The unit letter: a strategy for reconciling explicit instruction and whole language

Lucy Butin Ashby
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
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THE UNIT LETTER: A STRATEGY FOR RECONCILING EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION AND WHOLE LANGUAGE

A Graduate Research Paper

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by
Lucy Butin Ashby
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Date Approved

Penny L. Beed
Graduate Faculty Reader

April 24, 1997
Date Approved

Dale D. Johnson
Graduate Faculty Reader

Greg P. Stefanich
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Abstract

Though differences between whole language and explicit instruction theories and research may seem irreconcilable, a growing body of research advocates an integration of the two. Combining the meaning-filled and student-empowering environment of whole language with needs-based explicit instruction is the solution most highly recommended. The unit letter activity is a teaching strategy for elementary-aged students which blends explicit instruction and whole language approaches. The activity involves student interaction with a thematic-related letter. The activity's purposes are two-fold: to convey information related to a theme chosen by the students and to provide an authentic context for learning and practicing reading skills and strategies. Students read the letter for meaning-making purposes, discuss areas of interest, then practice using and implementing specific reading skills and strategies. The unit letter activity is completed by a final review of the letter's meaning and a typed copy is sent home with the students to share with caregivers.
April 24, 1997

Editors
The Reading Teacher
414 White Hall
College of Education
Kent State University
Kent, OH 44242

Dear Editors,

Enclosed please find five copies of the manuscript "The unit letter: A strategy for reconciling explicit instruction and whole language," which I am requesting you consider for publication in The Reading Teacher. This manuscript is an original work and has not been simultaneously submitted to any other publication outlet.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Lucy B. Ashby
UNI Reading Clinic
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50613
H: (319)266-7741
W: (319)273-2698
The Unit Letter: A Strategy for
Reconciling Explicit Instruction and Whole Language

Lucy B. Ashby
University of Northern Iowa
The Unit Letter: A Strategy for
Reconciling Explicit Instruction and Whole Language

Practitioners in the field of reading today may feel as if they are caught in the middle of the direct instruction versus whole language debates (Walmsley & Adams, 1993). Proponents of both sides quote research extensively and reason articulately for the merits of their philosophies and the inadequacies of the other and may leave us feeling as if we must take a stand on one side or the other with the possibility of compromise or a middle ground seemingly out of reach and far-fetched (Stahl, 1992).

While many skills and strategies involved in the process of reading and writing could be directly taught (Eldredge, 1995; Stahl, 1992) the direct teaching of phonics has become the main issue about which this debate rages (Chall, 1996; Goodman 1996; Glazer, 1995; Willis, 1993).

Recent research has suggested that proficient readers use phonics (Adams, 1990; Goodman, 1994; Barker, Torgeson & Wagner, 1992; Ehri & Sweet, 1991; Newman & Church, 1990), that phonemic awareness is an essential skill in reading (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Stahl & Murray, 1994), and that explicit instruction in the area of phonemic awareness and phonics is beneficial to beginning readers (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Cunningham, 1990;
Baumann (1991) suggests that the evidence in favor of explicitly teaching literacy skills is so overwhelming that the issue between whole language advocates and direct teaching proponents is now no longer whether skills and strategies should be taught but rather by what method.

Studies supporting the value of explicitly teaching phonemic awareness and comprehension as well as other reading skills and strategies within a meaningful and literature-rich environment are in abundance (Vellutino & Scanlon, 1984; Byrne & Fielding-Barnesley, 1991; Vellutino, 1991; Cunningham, 1990; Paris & Jacobs, 1984; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1992). Active manipulation of print and the awareness of the forms and purposes of print that results provide not only the motivation for reading and writing but the backdrop against which reading and writing may best be learned (Clay, 1979; Adams, 1990; Stahl & Miller 1989; Vellutino, 1991; Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Stanovich, 1994). Research in which children who were taught phonics by "skill and drill" were compared with children taught through daily experimentation, discussion, and meaningful interaction with letter-sound relations showed significant gains by the interactive group over the "skill and drill" group (Cunningham, 1990; Dahl & Freppon, 1995). Children who are more
aware of the nature of reading tasks and strategies score higher on tests of reading comprehension, and several studies suggest that strategies fostering reading and thinking can effectively be taught in the classroom through direct explanation in appropriate contexts (Paris & Jacobs, 1984; Paris, Wasik & Turner, 1992).

