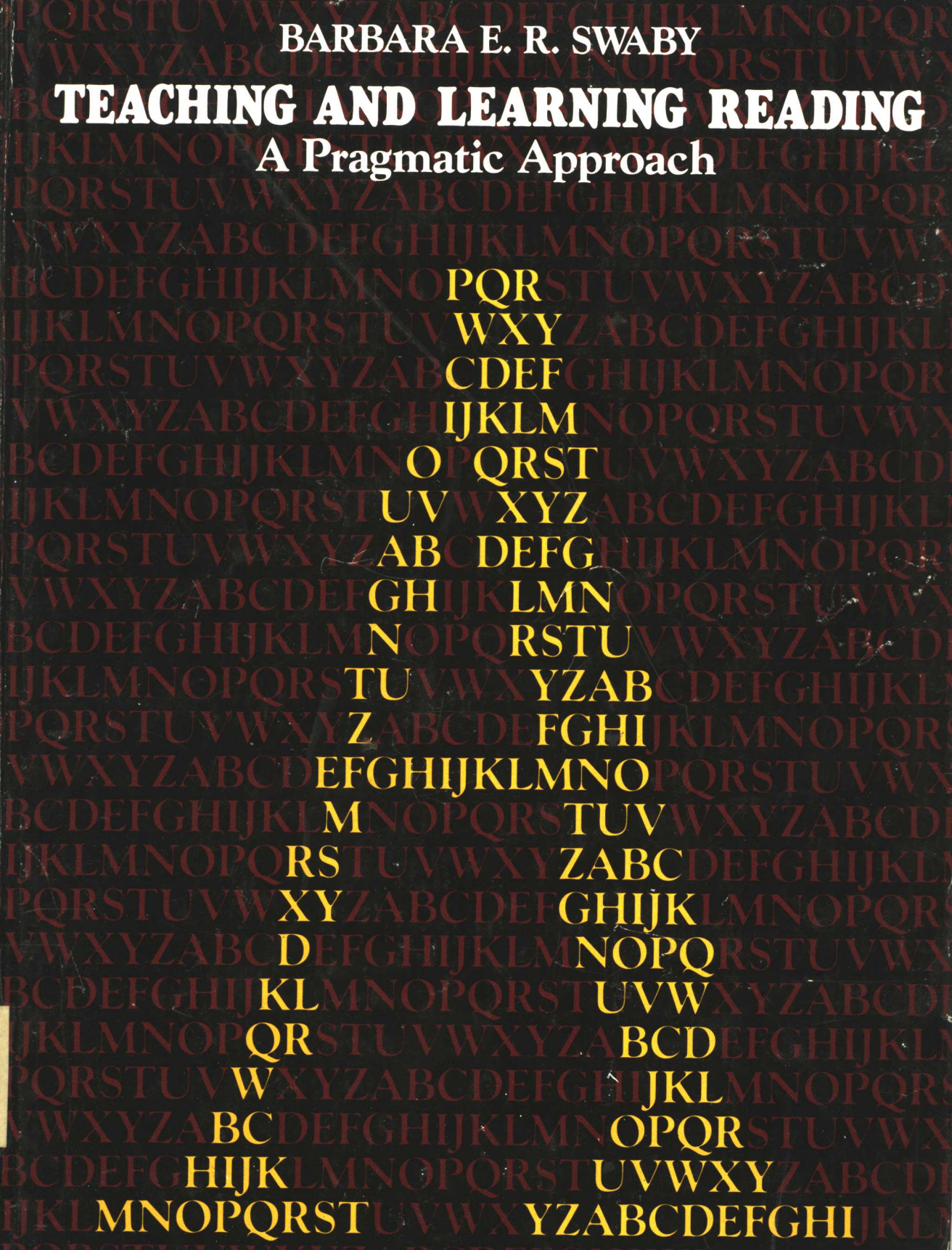
BARBARA E. R. SWABY

TEACHING AND LEARNING READING

A Pragmatic Approach



Teaching and Learning Reading

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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To my parents

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(continued on page 334)

Preface

The acquisition of reading may be considered the most valuable gift that schools can give to children. Indeed, reading is such an important skill that it is a mistake to think of it as a subject; rather, it is an introduction to living and an extension of knowledge.

