

Teaching Reading in the Elementary School

Second Edition



ELDON E. EKWALL
JAMES L. SHANKER

SECOND EDITION

**TEACHING READING
in the
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Eldon E. Ekwall

The University of Texas at El Paso

James L. Shanker

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Preface

This is a book about teaching developmental reading in the elementary school. It is meant to be used primarily as a developmental reading methods book. We believe, however, that it is a rare classroom where all students learn everything taught by the teacher the first time it is presented. When a certain amount of reteaching (based on assessment that shows which students did not learn the material during the original presentation) becomes necessary, you become involved in corrective reading instruction. Therefore, we have sought to include throughout the book procedures for both developmental and corrective teaching. We hope that the order of events in your classroom reading program will be: assess (as necessary), teach (including direct instruction, guided practice, and reinforcement), reassess (to see who has not yet learned), and re-teach constantly so that all children progress successfully in every area of reading instruction.

We break with the traditional format of developmental reading books by including a section entitled Review of the Research in chapters 1–12. These sections emphasize aspects of the research that are crucial to you as an elemen-

tary school teacher trying to develop a successful reading program. They help you understand why experts in the field of reading advocate certain instructional procedures and not others. You will find that substantially more research information is presented in chapters 1–8. The importance of the topics covered in these chapters, as well as the controversial nature of some of the content, warrants additional emphasis on the research findings.

After the research section, generally, the main topic of each chapter is presented. In chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, we address the subjects of reading readiness, sight word learning, decoding skills, and comprehension skills by focusing first on the assessment and then on the teaching of these skills. This repeated order of presentation of material should clarify the distinction between testing and teaching, and at the same time enhance your understanding of how these processes work together to promote student learning.

Following the summary at the end of every chapter, you will find Review Questions. We hope that these questions will reinforce your understanding of the information presented in each chapter.

This book contains thirteen chapters. Chapter 1 provides background information on the nature of reading, which should help you keep in perspective the important topics subsequently developed in the book. New to this edition is a description of the major models of reading instruction, with specific examples of how a theoretical framework affects instructional practice. Chapter 2 describes the major approaches to the teaching of reading, and includes a new section on the use of the computer in reading instruction. Chapter 3 presents specific procedures for organizing and managing your classroom reading program. Many reading methods texts present the information on approaches and management much later in the book. We have placed this information early for two reasons. First, many prospective teachers are anxious to get a picture of what reading instruction is like in an elementary classroom. Second, obtaining a feeling for the rigorous demands made on you by conducting daily reading instruction will give you a sense of the urgency of all the teaching presented in the book. Many returning graduate students have told us that they felt inadequate as beginning teachers when it came to organizing and managing daily reading instruction. We also realize that reading methods texts are often criticized for providing too much theory and not enough practical content. We are confident that the material in chapters 2 and 3 addresses these concerns.

Chapter 4 addresses the complex, fascinating issues that surround reading readiness, and offers specific procedures for assessing and teaching various readiness skills. New to this second edition is coverage of the reading/writing connection in beginning reading. Chapter 5 presents the assessment and teaching of sight words and basic sight words. Chapter 6 deals with assessing and teaching the various decoding skills, paying particular attention to phonics, structural analysis, and context clues. It is one of the longer chapters; however, we believe that a teacher who masters this information, as well as the information in chapters 5 and 7 on sight words and comprehension, will

be well grounded in the teaching of basic reading skills. Chapter 7 focuses on reading comprehension, including vocabulary. Clearly, this is a timely topic in reading, judging by the interest shown among professionals and laypersons alike. New to this edition is expanded coverage of techniques for teaching reading comprehension, especially as it pertains to the use of metacognition.

Chapter 8 teaches content area reading instruction and the study skills, which we refer to as *learning for a lifetime of learning*. This chapter was written by a specialist in the area, Ellsworth A. Berget, Professor of Teacher Education, California State University, Hayward. Chapter 9 addresses a practical subject—analysis of oral reading errors. In this chapter you will discover how oral reading errors, once coded and understood, can become a blueprint for instruction. Chapter 10 presents techniques for matching children and reading materials. We firmly believe that many of our students who fail to learn to read do so because, in the beginning of their schooling, they were not matched with reading material at a proper level to ensure success.

