2 | Focus on Teaching Materials

Part 1 Research: What Kind of Reading Materials Promote Early Reading Development?

Schemes Cater to Popular Views

Publishers of reading schemes are careful to gauge the climate of educational theory so that their programmes will reflect the doctrine that teachers and educators currently endorse. Over the last twenty years, *whole-word, 'meaning-emphasis' methods* have been popular and most reading schemes currently on the market have attempted to cater to this view. With whole-word, 'meaning-emphasis' methods, children are encouraged to recognise whole words on the basis of their shape, the surrounding context, the accompanying pictures, or the syntax of sentences. Attention to the interior details of words is avoided; without any prior alphabetic instruction, children are to guess at unknown words, using any available clues, such as the other words that may be recognised, or simply knowing what the whole story is about as a result of hearing the teacher read the story many times.

It should be pointed out that although such methods are often said to focus on the meaning of stories, to refer to such approaches as 'meaning-emphasis' is misleading, since whatever the method of instruction being used, the main goal of reading is to derive meaning. It would be more accurate to think of such methods as memory-emphasis methods, methods that rely on memorisation of words and stories as the route to accessing meaning. To illustrate this point, the guide to the Oxford Reading Tree states that the scheme uses the 'story method', where the needs of the 'whole child' are addressed; 'children hear the stories, talk about the pictures and text, and re-tell the stories themselves, they ... gradually match and check what they are hearing and seeing [and come] to an ... appreciation of what reading is about'; teachers are further instructed, 'it is important not to worry too much ...

whether children are reading or *simply memorising*' (Hunt et al., 1996, p. 6, emphasis added). In an earlier version of this text they labelled this method a 'whole language approach'.

However, progress in learning to read is largely determined by how early children are able to shift their attention from purely visual information (seeing words as whole visual shapes) to graphic or letter information (Biemiller, 1979). Research evidence consistently shows that adherence to whole-word methods, particularly during the early stages of learning to read, produces significantly inferior achievement on a number of reading measures (including reading comprehension), compared to methods with a code-emphasis approach (Becker & Gersten, 1982; Blachman, 1987; Calfee, et al., 1973; Chall, 1989; Enfield, 1987; Pflaum, et al., 1980; Wallach & Wallach, 1976; Williams, 1985). There may be several factors that contribute to this phenomenon.

The Vocabulary of Current Reading Schemes

One problem with these schemes concerns the vocabulary. Code-emphasis methods require a controlled vocabulary while whole-word methods demand that reading materials have 'natural-sounding' language, wide-ranging vocabularies, and/or predictable, easy-to-memorise text. As a result, today's reading schemes have turned into 'anthologies of children's literature' (Juel, 1995). Just as with the use of 'real books', the vocabulary contained in these books is not controlled or sequenced in difficulty. Even in the very first early reading books of current schemes, common, but irregularly spelled words, as well as uncommon longer words (the most unpredictable from context) occur frequently. Children cannot deduce letter-sound correspondences for themselves, but even if they have been taught and do possess such knowledge, they would find it extremely difficult to build on their knowledge of spelling patterns with such texts. These texts lack the carefully sequenced presentation of short, regularly spelled words. Indeed, even in a case where reading materials might contain many regularly spelled and simply decoded words, children learning to read are often insensitive to spelling patterns (Bruck & Treiman, 1992; Ehri & Robbins, 1992). Carefully sequenced materials and much practice are required to develop this knowledge (Treiman et al., 1990).

However, the use of the randomised, uncontrolled vocabularies evident in today's reading scheme books appears

to be based on the false assumption that children are able to discover letter-phoneme relations quite readily for themselves, after being taught to memorise whole words based on their shape, words that are frequently irregular in their spelling or pronunciation.

The effects of word type on children's beginning-reading progress were investigated in a study by Juel and Roper-Schneider (1985). Children of similar entry ability drawn from 11 grade one classrooms were taught a strictly controlled programme of synthetic phonics instruction for thirty minutes a day, followed by reading activities using one of two scheme readers. The texts in one reading scheme stressed (and repeated more often) common, irregularly spelled words, while in the other, the texts stressed easily decoded, regularly spelled words. Assessment of children's skills at five different times during the year revealed that there were no differences between the two groups in their ability to read the core words of their particular reading scheme, and no differences between groups in their ability to make use of context cues. However, significant differences between groups did occur in their ability to read words with letter sounds that had *not yet been taught*. After as little as two months into the project, those children using the phonic-oriented readers were much better able to decode novel words and were found throughout the year to be making far greater use of phonological decoding strategies than those children using the whole-word-oriented readers. This study shows that, *even when the method of reading instruction is identical and phonic-oriented*, the type of texts young, beginning readers are first given to read will significantly influence the extent to which children develop either generative, alphabetic, or non-generative, whole-word reading strategies.

