

Core Presuppositions of Balanced Reading Theory

Personal Reflections

By George Demetrian

As a program manager and curriculum developer who has spent the bulk of his 25 year career at the ground level of adult literacy education practice I have been highly invested in the issue of how adult literacy students take on the challenging process of learning how to read and how teachers, particularly volunteer tutors, have sought to assist them. Before entering the field of adult education in 1983 my only experience in teaching reading was with a 17 year old male who was suspended from high school. Having no background in reading pedagogy I drew on my intuition and common sense in working with narrative-based texts, while keeping lists of words he had trouble pronouncing or understanding which we then worked on after completing the assigned narrative text of the day. My student was far from a non-reader, but was also a good distance from achieving reading proficiency.

This basic approach of discerning some type of overall sense of the ways in which students approach reading, and incorporating something of their core abilities, ways of learning, and accounting for their gaps in an instructional plan, guided me when I began to work with adult literacy students and their tutors in 1987 in Hartford, CT. In leading tutor training workshops at Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH) I became familiar with the LVA-based four part methodology of incorporating phonics, word patterns, sight words, and language experience approaches into a plan of teaching which required a great deal of individual adaptation.

Two basic perceptions began to emerge. The first was that the key factor was not any given set of methods but the necessity of identifying the student's learning edge and to infuse that with a great deal of facilitative, or "scaffolding" instruction. The second observation had to do with the wide diversity of tutor perceptions on how students learn to read, in which their own innate sense of what works serves as their most powerful guide regardless as to any given instructional philosophy, as the latter may or may not enter into their sense of plausibility. Regardless as to methodological approach, which, as I have observed, ranges widely with volunteer tutors; based on my own management style and understanding of how students and tutors work effectively together I was able to make the most progress by honoring the "multiple intelligences" of our tutors and helping them to increase their repertoire of strategies from that standpoint. I sought to embed all of these perspectives in my review of N.S. Prahbhu's *Communicative Competence and Second Language Teaching* (Demetrian, 1997).

Over the next few years I became increasingly knowledgeable about whole language reading theory especially through the writings of Frank Smith (1996). During this period, the LVA organization also began to emphasize whole language philosophy as an overarching framework which the agency incorporated into their two pivotal texts, *Small Group Tutoring: A Collaborative Approach for Literacy Instruction* (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990) and *Tutor: A Collaborative Approach to Literacy Instruction* (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993). Neither these texts nor my approach was as radical as Smith's virtual rejection of phonics instruction. Moreover, I had always taken a more "common sense," less ideological orientation

and continued in that perspective even in an embrace of whole language reading theory. Thus, as of the early 1990s, through this work, including Smith's important *Reading without Nonsense*, I had a language and a framework to incorporate a coherent philosophy of reading in my program which I thought was missing from the initial eclectic approach embedded in the early LVA training of the mid-1980s. Such "whole language" coherency not only addressed the matter of reading theory, but brought into its overarching framework the core assumptions of collaborative learning theory and process writing in the flourishing of a moderately progressive theory of adult literacy education which I incorporated into my more formal work in the educational philosophies of John Dewey (especially his concept of "growth) and Lev Vygotsky's scaffolding concept of the "zone of proximal development. I incorporated these insights in a formal sense in my essay, "A Scaffolding Paradigm: Small Group Tutoring at the Bob Steele Reading Center 1990-1995" (Demetron, 1999)

As documented so well in Pearson's (1999) *Reading in the Twentieth Century*, the whole language "revolution" hit an unanticipated road block in a phonemic revival of massive proportions telegraphed in the most elegant of ways in Marilyn Adam's (1994) widely read *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. The impact was experienced not only in K-12 schooling but in adult literacy circles as well. Programs that heretofore had placed phonics in a very marginal position now began to reconsider a central, if not a dominant role for a reading philosophy grounded in phonemic awareness, including a strong emphasis on the importance of "systematic phonics."

In LVGH, where I worked from 1987-1996, this resulted in the late 1990s in an embrace of the *Wilson Reading System* which all Basic Literacy small group tutoring sessions would incorporate as 50% of their instructional program. The remaining 50% would take on a text-book based "life-skill" approach which allowed scope for basic skill development and content-based instruction in such areas as employment, health, parenting, and civic awareness. I returned to LVGH in 2000 and was initially assigned to a community-based program management position away from the main center where I had complete discretion in setting the instructional program. I did not embrace this "phonemic revival." Nonetheless, I became increasingly appreciative of the value in helping students to enhance their phonemic sensibilities. Thus, I began to incorporate a more balanced approach, still with a strong inclination toward what I took as the more holistic methodologies of assisted reading, language experience, and the importance of rich content-based instruction. Such an orientation I believed was critical in tapping into zones of learning and motivational drives not as easily accessed through excessive focus on isolated skill work. At the that time I concentrated on "whole-part-whole" approach in teaching phonics especially through word pattern activities and to sight-word memorization of basic words.

