

COMPETENCY 1.0 THEORETICAL BASIS OF READING AS A PROCESS AND EARLY LITERACY

Skill 1.1 Demonstrate an understanding of, recognize and support cultural, linguistic, ethnic and linguistic differences in language and literacy learning as they are related to the socio-economic environment of students

A positive self-concept is a very important element of a student's ability to learn and to be an integral member of society. If students think poorly of themselves or have sustained feelings of inferiority, they are not able to optimize their potential for learning. It is therefore part of the teacher's task to ensure that each student develops a positive self-concept.

A positive self-concept does not imply feelings of superiority, perfection, or competence. Instead, a positive self-concept involves self-acceptance and self-respect. Encouraging these factors contributes to the development of a positive self-concept in students.

Teachers may take a number of approaches to enhancing self-concept among students. One such scheme is the process approach, which proposes a three-phase model for teaching. This model includes a sensing function, a transforming function, and an acting function. These three factors can be simplified into the words by which the model is usually given: reach, touch, and teach. The sensing or perceptual function incorporates information or stimuli in an intuitive manner. The transforming function conceptualizes, abstracts, evaluates, and provides meaning and value to perceived information. The acting function chooses actions from several different alternatives to be set forth overtly. The process model may be applied to almost any curricular field.

An approach that aims to directly enhance self-concept is called *Invitational Education*. According to this approach, teachers and their behaviors are classified as inviting or disinviting. Inviting behaviors enhance self-concept among students, while disinviting behaviors diminish self-concept.

Disinviting behaviors include those that demean students, as well as those that may be chauvinistic, sexist, condescending, thoughtless, or insensitive to student feelings. Inviting behaviors are the opposite of these and display consistency and sensitivity. Inviting teacher behaviors reflect an attitude of "doing with" rather than "doing to." Students are "invited" or "disinvited" depending on teachers' behavior.

Invitational teachers exhibit the following skills (Biehler and Snowman, 394):

- reaching each student (e.g., learning names, having one-to-one contact)
- listening with care (e.g., picking up subtle cues)
- being real with students (e.g., providing only realistic praise, “coming on straight”)
- being real with oneself (e.g., honestly appraising your own feelings and disappointments)
- inviting good discipline (e.g., showing students you have respect in personal ways)
- handling rejection (e.g., not taking lack of student response in personal ways)
- inviting oneself (e.g., thinking positively about oneself)

Cooperative learning situations as practiced in today’s classrooms grew out of research conducted by several groups in the early 1970s. Cooperative learning situations can range from very formal applications such as Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) to less formal groupings sometimes called “group investigation,” “learning together,” or “discovery groups.”

Cooperative learning is now firmly recognized and established as a teaching and learning technique in American schools. Since cooperative learning techniques are so widely diffused in the schools, it is necessary to orient students in the skills by which cooperative learning groups can operate smoothly and thereby enhance learning. Students who cannot interact constructively with other students will not be able to take advantage of the learning opportunities provided by the cooperative learning situations and will further deprive their fellow students of the opportunity for cooperative learning.

These skills form the hierarchy of cooperation in which students first learn to work together, so that they may proceed to levels at which they can engage in simulated conflict situations. This cooperative setting allows different points of view to be constructively entertained.

Effective teaching and learning for students begins with teachers who demonstrate sensitivity for diversity in teaching and relationships within school communities. Student portfolios include work that has a multicultural perspective and inclusion in which students share cultural and ethnic life experiences in their learning. Teachers are responsible for including cultural and diverse resources in their curriculum and instructional practices.

Exposing students to culturally sensitive room decorations and posters that show positive and inclusive messages is one way to demonstrate inclusion of multiple cultures. Teachers should also continuously make cultural connections that are relevant and empowering for all students. Cultural sensitivity should be communicated beyond the classroom with parents and community members to establish and maintain relationships.

Diversity can be further defined as the following:

- Differences among learners, classroom settings and academic outcomes
- Biology, sociology, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, psychological needs, learning modalities and styles among learners
- Differences in classroom settings that promote learning opportunities such as collaborative, participatory, and individualized learning groupings
- Expected learning outcomes that are theoretical, affective and cognitive

Teachers should establish a classroom climate that is culturally respectful and engaging for students. In a culturally sensitive classroom, teachers maintain equity and fairness in student interactions and curriculum implementation. Assessments include cultural responses and perspectives that provide further learning opportunities for students.