The type of words used in reading schemes also affects the level of text difficulty. Stories containing common, irregularly spelled words are more difficult to read than those written with short, regularly spelled words. Thus, in the whole-word-oriented schemes, in order to compensate for this problem, the common words to be learned may sometimes be repeated even more often than they occur in 'real books'. Whether or not they are repeated liberally, however, these irregularly spelled words will be difficult to 'read' initially and many adult-assisted readings will be required. Used as beginning reading

materials these texts (their difficult vocabularies, and their demand for adult involvement) encourage whole-word, memorisation strategies. If a child is constantly encouraged to memorise, the ability to *decode* novel words is effectively retarded; even if a child has learned the alphabetic principle, this knowledge will not be encouraged to spread in the same way as it would with the use of phonic-oriented texts.

Why is the level of text difficulty important? The high error rates, often accepted as part of the learning process with today's reading scheme books, are negatively correlated with growth (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1984). Studies have shown that for maximum reading progress the text a child is to read must be written at a level of difficulty that is neither too easy (can be independently read with 98% success) nor too difficult (can only be read with frustration where less than 90% of the words are read correctly). Thus, if a reader is to be matched with a text written at an appropriate instructional level, he or she should be able to read without any type of error at least 9 out of every 10 words (May, 1986).

Currently there is concern that books children are to read be interesting, appealing, colourfully illustrated, tell 'real' stories about everyday events and use 'natural' language; these are all laudable goals but there is little, if any, attention paid to the fact that the words appearing on the pages might be far too difficult for the children to read. While it is important that children be interested in the *idea* of reading, they will not like 'reading' very much if it means that the words on the page are largely a mystery, any attempts to read the words resulting in frustration and a sense of failure.

Attention to the Alphabetic Code

The type and amount of phonics instruction advocated by today's reading schemes is of particular concern when, unlike code-emphasis schemes, they carry the expectation that teachers will introduce children to such books at the very beginning of primary school without any prior alphabetic or phoneme training. At the same time, it has been noted that currently there are no reading schemes available that offer a code-emphasis approach (Cato et al., 1992). Whereas it was possible in the past for teachers to choose reading schemes that provided either a whole-word approach or a code-emphasis approach, this is now very difficult.

Approaches to teaching reading are sometimes referred to as *analytic* (involving *segmentation*), or *synthetic* (involving *blending*). Synthetic methods begin with the introduction of letter sounds and/or the sounds made by combinations of letters, and culminate with whole words (the sounds /s/, /u/, /n/ are blended to form the word *sun*). Such instruction is comprehensive, sequenced in difficulty, and *precedes* the reading of material that practises what has been taught. Analytic methods begin with the word, phrase, sentence, or story, and the whole is broken down or analysed into its separate components (the word *sun*, for example, is segmented into its three separate sounds – /s/, /u/, /n/ – or more commonly only one segment of the word is isolated and examined, the initial consonant, the medial vowel, or the final consonant). This sort of instruction usually occurs *after* reading, where the reading material itself furnishes the words chosen for particular instructional focus. The teaching, therefore, tends not to follow any specific sequence.

Letter-sound relationships are taught directly in synthetic methods, but, in analytic methods, these associations must often be inferred. Researchers have found that analysing sounds in words, or breaking words down into parts, appears to be a more difficult task than blending separate sounds together (Goldstein, 1976; Torgesen, Morgan, Davis, 1992). Perfetti and others (1987) concluded that high levels of synthesis or blending skills predicted better reading gains than analysis skills, and Fox and Routh (1984) found that training only in analysis skills failed to help children read new words. However, in the teaching manuals of current reading schemes, if there is any attention addressed to sounds and letters at all, activities suggested are invariably of the less effective, analytic type.