Purcell-Gates' (1997) important essay, "There's Reading...and There's Reading," helped me to think through conceptually the importance of a balanced approach to adult reading instruction, which, as the author argued, needs to be tailored in light of the learning capabilities and inclinations of each student. As an overarching framework I continued to draw on Dewey's concept of "growth" and Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development." This underlying interactive theory of learning helped me to incorporate a more balanced perspective into the agency's Basic Literacy instructional philosophy when I assumed primary responsibility for the main BL program in 2004. This resulted in several shifts, including a three-ring binder format curriculum for two years (Demetron, 2004

circa) and then a shift to the *Voyager Reading Program*. These did represent significant changes toward a more balanced approach in which basic skill and content-based instruction were intertwined, but not rigorously integrated.

By the time I had left the program at the end of 2008, a program-wide shift toward a more balanced perspective had taken place even as a wide diversity of tutor viewpoints from those emphasizing uncompromisingly phonemic sensibilities to those embracing equally ardent holistic perspectives, with all points in between, remained in full swing. The commentary that follows are reflections of my continuing efforts to increase my understanding of adult literacy reading theory and practice in the process of sharpening my position, and desire to dialogue about these insights amidst the conflicting paradigms still pervasive within the field, notwithstanding the increasingly pragmatic shift toward a balanced perspective.

Balanced Reading Theory: Overview

In the *Research-Based Principles on Adult Reading Instruction* (Krudenier, 2002) sponsored by the Partnership for Reading and the National Institute for Literacy, a broad, practical consensus has emerged on the importance of a generalized four part methodology that includes alphabetization, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension. The result is that a great deal of solid work has emerged that teachers have been able to take back into their programs through excellent handouts and fresh ideas that can be incorporated into many aspects of teaching. This pragmatic resolution at the level of methodology to a long seated cultural war on how reading is best taught is most welcome. It helps to break down more extreme claims by proponents of whole language and phonemic-based theory against singular approaches on how best to teach reading to adults with limited reading ability. The incorporation of these four components also provides those working out of phonemic-based or whole language orientations a means to incorporate a broader set of methods to be applied as they deem appropriate for the learners they are working with in their classes, tutoring sessions, and programs. This work around the four components has been premised on effective methods, determined largely by “evidence-based” empirical data on what “works” largely in childhood literacy. Such reliance on childhood literacy is due to the paucity of research on adult reading studies.

What has been less attended to is a coherent theory of reading instruction, upon which such a methodological framework can be based. Without this, large questions remain both in terms of application, especially in terms of how the methods work together in a coherent instructional program, as well the content focus and purpose of adult literacy education, which is very theory-driven, whether or not explicitly acknowledged. That is so because teachers draw on both explicit and implicit theories of reading that invariably shape their values on the selection of methods, materials, and content which has implications for what they ignore or minimize as well as what they concentrate upon. To put it in the strongest of terms, our *theory in use*, whether articulated or not, drives our values and priorities in the most fundamental sense. In this respect, theory is not a luxury or an add-on, but an embodiment of our world view and in this case, our respective philosophies of adult literacy reading and literacy practice. On this definition theory construction is unavoidable as an ever present reality in giving concrete shape to our most deeply rooted assumptions, both when they conform, or in some way contradict what we claim to be the case. As put by social psychologist Kurt Lewin, “there is nothing more practical than a good theory,” including possessing some awareness as to how a theory operates within the framework of given paradigmatic assumptions, or more colloquially, our “mental models.”

The argument put forth in this essay is that a well constructed hypothesis in support of a balanced theory of reading instruction can help us move forward in our thinking and corresponding teaching application in some extremely significant ways. This is so, I maintain even as one cannot prove its validity in any absolutely conclusive sense. At the least, one can view the balanced perspective as a compelling heuristic of how enhanced reading competency emerges among adult literacy students. The degree to which future research discloses the extent and manner by which literacy development is enhanced among adults through the utilization of balanced methods could (and logically should) contribute to refined adult literacy theory construction. Even in the improbable unlikelihood that the theory will become falsified the end result of such work, if cogent and well-researched, is that a better understanding of how reading among adults emerges would surface. On that presupposition balanced reading theory will have served as mid-wife (Popper, 1963).

