

A Balanced Literacy Approach to the Classroom

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Abstract

In recent years, educators and researchers have become conflicted and outwardly concerned over low language arts test scores. Students from various backgrounds with different learning styles are not reaching literacy and language arts goals of the 21st century. To fix this present conflict, a new system has been formulated, officially known as the balanced literacy approach. This system incorporates all necessary elements to learn the English language appropriately by combining two or more approaches into the curriculum. Using these various approaches collectively, students will have the opportunity to learn the structure of the English language and will receive instruction in phonics, spelling, writing, speaking, and reading.

A Balanced Literacy Approach to the Classroom

A new school year has just begun. Teachers are attending meetings, revising lesson plans, and making last minute adjustments to the way they will organize the classroom. Each step from meetings to crafting lesson plans is vital to creating a safe learning environment for students to prosper and develop according to state and national standards. In order to achieve grade level goals, teachers must implement strategies that provide quality learning for students with different modalities and various skill levels. In accordance with language arts a strong literacy curriculum is imperative to develop strong readers and writers (Tompkins, 2013). However, many upper elementary students have yet to master simple literacy skills with the instructional strategies provided by their teachers. A 2003 study conducted by the Nation's Report Card identified that only "Thirty-two percent of eighth grade students were reading at the proficient level..." (Bushman & Haas, 2006, p. 2). Action must be taken.

One of the most crucial aspects to include in the elementary setting is a concise and balanced literacy system. The balanced literacy system is "a combination of whole language and skill development approaches" (Uzuner, 2011, p. 2126). This method combines several approaches to increase each student's level of literacy comprehension. Students must be given the necessary tools to become citizens who can effectively communicate. The balanced system will help meet all the needs of students at their own level of cognitive development. The different approaches used in classrooms are as follows: literature circles, basal reading programs, reading and writing workshops, literature focus units, and thematic units (Tompkins, 2013). It is essential that teachers

implementing a balanced literacy program possess the necessary fundamental knowledge of various approaches to meet the intricate learning needs of individuals.

Literacy & Illiteracy

Effective communication is vital to the success of individuals and communities alike. The creation of society and the developing and expanding of one's knowledge would never come to fruition if it were not for writing and reading. Moreover, the preservation of artifacts, historical documents, records, and other data found throughout the ages would be non-existent for the use of future generations (Harman, 1987). Beloved fairy tales would eventually disappear because "Cultures sustained through oral means are subject to transformation and loss" (p. 93). Literacy is a foundation and stepping stone for individuals to become active participants in a world where new discoveries are continuously made. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "It is the key, or one of the keys, to the already solved problems. And not only so. It gives a relish, and facility, for successfully pursuing the [yet] unsolved ones" (1953). Being literate can be simply defined as having the ability to read and write or more specifically "to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 182). Empowering future generations to acquire knowledge through literacy is one of the most valuable assets one could give.

In 2006, a study called *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading* was released by ACT to the public (Rothman, 2007). The ACT report claims that "Student readiness for college-level reading is at its lowest point in more than a decade" (Rothman p. 96). Authors Relles and Tierney note that "the

estimated 36 percent” are active in remediation coursework (2013, p. 478). Although numerous surveys and organizations claim various statistics for illiteracy, a wide majority of adults and young adults are less than proficient on the literacy scale (Relles & Tierney). Another study done by *Reading at Risk* in 2004, mentioned that thousands of adults are reading less literature than ever before (Rothman, 2007). As this is the case with adults alone, one can imagine the damaging effect this has on future adults. In today’s world, a person can listen to the radio or turn on the television to listen to the news without having to read. In such a technologically infused culture, teachers and parents must be aware of the developmental process that takes place when introducing literacy into a child’s life.

The stages of literacy begin early on in childhood because children are exposed to language, sounds, facial expressions, and gestures as forms of communication. Children entering kindergarten will most likely be able to communicate orally, whereas they will still be in the very early stages of writing and reading. G. E. Tompkins, author of *Language Arts: Patterns of Practice*, writes that “Young children aren’t taught how to talk; this knowledge about language develops unconsciously” (2013, p. 8). Children at this stage of development may be able to write by using scribbles or read by recognizing environmental print prior to school mainly due to their exposure to reading and writing through caregivers or self-discovery (Tompkins, 2010). At any rate, a teacher’s goal is to prepare all students, regardless of skill level, for a successful mastery of the standards.