Chapter 11 addresses the important subject of bringing children and books together. Teachers must not only teach children how to read but also teach them to appreciate the joy of reading good books. We believe that many, many children learn how to read, but fail to become adept at reading simply because they take little or no time to practice the act of reading. In Chapter 11 we describe in detail how to set up a successful sustained silent reading program that will enable students to practice and refine their reading abilities, and also enable them to develop the habits necessary to become lifetime readers. New to this edition is expanded coverage of techniques and procedures to motivate your students to read in your classroom and outside of school. Also included in this chapter is a section on the literature-based approach to teaching reading.

Chapter 12 helps you deal with the challenge of teaching children with special needs, including problem readers, gifted students,

and students who speak other languages or dialects. Finally, Chapter 13 is about the history of reading instruction and what it has taught us. Whatever interest you may take in the history of reading, we hope that you will note well some of the promising new research, as well as certain lessons that seem to have been proved effective time and again through research and experience.

In this edition we have expanded our already comprehensive set of appendixes. Much of the information presented in the appendixes will continue to be of value to you when you enter the teaching profession. The information includes a scope and sequence chart of various reading skills, a complete set of test instruments to assess individual students' reading abilities, a list of publishers of reading materials, and a description of commercially prepared reading tests. In addition to the appendixes, there is a glossary of terms related to reading.

In many places throughout the book we have reported findings from a landmark publication, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, published in 1985. The conclusions drawn by the researchers and authors of this publication match the important themes that underlie this book. Certain themes—beliefs about reading instruction that we hold strongly—are repeated throughout this book. These beliefs are supported not only by a substantial amount of research, but by our own practical experiences and the experiences of many others. Among these themes are:

1. You the teacher are the most important factor in the reading instruction your students receive in school. To be most effective, you need to understand how children learn to read, and to understand the advantages and disadvantages of using various approaches, methods, and materials in the classroom.

2. Fads come and go in reading instruction. We believe research and experience have proved that the best approach is an eclectic one. A balanced reading program

best serves most students' needs. If you are a beginning teacher you should be familiar with the basal reading approach and able to use this system properly as the core component in your reading instruction program. You also need to incorporate the most beneficial aspects of the language experience approach and individualized, whole language or literature-based approaches, so that your students can learn how to read and to love reading.

3. Although the skills required to teach children to read in an elementary school classroom are formidable and complex, they are learnable. Effective teaching is a craft that is developed over time. With patience, guidance, and some assistance, you can become a successful teacher of reading.

4. The teaching of reading is not a mystical process. Although much remains to be learned about how children learn to read and how we can best help those who are failing, we do know which practices succeed most often. Some are listed below:

- a. Most students require a certain amount of systematic, sequential skill instruction to learn how to decode or pronounce unknown words. The amount of this type of instruction required varies considerably from child to child.
- b. Most students require direct instruction, in which the teacher presents information to the students and monitors the pace of their learning of new material.
- c. All students should be taught at an appropriate level of difficulty so that they can experience frequent success.
- d. All students need a substantial amount of practice in the act of reading to ensure that important skills are learned and utilized, and to promote an appreciation for the value and joy of reading.
5. Children vary in their reading abilities, just as they do in other areas. Your task as a teacher is to help each child reach his or her potential as a reader.
6. Learning to read should be a fun,

exciting, and satisfying activity for your students; the teaching of reading should be a stimulating, challenging, and rewarding activity for you.

We hope that you find reading this book to be an enjoyable experience, and that the information it conveys is beneficial to you in the future as a teacher of reading.

We would like to thank a number of people who have in some way contributed to the completion of this book. First, thanks to Jeff Johnston, our editor, who gently prodded us to complete the manuscript on time, and to Linda Sharp, Victoria Althoff, Lorraine Woost, and Gail Meese of the Merrill staff, who provided a great deal of assistance throughout the preparation of the manuscript. It has been a pleasure to work with our editors at Merrill.

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James Shanker would like to thank his wife, Susan, and his sons, Michael and Kenneth, for their unfailing support.