Of relevance here, five programmes that taught *phonics* synthetically (direct teaching of letter-sound correspondences and phonological skills, including blending sounds together to form words) were compared to another five that taught phonics analytically, in twenty classrooms of beginning readers (Bliesmer & Yarborough, 1965). After one year it was found that students being taught with one of the five synthetic reading schemes significantly outperformed students taught by the analytic programmes on a number of reading measures, including comprehension skills. Others have found

similar results favouring the synthetic approach used in the first one to three years (Henderson, 1959; Shore & Marascuilo, 1974) and with retarded children (Vandever & Neville, 1976). Synthetic phonics teaching that does not include training children to detect the separate sounds in spoken words may not be so successful with learning-disabled children (Lovett, Ransby, Hardwick, Johns, & Donaldson, 1989; Lyon, 1985), but training in this area prior to synthetic phonics instruction has produced dramatic effects on such children's alphabetic reading skills (Alexander et al., 1991).

Training in Phonemes or Speech Sounds

Whole-word, 'meaning-emphasis' reading schemes also fail to recognise the importance of developing phonological awareness at the initial stages of learning to read, the inherent assumption of these schemes being that without any prior or simultaneous instruction, children can immediately tackle a reader. However, phonological awareness does not develop automatically as a consequence of learning to read. Direct evidence against this idea has come from many studies which show that the level of phonological awareness is not altered by reading activities alone (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Tunmer et al., 1988; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987). Training in phonological awareness, especially for at-risk children, results in better and faster reading progress (Ball & Blachman, 1988; Content, et al., 1986; Lundberg et al., 1988; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987), their lead being maintained even after 4 years (Bradley, 1987).

Children who are exposed to a strictly whole-word setting when learning to read (as would be the case if taught entirely through the use of today's reading schemes) have no segmental awareness of speech; such an ability, without opportunity for use, is never developed (Morais, Alegria, & Content, 1987).

Although experiments show that giving direct instruction which points out shared sounds in words, for example, is an effective way to promote phonological awareness (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1993), most reading schemes include only a minimal amount of direct teaching. And, rather than attention to phonological awareness or letter-sound correspondences, the bulk of the teaching suggested is directed towards helping children to memorise stories so that they might use this

knowledge to guess what the words on the pages are, perhaps eventually building a store of easily recognised words.

Illustrations

Large, colourful illustrations are a major feature of today's reading schemes. While the presence of pictures is unlikely to present a problem for the skilled reader, there is evidence that for the child who is in the very beginning stages of learning how to read, pictures may cause some difficulty. If one is skilled at both picture and print decoding, problems with the simultaneous processing of them do not arise; it is only when, as is the case for the beginning reader, he or she possesses limited skill with both tasks, that interference results (Wu & Solman, 1993). Under the principle of least effort, faced with both picture and text, the child will choose to concentrate on the picture. If the child is faced with such a combination when the words are unfamiliar and have not been encountered before in a non-picture setting, the presence of the picture will be particularly influential in diverting attention away from the print.

Many researchers have studied this phenomenon and reached the conclusion that while pictures may be helpful in some circumstances with skilled readers, they are detrimental in the context of beginning reading instruction (for review, Brigham, 1992; also McDowell, 1982; Rusted & Coltheart, 1979; Saunders & Solman, 1984; Willows, 1978). Recently two studies have suggested that the combination of written word with picture results in a learning deficit or blocking effect with young children, severely hindering word decoding (Singh & Solman, 1990; Solman, Singh, & Kehoe, 1992).

The Rhyme Element

Books that make use of rhyme or repetitive patterns are likely to be easier for children to memorise. Although this may be what has motivated the use of rhyme in reading scheme books in the past, a number of publishers have offered something new recently by introducing whole books of poetry to their schemes. Recent studies investigating both the use of rhyme, as well as *onset and rime* (in the word *cat*, the sound */c/* is the *onset*, and the sound */at/* is the *rime*) appear to have provoked this sudden inclusion. This innovation is misguided on two fronts.

First, if the poetry books are provided in response to the research on the usefulness of nursery rhymes, they are more appropriate materials for the preschool or nursery teacher. Research has shown that exposure to rhyming sounds in poetry is useful as a rudimentary form of phonological awareness training, alerting children to shared sounds in words, and encouraging the revelation that words are made up of separate sounds. But it has been shown that rhyming tasks are the easiest types of phonological tasks to perform (Yopp, 1988); the beginning reader must develop more advanced phonological skills. For the beginning reader, direct teacher instruction in how to identify the separate sounds of words would be more effective in developing the necessary prerequisite reading skills than simply listening to the teacher read these books. On the other hand, as these materials are written at a level appropriate for the already competent reader, for the older child who is able to read them independently, they could help to consolidate and expand a child's knowledge of spelling patterns.