In light of this research, a call for balanced instruction is resounding throughout the professional literature (Trachtenberg, 1990; Stahl, 1992; Diegmueller, 1996; Glazer, 1995; Moorman, Blanton, & McLaughlin, 1992). Proponents of balanced instruction advocate that educators utilize the "best of both worlds" and undertake explicit instruction of reading skills and strategies within the context of whole language's meaningful and authentic literary experiences (Eldredge, 1995; Baumann, 1991; Spiegel, 1992; Heymsfeld, 1989; McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1993, Chall, 1996; Stanovich, 1994). This leaves teachers with a dilemma. Exactly how can these two seemingly mutually exclusive theories of instruction be combined in a complementary manner? The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of the research in support of these two paradigms and then to present two methods that illustrate how they may be used in conjunction with one another.

Whole Language Rationale

Whole language refers to the theory that reading and writing
are language systems which should remain whole during instruction and not pulled apart into isolated and meaningless skills (Moorman, Blanton, & McLaughlin, 1992). Whole language advocates stress that whole language does not prescribe a set of classroom methods; it is rather a philosophy centered around the empowerment of the teacher and the student as decision-makers about the instruction and the learning taking place in the classroom (Deegan, 1995; Harste & Short, 1996; Willinsky, 1994). Students and teachers collaborate meaningfully and functionally with text in order to develop students' motivation and interest in the process of learning (McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1993). Whole language proponents assert that reading is a process acquired as naturally as speaking (Doake, 1986; Freppon & Dahl, 1991; Goodman, 1994) and that as students are immersed in a literate environment they will make discoveries and develop personalized understandings of language usage and conventions in text. Research by Freppon (1991, 1995) suggests that children engaged in self-initiated literacy learning activities are more active in their pursuit of meaning and less teacher dependent than their counterparts in a more traditional classroom. According to Goodman (1994), the kind of instruction needed is that which supports the learning children are naturally engaged in as they try to make sense of written language. Thus,
instruction occurs in response to the individual interests and needs of the student and may or may not involve specific phonics instruction (Freppon & Dahl, 1991).

Explicit Instruction of Reading Skills Rationale

Advocates of explicit or direct instruction adhere to the body of research supporting the idea that children learn best when reading skills are taught systematically and explicitly (Adams, 1990; Spiegel, 1992; Paris & Jacobs, 1984; Calfee and Piontowski, 1981; Baumann, 1988; Heymsfield, 1989). Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, & Donnelly (1996-1997) found this to be especially true of first-graders who were at-risk for reading failure: "First graders who are at risk for failure in learning to read do not discover what teachers leave unsaid about the complexities of word learning. As a result it is important to teach them procedures for learning words" (p. 325).

Systematic instruction in phonics along with the reading of books produced better results than no phonics instruction or incidental (taught individually on an "as needed" basis) phonics instruction particularly among at-risk children and those with disabilities (Chall, 1992-1993; Haskell, Foorman & Swank, 1992; Juel, 1996). Proponents believe that specific skills and knowledge about how print operates are necessary in order to comprehend text effectively and that beginning reading
instruction must involve the development of these skills (Eldredge, Quinn & Butterfield, 1990; Adams, 1990; Jardine & Field, 1996). One of these skills is phonemic awareness, or the ability to perceive a spoken word as a sequence of individual sounds (Lewkowicz, 1980; Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1986). Phonemic awareness itself has been shown to be a more powerful predictor of literacy acquisition than any other measure including intelligence and socio-economic factors (Bradley & Bryant, 1983). A study by Byrne & Fielding-Barnesley (1991) indicated that children who were engaged daily in activities designed to develop phonemic awareness (i.e., Is there a /s/ at the beginning of sea?) made greater gains in phoneme knowledge and word recognition than students who were given the same materials but asked to engage in semantic activities.