Some methods of displaying sensitivity to diversity include:

- Student portfolios reflecting multicultural/multiethnic perspectives
- Journals and reflections from field trips/ guest speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds
- Printed materials and wall displays from multicultural perspectives
- Parent/guardian letters in a variety of languages reflecting cultural diversity
- Projects that include cultural history and diverse inclusions
- Disaggregated student data reflecting cultural groups
- Classroom climate of professionalism that fosters diversity and cultural inclusion

Aiming for diversity allows teachers to expand their experiences with students, staff, community members and parents from culturally diverse backgrounds, so that their experiences can be proactively applied in promoting cultural diversity in the classroom. Teachers can engage and challenge students to develop and incorporate their own diversity skills in building character and relationships with cultures beyond their own. By encouraging students to become culturally inclusive, teachers are addressing the globalization of our world.

Skill 1.2 Demonstrate knowledge of the role of readers' prior knowledge, social/cultural/linguistic background, and social interaction in constructing meaning

Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge can be defined as the entirety of an individual's experiences, learning, and development which precede his or her entering a specific learning situation or attempting to comprehend a specific text. Sometimes prior knowledge can be erroneous or incomplete. Obviously, if there are misconceptions in a child's prior knowledge, these must be corrected so that his or her overall comprehension skills can continue to progress. Even for kindergarteners, prior knowledge includes accumulated positive and negative experiences both in and out of school.

These experiences might range from wonderful family travels, watching television, visiting museums and libraries, to visiting hospitals, prisons or surviving poverty. Whatever prior knowledge the child brings to the school setting, the independent reading and writing the child does in school immeasurably expands his or her knowledge and hence broadens reading comprehension capabilities. As they prepare any imaginative/literary text, teachers must consider the following about students' level of prior knowledge:

- What prior knowledge needs to be activated for the text, theme or for the writing to be done successfully?
- How independent are the children in using strategies to activate their prior knowledge? Holes and Roser (1987) have suggested five techniques for activating prior knowledge before starting an imaginative/literary text:

FREE RECALL: Tell us what you know about . . .

UNSTRUCTURED DISCUSSION: Let's talk about . . .

STRUCTURED QUESTION: Who exactly was Jane Aviles in the life of the hero of the story?

WORD ASSOCIATION: When you hear these words—"hatch," "elephant," "who," "think"—what author do you think of?

RECOGNITION: "Mulberry Street"—what author comes to mind?

Previewing and predicting and story mapping are excellent strategies for activating prior knowledge.

Schemata

Schemata are structures which represent generic concepts stored in our memory (Rumelhart, 1980). Young children develop their schemata through experiences. The more closely the reader's experiences and schemata approximate those of the writer, the more likely the reader is to comprehend the text. Prior knowledge and lack of experience can influence comprehension. It is obvious that for many children from non-native English-Language-speaking backgrounds, and perhaps for those from struggling socioeconomic family structures, schemata deficits indicate the need for intense teacher support as these children become emergent and early readers.

Often the teacher will have to model and scaffold for the child the steps to form a schemata from the information provided in a text.

Comprehension

Cooper (citation missing here) defines comprehension as "a strategic process by which readers construct or assign meaning to a text by using the clues in the text and their own prior knowledge." We view comprehension as a process in which the reader transacts with the text to construct or assign meaning. Reading and writing are both interconnected and mutually supportive. Comprehension is a strategic process in which readers adjust their reading to suit their reading purpose and the type or genre of text they are reading. Narrative and expository texts require different reading approaches because of their different text structures.

Strategic readers also call into play metacognitive capacities as they analyze texts so that they are aware of the skills needed to construct meaning from the text structure.

Skill 1.3 Demonstrate knowledge of the role of fluency in constructing meaning

Fluency is the ability to read a text quickly and accurately. In silent reading, readers can recognize words automatically and they fully comprehend what they read. If comprehension is not immediate, these readers can use context clues to grasp the meaning of the sentence or paragraph. When reading aloud, fluent readers display confidence and read effortlessly and with expression (prosody). Readers who are not fluent read slowly, often one word at a time. By focusing on reading accurately, meaning is lost.