In today’s classroom, there are students from all walks of life. This includes different cultures, religions, nationalities, and other influential aspects of people’s lives. The job of a teacher is no longer to present the information one way but in multiple ways

for different people. People process information in diverse forms. For example, some people are auditory learners, while others are visual or kinesthetic learners. Each child will come to the classroom with his or her own experiences and levels of literacy. In order to build upon each student's schemata successfully, the teacher must be aware of each student's background and differentiate instruction accordingly (Tompkins). For students to develop literacy skills efficiently, differentiation and full exposure to language arts as a whole can be implemented by using a plethora of approaches. One of the best ways to differentiate and meet the intricate needs of students is to create a balanced system for literacy.

Language Structure

Before a specific analysis of the balanced system occurs, one must understand the basis and overall structure of language. There are four language systems that are combined together to create the English language (Tompkins, 2013). Each system is necessary in order for effectual communication and appropriate literacy techniques to transpire. The four language systems are as follows: phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (Tompkins). The phonological system is referred to as the sound system because it represents the 44 sounds that make up the English language (Tompkins). While learning this system, students increase their understanding of phonological and phonemic awareness and become conscious of the relationship between sounds, phonemes, and the "written representation" of sounds, graphemes (Tompkins, p. 9).

The syntactic system deals with the grammatical structure of English (Tompkins). Without students' proper instruction of the syntactic system, communication could prove to be difficult. Since language usage is intended to create meaning, the third

system, known as the semantic system, primarily focuses on the terminology of words (Tompkins). Tompkins acknowledges that “Children probably learn 7 to 10 words a day, many of which are learned informally through reading and through social studies, science, and other curricular areas” (Tompkins, p. 10). Children are exposed to vocabulary at home, in their community, and virtually everywhere.

This leads us to the pragmatic system, which refers to the use of standard and non-standard forms of English (Tompkins). Standard English is used in formal settings while non-standard English is used at home and reflects the community the speaker is from (Tompkins). S. M. Blair-Larsen and K. A. Williams (1999) solidify the importance of each system by stating “Literacy is not solely constructing meaning. Any program that attends only to the construction of meaning, without attention to word identification, cannot by definition be a balanced approach” (p. 10). Each system is a part of a greater plan and if one part is left out, then a student’s ability to be proficient in the English language has been altered.

The Balanced Approach

Each system of the English language should be bound together for the betterment of the student. The same is true for the multiple approaches used by teachers to instruct literacy. Separate approaches should be conjoined into a cohesive system. D. L. Spiegel dictates that, “Not everyone learns in the same way; not every task requires the same strategies not every teacher has the same talents; not every school has the same combination of learners and teachers” (1998, p. 116). This statement further solidifies the point that one, solitary approach will never reach the needs of an entire classroom.

When referring to the diversity of students, it is safe to say that an isolated approach does not contain a quick fix of being a “one size fits all” deal (Spiegel, p. 115). Students come to class with previous background knowledge, as well as social and cultural differences than their peers. It is up to the teacher to choose specific strategies that will connect to each student. Spiegel supports the implementation of a balanced literacy system mainly because it is the best way to help diverse learners effectively (p. 116). A balanced system insures achievement for multiple reasons. A deeper look into its origin reveals its basis of success.

In 1996, reading test scores were below average in California schools (Asselin, 1999). During this time the whole-language curriculum was being used and was proving to be ineffective. The whole-language approach does not support or include phonics in instruction, but rather focuses on creating meaning within the text the student is reading (Reyhner, 2008). This approach allows students to explore and form their own understanding within the text (Reyhner). However, without the application of phonics into the classroom students are losing an important piece of the literacy puzzle. What occurred in California has now spread throughout the world of education and thus, the balanced literacy system has been born (Asselin, 1999).

The balanced literacy system includes anything that has to do with literacy. Phonics, spelling, writing, reading, and oral communication should all be included as part of a balanced curriculum. This system is founded on research, a comprehensive view of literacy, the necessity of differentiation, and is flexible (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999). Research is a base for the balanced system primarily because researchers have found that one approach may meet some students’ needs, but not all the students in the class (Blair

Larsen & Williams). In order to create a successful approach to meet the various needs of each student, research has shown that numerous approaches would serve as key to the classroom experience. Spiegel explains that “A comprehensive view of literacy is inclusive, not exclusive. It does not emphasize one aspect of literacy at the expense of another. It is balanced” (1998, p. 118). Reading and writing are to be treated as equally important when using the balanced system because the successful use of one strengthens the successful outcome of the other (Spiegel).