Reconciliation

Despite the appearance of incompatibility between the theories of whole language and explicit instruction there is a growing body of research in which suggestions for integrating the two theories is predominant (Spiegel, 1992; Trachtenberg, 1990; Richgels, Poremba & McGee, 1996). A recent article in Reading Today (1996) reported the results of a survey of effective elementary school teachers indicating that most of these exemplary educators blend explicit phonics instruction and whole
language approaches in their reading instruction. Whole language theorists concede that whole language does not have to exclude explicit instruction (Newman & Church, 1990; Willis, 1993; Strickland & Cullinan, 1990; Freppon & Dahl, 1991; Sulzby & Teale, 1991) and explicit instruction advocates concede that phonics and skill instruction does not need to follow a predetermined sequence or be conducted in isolation from actual reading and writing (McIntyre & Freppon, 1994; Stahl, 1992; Stahl & Miller, 1989; Yopp, 1995). In fact, both planned and unplanned reading instruction is advocated (McIntyre & Freppon, 1994; Durkin, 1990; Slaughter, 1988). A fear of some whole language advocates is that when phonics skills are taught, comprehension and meaning of texts will be lost. However, according to Chall's (1996) review of the NAEP 1992 summary results, when decoding skills were emphasized in the classrooms during the 1970s, comprehension scores actually increased. Research by Perfetti, Beck, Bell, & Hughes (1987) suggests that reading and phonemic awareness are reciprocal and may even benefit and build upon one another. A study by Reutzel, Oda, & More (1989) compared students' achievement in classes whose teachers employed a combination of explicit instruction and whole language with traditional phonics classrooms and whole language classrooms. They found that students in the combination whole
language/explicit instruction classroom fared as well or better on standardized measures of reading achievement. Other studies (Uhry & Shepherd, 1993; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1984) produced similar results. In addition, there is some evidence to support the idea that the usefulness of explicit instruction in reading skills increases as children gain more exposure to quality literature and are more familiar with the function of literature as communication (Stahl & Miller, 1989).

The dilemma regarding precisely how the combination of the two theories plays out in the classroom is very real and alive for many educators. Over my past eleven years as a classroom teacher of primary-aged students, this issue has been the central challenge to my language arts instruction. My classroom has evolved from one with a very traditional skills-oriented and basal-driven language arts curriculum to a whole language classroom in which decisions regarding when and what to teach revolved around personal observations from and about my students. I have worried that my whole language classroom has seemed without clear goals since I am no longer the one who predetermines precisely what teaching will occur. But once I observed the changes among my students as they reveled in the privilege of engaging in literate activities about things of importance to them, I was hooked on whole language and there was
no turning back despite my misgivings. However, it was my misgivings about the lack of structure and clearly defined mastery objectives that kept me from making the change all at once. Relinquishing control of the reins did not come naturally. Some would argue that I never truly did let go of the reins and I am inclined to agree with them. My agreement comes with an understanding that relinquishing my role as the planner, teacher, and final authority in the classroom is not a necessary component of whole language education. Instruction can be planned ahead of time and carried out in a predetermined manner and does not need to wait in the wings hoping that a teachable moment will present itself. There are, however, two conditions for the instruction. Pre-planned and scheduled instruction must occur in response to the interests, strengths, and needs of students and must be contextualized within meaningful literate activity. In my multi-aged classroom of six, seven, and eight-year-olds, children participate in reading and writing workshops (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994) as well as literature circles (Hill, Johnson, & Schlick Noe, 1995). Children are involved daily in several hours of reading, writing, sharing, and discussing for their own purposes. During this time I roam the classroom, conducting impromptu conferences with children as needs arise as well as formal ones in which we discuss progress toward individualized
literacy goals.

Our curriculum is integrated into units pertaining to social studies and science themes. Some of the literature read and discussed by students during literature circles and reading workshop is related to the current theme. However, one challenge is that there is a paucity of informative nonfiction books written on a level that beginning readers can enjoy and comprehend. In an attempt to remedy this lack of informational reading material as well as to teach the reading skills needed by the students, I initiated the unit letter activity. This activity consists of student interaction with a thematic unit-related message or letter. Because the content and skills taught through the unit letter activity can encompass such a wide variety of interests and abilities, I have found it to be successful with children in grades K-5.

The unit letter activity takes place during our daily unit meeting. The unit meeting is a classroom gathering that kicks off our science/social studies time each day. This meeting provides an opportunity for the children to sing favorite songs and share items or ideas pertaining to our current unit of study. The unit letter activity concludes the gathering.

A unit letter can take two forms (State College Area School
District, 1972). The first is that of a content letter which provides meaty information about our current thematic unit (i.e., reptiles and their characteristics, how to assemble an Inuit icehouse,) and can be used with any elementary-aged group. The second is the thematic poetry/nursery rhyme (i.e., Valentine's Day poetry, nursery rhymes about animals) which is best utilized with emergent readers. The latter variation provides students with a meaningful context in which to play with words and the sounds they contain, thus facilitating the development of phonemic awareness (Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1986). Since I have children who benefit from each of these unit letter formats, I use both of them on a regular basis with different groups of children.