Fluency is an important skill because it helps readers develop from word recognition to comprehension. When readers don't have to spend time focusing on reading individual words, they can group words together to form ideas, which leads to comprehension. Not only can they grasp the main idea of the text, but they can make connections between the text and their prior knowledge and events in their own lives.

Fluency is a skill that is developed over time with repeated practice, exposure to literature and opportunities to read for various purposes. Early readers read words rather than phrases and sentences and the act of reading often appears to be laborious rather than enjoyable. Fluency changes over time as readers are exposed to more difficult texts. The most fluent readers at one level may read slowly when they are first introduced to a more difficult text because they need time for comprehension.

Fluency requires more than just a repertoire of recognizable words, however; expression is also part of fluency. To read fluently with expression a reader must be able to break the text into meaningful phrases and clauses. Some techniques to use when teaching students to read fluently include:

- repeated reading of the same text
- oral reading practice using audiotapes
- providing models of what fluent reading looks and sounds like
- reading to students
- choral reading
- partner reading
- Readers' Theatre

Skill 1.4 Demonstrate an understanding of the major theories of language development, cognition, and learning, including acquisition of language, social interaction, using language for communication, understanding the relationship between oral and written language, activating prior knowledge, constructing schemata, using text structure and cueing systems, and developing reader response

Decoding

In the late 1960s and the 1970s, many reading specialists, most prominently Fries (1962), believed that successful decoding resulted in reading comprehension. This meant that if children could sound out words, they would then automatically be able to comprehend those words. Many teachers of reading and many reading texts still subscribe to this theory.

Asking Questions

Another theory or approach to teaching reading that gained currency in the late 1960s and the early 1970s was the importance of asking inferential and critical thinking questions which would challenge and engage children in the text. This approach to reading went beyond the literal level of what was stated in the text to an inferential level of using text clues to make predictions and to a critical level of involving the child in evaluating the text. While asking engaging and thought-provoking questions is still viewed as part of teaching reading, it is viewed currently as only one component of that process.

Comprehension Skills

As various reading theories, practices, and approaches percolated during the 1970s and 1980s, many educators and researchers in the field came to believe that the teacher of reading had to teach a set of discrete comprehension skills (Otto et al, 1977). The reading teacher thus became a teacher of individual comprehension skills. Children in such classrooms gleaned such concepts as main idea, sequence, and cause and effect that were supposed to make them better comprehenders. But did acquiring such skills make them lifelong readers?

Transactional Approach

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, researchers in the field of education, psychology and linguistics began to examine the ways in which a reader comprehends. Among them was Louise Rosenblatt, who posited that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. It is Rosenblatt (1978) who explained successful reading as a process in which the reader constructed meaning from a text in such a way that reflected both the reader and the text. She described two general purposes for reading: *efferent* and *aesthetic*. Efferent reading is looking for and remembering information to use functionally. Examples would be filling out a job application, reading a story in preparation for a test, or reading a newspaper article to find out who won the state basketball championship. Aesthetic reading connects one's own life to the text; the aesthetic reader is swept away by the beauty of a poem or responds emotionally to a book such as *Bridge to Terabithia*.

These differing purposes call for somewhat different reading strategies: one might skim the newspaper article for basketball information but read a poem closely ten times and create mental images of different passages. When children are asked to read all fiction differently (What's the setting? What's the main conflict in the plot? There will be a test on Thursday!), it can thwart a child's joy in the written word and work against his or her desire to be a lifelong reader.

Bottom-up, Top-Down Interactional Theories of Reading

Bottom-up theories of reading assume that children learn from part to whole, starting with the smallest segments possible. Instruction begins with a strong phonics approach, learning letter-sound relationships and often using basal readers or *decodable books*. Decodable books are vocabulary-controlled using language from word families with high predictability. Thus we get sentences like “Nan has a tan fan.” Reading is seen as skills-based and the skills are taught one at a time.

Top-down theories of reading suggest that reading begins with the reader’s knowledge, not the print. Children are seen as having a drive to construct meaning. This stance views reading as moving from the whole to the parts. An early top-down theory was the *whole word* approach. Children memorized high-frequency words to assist them in reading the Dick and Jane books of the 1930s. Then teachers helped children discover letter-sound correspondences in what they read.