Second, if the poetry books are provided in response to the onset-rime research as materials useful to the teacher during early reading instruction, they are also misguided. Onset-rime instruction has not been proven an effective method to teach children about individual letter-sound correspondences (Bruck & Treiman, 1992). If the poetry books are provided in order to encourage teachers to point out initial sounds (onsets) and common final chunks (rimes) of words to children, *before* they have developed any knowledge of individual letter-sound correspondences, such instruction will fail as a beginning reading method (see Chapter 3 for discussion of this topic). Similarly, assuming that children will deduce letter-sound correspondences for themselves, through the shared reading of such books, is not supported by research either (Byrne, 1991).

The Sight Word Foundation

Another disadvantage of many reading schemes is the emphasis given to whole-word learning and the building up of large sight vocabularies; this is a practice that reinforces the child's natural inclination, at an early stage, to see words purely as visual shapes. Byrne (1992) describes this natural tendency as the 'default acquisition procedure'; recognising

words in a logographic way, as if they are pictures, occurs in the absence of guidance. The procedure eventually breaks down when the child is faced with too many words, and too many similar words (Ehri, 1991; Gough, Juel, & Griffith, 1992; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1991).

Evidence from a number of experiments suggests that reading failure may actually result from having too much success with this suboptimal strategy of word recognition, and that a substantial proportion of children with reading difficulties who have reached the limit of their memories do not abandon whole-word strategies (Boder, 1973; Johnston, 1985; Snowling, 1980).

Further support for this notion comes from neurological studies which indicate that encouraging sight word learning through whole-word or logographic strategies at the early stages of reading instruction reinforces visuospatial brain processing, the kind of cognitive operations which are performed in posterior regions of both hemispheres, but primarily within areas of the right hemisphere (Hynd, 1992; Iacoboni & Zaidel, 1996; Menard, Kosslyn, Thompson, Alpert, & Rauch, 1996; Pumfrey & Reason, 1991). This emphasis on the visuospatial aspects of words may make it more difficult for some children, research suggests (Bakker, 1992; Flynn, Deering, Goldstein, & Rahbar, 1992), to transfer to the sort of processing which occurs largely within language areas of the left hemisphere, to the sort of processing involved during phonological recoding or alphabetic reading (Flowers, 1993; Hynd, 1992; Ogden, 1996). This finding has particular relevance to the slower rates of reading progress observed in boys compared to girls. Boys, who initially spend longer than girls perfecting their right hemispheric visuospatial skills (Halpern, 1992; Harris & Sipay, 1990; Kail, 1992), may be particularly adept at memorising words as whole visual units. Their success with whole-word strategies may mislead teachers about their ability to decode.

Summary

Not unlike ordinary children's story books, today's reading schemes provide the child with very attractively illustrated books containing interesting, real-life stories that he or she can relate to. As books serving solely as practice reading materials, once the child has learned how to read, they are

likely to be rather useful, but research suggests that published reading schemes may have many shortcomings as suitable tools for promoting the child's early acquisition of the alphabetic principle. These include: (a) the lack of regularly spelled, simple, short words in the children's readers, words that children are readily able to decode; (b) the lack of provision in the teacher's manuals for synthetic, code-emphasis instruction; (c) the absence in the teacher's manuals of a structured, systematic programme to teach letter-sound correspondences, where instruction is given *before*, and closely matched with what children are to read subsequently; (d) the failure to provide teachers with a systematic programme to develop phonological awareness skills; (e) the predominance of illustrations in the children's readers, a potentially distracting feature in the context of early reading instruction; (f) the limitations of using poetry books on their own in the absence of direct instruction as appropriate avenues to develop advanced phonological, letter-sound skills; and (g) the emphasis on encouraging memorisation and whole-word learning, thus training pupils to use suboptimal word-recognition strategies.