—Eldon E. Ekwall

—James L. Shanker

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PREVIEW OF TOPICS COVERED

- The state of literacy in the United States
- The challenge of teaching children how to read
- A definition of reading
- The two major categories of reading
- The three models of reading
- What research says about the nature of reading
- An eclectic view of reading instruction
- A skills-oriented approach versus a holistic approach
- Basal readers versus children's literature
- Grouping strategies for teaching reading
- A framework for understanding and teaching reading
- The terminology used in reading skills and the various subskills into which reading is usually divided



1

The Nature of Reading

Individuals who wish to become elementary school teachers know that they will assume the responsibility for teaching children how to read. This is a significant responsibility because to function fully in modern society, a person must possess the ability to read. For those adults who are unable to read, life can be very difficult. An extraordinary percentage of the people in the categories that often represent failure in our society—such as unemployment, welfare, prisons—are illiterate. People who are unable to read but manage to support themselves and live outwardly normal lives invariably suffer humiliation and low self-esteem. Certainly parents can have an important influence on their children's reading success, but it is in the elementary school classroom where nearly all children either learn or fail to learn how to read.

Through knowledge, dedication, and hard work, millions of teachers have taught most students to be effective readers. Indeed many educators believe that we have done an excellent job of teaching people to read in our society. A major study completed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Kirsch and Jungeblut, 1986) found that

approximately 95 percent of America's young adults could perform routine tasks using printed information. You should note, however, that this figure refers to the percentage of young adults who read at or above the *fourth-grade* reading level. The study found that 80 percent of the subjects could read at or above the eighth-grade reading level and 62 percent, at or above the eleventh-grade reading level.

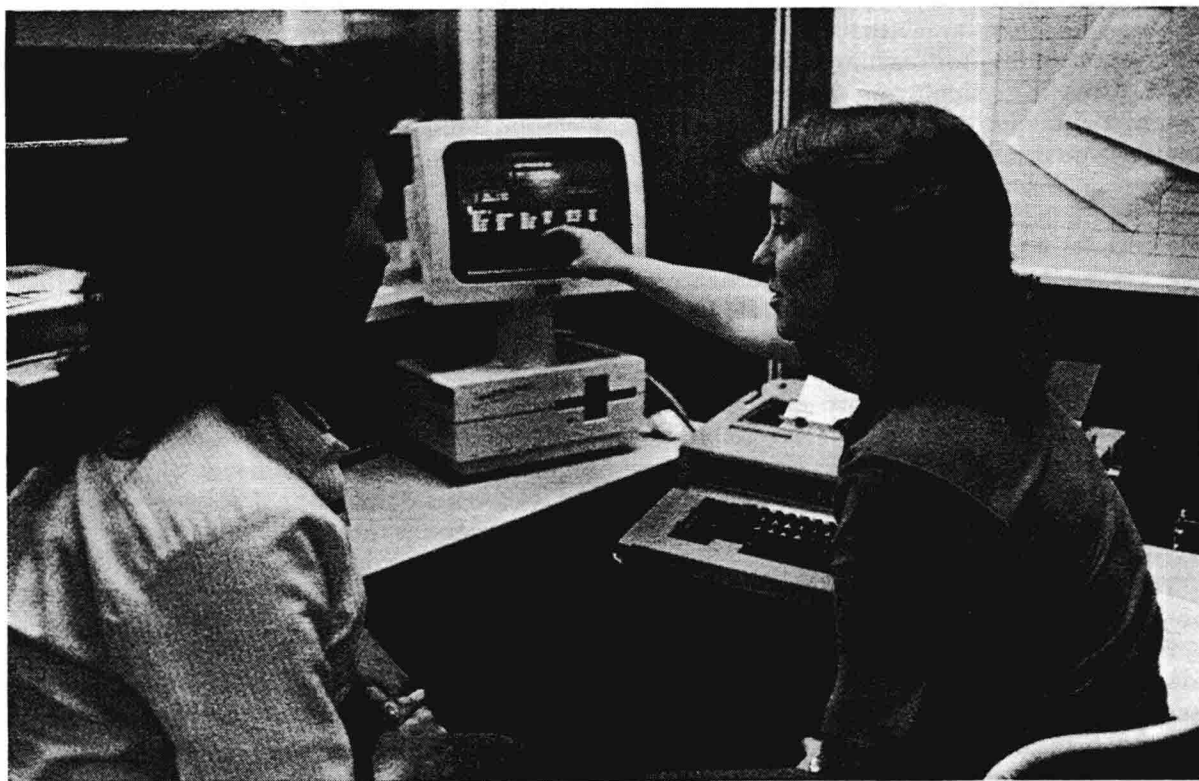
One literacy expert, Jonathan Kozol (1985) believes that illiteracy is a major national problem. From his review of the research, Kozol estimates that 25 million American adults are seriously disabled readers and an additional 35 million adults read at a level "which is less than equal to the full survival needs of our society" (p. 4). When combined, these two groups of adults make up more than one third of the entire adult population of the United States. Kozol also points out that in the area of literacy, the United States ranks forty-ninth among the 158 nations of the United Nations. These data suggest that, whereas most young adults may achieve minimal levels of literacy, large numbers of people cannot read well enough to comprehend the printed material we encounter daily in an advanced technological society.