Core Presuppositions

It is claimed by a number of key proponents that balanced reading theory provides a more satisfactory interpretation of how students learn to read than either whole language or phonemic-based theories. This case is succinctly made by Purcell-Gates (1997), who argues, that “most reading theorists...have abandoned such all or nothing approaches and embrace some form of interactive theory of the reading process, while prioritizing different parts of it” (p. 5). By contrast, whole language theorists emphasize the importance of learning how to read via an unconscious process of assimilation combined with regular practice in reading “real texts” over time, which taps into the motivational dynamics of students. Phonemic-based methodologies are not rejected, but are contextualized as one crucial cueing system that may or may not be salient in any given learning situation. A core assumption of whole language advocates, and one that is sharply disputed by others, is that learning to read is as natural as learning how to speak (Smith, 1996, Adams, 1994). Smith, for example dismisses the importance of explicit phonics teaching altogether.

The advocates of phonemic-based instruction argue that a mastery of the sight-sound connection (the alphabetic principle) is not merely important, but the *foundational baseline* upon which success in independent reading depends. This requires the processing of individual phonemes (letter sounds and digraphs – e.g., “sh,” “ch”) and syllable units, typically in a sequential format based on the logic of what should be learned *first* according to the precepts of the alphabetic principle. As explained by Purcell-Gates, on this assumption, “the reading process is linear, with letters being recognized first feature-by-feature by a visual system and then transferred to a sound (phonemic) system for recognition and held [however briefly] until the next letter is processed in the same way” (p. 5). Thus, on the phonemic-based theory, the processing of every letter is critical in which a great deal of internalization needs to take place before any serious work on consecutive fluent reading can take place.

This represents the very opposite of the whole language assumption based on a *schema theory of learning*, which places more emphasis on inferential thinking in which letters and sounds operating as *partial cues*, (i.e., mental representations) interact with other cues, including meaning and syntax-based ones in providing the needed information to read a given text. In whole language approaches, educated guesses are encouraged in stimulating inference making and internalization of the reading process. This approach is categorically rejected in phonemic-based theories, which sometimes caricaturizes such efforts as merely “guessing.”

To summarize, in the whole language theory, making sense of the text and drawing on partial cues to make educated guesses, along with the process of self-correction enhanced by teacher facilitators, are the primary means of mastering the reading process (reading for sense instead of nonsense in the terminology of Frank Smith). In the phonemic approach, the central objective is accurate reading of the words through mastery of the sight-sound relationship. From this vantage-point, this *foundational* mastery is central, without which comprehension is impossible. Reading depends upon the accuracy of decoding and mastery of the alphabetic principle as the primary skill required of “pre-readers” if they are going to have any hope of learning to read at all.

These opposing perspectives are underlain by fundamentally different psychological learning theories of reading. The phonemic model is based on a behaviorist, stimulus-response learning theory which emphasizes *automaticity* while the whole language school is based on a *constructivist learning theory* emphasizing a more complex internalization of learning through schema enhancement. The goal in the phonemic-based model is mastery of an *objective process*, the alphabet principle. The goal in the whole language model is *interactive engagement* through a dynamic relationship between the text and the reader, with the emphasis on expanding the insights of the students through a reader-response theory in which the text in itself may or may not be a primary stimulus.

While far from fully explaining the process of learning how to read, proponents of balanced theory argue that it represents a better approximation leading “toward the truth” of how learning to read takes place (Popper, 1963). In incorporating what they view as the best from bottom-up and top-down approaches, the key credo is that “learners need to focus on meaning with real, authentic text *and* to work on skills” (Purcell-Gates, 1997, p. 7). To put it in terms of learning psychology, students learn both from stimulus-response automaticity and constructivist-based inferential meaning making processes in which different parts of the lesson for different levels and sets of students draw on one or the other of these modes of learning in varying degrees and ways. In short, the balanced framework seeks to draw on the best aspects of whole language and phonemic based models as applicable within the context of the lesson as a whole, while rejecting extreme, either/or positions. According to the proponents of balanced reading theory, learning to read is based on “the *reciprocal influence* of different levels of knowledge held by a reader—from letter featural knowledge of the features of the letters to semantic knowledge.” Even more to the point is the dynamic “interaction with each other” (p. 8) of these dimensions or features of the reading process in their varied influence with specific students or sets of students.