Part 2 Practice: The Wide Use of Reading Schemes

Universal Use of Schemes

According to a number of government reports (HMI, 1989-90; 1990; 1992), the use of published reading schemes is almost universal in the country's 19,000 primary schools; they are used by more than 95% of teachers. The two most popular schemes are *The Oxford Reading Tree*, used in about 50% of primary schools (approximately 10,000 schools), and Ginn 360, used in about 30% of schools. The *Ginn 360* 'meaning-oriented' reading scheme was widely adopted in British schools during the 1970s, while the 'whole language' *Oxford Reading Tree*, introduced in the 1980s has gradually infiltrated the market. Other schemes in use include *Story Chest* by Nelson Publishing, employing a 'shared reading', 'guessing game' approach (Nelson, 1991, p.8), and schemes from Heinemann, Longman, and Collins, all of which are

meaning-oriented memory-emphasis, or non-alphabetic in their approaches.

The Vocabulary

An examination of the Ginn and Oxford schemes reveals that, rather than representing a mix of methods, these programmes stress only one way of teaching reading. In both of these schemes reading is taught by a whole-word or 'look-and-say' approach; children are to build up sight vocabularies (words automatically recognised, in this case because they are memorised by shape or idiosyncratic features). The vocabulary selected is not graded in difficulty, and key words are often common irregularly spelled words, or uncommon longer words. In the Oxford series, some of the words children are expected to read in their very first readers, after a series of wordless picture books, are: *couldn't, dragon, sleep, dreamed, nasty, fight, everyone, joined, pillow, hungry, shoes, laces.*

It is not clear how children are expected to read these words to begin with. What appears to be the goal is the eventual memorisation of the stories, and the gradual recognition of some of the words by sight, through many shared readings with the teacher. The Ginn series contains words which are repeated liberally throughout. Repetitions of common, often regular, but more difficult to spell words (such as *look, you, here),* as well as common, irregularly spelled words (such as *said, the, was, come, where*) are prolific. In both schemes children are expected to learn to recognise words as whole visual units using any clues available such as shape or length of the word, accompanying illustrations, available context (derived mainly from knowing what the story is about after several 'readings'), and, only as a last resort, initial letters (whether or not children have been taught to recognise letters or associate them with sounds beforehand). The readers can be read in any order as there is no systematic, sequenced teaching of letter-sound correspondences, or spelling patterns.

Phonemes and the Alphabetic Code

Contrary to the scientific evidence of the efficacy of making children aware of the separate sounds in spoken words and of making sound/symbol correspondences explicit prior to giving children books to read, these schemes make no provision for

prior training in this area. If there is any code instruction suggested at all, it is to occur primarily during reading activities and similar to any separate phonics activities described, it is of the discovery type. Unlike synthetic phonics instruction where letters and sounds are associated and then blended to form words, in these activities the teacher is instructed to read a word aloud and then select certain letters (initial consonants or medial vowels, for example) for children to guess what their corresponding sounds might be. Although research indicates that children are not able to perform this task (that is, they are not able to infer letter-sound relationships for themselves), this analytic phonics instruction is the type that schemes invariably model; synthetic phonics instruction, where letter-phoneme relationships are taught explicitly, is omitted.

The type of phonics instruction aside, the systematic and intensive coverage of sound-spelling associations in both the Ginn and the Oxford programmes is not possible because the text to be read is not sequenced in difficulty. Thus the words selected from the text drive a random, incidental approach to the teaching of the alphabetic code. Separate phonics instruction may be regarded as an optional extra. Indeed, in the case of the Oxford programme, until recently there was no phonics instruction of any kind offered until Level 3. In 1995, however, this scheme introduced an alphabet frieze, and card games for 5- to 7-year-olds. Despite the analytic approach taken, and the concentration on initial sounds of words and the ending chunks (or rimes) of words, these materials represent a significant improvement as they offer the opportunity for children to become sensitive to the separate sounds in words (initial consonants only), as well as to learn and practise some letter-sound correspondences.

Publishers' Concerns

When asked what determines the nature of their reading schemes, or the philosophy adopted, publishers agree that these are mainly driven by what teachers want. Sales directors list a number of elements which presumably teachers want and which contribute to the sale of their books (personal interviews, Birmingham Education Show, 1994). In contrast to the research findings indicating the rather dubious efficacy of the place of illustrations in beginning readers, all of those representatives interviewed agreed that the most

important factor in selling their books was the quality of the illustrations.