The balanced system is realistic in that it encourages the further advancement of literacy skills for all students (Blair-Larsen & Williams). It also serves as a realistic viewpoint of the diversity within each classroom. Past approaches focused on teaching one way, rather than teaching each individual student by using a plethora of techniques. Therefore, the balanced system is extremely flexible because there is room for multiple approaches to be used (Blair-Larsen & Williams). The teacher makes decisions on a day-by-day basis to fulfill the needs of her students (Spiegel, 1998). This flexibility keeps reading and writing interesting for students. It is important to remember that students need to be stimulated in order for learning to occur. Learning would become dull if students were only introduced to limited amount of approaches throughout an entire year. If students’ cognitive needs are not being met, then they will lose touch with what is taught in the class.

B. B. Frey, S. W. Lee, N. Tollefson, L. Pass, and D. Massengill state, that “Balanced literacy is often characterized in a comprehensive and complex way. It is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments by using various

approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control” (2005, p. 272).

Teachers can choose from several approaches because a balanced approach includes the following: independent, small and whole group activities, mini-lessons, student discovery and teacher directed activities (Spiegel, 1998). It is a teacher’s goal and responsibility from the first day of school all the way to the last to teach effectively using hands-on activities, creative assignments, diverse and enriched lessons, setting a positive learning environment, and giving students the best possible education. Strategies, skills, and multiple approaches must be implemented well in order for such a learning experience to occur. There are a variety of instructional programs that can be implemented and combined to form a balanced approach for a teacher’s literacy curriculum. The approaches will be mentioned as follows: literature circles, the basal reading program, reading and writing workshop, literature focus units, and thematic units.

Literature Circles

Implementing literature circles is one way to encourage the creation of a balanced literacy approach in the classroom. Literature circles cater to the whole individual for a well-rounded effect. Not only do literature circles focus on fostering reading fluency and a passion for reading, but also on building discussion skills, promoting independent reading and forming the belief that acquiring knowledge is, in part, each student’s responsibility (Tompkins, 2013). The students read the book independently and then discuss the various aspects of it with a small group of classmates. The discussions also help students comprehend the texts, making reading a more enjoyable assignment. For example, a student named L. C. expressed that “Literature circles help me improve my understanding of the books we read. It’s helpful to be able to discuss the book with peers

and what others think. Literature circles help me a lot, and they're a lot of fun" (Morris & Perflenfein, 2009, p. 8). These literature circles meet the needs of kinesthetic, visual, and auditory learners alike because of the group discussion and the diverse roles that are used.

The first step a teacher takes when creating literature circles is by selecting five or six books that are written at the independent reading level for all the students in the class (Tompkins, 2010). Reading at an independent level means someone is reading a text fluently, can comprehend more than 97% of the words, and does not need assistance (Treptow, Burns, & Mccomas, 2007). Then, the teacher collects about six copies of each book so that every student is provided with a book of his own (Tompkins, 2013). The teacher then introduces the books to the class. This is sometimes referred to as a "book talk" because the teacher is talking about the book (Tompkins, 2013, p. 33). The reason why the teacher does a "book talk" is because each student is given permission to choose his own book (p. 33). However, the students must be reading a book that is at their independent reading level to prevent frustration with a text being too easy or too difficult (Tompkins, 2010). So, students can rank the books from most interested to least interested by writing the titles in descending order. Then, the teacher will place the students in a group with a book that meets their independent reading level (Avci & Yuksel, 2011).

Once the groups are made, it is up to the students to select their roles and plan a schedule of how much to read and when to meet (Avci & Yuksel, 2011). Teachers may decide to choose the meeting times and reading schedule for time management purposes. She may also give the students a list of roles that are suitable. Each student will be responsible for filling a role each week and will be expected to discuss their finding at the

next meeting. One person may be the “word wizard,” while someone else may be the “artful artist” for the particular week (Tompkins, 2013, p. 35). Other roles such as the “discussion director” and “connector” direct each student’s attention to a different facet of the book (p. 35). The variety of roles that students fill in literature circles is what makes it so versatile. Once the groups have finished their books, each group will create and present a project about the book to the class (Tompkins). The purpose of the presentation is to present the book without giving away the ending so that the audience, classmates, will decide to read the book (Tompkins). This approach further encourages aesthetic reading in young people because students are given more freedom to read texts that they are interested in and can connect with.

