Best Practices in Literacy Instruction (2nd edition)

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*Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* is worthwhile reading for any literacy worker, whether as a source of “best practice” ideas for the lower and middle grade teacher in a formal school setting or as background building for non-formal literacy workers in more remote settings. Editors Lesley Mandel Morrow, Linda B. Gambrell and Michael Pressley have done an admirable job of pulling together and organizing an inviting range of helpful topics. Their continuing concern for best literacy practices in the classroom is evident in this second edition of the book. While they are not very hopeful that best practices will become the norm in classrooms in the immediate future, that does not deter them from providing helpful ideas about what constitutes best practices in literacy.

The writers of each chapter have extensively researched their topics, with most chapters including a lengthy bibliography.

In what follows, I will present a brief summary of each chapter. I will also include general comments and more specific observations regarding how the material relates to the literacy development work among minority language groups that SIL International typically engages in.

**Perspectives on Exemplary Practices in Literacy (Part I)**

This first section contains two chapters. In chapter one, “Principles of Best Practice: Finding the Common Ground,” Susan Anders Mazzoni and Linda B. Gambrell discuss the characteristics of proficient readers. The importance of the role of the teacher in best literacy practices is presented. A table of ten research-based best practices is shared. Finally, eight principles of best literacy practices are listed and explained.

In chapter two, “Toward a More Complex View of Balance in the Literacy Curriculum,” authors P. David Pearson and Taffy E. Raphael deal with the need for a complex view of balance in the literacy curriculum. The debate about balance in the literacy curriculum is addressed, along with the attendant problems that arise when balance is not achieved. Finally, the chapter discusses what literacy professionals can do to ensure that balance is achieved in literacy education.
Strategies for Learning and Teaching (Part II)

This is the largest section of the book, comprising nine chapters.

In chapter 3, “Current Practices in Early Literacy Development,” authors Lesley Mandel Morrow and Elizabeth Asbury address current practices in early literacy development. They discuss theory, philosophy, and research that have had an impact on early childhood literacy instruction. Case studies are used to demonstrate exemplary literacy practices.

Much of the literacy work currently engaged in by SIL International literacy workers involves children. This may be direct, for instance, by helping a village develop a school where there are no other opportunities available for its children; or it may be indirect, for example, supporting the training of teachers and development of materials for the formal school system (as is being done in some areas of the Pacific and Africa).

In chapter 4, “What Research Says about Teaching Phonics,” author Patricia M. Cunningham addresses the issue of phonics. This is a highly debated topic. The author’s major conclusion is that children profit from systematic phonics instruction but that there is more than one effective way to teach phonics. Good results come from a high level of engagement, good classroom management, explicit skills teaching, integration of curriculum and lots of reading and writing practice. In this connection, it is worth noting that field literacy development organizations like SIL International are not exempt from the debate about phonics.

In chapter 5, “Best Practices in Vocabulary Instruction: What Effective Teachers Do,” Camille L. Z. Blachowicz and Peter J. Fisher address the topic of what effective teachers do to teach vocabulary. They present five guidelines for effective vocabulary teaching. The authors present the underpinning research for good practices in effective vocabulary teaching; then they describe a classroom where effective vocabulary teaching is happening.

Vocabulary building can be especially important where members of the language community tend to think more globally than linearly. One successful program in Africa started by learning several vocabulary words. Later in the program, word attack skills in the sense of dividing words into their component parts were addressed. We can learn from this.

In chapter 6, “Best Practices in Comprehension Instruction,” Cathy Collins Block and Michael Pressley take on the challenge of comprehension instruction. Several of the objectives for the chapter are quoted here.

This chapter will:

- Explore the theory, research, and current issues concerning comprehension instruction.
- Examine how comprehension is affected by word-level processes, vocabulary instruction, and above-word-level processes, vocabulary instruction, and above-word-level contexts.
- Describe recent developments in the teaching of comprehension processes.
Present recently developed comprehension instructional practices, including teacher reader groups, comprehension process motion signals, following author’s train of thought, and use of bookmarked texts. (p. 112)

The authors include several comprehension-building techniques in the chapter. Building comprehension techniques is at the heart of field literacy for organizations like SIL International. Once students understand that they really haven’t read something if there is no comprehension, then comprehension building techniques become essential. This chapter is helpful in this area.