Other current concerns included: stories with real language and everyday familiar events, provision for books of poetry to take advantage of the 'latest research about rhyme being helpful', and an abundance of different types of reading materials. None of these publishers mentioned provision for phonics, but when asked about it, they readily agreed that their schemes included that too. Several of these publishers pointed out that teachers now use a mixture of methods so it was important that their reading programmes catered to this need, and included 'a bit of everything'.

Seven new reading schemes were introduced in 1994. Accordingly, most of them include: attractive illustrations, stories about everyday events, books of poetry and rhyme, and a phonics element. But whether they are marketed as including 'everything' or not, the fact remains that the reading approach adopted is whole-word, with the emphasis on having children respond to printed words as if they are whole visual shapes, not as if they are symbols representing speech sounds, but as if they are symbols purely for meaning.

Illustrations

As illustrations are the most important feature teachers consider when buying reading schemes, early readers tend to be totally dominated by the illustrations. Both Oxford and Ginn offer a complete series of picture books for beginning reading that have no words in them at all. Thereafter the illustrations dominate the pages, with one or two words appearing insignificantly at the bottom of some of the pages. Instead of seeing the text as an important medium for interpreting the pictures, the new National Curriculum directs that reading materials should have 'illustrations that are visually stimulating and enhance the words of the text' (SCAA, 1994a, p. 6). Contrary to research evidence, illustrations are seen not as the distractors they are for many children, but as aids in learning how to read.

The Rhyme Bandwagon

The poetry books in the Oxford series are for older, accomplished readers beginning at Stages 3 and 4. Aside from

this too-little-too-late attempt, until recently there was no provision for developing phonological awareness. Oxford's introduction in 1995 of the *Rhyme and Analogy* materials (edited by Goswami) do provide the kind of instruction which alerts beginning readers to shared sounds in words. In this sense, this addition to the Oxford Reading Tree is to be greatly applauded as it puts into practice what has been confirmed by hundreds of research studies. However, using analogy or rhyme to teach letter-sound correspondences, as some of the games attempt to do, is a strategy that research has shown to be ineffective (for a discussion of this research, see Chapter 3, part 1).

Do such reading schemes along with the supplementary activities employed by teachers constitute a mixed-method approach to teaching reading?

The Mixture of Methods

In general terms, the mixture of methods used by almost 85% of teachers consists of: (a) the liberal use of reading schemes and their methods, and (b) the supplementation of this instruction with other materials and approaches. A closer look at the elements making up the 'mixture' will throw light on the degree to which the approaches used actually do represent a combination of different approaches.

(a) Reading Schemes in the 'Mixture'

If most of the popular reading schemes now being sold are marketed as programmes which incorporate a wide variety of approaches, as claims among publishers would suggest, then it is likely that teachers view their main reliance on a published reading scheme as fitting the mould of a mixed-methods approach. However, in a recent survey of schools, the fallacy of assuming that today's reading schemes provide a mixture of teaching methods was acknowledged (Cato et al., 1992). All of the reading schemes in popular use today advocate *only one way* of teaching reading: whatever the terms used to describe the methods, these schemes are fundamentally whole-word, non-code, so-called 'meaning-oriented' in their approaches. They all encourage whole-word or whole-story recognition, they emphasise deriving meaning through the use of memorisation and guessing strategies, and they are further characterised by their lack of attention to the importance of the alphabetic code.

(b) Supplemental Materials and Approaches in the 'Mixture'

An HMI survey of 470 classes (1990) describes in more detail some of the reading activities that are in common practice. While most of children's reading is 'centred' on books from various reading schemes during Years 1 and 2, other 'non-scheme books to widen the choice' are also in use (HMI, 1990, p. 9). The 'non-scheme' books referred to here are often called 'real books'. These are ordinary story books, but they are whole-word materials in the sense that the vocabulary is non-graded and it is expected that children will gradually learn to memorise what the words on the pages are.

Accompanying the use of these non-graded materials is a whole-word method, 'shared reading', cited by inspectors as a supplementary activity (HMI, 1990, p.9). This teaching method is often known as the *apprenticeship approach.* The method involves an adult reader, who models the reading process, shares the reading of a book with the child, reading it over and over aloud until the child is able to join in with the occasional word, recognising some of the words on sight in a whole-word fashion (i.e. no attention is paid to the individual letters making up the words).