This text is built on the premise that there are two basic philosophies underlying reading instruction. The first is the "curriculum-driven" philosophy, which views the reading curriculum as the primary focus. That curriculum is seen as relatively inviolate and children are taught and retaught the information until they learn it appropriately and learn it in the way it is presented.

The second view — the "alternatives-driven" philosophy — sees the child as the primary focus. It accepts the notion that the best and most effective route into reading may be different for many groups of children. All reading curricula, then, must be modified to meet the needs of children.

This text totally endorses the second philosophy. I view the teaching of reading as a spiral of modifications of any given curriculum based on the strengths and weaknesses of children. I am fully aware, however, that in order to be able to modify curriculum, to teach *reading* rather than to teach a *text,* teachers must have a thorough knowledge of the reading process, children's learning styles, and strategies of reading instruction. To this end, this text provides clear, practical, and realistic information relevant to these three topics.

In the area of the reading process, the text provides a thorough analysis of the six major methodological perspectives in the field of reading instruction. It also gives a clear explanation of the process of comprehension.

In the area of learning styles, the text explains the major characteristics of inductive and noninductive learners and shows the ways in which learning styles affect the processing of information and dictate specific instructional procedures.

In the area of instructional strategies, the text provides a myriad of procedures designed to effectively teach reading to the average reader, the gifted reader, the remedial reader, and the child with oral language difficulties. Valuable suggestions for motivating children to read and for involving parents in the learning-to-read task are included.

The entire text adheres to psycholinguistic theory, which places primary emphasis on the importance of prior knowledge in reading. Reading is viewed as an active information-seeking activity in which a reader brings prior knowledge to bear and links that knowledge to the information presented by the writer. This active connection is responsible for the richness of comprehension. The teacher's responsibility is to assist children in reaching this vital level of interaction with print. Major stress, therefore, is placed on interactive teaching.

Throughout the text a conscious and continuous effort has been made to merge theory and teaching practice. By helping teachers *use* theory to heighten the effectiveness of instruction, it is hoped that the information in this book will assist teachers in becoming not only skilled technicians of reading, but also effective artists in the teaching of reading.

After dealing with basic issues like definitions of reading and approaches to reading in the initial two chapters, we go on to take an in-depth look at the basal reader approach in the third chapter. This is followed by a detailed chapter on comprehension. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7 the topics of readiness, word recognition and word analysis, and basal reading instruction are covered. Teaching the remedial reader and the gifted are the topics of Chapters 8 and 9. Oral language development is the subject of Chapter 10, and the final chapter focuses on developing interest and motivation. The book concludes with four appendices.

In preparing the text, a number of people were instrumental in providing me with invaluable assistance. I would like to acknowledge the editorial staff of Little, Brown and Company, particularly Mylan Jaixen, Cynthia Mayer, and Sally Stickney, who not only got the project started, but who offered capable leadership. I would also like to thank my reviewers, many of whom provided valuable and

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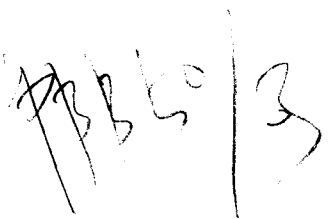
Barbara E. R. Swaby



Brief Contents

1	Reading: Definitions and Perspectives	2
2	Current Approaches to Reading Instruction	14
3	The Basal Reader: Insights	46
4	Understanding Comprehension as a Process	62
5	Reading Readiness	118
6	Word Recognition and Word Analysis Skill Instruction	140
7	The Basal Reading Lesson	186
8	Diagnosis and Remediation of the Remedial Reader	210
9	Reading and the Gifted and Creative Reader	244
10	Oral Language and Reading Development	278
11	Developing Interest in and Motivation Toward Reading	306
	Appendix A Newbery Award Books	336
	Appendix B Caldecott Award Winners	338
	Appendix C Predictable Pattern Books	340
	Appendix D Wordless Storybooks	342
	Index	344