As a teacher of reading in an elementary school, you have an opportunity to reduce the number of illiterate or marginally literate adults of the future. To do this you must have an understanding of the process children go through in learning to read, and the knowledge and skill to direct your students' reading instruction so that they will be successful learners.

Teaching children to read is by no means an easy task. As an elementary school teacher you may face more than thirty pupils each day. Some of these children likely will be difficult to control or motivate. You may have inadequate materials with which to teach, and the management challenges will be formidable. At least some of the time you will probably want to group your students for specialized instruction. This will require organizational skill and a

great deal of planning. While teaching one group or working with individual students, you will have to devise ways to keep the other students busy and productive. You will need to keep track of the progress of each child as reading skills develop. You will want to do your best to assist the students who are not learning as quickly or easily as the others, while finding ways to keep your most capable students motivated and challenged. You will want each student to learn *how* to read, yet you will be equally concerned that your students develop a love for reading and for books.

With all of these potential challenges and difficulties, why would someone want to teach reading? Because the rewards are so great! You will experience tremendous joy and satisfaction when you observe your young students as they first learn to read, or your older students



Life in an advanced technological society requires the ability to read.

as they develop the ability to comprehend difficult or complex reading materials. You will feel enormous fulfillment when you see your students use their reading and language abilities to learn about and understand their world. You will know that you have given your students a precious gift, the gift of literacy.

In this book we have set out to give you the information that you will need to teach children how to read. We will describe the process children go through as they learn to read, and we will guide you through many aspects of teaching reading. We will emphasize the practical matters of teaching reading, including how to understand the various approaches currently being used, organize and manage reading instruction in your classroom, effectively assess and teach reading skills from the beginning to the most advanced stages, teach students with special needs, and instill in your students a love for literature.

As you will see, there is much to know about teaching reading. Let's start with a definition of reading and an examination of the nature of reading.

THE NATURE OF READING

In 1985 the National Institute of Education published a most important report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. The authors synthesized extensive research on reading, and presented their findings about the nature of reading and practices in teaching reading. The authors of this report defined reading as follows: "Reading is 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).

Reading consists of two major components: *recognizing and analyzing words*, often referred to as **decoding**; and *understanding words and ideas*, often called **comprehension**. When we use the term *decoding*, we are referring to the process of taking words in print and changing them to spoken words. What a beginning

reader sees when he decodes is a bunch of squiggly marks that must be translated (decoded) into meaningful sounds.

Teachers often say, "I have a student who reads well, but he can't seem to understand anything he reads." Others say, "I have a student who just doesn't know the words, but if I read material to her, she seems to understand perfectly well." Such statements clearly show that reading is neither just calling words nor just understanding what is heard. It is a combination of being able to recognize or analyze words almost instantly and understand what they mean when they are strung together in a sentence, paragraph, or longer passage. Thus, the teacher who says, "I have a student who reads well, but he can't seem to understand anything he reads," is technically wrong in stating that the student *reads*. It would be more correct to say, "I have a student who calls words well, but he can't seem to understand the meaning of those words."

