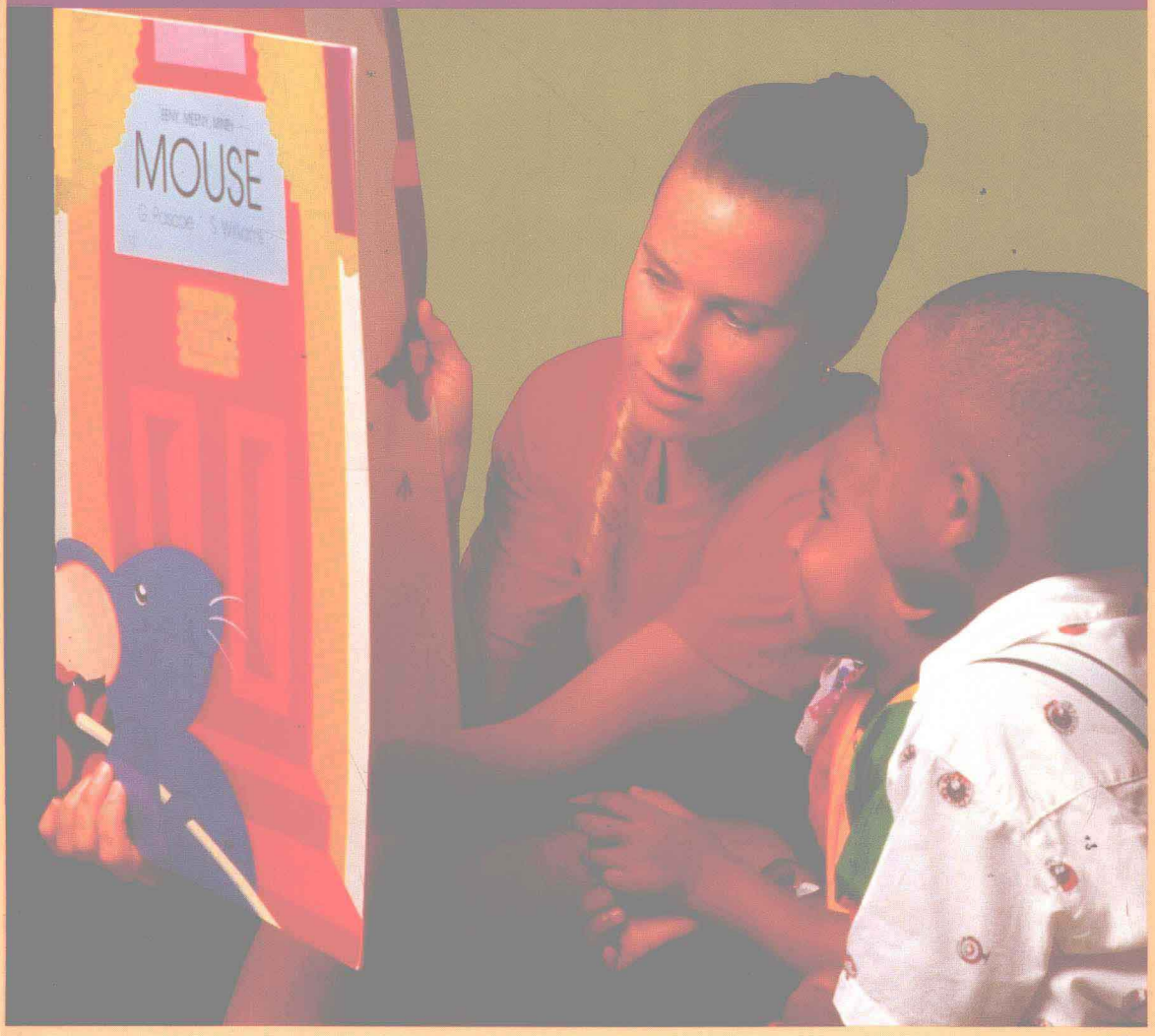
# Integrated Language Arts for Emerging Literacy




*Walter E. Sawyer • Jean C. Sawyer*

# Integrated Language Arts for Emerging Literacy

Walter E. Sawyer
Jean C. Sawyer

Delmar Publishers Inc.