Contents

1
Reading: Definitions and Perspectives 2

Basic Premises 4
Reading and Language 4
Reading and Early Experience 4
Toward a Definition of Reading 6
Three Definitions of Reading 6
Relating Definitions to Teaching 8
A Personal Definition of Reading 9
Summary 12
References 12

2
Current Approaches to Reading Instruction 14

Evaluating Methodologies 16
The Phonic Methodology 17
Basic Features 17
Criticisms and Weaknesses 19
Strengths 20
Phonics Materials 20

The Linguistic Methodology 20
Basic Features 20
Criticisms and Weaknesses 23
Strengths 23
Linguistic Materials 24
The Language Immersion Methodology 24
Basic Features 24
Criticisms and Weaknesses 27
Strengths 28
Language Immersion Materials 28
The Symbol Augmentation Methodology 29
Basic Features 29
Criticisms and Weaknesses 32
Strengths 32
Symbol Augmentation Materials 32
The Individualized Methodology 32
Basic Features 33
Criticisms and Weaknesses 36
Strengths 36
The Basal Reader Methodology 36
The Basal Format 37
The Developmental Basal 38
Basic Features 39
Developmental Basal Materials 42
Relevant Methodological Research 43
Summary 44
References 44

3
The Basal Reader: Insights 46
The Reading Methodology Continuum 48
Scope and Sequence 48
Distar Reading System: Code Emphasis 48
Sounds of Language Series: Meaning Emphasis 50
Developmental Basal Series: Between Code and Meaning 51
Use of Developmental Basal Series 56
Effects of Children's Learning Styles on Reading 56
Inductive Readers 56
Noninductive Readers 58
Developmental Basals and Learning Styles 58
Summary 61
References 61

4
Understanding Comprehension as a Process 62

Traditional View of Comprehension 64
Psycholinguistic View of Comprehension 65
The Formation of Concepts 66
Interrelations Among Concepts 68
Teacher as Facilitator 70
Schema Theory 71
The Memory Process 72
Merging the Traditional and Psycholinguistic Views 75
Instructional Strategies 76
Conceptual Awareness Strategies 76
Thinking Strategies 93
Visual Follow-up Strategies 104
Using Instructional Strategies 112
Summary 115
References 116

5
Reading Readiness 118

Historical Perspective 120
1900 to Mid-1930s 120
Mid-1930s to Late 1950s 121
The Turning Point: 1957 122
Ausubel's View 123
Readiness and Child-Centered Factors 124
Visual Factors 125
Auditory Factors 126
Oral Language Factors 127
Environmental Factors 128
Readiness Skills and Methodology 130
The Phonic Program 130
The Linguistic Program 131
The Basal Format 131
Developing Readiness for Reading 132
Readiness for Initial Reading 132
Readiness for All Stages of Reading 135
Summary 138
References 138

6
Word Recognition and Word Analysis Skill Instruction 140

Skill Instruction 142
- *Basic Problems 142*
- *Principles of Skill Instruction 142*

Clues to Recognizing Words 144
- *Sight Vocabulary 145*
- *Meaning Clues 151*
- *Visual Clues 156*
- *Structural Clues 157*
- *Phonic Clues 161*
- *Dictionary Clues 181*

Summary 183
- *References 183*

7
The Basal Reading Lesson 186

Popularity of Basals 188
- *Reasons for Popularity 188*
- *Factors That Reduce Effectiveness 189*

Toward Effective Instruction 190
- *Introductory Activities 190*
- *Reading Activities 194*
- *Summation Activities 200*

Applying the Strategies 205

Summary 209
- *References 209*

8
Diagnosis and Remediation of the Remedial Reader 210

An Overview of Diagnosis 212
- *Formal Diagnostic Tests 212*
- *Informal Diagnosis 216*
- *A Working Definition 216*

The Informal Reading Inventory 219
- *Preparing an Informal Reading Inventory 221*
- *Administering the Informal Reading Inventory 221*
- *Analyzing Oral Reading 222*
- *Analyzing Comprehension 224*