To further complicate matters, reading comprehension is not static. The same written words may convey different messages to different readers. Indeed, the same written words may convey different messages to the *same* reader. Probably, you have had occasion to read the same material more than once, only to discover that you get a different meaning with each rereading.

As you might expect, experts do not agree about the nature of reading. Although most would agree that "reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts," some focus on the decoding aspects of reading while others emphasize comprehension.

The Three Models of Reading

Experts often develop models to describe how readers construct meaning from written texts. Currently, the three most popular models of reading relate to the decoding and comprehension aspects we have already noted. These models are known as the **bottom-up model**, the **top-down model**, and the **interactive model**, and are illustrated in Figure 1.1.

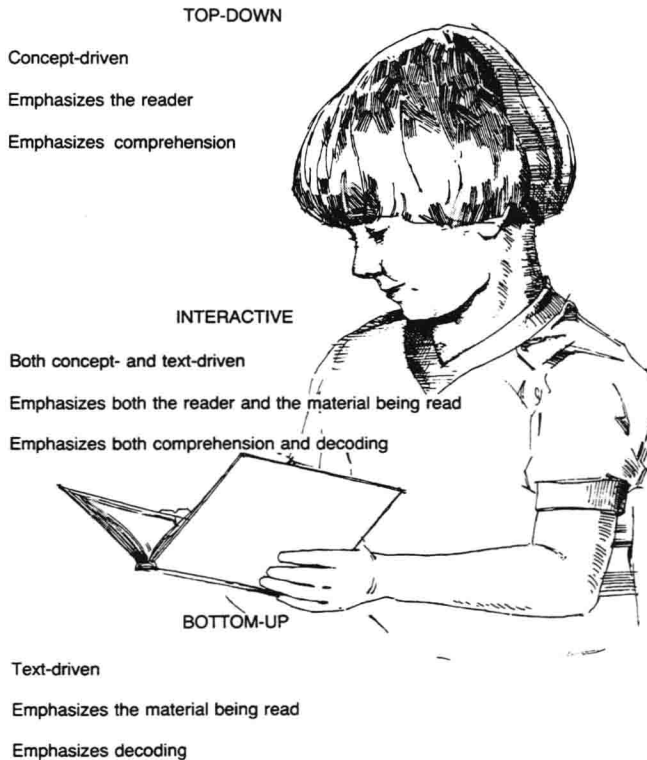


FIGURE 1.1 The Three Models of Reading

All three models include a reader and the material being read. The models differ in their concern with which factor is most important in describing the reading process.

The bottom-up model emphasizes the material being read and is often described as text-driven. Proponents of this model believe that the material being read is more important to the process of reading than the person who reads the material, or as one expert put it: "the page brings more information to the reader than the reader brings to the page" (Strange, 1980, p. 392). The bottom-up model focuses on the reader's recognition and analysis of the words, or decoding.

The top-down model emphasizes the reader and is often described as concept-driven. Proponents of this model suggest that the reader is more important to the process of reading

than the material being read. This is because readers usually have some prior knowledge about the topic. (*Schema* is a term used to describe the prior knowledge or presuppositions that readers possess about the meaning of a passage.) Using prior knowledge, the reader makes predictions about the meaning of the material. In other words, the reader's prior knowledge can be a powerful influence on his comprehension of the text. A top-down theorist would say that decoding plays a minor part in the reading act, and that the decoding process may serve only to verify the accuracy of the predictions made.

At this point you may be thinking that both the bottom-up and top-down models make sense, or that each may contribute to an understanding of the reading process. Most experts feel the same way, and the interactive model

was developed to describe the reading process as both concept- and text-driven; a process in which the reader and the text work together to elicit meaning. The reader constructs meaning from print by relying on both prior knowledge and decoding. Thus, the interactive model emphasizes both the reader and the material being read, both comprehension and decoding.

What Research Says About the Nature of Reading

The authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* summarized five generalizations that can be drawn from research on reading over the past decade. These generalizations are listed below with a brief explanation for each.