The unit letter activity includes seven elements: teacher preparation, preview, shared or individualized reading, content discussion, skill and/or strategy discussion, shared reading, and family time. I will first describe each of these elements as they relate to the content letter format since this format generalizes to the widest variety of age groups. Transcripts from lessons using two different content letters from our unit on animals and their habitats will be used to provide examples of students' interactions with the letters. Then I will explain the differences specific to the second type of format, the
Teacher Preparation of the Content Unit Letter

Selection of the (a) letter's content, as well as the (b) reading strategy(ies) or skill(s) to be addressed, and (c) the recording of it onto a space large enough for groups of children to read, are the main steps involved in teacher preparation.

Letter content.

Once we have decided upon a social studies or science unit, I allow my students to generate and select the thematic subtopics about which they wish to know more. The unit letter for the first and last day of every new thematic unit consists of a K-W-L chart (Ogle, 1986) in which the children orally brainstorm, while I record what they already know, what they want to know, and on the last day, what they have learned about our unit of study. Using this list, I plan out a logical sequence for the subtopics and attempt to fit them onto a calendar of the weeks allotted for the unit. I select the content for each daily unit letter by referring to this calendar. Often I compose the daily unit letter myself using informational books as a guide; at other times I use a paragraph from pertinent literature verbatim or with adjustments to match the reading needs of my students. Sometimes I precede the unit letter with a read-aloud from a book pertaining to our theme; then the unit letter consists of a
written discussion about the selection read or directions regarding how we will be making use of the book selection in the day's activities.

**Skills or strategies.**

Selection of the skills or strategies to be taught is based on needs demonstrated by my students during observations of their literary activities (reading and writing, discussions, and journal entries) as well as their personalized literacy goals. Examples include: strategies for figuring out new words in texts; specific letter-sound relationships; comprehension strategies; conventions of print such as right to left movement and concept of a word; friendly letter format, punctuation, capitalization, word suffixes or prefixes and common spelling patterns.

**Recording of the letter.**

After deciding upon the content of the daily unit letter, I record the letter for the children to read. Recording of the letter can be a little tricky because I like to use the chalkboard to promote student interaction with the letter. This necessitates planning ahead so that the chalkboard is not needed for any other activity until the unit letter activity is completed. However, using chart paper on an easel is another good alternative although the children must take care to sit in spots allowing them to see, since chart paper does make the
letter a less than ideal size. When recording the letter, I use different colors to highlight features of the text that I want students to notice and new vocabulary words that will be discussed during the previewing part of the activity.

**Previewing**

Previewing begins as children come to the carpeted area in front of the letter for the unit meeting. After the singing and sharing, the students' attention is directed to the highlighted vocabulary words in the letter. Children enjoy the challenge of using decoding or semantic strategies to determine the words' pronunciations as well as their meanings. After making discoveries on their own, children share ideas and engage in discussion about the new words. Often books or dictionaries are pulled off the shelves to solve differences of opinion. Children make predictions about the content of the letter, based on the discussion, and establish a purpose for reading. An example of a previewing activity can be found in a unit letter activity on May 8 that introduced reptiles and their characteristics. The students had spent the previous week studying amphibians. The letter on the chalkboard read as follows:

May 8, 1996

Dear Biologists,

Another animal group is called reptiles. Reptiles resemble
amphibians in some ways but differ in others. Reptiles have scaly skin, not smooth like amphibians. They live mostly on land. Reptile babies resemble their parents. Reptiles lay eggs in land but not in water like amphibians. Reptiles are vertebrates. They breathe with lungs and are cold-blooded. How do reptiles compare to amphibians?

Love, Mrs. Ashby

The word resemble was new to the children and thus highlighted.

Mrs. A: This word here is kind of tricky, let's break it down.
Class: Re-sem-ble
Mrs. A: Can anyone put those parts together and come up with the word?
Marta: Resemble?
Mrs. A: Right, what does it mean to resemble?
Barbara: We could read the sentence to see what would make sense there.
Mrs. A: Great, would you all try that?
Joy: Does it mean that they have some things in common?
Mrs. A: Yes, I might say that Joy and Tennille resemble each other.
Joy and Tennille came up to the front of the room and the
rest of the children discussed the ways in which these two girls resembled one another. The next highlighted word was *differ*. We then discussed the ways in which these two girls differed. *Vertebrates* was also highlighted.