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Children and Reading Difficulties 225
Classifications 225
Causes of Reading Difficulties 227
Remediation Techniques 235
Basic Principles 235
Components for Success 237
An Instructional Model 238
Summary 243
References 243

9
Reading and the Gifted and Creative Reader 244
Giftedness and Gifted Education 246
Historical Perspective 246
Definitions and Characteristics 248
Key Factors in the Reading Program 249
Creating a Dynamic Reading Program 259
Curriculum Modification Strategies 260
Models of Teaching Reading to Gifted Readers 265
Summary 276
References 276

10
Oral Language and Reading Development 278
The Study of Language 280
Behaviorist Theory 280
Nativist Theory 280
Cognitive Theory 281
Some Implications for Reading Instruction 281
Acquiring Language 283
Oral Language Acquisition 283
Reading Acquisition 286
Language and the School-Age Child 286
Role of the Teacher 288
Language Stimulation in the Classroom 294
Conversation and Discussion 294
Integrating Oral Language Development with Reading Instruction 296
Application of Activities 301

Summary 303
References 304

11
Developing Interest in and Motivation Toward Reading 306

Motivation for Reading 308
Factors That Affect Motivation 308
Developing and Maintaining Motivation 311
Computers and Reading Instruction 327
Types of Computer Applications 328
Applications to Reading 329
Summary 333
References 333

Appendix A
Newbery Award Books 336

Appendix B
Caldecott Award Winners 338

Appendix C
Predictable Pattern Books 340

Appendix D
Wordless Storybooks 342

Index 344

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A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

1

Reading: Definitions and Perspectives

The field of reading is one of the most intriguing, complex, and seemingly overwhelming areas in all education. But what is reading? What is the definition of reading? Is there one definition of reading? These are questions that should be and often are asked by professionals involved in education, particularly elementary education. Regardless of how we answer each question, there are two general premises about reading that many mature readers would accept. Conscious attention to these premises makes it easier to arrive at a personal definition of reading.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How does a teacher's definition of reading affect the way in which that teacher teaches reading?
- What are some of the major definitions represented in the field of reading?
- What are the main implications that result from a particular definition of reading?
- How does the teacher make his or her definition obvious to the children he or she teaches?

Basic Premises

Reading and Language

Reading has something to do with spoken language. We may not be sure about the exact nature of this relationship, but we intuitively feel that there are strong connections. Our ability to speak — to manipulate sounds — assists us in some way in reading print. Spoken language is affected by three major systems, which linguists call syntax or word order; semantics or word meaning; and phonology or sound. Each system allows us as speakers of the language to use natural prediction skills to process and understand spoken language quickly and successfully.

Syntax helps us predict the sequence of spoken words. Our knowledge of syntax tells us that certain parts of speech fit into specific slots in a sentence. At the simplest level, the phrase "The farmer _____" will likely be followed by either a single verb or an adverb followed by a verb. It is very unlikely to be followed by a noun. In contrast, the phrase "The farmer's _____" will most likely be followed by a single noun or an adjective followed by a noun. Syntax gives us certain expectations about word order and sequence in spoken language.

Semantics in language has to do with meaning; it allows us to make predictions based on content. Suppose we are involved in a discussion about a farm, and the following statement is made: "I want to help the farmer cut the _____." Our knowledge of syntax leads us to expect a noun, and our knowledge of semantics helps us predict that the noun will be something like *wheat*, *corn*, or *hay* rather than *wave*, *shell*, or *cloud*.

Phonology in language refers to sound. If in the previous sentence, "I want to help the farmer cut the _____," we are told that the omitted noun begins with the sound /h/, we strongly expect the word *hay*.

Syntax, semantics, and phonology work together to help us predict spoken language, and in varying degrees they also help us read printed language.

Reading and Early Experience

Familiarity with, attention to, and prediction of printed language are aspects of reading that should begin to be developed prior to formal reading instruction. We know intuitively that familiarity with print assists the acquisition and development of reading skills. We know

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