1. Reading Is a Constructive Process

By this, the authors mean that written material is interpreted differently by different readers according to the store of knowledge (schema) that each reader brings to the reading of the text. In this sense, each reader “constructs” the meaning. Some readers may have poor comprehension when reading if they lack background knowledge about the written material, even if they are capable decoders. This research conclusion supports a top-down theory of reading. In Chapters 7 and 8 we shall describe in detail what you can do as a teacher to help students become more constructive readers and thus have better comprehension of what they read.

2. Reading Must Be Fluent

To be a skilled reader, a person must be able to identify and pronounce the words (decode) quickly and accurately. Readers who are unable to decode fluently simply do not comprehend written material as well as their fluent counterparts. Good readers decode so well that this process is automatic, requiring little or no conscious attention. This research conclusion helps explain why reading is different at various stages of development. The youngster

who is just beginning to read usually must expend a great deal of effort to figure out how to pronounce the words or decode. It is normal for such a reader to have difficulty with comprehension. The fluent, mature reader, by contrast, decodes automatically and is better able to concentrate on the meaning of the material being read. This research conclusion supports a bottom-up theory of reading. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 we shall describe the techniques and procedures that you may use to teach children to become fluent decoders.

3. Reading Must Be Strategic

A skilled reader understands that we read for different purposes, and the way that we read is altered according to the purpose or material being read. Sometimes we read purely for pleasure, for news or information, or to master material in preparation for a test. A skilled reader is a flexible or strategic reader—she knows how to manipulate her reading-thinking skills so that they are appropriate to the type of reading being done. Another aspect of strategic reading has to do with one’s ability to take corrective action when reading comprehension is not occurring. Poor readers often lack the flexibility to adjust their reading behavior for different types of reading purposes or when they fail to comprehend what they are reading. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 we shall discuss ways that you can teach your students to become strategic readers.

4. Reading Requires Motivation

Research has shown that students’ learning can be affected by the quality of instruction that teachers provide. Teachers must provide a proper setting and effective instruction to motivate students to read. This includes the use of the best literature (which is intrinsically motivating) for children to read and teaching conditions that research has shown to be effective. These include management skills; high expectations; appropriate length and pacing of lessons; high success rates; appropriate group-

ing; quality direct instruction; and a warm, nonthreatening classroom environment. In Chapters 2, 3, 10, and 11 we shall present information that will help you become a motivating and effective teacher.

5. Reading Is a Continuously Developing Skill

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers* the authors state:

Reading, like playing a musical instrument, is not something that is mastered once and for all at a certain age. Rather, it is a skill that continues to improve through practice. The process begins with a person's earliest exposure to text and a literate culture and continues throughout life (pp. 16–17).

Throughout this book we emphasize the importance of providing students with ample practice in the act of reading. We believe that in a comprehensive reading program, there is a place for instruction on the skills or small parts

of reading. But for reading to be meaningful and for the skills to become automatic, teachers must provide instruction and practice that focus on the whole of reading, on real language as it appears in poems, stories, and informational text.

AN ECLECTIC VIEW OF READING INSTRUCTION

We believe that the five generalizations drawn from research support an interactive model of reading. We hope that you as a teacher agree that both the bottom-up and top-down models fail to account for the complexity of the reading process, and the fact that both the reader and the text must interact to create meaning. The interactive model supports an eclectic view of reading instruction, one that draws the best from various perspectives or approaches.

Why does it matter which model or viewpoint you subscribe to? Because your beliefs will affect your teaching practices. Teachers who teach reading and those who write books and articles about the teaching of reading do not always agree about which approaches are best. At any point in time different approaches will be popular, and over time some approaches may become more or less fashionable. It is quite common for teachers of reading to embrace one perspective and reject all others. Such behavior is not limited to the field of reading, of course. It was not that long ago that traditional approaches to the teaching of mathematics were dropped in favor of something called “new math.” Unfortunately, this change resulted in a generation of students who could not compute, and the new math has long since disappeared.

A teacher who relies exclusively on a limited or narrow approach to reading instruction fails to take advantage of the benefits of other methods. Our hope is that you will understand the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches and seek to teach in a *balanced* way, to draw the best from the many ap-



The best children's literature is intrinsically motivating.