There are additional supplementary activities, or 'associated work' noted by inspectors. These include the use of 'workbooks', 'games', 'practice sheets', 'word banks', 'dictionaries', 'sentence building', and 'phonic work' (HMI, 1990, p. 9). The 'workbooks', 'games', 'practice sheets', and 'phonic work' represent some of the practice materials that accompany the whole-word-oriented published reading programmes. These supplementary materials are invariably focused on developing reading comprehension and/or analytic word-attack skills. Finally, the 'sentence building', 'word banks', and 'dictionaries' are all features of a teaching method known as *language experience,* an approach which integrates the teaching of reading and writing. Language-experience is a whole-word approach where children are encouraged to memorise by sight an increasingly large collection of words that they have used in dictating their own personal stories to the teacher; after dictating, they copy out the stories and are then required, through various activities, to learn their own sets of words. Because the children effectively choose the words themselves, the words to be learned vary greatly in difficulty.

Taken together, neither the reading schemes in popular use nor the activities used to supplement them embody a mixed-methods approach. There is one basic method being used to teach reading in all these situations. As has been seen, not only are the reading schemes in use completely whole-word in their approach, but the supplementary activities observed reflect whole-word practices as well.

The Real Picture: The Mix-of-Methods Illusion

If, as shown, almost 85% of teachers concentrate on a mixture of methods, centring their instruction around reading schemes in combination with the supplementary activities, and a further 15% of teachers primarily use either a look-and-say, or a 'real books', shared-reading approach, *the actual percentage of teachers emphasising whole-word methods of teaching reading could be greater than 95%.*

Rather than a mixture of different methods, the true state of practice is that what most teachers are currently using to teach reading is a mixture of whole-word methods, methods that are not different, but all very much the same. That this is very much the case is confirmed by a National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) survey in which 90% of teachers reported that they used a method of teaching reading 'involving look-and-say' (Cato et al., 1992, p. 23). Once again, *look-and-say* is another term applied to a whole-word approach: children are taught to *look* at words, and *say* them, automatically recognising them as whole visual shapes; this is accomplished either through flashcard practice, or through the repeated exposure of the words in context.

Reading Schemes and the Alphabetic Principle

In short, the current reliance on the methods advocated by today's reading schemes is not supported by research as an effective way to teach reading at an early stage. There is little time spent on what children really need to know – the alphabetic principle. Progress towards a grasp of the alphabetic principle is hindered because:

1. the vocabulary presented is ungraded, irregular, and not sequenced in a way that facilitates the grasp of spelling-to-sound connections;

2. the type of phonics instruction, where provided, is infrequent, and analytic rather than synthetic, and therefore not systematic or explicit enough for most children;
3. the use of rhymes and poetry books is too late for promoting phonological awareness (most children will already possess phonological awareness at this rudimentary level by the age of 5);
4. there is no provision for early phonological training in hearing and identifying individual speech sounds, or for the systematic, sequenced, explicit teaching of letter-sound correspondences;
5. the whole-word emphasis encourages readers to remain stuck in a rudimentary pre-reading stage where words are perceived as visual wholes; unproductive reading strategies are encouraged to the point that for some children the 'reading' habits developed will be very difficult to break.

Thus, although present reading schemes may provide useful materials for later reading development, the current readers, and approaches advocated within these schemes, do not support *early* reading development, where acquisition of the alphabetic principle is key.

On the other hand, reading-scheme books that were to introduce regularly spelled words gradually in a structured, systematic, sequenced manner would provide the necessary practice; reading scheme books that were to introduce simply spelled words in parallel with the direct teaching of the letters and sounds needed to make up these words would provide the support needed for early reading progress. One research-based scheme that did provide such books was *Language in Action*. This scheme was based on the forty-four sounds of the English language and their degree of usage (Morris, 1974-1983) but unfortunately it is no longer in print.

The next chapter examines the research related to code-emphasis instruction, in order to gauge more clearly the impact that whole-word, 'meaning-emphasis' approaches have in dominating the current teaching of reading.

Summary

In spite of publishers' claims to the contrary, presently available reading schemes do not advocate a mixture-of-methods approach to teaching reading. The one universal

approach adopted is to encourage the memorisation of whole words and whole stories. The importance of teaching the alphabetic code is neglected in favour of satisfying other more fashionable demands from teachers. The features that publishers see as most important to include in their reading schemes are: natural-sounding language, poetry and rhyme, and above all, attractive illustrations.