In chapter 7, “Fluency in the Classroom: Strategies for Whole-Class and Group Work,” Melanie R. Kuhn discusses the topic of fluency in the classroom. The author presents strategies for the entire class, as well as for smaller groups. Fluency in the reading process is a major topic. Some strategies are presented for integrating fluency instruction into the literacy curriculum. An easy to implement four-point scale, the “National Assessment of Educational Progress’s (1995) Oral Reading Fluency Scale,” is suggested as an effective way to measure fluency among students in the classroom.

Failure to reach fluency is one of the greatest failings of mass literacy campaigns and for field literacy workers. Any helpful ideas on how to build fluency in a field literacy program should be welcomed by field workers.

In chapter 8, “Building a Sound Writing System,” Karen Bromley addresses the subject of building a sound writing program.

The chapter will:

1. Explore writing theory, research, and issues related to instruction.
2. Identify guidelines for effective K–8 writing instruction.
3. Describe classroom writing practices.
4. Suggest directions for future research and practice. (p. 144)

Questions are provided to help the teacher and the student do a self-assessment of his or her writing tasks—both the student as a writer and the teacher as one teaching writing skills. The author also presents a list of interesting websites for young writers.

Many, if not most, literacy programs that teach reading skills in a language not fully understood by the students will not be very successful in teaching good writing skills; that is, creative writing, not copying. Field literacy workers will benefit from this chapter.

In chapter 9, “Material Matters: Using Children’s Literature to Charm Readers (or Why Harry Potter and the Princess Diaries Matter),” Douglas Fisher, James Flood, and Diane Lapp address material matters; the use of children’s literature to hold and increase the attention of readers. The importance of using children’s literature in elementary classrooms is underscored. Instructional approaches for using children’s literature are identified. The question of how oral and written language development relates to literature instruction is examined. Grouping for effective
literature instruction is addressed. Some help is presented that will aid teachers in identifying good quality children’s literature.

Lack of materials—any kind of worthwhile reading materials—is one of the greatest challenges faced by field literacy workers. This challenge is even greater in languages where a literary base is only just developing. Good children’s literature in languages of wider communication can provide ideas for how to develop good literature in the emerging language development areas where many SIL International teams work. There is certainly a great need for this!

In chapter 10, “Adolescent Literacy,” Lisa Patel Stevens and Thomas W. Bean address such topics as the dichotomy between the literacy used in most secondary schools and that practiced by the adolescents outside the classroom. A brief review of content area literature and adolescent literacy is provided. Examples of engaging and not-so-engaging teaching of adolescents add reality to the chapter.

In many nations around the world there is a large population of out-of-school youth who need to be reached with effective teaching and learning of literacy skills. The lack of materials, mentioned in chapter 9, is a significant issue. Any help in effectively reaching reluctant or unschooled adolescents should be welcomed by field workers. This is aimed more at formal education but some ideas may be gleaned from this chapter for this needy area.

In chapter 11, “Best Practices in Literacy Assessment,” Peter Winograd, Leila Flores-Dueñas, and Harriette Arrington discuss assessment. The chapter examines some of the educational theory and political factors that influence current assessment practices. Guidelines that classroom teachers should follow in the ethical and constructive use of assessment for all students are discussed. Various ways of gathering information for assessment are explained. This thought-provoking chapter presents many worthwhile ideas on best practices in literacy assessment.

Assessment and evaluation are often neglected in field literacy programs (for instance, it is a minor topic in literacy training programs such as SIL International’s “Principles of Literacy class”). This chapter can be a helpful reminder to field workers that assessment is essential and it provides ideas that local teachers in field programs can adapt for conducting on-going assessment.

Special Issues (Part III)

In chapter 12, “Organizing Effective Literacy Instruction: Grouping Strategies and Instructional Routines,” D. Ray Reutzel deals with grouping strategies and instructional routines. The author shares some findings from a review of the current research on the effects of various grouping strategies. Strategies for implementation and the benefits and limitations of a variety of classroom grouping strategies are addressed. Variety is important for students, but it is also important to have some order and predictability in the classroom day. This builds security for the students, especially young ones.

