better comprehension after reading. Thus, in our view, the problem may be that American educators place too much emphasis, when either a skills-emphasis or a meaning-emphasis approach is adopted, on one aspect of effective beginning reading instruction, which differs by program emphasis. In other words, both sides in the reading wars are, in part, correct in supporting their preferred emphasis. At the same time, both sides are wrong, in part, because they have elected to ignore the advantages of the opposing camp. Too much of what is marketed as curriculum under the skills-emphasis model ignores the importance of potential tools such as invented spelling and wide independent reading. Too much of what is marketed as curriculum under the meaning-emphasis model ignores the evidence of the importance of accurate reading and developing strong decoding skills.

Our solution is to attempt to integrate the strengths of both the skills-emphasis and the meaning-emphasis approaches, much as the Snow et al. (1998) report suggested. Routman (2002) has already largely followed this path. However, some skills-emphasis proponents (Moats, 2000) have already mischaracterized the balanced approach as yet another variation of the meaning-emphasis approach, in this case whole language.

We will admit that, in our view, beginning reading lessons are more effective when elements of the whole language are integrated into those lessons. At the same time, we believe that the research supports aspects of the skills-emphasis approaches as well. However, as long as the primary advantage of skills-emphasis instruction is improved decoding and little else, it is impossible for us to recommend that approach without some significant modifications, as suggested from the research on the meaning-emphasis approach. The work of Connor and her colleagues (Connor et al., 2004, 2009) supports our point of view while at the same time addressing the complexity of providing high-quality literacy lessons given the commercial materials available in today's market. We can only hope that educators will soon see more balanced curriculum frameworks for beginning reading lessons, but until that time, each individual teacher will have to work to adapt existing commercial programs to better fit a balanced approach to instruction.

We hope that, as you read this text, you come to understand what balanced reading instruction looks and feels like. That, at least, is our primary goal.

SO, WHAT IS READING?

The current reading debate continues to focus on the specific aspects that teachers should emphasize when teaching reading. We believe that reading practices need to be backed by science; however, we fall in line with many researchers in the *Reading Research Quarterly* special issues, who say that the definition of the science of reading is often too limited and must include more than just phonics and comprehension instruction. On the other side, meaning emphasis focuses on using context and student inquiry to drive the reading. This approach has been present in K–12 schools for several decades and has limited success with teaching students to read. One issue is the limited research (limited but not absent) studies or science that supports the use of meaning-emphasis reading instruction. Another major issue: Many teachers do not know that the meaning-emphasis approaches that they are teaching through major reading curriculums are not backed by research.

So where does that lead this book? We believe in a balance between the two approaches—skills emphasis and meaning emphasis. We believe that

the skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis approaches are each too limited to enable a student to become a skilled reader. The fact is that reading is complex and includes multiple skills working together, rather than individual skills working separately. We believe that teachers need to understand and incorporate all aspects of reading to support student learning. There are a lot of reading programs present in today's classrooms that are not backed by any sort of research. It is important for teachers to incorporate reading instruction that is backed by science and not so much by catchy phrases or colorful pictures. We believe that a balanced approach to reading is not focusing on one side or the other (skills emphasis vs. meaning emphasis), but rather incorporating skills backed by research that support the many important aspects of reading, such as decoding, comprehension, fluency, motivation, individual differences, and vocabulary. Thus, throughout this book, we present the research-based approaches for the different components of reading and believe that balancing these components is critical for developing skilled readers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

1. Both skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis reading instruction have been used in American classrooms for at least a century. Over that period, the reading programs used in American schools have reflected one of these approaches or another, though there has been an abundance of reading programs produced and used that reflect neither stance very well. For at least a century, there have been avid proponents of both approaches. At various times, actual "reading wars" broke out, with one side or the other dominating the nature of reading instruction for a decade or two. Throughout this whole era, publishers have responded to the marketplace by adding and subtracting either skills-emphasis or meaning-emphasis elements from their reading program offerings. Visit any large number of elementary school classrooms today, and you will undoubtedly see remnants of both the skills-emphasis and meaning-emphasis approaches. In some classrooms, you may also see what could be considered pure skills-emphasis or meaning-emphasis approaches.

2. Extensive reviews of the reading literature over the years have found research support for more balanced instructional approaches. Classroom teachers must understand that teaching reading is not a "one or the other" activity (skills emphasis or meaning emphasis). Strong reading incorporates instruction backed by science and understands the complexity that is reading. In order to develop skilled readers, teachers must look for a balanced approach that is supported by reading research.

3. A more recent debate within the field of reading has revolved around the science of reading (SOR). The SOR debate is important for teachers because it is critical for teachers to incorporate reading skills backed by research that supports the many aspects of reading, such as decoding, comprehension, fluency, motivation, individual differences, and vocabulary. In the past, the SOR has often only focused on the NRP report and was often too narrow when examining the reading research. This has led to the simple view of reading that only focuses on phonics and comprehension. Throughout this book, we have reviewed and incorporated research-based reading practices to support teacher development in the different areas of reading instruction. Thus, we frame the SOR for this book as reading practices backed by strong research that incorporates all aspects of reading rather than just one or two aspects.

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