Brad: That word is *vertebrates*. We talked about that yesterday.

Mrs. A: And it means what?

Brad: It means they have those little bones in their backs.

A discussion ensued regarding other animals that were vertebrates and a disagreement arose regarding whether humans were vertebrates. It was resolved by Joel's insistence that he could feel those little bones in his back and as the others proceeded to feel their backbones and those of their classmates, we arrived at the conclusion that we, too, must be vertebrates.

The children then predicted what they thought the letter would be about based on our discussion. We decided upon "reptiles and how they're like amphibians" and each student was asked to be prepared to tell at least one way in which the two animal groups could be compared when they had completed their reading.

**Shared or Individualized Reading**

Depending on the material and the reading strengths of the group with which I am working, the letter is either read chorally with a student pointing to each word as we read or read silently
and individually. Comprehension and understanding are the goals of this reading. Specific skills have not yet been addressed and should not be until after meaning and purposes have been established. If individualized reading is done, I encourage students to ask for help on unknown words in an effort to ensure that comprehension of the letter is not hindered.

Content Discussion

The format of this discussion varies but always centers around the purpose for reading that was established in the preview. I facilitate this discussion but don't need to lead it as the students' enthusiasm and interests often dictate the discussion. I continue with an example from the unit letter on reptiles.

After a discussion in which the two animal groups were compared, the characteristic of scaly skin caught the interest of many of the students.

Amelia: What do scales look like?

Mrs. A: They're a little like fingernails laid on top of each other.

Amelia: Would they cut you?

Sean: They might if you ran your finger down them the wrong way. It's like a shark's skin only sharks don't have scales; they have little hooks in their skin.
Andy: Can I go get E.T. (the classroom turtle) so we can see?

Andy returned with the turtle and we passed him around, feeling the scales on his legs and observing his backbone which was on the outside ("Not on the inside like ours", Patrick observed).

**Skill and/or Strategy Discussion**

After the meaning and purposes of the letter have been established, only then is it appropriate to engage in explicit instruction of specific reading skills and strategies. This instruction is based on the observed needs of my students and can take any number of forms. If I am introducing a new skill or strategy, such as using context to determine an unfamiliar word, I might model its use as I read the letter and then ask the children to practice. If we are developing a skill that is already familiar, such as skimming for essential information, the children may be asked to practice the skill as they reread the letter. If we are studying letter-sound relations such as the sounds represented by the blends sh, th, wh, or ch, or learning to recognize spelling patterns such as words containing the rime "_air" , students might be asked to locate words in the unit letter that fit a specific pattern. An important aspect of this discussion is the unit letter booklet that children bring to each
unit meeting. These can be as simple as twenty half-sheets of blank or lined paper stapled together with a construction paper cover or as complex as spiral notebooks or shape-books cut to coincide with an aspect of the current unit of study. Children use this booklet to practice the skills being discussed. If we are studying meaning-making strategies children may be asked to write what they think the letter is mostly about and to list aspects of the letter that support their thinking (a variety of answers occurs and is always acceptable!) If we are learning how to actively question text, students might be asked to write one thing about the letter with which they disagree. If we're practicing prefixes or suffixes, children may be asked to write words from the letter that have these specific word parts. I use this practice time to rove among the students, answering questions, giving feedback, and making mental notes to record in my anecdotal records. An example of this type of interaction can be found during a lesson in which a unit letter about mollusks had been read and discussed on April 1. The skill I was introducing was recognition of prefixes. Several lessons on word endings had been presented prior to this.

April 1, 1996

Dear Oceanographers,

A mollusk is another type of animal that lives in the sea.
Mollusks are the largest group of animals that live in the water. Mollusks are *invertebrates*. They have soft bodies and are often *unprotected* from their enemies. Some mollusks have shells to protect themselves. Others must protect themselves in unusual ways. Can you name some animals belonging to the mollusk family?

*Love, Mrs. Ashby*

Mrs A: Today we'll be working on prefixes. Prefixes are word parts that come at the beginning of the word instead of at the end. You have a main root word but instead of an ending you have a "beginning". A good test is to take the beginning of the word off and see if a word that makes sense is still left.

The children began to search the letter for examples of words containing prefixes to record in their unit letter booklets.

Andy: Can you do something with *the*?

Mrs. A: Can you take part of *the* away and still have a word that makes sense?