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# *Dedication*

To our parents, our first and most influential teachers, who started each of us on the road to literacy:

Rose D. Sawyer (1906–1989)
Walter E. Sawyer, Sr. (1904–1971)
Norma L. Handschur
Charles F. Handschur

*WES*
*JCS*

# *Preface*

*Integrated Language Arts for Emerging Literacy* responds to the most current thinking, research, and practices in early childhood literacy programs. It presents a whole language approach to literacy development instruction for children from birth through the primary grades. The whole language approach has its roots in the educational programs of New Zealand and Australia, as well as the United States. The approach is increasingly being implemented in schools throughout the United States and Canada. It is a well thought out approach, supported by both research and common sense, and it is causing both states and provinces to rethink the process of becoming literate. The book makes a compelling case for the need to integrate language arts instruction for all children, in all programs in the community.

This book is needed because of its comprehensive approach to literacy development with young children. It may be the only book that presents a plan to integrate disabled children, parents, community resources, and the total curriculum into the regular classroom literacy development program. Whole language is not a specific set of activities, but is a system of beliefs about the interaction of a child's language modes and how educators can use the child's language to foster further growth. The approach emphasizes the use of whole pieces of language and texts rather than focusing on isolated bits and pieces of language. As a result, the emphasis is on using an abundance of children's literature as well as ample opportunities for using oral language and writing abilities. In order for teachers to be effective with the approach, they need to learn to make decisions about their instruction rather than relying on a teacher's manual or program guidebook for instructional practices. This book provides teachers with the background and practices needed to become effective decision-makers in the classroom.

A number of outstanding features of this book will help teachers become more effective in the classroom. The overall organization of the book enables readers to see the broad picture of education and how different parts of instruction fit into the broad picture. The seven major sections each introduce a general idea. Each section begins with a related statement from a well-known children's book author. These ideas can be discussed with others, prior to the reading of the units within the section, and used as motivators for seeking answers and understandings. Each unit begins with goals and a preview. The goals enable the reader to understand what should be acquired as a result of reading the section. The preview provides additional ideas and questions for consideration as the reading proceeds. Questions and activities for review and discussion follow each unit. These help the reader determine whether or not the goals for the unit have been achieved. They can serve as excellent ideas for classroom discussion as well as written responses.

The content of each unit includes a number of additional special features. Several hundred children's storybooks are cited, described, and used as examples. This helps the reader become familiar with a wide range of both classical and contemporary books for young children. Another special feature of the book is complete sections addressing the involvement of parents and exceptional children in the regular instructional program.



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Several examples of thematic units are provided both in individual units and in the appendices of the book. Thematic units are essential building blocks for developing literacy through a whole language approach. Those described here can be readily transferred to actual classroom practice. Finally, a wide range of procedures, formats, checklists, and planning sheets are illustrated throughout the book. They cover virtually all aspects of a literacy development program. These two can be readily applied to actual classroom practice as they are presented or with local adaptations.

An instructor's guide is available for use with the program. The guide contains correct answers to the objective questions at the end of each unit as well as model responses to the more open-ended essay and discussion questions that are also found at the end of each unit. Also included in the instructor's guide is a set of additional activities that can be used with individuals or groups of pre-service or in-service teachers seeking to become more effective instructors.