Moreover, and this is a key assumption with Purcell-Gates, *balanced theory flows along the continuum from a skills orientation to various holistic approaches*. *What places the continuum in the balanced framework is the rejection of foundational claims that one approach or the other is at the base*. The balanced argument is that students learn to read in different ways, and that the primary dynamic is the interactive (or better yet, the transactional) one in the utilization of whatever methodologies, approaches, and sources of materials that best tap into the student’s capacity to learn to read. While certain methods and approaches will have more effect with certain students, in the broad scheme of things, learning to read requires interactive, “whole-part-whole instruction” (p. 8) along with de-contextual practice to enhance skills and reinforce automaticity. These are the core concepts of the integrated approach.

Integrated Reading Theory and the Role of Successive Approximation

Consequently, in a balanced reading perspective, stimulus-response behaviorist and intuitive-inferential constructivist approaches in learning to read work together as mutually reinforcing methodological resources toward the facilitation of competent reading development. As in learning anything complex, mastering the basics, in this case, of how print-based literacy works, is indispensable. In this respect, an emphasis on the regularities of print-based English through a systematic or at least a regularly built in phonemic instructional plan, including analogical phonics based on word patterns is a proper focus of initial instruction. Phonemic exceptions to the sight-sound relationship remain important, but they can be introduced after progress has been made on some basic mastery without which any movement toward independent mastery becomes exceedingly unlikely. Without some systematic attention, moreover, phonics can only be taught episodically based on perceived need as it arises in gaps identified in content-based text. For many students this might not offer sufficient enough phonemic practice in helping to move toward progressive mastery of this core competency. For this reason I take some issue with Purcell-Gates' "whole-part-whole" approach if that is intended to skip de-contextual skill development practice. A critical point of contention is not over the importance of phonics instruction, but its functional role as only one of the cueing language systems in which its *appropriate* emphasis depends on specific student need, including capacity to learn through phonemics-based methodologies.

With many learners, a more balanced spiral methodology may be effective, which strong phonemic advocates deny even as many whole language advocates tend to downplay the viability of regular phonics instruction for some students (more than a few, one might argue). Still, a program that focused only on phonemic instruction, or one that required phonemic mastery *before* moving on to other aspects of the reading process (including the utilization of whole language and balanced methodologies) would, in my estimation, be extremely short sighted.

Where, in my view, some of the phonemic advocates are off mark is in viewing the phonemic unit (the letter or blend within the context of the syllable) as the underlying context for mastering written language. It is one matter to point out the written code in the English language is based on the alphabetic principle. What also has to be considered is the highly symbolic nature of the alphabetic principle in which there is no relationship between the sounds that comprise the word and the meaning of what is being signified. It is the foundational assumption which links breaking the code with mastery of the alphabetic principle that balanced reading theorists and practitioners seeks to deconstruct. Both phonemic-based and sight word instruction contribute toward reading development. So do various scaffolding approaches to fluency (such as assisted reading methodologies). Work on comprehension and the role of content knowledge are also important in facilitating the reading of texts at higher levels than "typically" accessible based on reading levels alone as an abstract principle. Such a balanced approach draws pragmatically on the range of methods, approaches, and instructional principles that underlie bottom-up and top-down approaches to reading instruction which has given shape to the intellectual wars on 20th century reading practice and theory.

Mastery, then, requires a combination of explicit practice and skill development focus of a variety of types (stimulus-response behaviorism), along with inference-making opportunities fostered through scaffolding support in all areas of language development. Such an approach includes phonemic awareness, but extends to fluency, vocabulary development, comprehension, and unconscious assimilation over time, in which, in the scheme of things, learning to read is as much caught as specifically taught. How these factors apply with specific individuals is varied, though one might reasonably conclude that a balanced, or integrated perspective attuned to specific learning styles and needs of specific learners has a great deal of merit to it.

Concluding Remarks

Helping adult new readers expand their reading capacity takes considerable time and is more often than not, highly incremental in scope. Throughout the learning process, certain principles, approaches, and emphases may emerge as more salient than others at any given time with any set of students. Keeping students as fully engaged as possible at the nexus of their ongoing learning capacities through methodologies, approaches, materials, motivational strategies, and other support systems that draw out as much as reasonably can be accomplished at a given time may be the most efficacious approach feasible of moving toward an effective pedagogy of adult literacy instruction. It is such interactive learning itself rather than the intrinsic viability of specific methodologies per se that opens up the most stimulating dynamic in the adult literacy education or so I am positing as a core tenet of balanced reading theory. There is little doubt that this hypothesis, which has emerged for me both through years of site-based practice and theoretical work on the nature of adult reading and competing definitions of literacy requires a great deal of testing and close theory refinement, but there is much here to work in advancing our theory building and practice forward.

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