Andy: Oh, no...

Allison: Is *unprotected* one?

Mrs. A: Let's help her check. What do you think the prefix on that word is?

Allison: *un*
Mrs. A: Can we take *un* away and still have a word? (Erases *un*) What word is that now?

Marta: Protected! That's still a word!

Mrs. A: Great, Allison. Come up here and underline the root word then circle the prefix.

A favorite aspect of this time is demonstration. Once students have practiced on their own, they revel in the opportunity to show what they have learned. Students enjoy circling, underlining, crossing out, revising or in other ways interacting with the letter on the chalkboard. This is also a chance for students to teach each other as they explain their observations and thinking processes and share their ideas. Due to the practical application that occurs during this time, opportune moments for clarifying misconceptions or for filling in any gaps in my explanations of the skills or strategies often present themselves. An example of this might proceed as follows.

Barbara looked at her booklet and realized she had written down a word that we had not discussed.

Barbara: But what about *belong*?

Mrs. A: I'm so glad you brought that up. This is very tricky. If we take off *be* do we still have a word?

Ben: Yes, it's *long*.

Mrs. A: But what is *be*?
Abhay: It's a real word like in "I'll be at your house at 5 o'clock to pick you up."

Mrs. A: Right! It's not a prefix. The word be just isn't ever used as a prefix in another word.

Shared Reading

After having pulled the "whole" letter into some of its "parts", it is necessary to reunite those "parts" back into a meaningful "whole" before leaving it. Rereading the letter chorally accomplishes this and ensures that the meaning-making purposes behind the reading are not forgotten. Individual students enjoy pointing to the words with a pointer as the rest of the class reads along. Final thoughts about the content are solicited and the lesson is concluded.

Family Time

Each day, the letter is typed out onto one-fourth of a sheet of paper and sent home with the students to share with their families. Parents have been very appreciative of this as it keeps them informed about classroom events and gives their children the opportunity to review both the content and the skills discussed.

Poetry/ Nursery Rhyme Variation

The poetry/nursery rhyme variation of the unit letter is one in which a theme-appropriate poem or nursery rhyme is used for
the letter instead of nonfictional content. It is a strategy I've used with emergent readers for the purpose of developing phonemic awareness, but older readers may enjoy a good poem as well. Research in phonemic awareness, specifically in the area of onset and rime acquisition, suggests that this ability is best taught to children prior to or concurrently with beginning reading (Haskell, Foorman, & Swank, 1992; Goswami, 1986; Perfetti, Beck, Bell & Hughes, 1987). Due to its extremely high correlation with reading ability, there is some evidence to support the idea that if students do not develop phonemic awareness prior to second grade they will not catch up with their peers in reading proficiency (Juel, 1988). Many children develop phonemic awareness on their own but for those who don't, lack of instruction reaps very harsh results.

Onset-rime segmentation (the rime consists of the vowel and all that follows it in the syllable, -all in fall, and the onset consists of anything preceding the rime in the syllable, f- in fall,) is one of the most useful phonemic awareness skills due to its predictability and generalizability (Wise, Olson, & Treiman, 1990; Gunning, 1995; Adams, 1990; Treiman, 1985) and one of the most enjoyable to teach and learn. Researchers in the field suggest that the most effective method for teaching it is by playing with words and the sounds in them (Griffith & Olson,
Research on children's preferences for poetry suggest that children most appreciate poetry containing humor, animals, and familiar experiences; for example, many children prefer the poetry of Jack Prelutsky and Shel Silverstein (Kutiper & Wilson, 1993). Rhyming poems are best enjoyed when the sounds can resonate throughout the room so choral reading rather than silent is recommended. The skill and/or strategy discussion section of this form of the unit letter focuses more on phonemic awareness skills. When I first utilize the poetry/nursery rhyme format with groups of emergent readers, I find my instruction must be explicit in order to teach them to hear and distinguish the sounds and patterns among letters and words. Later, I am able to take more of a backseat since the students enjoy taking the lead and excitedly point out rhymes and alliteration in the selected poems. Activities suggested by Lewkowicz (1980) for promoting phonemic awareness in the context of a poem are:

1) Sound to word matching (i.e., Does fish start with /f/? Does dog end with /g/?)

2) Word to word matching (i.e., Does dog end like pig?)

3) Isolation of beginning, medial and final sounds (i.e., What is the first sound in fish?)