Walter Sawyer is a graduate of Siena College, Assumption College, and the State University of New York at Albany. He holds B.A., M.A., and EdD degrees. He is certified in and has worked at all levels of education from nursery school through graduate school. Currently he is an administrator for the Waterford-Halfmoon School District in upstate New York and teaches graduate courses in reading and writing at Russell Sage College. He has been an active member at all levels of the International Reading Association and is past president of a local reading council. He has a deep personal interest in storytelling and has conducted storytelling workshops. He is the author of over forty publications in the field of literacy, including the Delmar publication, *Growing Up with Literature.*

Jean Sawyer is a graduate of the State University of New York. She holds a B.A. degree in Latin and an M.A. degree in developmental reading. She has worked with children from preschool through secondary school. While much of her current time is spent advocating for the education and literacy development of children with disabilities within regular educational programs, she continues an interest in classics through her membership in the Classical Association of the Empire State. Jean and Walter Sawyer have developed and implemented a lending library in their own school district that provides both related children's trade books and books on advocacy for parents of children with disabilities. They also review books for children and young adults for *Maine in Print,* the publication of the Maine Writer's and Publisher's Alliance.

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the many individuals who have provided their knowledge and support to make this a better book: to Jay Whitney, our editor at Delmar, who gave us unwavering support and inspiration throughout the project; to our children, Andrew and Emily, who shared so many of the literacy experiences described in this book; to Frank Hodge, who constantly inspires us to see the world in new ways through his insights and the children's books that he loves and shares; to Melanie Stracuzzi, for her help with some of the illustrations appearing here; to the authors and publishers of children's books who provided comments, photographs, and books for use with this project; to our reviewers, whose valuable insights have strengthened the entire book:

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# Section 1
# An Integrated Approach

**Carol Carrick**

"I was one of those lucky children to have a mother who read to me every day. I remember that even at the age of three I was trying, unsuccessfully, to decode my parents' novels. I was so anxious to read my own books that I spelled out the letters to my mother as she ironed, and thereby learned how to read.

It is clear to me that a child can do anything if he is motivated. Children will learn to read what interests them. What seven-year-old who is exposed to dinosaurs cannot read and spell *tyrannosaurus*?

Editors of basal readers have told me at the outset that they want good stories, but they can't mean this. The very qualities that make good literature—the development of interesting characters, provocative subject matter, and vivid descriptions are not allowed. I know it is impossible to write a compelling story with such constraints put on the writer. Given these limitations of vocabulary, subject matter, and length, the assignment becomes merely an exercise, a challenging puzzle."

*Text courtesy of Carol Carrick. Photograph courtesy of Jules Worthington.*

**TO THE READER:**

One of the most exciting and amazing adventures you will ever undertake may be about to begin. Watching, observing, and helping young children learn to use language can be one of the most important things a person can do. Teaching language skills will require you to be patient, understanding, and knowledgeable. You will need to be patient because all children grow at different rates. You must be willing to allow children to grow at these individual rates. As a teacher, understanding will also be an invaluable personal asset. Young children have many needs. They may not be ready to learn the things you would like to share with them on any given day. These needs are to be seen as opportunities rather than obstacles. You will need to have knowledge to assist you in making decisions about what constitutes a developmentally appropriate approach to developing language skills in young children.

The first section of this book will provide you with a basic understanding of language arts for young children. The approach shared in this section makes use of the ideas of many educators and early childhood specialists. It is a decidedly human approach, which is often referred to as whole language. The units in this section provide an integrated approach to oral language, writing, reading, and literature. You will notice that individual units may cover more than one language mode or major concept. For example, listening and speaking are addressed together in a unit on oral language rather than in two separate units on listening and speaking. This is because both listening and speaking occur simultaneously in natural environments. Reading and literature are also addressed in a single unit. This is because children don't simply read; children read written pieces, or literature. This view of the interwoven nature of language modes is a fundamental belief of the position taken in this text.

The ideas and strategies you will learn in this section will provide you with a firm knowledge base that you can rely on when making language arts instructional decisions. While the reader will find many practical ideas in this first section, the focus is on helping you to become a proactive teacher. That is, the knowledge presented here will help you to make decisions when a program is going smoothly and also when events in a program become less routine. Early childhood educators must be able to respond when children, programs, and classroom routines are not always predictable.