In some areas, such as the Pacific, SIL International field workers help in teaching such skills as grouping strategies. This can make a major difference in whether teachers of large classes of
young children succeed. Though not all field workers may profit from this chapter, some certainly will.

In chapter 13, “See It Change: A Primer on the Basal Reader,” Nancy L. Roser, James V. Hoffman, and Norma J. Carr address the much maligned basal reader. The authors provide a historical look at basal readers. Some of the criticisms against basal readers are acknowledged, but effective ways of using basal readers are also shared. The message of the chapter is that basals have been around for a long time and will probably continue to be used. But the needs of children, not a curriculum totally driven by the basal reader, should be the effective teacher’s guide.

This chapter may not have much application for field workers of organizations like SIL International. There may well not be any basal readers available. But on the other hand, there may be knowledge of and interest in basals. It would not be wise to skip this chapter without at least glancing through it.

Kim Baker and Richard L. Allington address the subject of children with disabilities in chapter 14, “Strategies for Literacy Development for Students with Disabilities.” How can the needs of children with disabilities be met? The chapter discusses how these children can have their literacy development improved by having access to appropriate instruction. The most effective teachers of these children are those who provide personalized, interactive lessons, skills instruction within context, and lots of reading and writing opportunities. Students experiencing reading difficulties need a comprehensive system where prevention, acceleration, and long-term support are provided.

In the last few years there seems to be a growing number of people in SIL International literacy training schools who are expressing an interest and concern for blind and deaf children. While this population may be relatively small, it is not insignificant. For people who have a concern for the disabled, this chapter may prove helpful.

Chapter 15, “Effective Use of Technology in Literacy Instruction,” examines effective use of technology in literacy instruction. Michael C. McKenna, Linda D. Labbo, and David Reinking show how young children can effectively use computers. Two myths, that computers are too hard for young children to use, and that the student must be able to read in order to use a computer, are challenged and shown to be just that, myths. This chapter urges that children not only can, but must, be introduced to and enabled to successfully embrace computer technology. The chapter shows how several exciting ideas for using computers with children, including reluctant readers, can be successfully implemented.

People in third world countries are very interested in computer technology. In some areas, the best that can be hoped for is having computers available in tertiary or possibly, secondary education. That doesn’t change the fact that young children can benefit from using computers if they are available. There is challenging and worthwhile information here for field workers—possibly more so for older workers than for younger ones who already take computers for granted!
In this 16th and final chapter, “Achieving Best Practices in Literacy Instruction,” James W. Cunningham and Kimberly H. Creamer state that two essential conditions must be met in order for best practices in literacy instruction to be achieved. These are:

1. We must stop holding teachers accountable for student literacy learning. (p. 335)
2. Faddism in literacy instruction must give way to a continuing professional consensus. (p. 337)

As a teacher with fifteen years of classroom teaching experience I agree in part with the message of this chapter. The message of the chapter is that teachers need to be held accountable for best practices in literacy teaching, not for how many of their students did or did not successfully achieve an adequate level of literateness. That is valid. But who sets the standard of what is best practices? There is much disagreement on this topic. The teaching of phonics is just one very obvious area of disagreement. This leads into the second area, faddism. Educational theory seems to be like a pendulum. What is “best practice” this year may be discarded next year for a new set of “best practice” rules which will in turn be replaced with another. The authors do not hold out much promise that faddism will soon be a thing of the past. In the meantime, it is the teacher who does much to shape the literacy destiny of the students in his or her classroom.

*Best practices in literacy instruction* may not have a lot of direct application to most of the minority language, emerging literacy situations in which organizations such as SIL International work. However, for literacy workers who do not have a teaching background, much good information can be gleaned here on best practices in literacy in classrooms in the United States. The principles behind them could then be adapted and applied to other situations, even where schools do not have the rich resources in books and equipment that are available in most U.S. schools. Best practices in literacy instruction could be a good supplemental reading text for field literacy workers. I commend it to you for your profitable reading.