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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest provides a rationale for an integrated language arts curriculum. The digest first defines integrating the language arts curriculum as providing natural learning situations in which reading, writing, speaking, and listening can be developed together for real purposes and real audiences. It then explores some of the research supporting integrated language arts instruction: first language acquisition research, emergent literacy studies, and classroom based research. Finally, the digest explores how the language arts can be integrated, suggesting that teachers focus on something other than language and provide an environment rich with resources for making language connections. (HTH)

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

Integrating The Language Arts

What Does It Mean?

Integrating the language arts means providing natural learning situations in which reading, writing, speaking, and listening can be developed together for real purposes and real audiences. It is a counterpart in the elementary school for the "language-across-the-curriculum" movement among high school and college teachers. Because such a high proportion of elementary classrooms are self-contained, with the individual teacher responsible for language arts as well as for most of the rest of the curriculum, the term "integration" seems appropriate to describe elementary school practice.

In the 1960s and 1970s, partly in response to the success of the integrated day curriculum in Great Britain, the claims of the many advocates of language arts integration began to be supported by an increasing body of respected research. During this same period, however, a counter trend developed, namely, an intensification of the conventional "subskills" approach to language arts instruction. In this approach, processes such as reading and writing are segmented into tiny components that are taught and tested as discrete units, discouraging efforts to teach the language arts in a holistic and natural way—to integrate them.

Language arts integration can be considered in three different ways: The most common understanding of integration is learning each of the language arts in terms of the others. Reading is learned through appropriate oral and written activities; writing is learned by attending to reading as a writer would—composing orally, reading drafts to peers, and engaging in related activities; and oral language is learned in the context of rich opportunities for receiving and producing written language. The second concept of integration is implied in the first: each language mode is an integrated whole, not a set of isolated, minute components. Finally, integration may involve the development of language while learning other content areas, such as social studies, science, or math, as in the "language-across-the-curriculum" model.

What Research Supports Integrated Language Arts Instruction?

Two decades of research in diverse fields have led to new understanding of a far more complex relationship between thought and language than that characterized by earlier behaviorist models of language and literacy acquisition. For example, John Mellon (1983) notes that children as they begin school have already successfully learned many word-order principles, semantic relationships, sentence-combining transformations, and lexical feature systems. The fact that this human competence grows as language used for real purposes—without formal coaching, drill, intensive corrective feedback, or direct instruction—suggests that school language programs might best emphasize the use of language in meaningful contexts.

At least three types of research support learning languages through use: first language acquisition, emergent literacy, and effective classroom experiences. Studies of *first language acquisition* of preschoolers demonstrate that children learn to use language not primarily as passive imitators, but as active agents constructing their own coherent views of the world. Children form hypotheses to try them out in natural contexts such as when a four-year-old puts all past tense verbs into a regular pattern (e.g., *cutted, eated, goed*) even after having previously used the irregular forms correctly (*cut, ate, went*). Many psycholinguists explain such phenomena by positing that infants are born "wired" for seeking meaning and generalizable patterns in their language-saturated milieu. When they discover a pattern, they try to extend it.

Major studies in *emergent literacy* have documented a similar search for pattern and meaning among preschoolers as they begin to pay attention to print. Even as young as two, a child can become aware of the difference between a written story and an oral narrative. Scollen and Scollen (1981) documented their daughter Rachel's transition from an informal oral account of her experiences to her "reading" of her own scribbles as "Once upon a time there was a girl named Rachel. . . ." When children first create scribbles, they expect them to carry meaning, as Marie Clay (1975) noted in her observations of children who, assuming that any adult should be able to read, asked her to "read" what they had "written" (i.e., scribbles). Thus, even before children are literate, they generate hypotheses about how written language is supposed to work. Charles Read's (1971) and Glenda Bissex's (1980) observations of children's development of invented spelling also support the belief that a child learns language in natural contexts for the child's own purposes.

Classroom-based research—longitudinal, ethnographic, case study, and classic control-group comparisons of student performance under various instructional conditions—also supports integration of the language arts. Donald Graves's and Lucy Calkins's case studies of writing show the energizing effect of oral interaction surrounding literacy events. Graves (1983) has convincingly demonstrated that children who are writing instead of going through a basal reader are learning to read at least as well as the other children and at the same

time are learning to write. Numerous other studies (e.g., King and Rentel, 1980; Clay, 1982) demonstrate that development of writing and reading are rooted in oral language.

Teachers have long been aware of the usefulness of oral prereading activities, such as Directed Reading Thinking Activities (DRTA), to generate questions prior to reading. This strategy has helped children learn to predict and thus read more efficiently. Teachers who have participated in Writing Projects have seen how writing can be used as an effective prereading activity, just as reading can be a powerful prewriting tool. Oral language throughout both reading and writing helps children maintain focus and interest. George Hillocks's (1984) meta-analysis of studies that compare strategies in writing instruction also demonstrates the value of integrating the language arts.

Three influential theorists and researchers—Kenneth Goodman (1967), Frank Smith (1983), and James Moffett—have translated into ideas for teaching many psycholinguistic insights into reading, writing, and oral language. In *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13,* Moffett and Wagner (1983) remind teachers that "language learning is different from other school subjects. It is not a *new* subject, and it is not even a *subject*. It permeates every part of people's lives and itself constitutes a major way of abstracting. So learning language raises more clearly than other school courses the issue of integration" (p. 38).

How Can the Language Arts Be Integrated?

Learning information *about* some aspect of language is not the same as developing language abilities, nor are drills, exercises, or workbooks a substitute for the *acts* of listening, speaking, reading, or writing in real communication settings. A good way to integrate the language arts is to focus on something else—the study of flight, or cats, or the water cycle, or energy-giving foods, or Boston in 1773, for example. If the goal is to experience a particular piece of literature, then the teacher should set up different ways of understanding that work through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, James Lincoln Collier's *My Brother Sam Is Dead* can be explored through a drama on the Boston Common in December 1773, involving the class in role-playing, pantomime, and diary writing.

When focusing on something other than language, the teacher needs to provide an environment rich with resources for making language connections. For example, a kindergarten teacher can provide opportunities to see print in context by labeling the objects in the classroom. In the primary grades natural occasions for reading and writing occur with the daily schedule, charts of classroom task monitors, or lists of the names and addresses of the class. The language experience approach to reading integrates the language arts in a way that improves not only reading but writing as well, because children see the *purpose* of both. Diaries, learning journals, records of observations—all will prepare children for later science lab reports. As they write true and invented stories, using almost anything inside or outside the classroom as a stimulus, they develop language fluency.

Also promoting integrated language learning are small group tasks, such as generating a list of questions for research, responding to first drafts of writing, discussing the meaning of stories or poems, deciding how to prepare a group report, editing one another's work for publication, and planning a readers theatre or other type of rehearsed reading.

School environments for integrated learning must be safe and structured, with ample opportunities for long periods of reading, writing, and carrying on task- or topic-oriented conversations in the classroom. Teachers can serve as models by engaging in all of these activities with their students. Children can learn subskills efficiently within meaningful interactions with others and with print. Their understandings of the language arts become integrated through processes that are themselves wholes rather than fragments.

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