Starting in Chicago during the 1990s, literature circles have become a success in the United States for both native English speakers and English language learners (Shelton-Strong, 2011). S. J. Shelton-Strong mentions that “Using LCS within the greater ELT context appears to be not only feasible but also largely compatible with established practice and within what is widely considered to be a pedagogically appropriate approach to stimulate language acquisition” (p. 222). Implementing a literature circle into a balanced literacy system is vital for the development of the English language. English learners can further develop their language skills because they are able to listen to classmates speak in an intimate setting where they can ask questions and form an understanding of the text alongside their classmates (Pearson, 2010). The use of roles is also effective because English learners will spend most of their energy and efforts completing one task rather than having full responsibility for a whole project. This decreases frustration and focuses in on one aspect to help the students hone their skills in

each role. Since literature circles are so effective, it would be to the benefit of a teacher and her students to include it as part of her balanced literacy system.

Basal Reading Program

Over the years, professionals in the education realm have either been advocates for or opponents against phonics. Phonics is an integral part of the English language system, and therefore is vital for school instruction. A. L Heilman insists that “The purpose of phonics instruction is to teach beginning readers that printed letters and letter-combinations represent speech sounds heard in words (1993, p. 1). Although highly necessary and vital to student development, phonics should be implemented without making it the centerpiece of literacy instruction. One reading program that includes phonics for the purpose of teaching students to decode words is the basal reader (Stein, Johnson, & Gutlohn, 1999).

Basal readers have been used in schools since the mid nineteenth century (Tompkins, 2010). A basal reader is a reading program that offers a compilation of readymade lesson plans, workbook assignments, paperback books, and grade-level textbooks (Tompkins). Everything is already mapped out for the teacher, which is a valuable feature for novice teachers. The lesson plans that are included generally focus on instructing students about grammar, phonics, spelling, phonemic awareness, and numerous reading strategies and skills (Tompkins).

The first few years of elementary school are vitally important to the development of literacy. During these foundational years, students are exposed to sight and high-frequency words. In order to help students take further notice of these basic words, basal readers actually “contain visual cues” throughout the textbook as a guide (T. B. H.

Brown, 2010, p. 265). Students need to be equipped with phonics instruction so that they can create meaning by decoding words on their own. Tammy B.H. Brown points out that “Mrs. Park sees reading as a meaning-making process, built on a foundation of fluent decoding” (2010, p. 264). Basal readers are one way to promote the learning of phonics to further increase reading skills.

Although a basal reader is great for strengthening reading skills, word identification, and decoding skills, it lacks differentiation primarily because everything included in the curriculum package is geared toward one reading level (Tompkins, 2013). Also, many teachers previously used basal readers as the only reading program for literacy development (Tompkins). In today’s classroom, teachers may decide to use certain aspects of a basal reader that may help students with a weakness that the basal reader addresses. The lesson plans provided can be a starting point for new and improved lessons that are appropriate for all the students. Just like using a curriculum book, a basal reader can be a wonderful foundation for teachers to build on. Including it in a balanced literacy system would promote phonics skills and reading comprehension.

Reading & Writing Workshop

In today’s America, a fast pace is considered the norm. Each day is filled with attending school, partaking in extra-curricular activities, watching TV, playing video games, exploring the internet, and running errands. Children and adults tend to gravitate to faster paced activities rather than reading a book. It is even noted in the textbook, *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* that “Most people don’t read. A very small part of our population, about 3% buys 95% of the books sold in bookstores” (Bushman & Hass, 2006, p. 2). One way to encourage students to become life-long

readers is to use reading workshop alongside other approaches as part of the balanced literacy program. The reading workshop began in 1987 and was created by Nancie Atwell (Tompkins, 2010). Reading workshop is unique because it is student directed rather than teacher directed (Tompkins). As G. R. Muschla put it, the teacher turns into “a manager of learning” rather than a “spoon-feeder” of knowledge (1997, p. 5). Students are allowed to pick their own books from any genre or specific topic that interests them (Tompkins, 2010). The freedom to choose a book is instrumental when encouraging students to read (Buhrke & Pittman, 2008). This is a fantastic way to connect young readers to texts that they are curious and passionate about.