A more recent top-down theory is the *whole language* approach. This approach was influenced by research on how young children learned language. It was thought that children could learn to read as naturally as they learned to talk. Children were surrounded by print in their classrooms, reading quality literature often printed in Big Books, and were viewed as writers from the start. Hence, even kindergarten children were encouraged to keep journals. Advocates of whole language viewed the “skill’em-drill’em-and kill’em” approach based on bottom-up theories as a deadly dull introduction to the world of reading.

Interactive theories of reading combine the strengths of both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Teachers need to be able to teach decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension skills to support children’s drive for meaning and desire for a stimulating exchange with high-quality literary texts from their earliest days in school. Strategies include shared, guided, and independent reading, Big Books, reading and writing workshops, and the like. Today this approach is called the *balanced literacy approach*. It is considered to be a synthesis of the best from bottom-up and top-down methods.

Literacy and Literacy Learning

To be literate in a twenty-first-century world means more than being able to read and write. To live well and happily in today's society an individual has to be able to read not only newspapers and books, but emails, blogs, directions for how to use one's cell phone, and the like. A disconnect has evolved between the isolated reading comprehension skills schools were teaching and the literacy skills, including listening and speaking, that are crucial for employment and personal and academic success. Thornburg (1992, 2003) has also noted that technology capacities and the ability to communicate online are now integral parts of our sense of literacy.

Cooper (2004) views literacy as reading, writing, thinking, listening, viewing, and discussing. These are not viewed as separate activities or components of instruction, but rather as ways of developing and being nurtured simultaneously and interactively. Children learn these abilities by engaging in authentic explorations, readings, projects and experiences.

Just as in learning how to ride a bike the learner goes through various approximations before actually learning how to ride, so too does the reader with the scaffold (support) of a teacher go through various approximations before developing his or her own independent literacy skills and capacities.

Emergent Literacy is the concept that young children are emerging into reading and writing with no real beginning or ending point. Children are introduced into the world of print as soon as their parents read board books to them at the age of one or two. When children scribble-write or use invented spelling during the preschool years, they reveal themselves as detectives of the written word, having watched parents and teachers make lists, write thank-you notes, or leave messages. This view of the reader assumes that all children have a drive to make meaning in print and will begin doing it almost on their own if surrounded by a print-rich environment.

Reading Readiness is an approach which is antithetical to emergent literacy in that it assumes that all children must have mastered a sequence of reading skills before they can begin to read.

Language Acquisition is continuous and never-ending. From the perspective of this theory and research, all children come to school with a language base which the school must build on. As a consequence of the connection between oral language and reading, it is important that schools build literacy experiences around the language the child brings to the school.

The Role of Literature in Developing Literacy

The balanced literacy approach advocates the use of “real literature”—recognized works of the best of children’s fiction and non-fiction trade books and winners of such awards as the Newberry and Caldecott medals—for helping children develop literacy. Balanced literacy advocates argue that:

- Real literature engages young readers and assures that they will become lifelong readers.
- Real literature also offers readers a language base that can help them expand their expressiveness as readers and as writers.
- Real literature is easier to read and understand than grade-level texts

In some US districts a phonics-only approach is heavily embedded. However, the majority of school districts would describe their approach to reading as the balanced literacy approach, which includes phonics work as well as the use of real literature texts. To contrast the phonics and balanced literacy approaches as opposite is inaccurate, since a balanced approach includes both.

It is important to go online and to visit the key resources of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) to keep abreast of the latest research in the field.

Activation of Prior Knowledge and Schemata is covered in Skill 1.2

Skill 1.5 Recognize the effects of emotional, social, physical, cultural, environmental and intellectual factors on language acquisition, language development and reading

Adolescent literature, because of the age range of readers, is extremely diverse. Fiction for the middle group, usually ages ten/eleven to fourteen/fifteen, deals with issues of coping with internal and external changes in their lives. Because children’s writers in the twentieth century have produced increasingly realistic fiction, adolescents can now find problems dealt with honestly in novels.

Teachers of middle/junior high school students see the greatest change in interests and reading abilities. Fifth and sixth graders, included in elementary grades in many schools, are viewed as older children while seventh and eighth graders are preadolescent. Ninth graders included sometimes as top dogs in junior high school and sometimes as underlings in high school, definitely view themselves as teenagers. Their literature choices will often be governed more by interest than by ability; thus, the wealth of high-interest, low readability books that have flooded the market in recent years. Tenth through twelfth graders will still select high-interest books for pleasure reading but are also easily encouraged to stretch their literature muscles by reading more classics.