# UNIT 1

# What Is Whole Language?

## UNIT GOALS

After completing this unit, the reader should:

- understand what is meant by "emergent literacy."
- be aware of the characteristics of whole language.
- become aware of the general history of whole language.
- possess a knowledge of the research supporting a whole language approach.
- understand the necessity for whole language teachers to develop a personal knowledge base.
- become aware of the criticisms of a whole language approach.

## PREVIEW

Language surrounds us throughout our lives. From the moment we are born, our worlds are filled with conversation, laughter, signs, billboards, media messages, books, magazines, songs, and discussions. Our constant immersion in this environment enables us to acquire language in early childhood. Few individuals learn oral language through educational programs in schools. Rather, they learn it by listening to others speak and by attempting to communicate.

An integrated language arts program recognizes these facts. Further, it takes advantage of the natural abilities and tendencies of children to acquire language within their natural surroundings. This unit contributes to an understanding of this approach by developing a solid understanding of a variety of key features of language and learning. Some of the key features addressed by this chapter are:

- The concept of emerging literacy
- The concept of an integrated language arts program
- A description of whole language
- Assumptions held by whole language teachers
- Characteristics of whole language
- A history of the whole language movement
- Research supporting a whole language approach
- The importance of developing a knowledge base
- The criticisms of whole language

## INTRODUCTION

To understand the concept of whole language, you must first comprehend the nature of literacy. This unit

discusses literacy as a general idea, with emergent literacy as a focal point. The unit provides a definition of literacy that is derived from the purposes of literacy. While the purposes may differ from individual to individual, they usually include communication, achieving personal needs, deriving pleasure, developing social relationships, understanding the culture, and learning the rituals of society. Each need is discussed in the unit as it relates to literacy.

From that point, the framework of an integrated language arts program is constructed. The basic assumption of the approach is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That is, the distinct facets of language cannot be separated from each other and retain the meaning that they have as a whole. Therefore, an integrated language arts program is comprised not only of different ideas and concepts, but also of the ways those ideas and concepts interact with each other. Among the components of such a program are communication modes, the thinking process, the concept of meaningfulness, the importance of processes, an understanding of human differences, and the role of evaluation.

An integrated language arts program is an extension of a whole language approach. A whole language approach to the language arts is best described as a philosophy rather than a set of activities. The philosophy is based on important assumptions about language, learning, children, and literature. A whole language approach is characterized by the use of whole texts, a literature-based approach to language learning, a child-centered atmosphere, cooperative activities, and parent involvement. Each of these is described in this unit.

In order for teachers to make appropriate classroom decisions, they need to understand the whole language approach. To do this they must be willing to continue to be students themselves. It is important that teachers become aware of the history of the development of the approach, its theoretical foundation, and the research that supports whole language. In addition, they need to continually expand this knowledge base through participation in workshops, exchanging ideas with other teachers, and reading relevant professional literature. Finally, they should become aware of the major criticisms of the approach. This knowledge will help teachers to continue to make valid classroom decisions and to grow professionally.

**FIGURE 1-1** Children enjoy the language of books at a very young age.

## EMERGING LITERACY

Defining literacy is a monumental task; defining emerging literacy becomes an even greater one. Over time, these subjects have been the focus of numerous professional articles and books. A fascinating look at the arguments is presented in a recent International Reading Association panel discussion (Aaron, Chall, Durkin, Goodman, and Strickland 1990). Though the participants disagreed about the quantity of language ability required to indicate that an individual is literate, they agreed that literacy refers to the ability to read and write. The argument about quantity concerned how well an individual had to read and write in order to be considered a literate individual in modern day life.

### Literacy Defined

For the purpose of this book, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write at a level that enables an individual to function effectively as a productive member of society and that the individual finds satisfactory. If an individual does not read and write well enough to hold basic employment, participate in citizenship activities, or pursue social functions that require literacy, the individual cannot be considered literate. Beyond that, if individuals feel that they do not possess the reading and writing skills necessary to function effectively in modern day life, such individ-

uals should be seen as needing further literacy instruction. The beliefs of the individual have a role in determining whether or not that person possesses literacy.