4) Deletion of a phoneme (i.e., Say fish. Now, say it without
the /f/.

5) Specifying which phoneme has been deleted (i.e., Say meat. Now say eat. What sound did we leave out?)

6) Phoneme substitution (i.e., Say meat. Now say it with an f instead of an m.)

Phonemic awareness is, by its very nature, an oral skill and so the unit letter booklet is not often used. However, it can be used to build on the phonemic awareness skills by writing other words which fit the alliteration or rhyming patterns. A sample lesson using a poem by Ilo Orleans entitled "The Frog on a Log" might proceed as follows:

There once was a green
Little frog, frog, frog
Who played in the wood
On a log, log, log.

A screech owl sitting
In a tree, tree, tree
Came after the frog
With a scree, scree, scree.

When the frog heard the owl
In a flash, flash, flash
He leaped in the pond
With a splash, splash, splash (Foley & Kaufman, 1985).

After listening to my reading of the poem as I point to each word, the children engage in repeated choral readings of the poem while we emphasize certain words, clap out the rhythm, use hand signals in place of various words and enjoy other choral reading activities. A discussion of the poem's content follows and then it is appropriate to begin phonemic awareness activities. Sometimes these activities are put off until the next day depending on how much time we spent on the choral reading and enjoyment.

Mrs. A: Let's look at a few parts of this poem on their own. As I was reading, I noticed that several words were repeated more than once. Did anyone else notice that? Let's look at this line (pointing to the second line of the poem). What word is here three times?

Children's voices can be heard reciting the poem to themselves as they try to match up the words in their memory with the words on the page.

Eric: Frog!

Mrs. A: Great! Would you come up to the board and circle the word frog with green chalk every time you see it? (Eric does so.)
Mrs. A: (Pointing to the fourth line of the poem) can you figure out what this repeated word is?  
Ashley: Log!  
Mrs. A: Exactly! Please circle that word with brown chalk.  
(Ashley does so.) Now, let's all say those words together a few times.  
All: Frog, log, frog, log  
Mrs. A: What do you notice when you hear the sounds in those two words?  
Marnisha: They end the same. They both have /g/ at the end.  
Andrew: They both have an "o" and a "g" at the end.  
Mrs. A: And what do the "o" and the "g" sound like in "log" and "frog"?  
Dallas: /og/  
Mrs. A: What sound are we leaving out in "frog" when we just say "og"?  
Molly: /fr/  
Mrs. A: Excellent listening! And how about in the word "log"?  
Kayti: /l/  
Mrs. A: (Writing og.) Let's see if we can make some other words using the ending /og/. What word would we make
if we put a /d/ in front of /og/? (Writing d in front of og.)

All: Dog!

Mrs. A: Great! How about a /j/? (Erasing the d and writing a j in front of og.)

All: Jog!

Mrs. A: Now, can you all think of any other new words we can make using /og/? Look at the alphabet line if you need help thinking of sounds.

Several other words such as "fog", "bog", "hog", as well as some nonsense words are discovered. We label these with the term "rhyming words" and proceed to the next stanza to discuss "tree" and "scree".

Conclusion

Research has strongly indicated that early, explicit teaching of phonics and other reading skills and strategies can be valuable to many young readers. There is also evidence that children learn best within the context of meaningful interactions with literature read for their own purposes. The unit letter activity provides a method for combining explicit teaching of reading skills and strategies with a meaningful and content-rich environment. Since the letter is a regular component of an ongoing classroom unit, it allows for the integration of literacy
into other areas of the curriculum. The unit letter activity is motivating for children because the content comes from topics of interest to them which they have generated. This motivational setting is then used as the context for introducing, demonstrating, and practicing reading skills and strategies that are appropriate because they are based on the children's observed needs. From reading and interacting with ideas and words in the unit letter, children can learn new vocabulary, concepts, and information. They learn to set their own purposes for reading. They observe and participate in meaning-making strategies that can be applied when reading independently. Finally, they can learn and practice word-level skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and structural analysis, using words that come from familiar and important material. After having moved from the whole text to a study of smaller parts of the text, students conclude the activity by applying their skills and strategies as they reread the text both with classmates and with family members or caregivers. For years I have been in search of methods that are congruent with my beliefs about the importance of teaching literacy skills and strategies in the context of meaningful reading. The unit letter strategy is one answer to the dilemma of how educators can utilize the best of both whole language and explicit instruction theories in a complementary manner.
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