## Purposes Of Literacy

To define emerging literacy, one must look even more closely at literacy and at the purposes of literacy. While literacy is usually seen as the ability to read and write, it must also be acknowledged that the ability to receive and express ideas, thoughts, and feelings plays an important role in developing reading and writing ability. Speaking ability, listening ability, sign language, and other forms of communication must therefore be included as important literacy skills. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are closely interrelated. They work in conjunction with each other.

By acknowledging the critical roles of listening and speaking in the total literacy development process, understanding the purposes of literacy becomes easier. As children grow in early childhood, one can observe them exploring the purposes of literacy on a daily basis. While many purposes can be stated, six of the most important ones are described here.

The first purpose of literacy is communication. When a child points to a teddy bear on a shelf and says "bear," the communication is usually quite clear to a parent. The child is saying, "Give me my teddy bear." This is closely tied to, and perhaps overlaps, a second purpose of literacy: meeting the needs of the individual. A baby who makes a certain cry when hungry is communicating a need to meet nutritional needs. A child who excitedly tells an older sibling about the exciting field trip in nursery school that day is satisfying a need to share information with another person. Again, this too is closely tied with the major purpose of communication.

The third and fourth purposes of literacy are closely related: pleasure and developing friendships. Obviously these two are related, since children experience such a definite sense of pleasure the first few times they establish a friendship. Young children elicit pleasure from telling jokes, answering questions, laughing at funny stories, and talking to a new friend on the telephone for the first time. It is usually through language and play, of course, that young children develop friendships. The informal discussions that evolve from cooperative play activities are often the beginnings of friendships. Children discover through language and play that they share common interests and enjoy many of the same activities. This process builds many friendships.

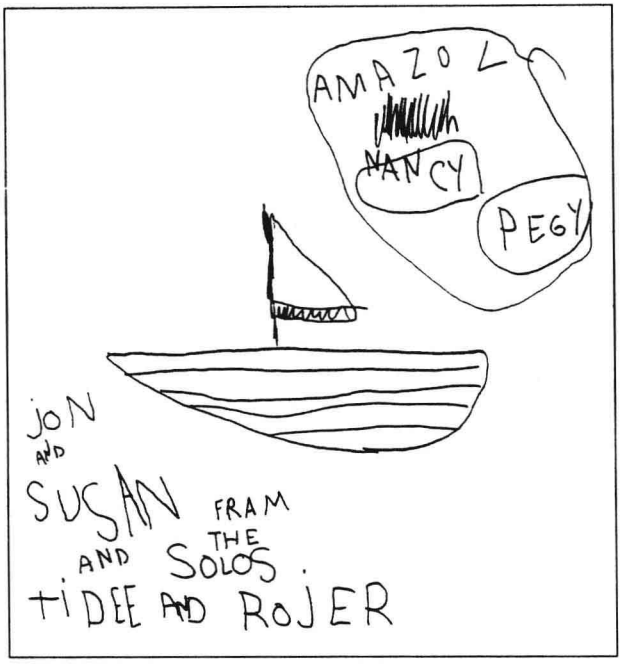


**FIGURE 1-2** Young children attempt to communicate through their drawings.

The fifth and sixth purposes of literacy also are related to each other: understanding the culture and learning rituals. As children watch the world around them they begin to understand that some parts of life and certain activities have their own importance. It is through language that parents and teachers can help children understand the culture. The importance of work, play, citizenship, grieving, and celebrating are all explained through language. Through the common language shared by a society, the younger members learn such things as why certain holidays are celebrated and why it is necessary for individuals to abide by the rules of society. Many cultural concepts are actually demonstrated through rituals. This might include Independence Day fireworks displays, participation at a wedding as a ring bearer or flower girl, worshipping at a church, temple, mosque or syna-

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