Each teacher can create her own reading workshop that works toward the benefit of her particular students and teaching style. However, a reading workshop is generally comprised of “reading, responding, sharing, teaching mini-lessons, and reading aloud to students” (Tompkins, 2010, p. 344). To begin, a teacher usually teaches a mini-lesson which lasts about ten minutes long (Muschla, 1997).

Mini-lessons are short lessons that teach students necessary skills, strategies, or various topics that address the texts being read (Muschla). After the mini-lesson, students read their books independently for at least thirty minutes (Tompkins, 2010). Then, the students respond by writing in their reading logs about their initial reactions to what was read to later share their findings with classmates or the teacher (Tompkins). Teachers can have students use reading logs in various ways. For example, a sixth grade teacher had her students write letters to her about their opinions on what they were reading and how it connected to their lives (Swift & Wolford, 1993).

Reading aloud to students is one crucial way to introduce a wide selection of books, genres, and authors that the students may become interested in. This essential activity takes place at some point during reading workshop (Tompkins, 2010). Once again, it is important to remember that each teacher is different and may organize reading workshop dissimilar to others. For example, one teacher may decide to read aloud before the mini-lesson, where another teacher chooses to read after the students share what they have read. The literature selected for read aloud is generally at the instruction or frustration reading level of students (Tompkins). This is a deliberate act, because it exposes children to higher forms of literature that they cannot read on their own. Reading aloud also encourages “grand conversations” because the whole class converses about the text (p.349). It serves as a model for English learners because the teacher is reading smoothly, fluently, and is providing a large span of vocabulary (Tompkins). Overall, reading workshop is highly effective.

Two teachers noted a specific change that elicited “positive reading experiences for students” while using reading workshop (Buhrke & Pittman, 2008, p. 18). One student even exclaimed that “Readers’ Workshop is fun reading!” (p. 18). These teachers support reading workshop and announced that “We have found that our students are confident in themselves as readers because they are able to read independently, at their own pace, through the use of leveled texts” (p. 19). Since reading is a fundamental skill, it is encouraging for teachers to use reading workshop, as it is known to work. Rather than centering in on reading levels and teaching to a state or national test, reading workshop focuses on creating life-long readers.

Reading and writing are inseparable. G. Tompkins mentions, that “Researchers have found that more reading leads to better writing, and more writing has the same effect on reading” (2013, p. 173). The addition of writing workshop to a classroom increases the quality of student writing and reading. Through writing workshop, students learn about the writing process from the first stage all the way to the last (Tompkins, 2010). The framework of the writing process begins with prewriting, then moves on to drafting, revising, editing, and finally to publishing (Tompkins). Writing workshop occurs during a segment of time between an hour to an hour and a half with three separate parts for students to write, share, and participate in mini-lessons (Tompkins). This approach is not designed for students to write for an hour and a half. In fact, it is discouraged because students need to learn about writing strategies and talk about their writing with others to further develop their writing skills.

Teachers use mini-lessons as a way to teach students about the five stages that occur throughout the writing process (Tompkins). Teachers may decide to model each stage by providing examples of written work for students to better comprehend the intricate process of writing. To further their knowledge, students choose writing activities, such as writing a story or poem, and write according to their individual pace for at least thirty minutes out of the entire workshop timeframe (Tompkins). The students are allowed to choose a topic of interest, because writing workshop is designed to teach writing skills in a positive learning environment. Therefore, letting students write at their own pace is essential because it alleviates frustrations and insecurities’ that the students may have when students are forced to finish writing assignments in a short span of time. Writing workshop encourages students to become confident writers.

During the writing stage, students meet with the teacher to ask questions or merely talk about the topic and the stage of the writing process they are currently working on (Tompkins). This is effective because it encourages an open relationship between the student and teacher. This meeting can also give the teacher insight about the student as an individual and his personal interests. After students meet with the teacher, they finish up their writing activity and prepare to meet with the rest of the class.

The final part of writing workshop consists of the students sharing and discussing what they have written to their classmates. Once students have published what they have written, they share by reading their piece to the whole class. This is sometimes referred to as the “author’s chair” (Tompkins, 2010, p. 351). Using the author’s chair is a great way to instill confidence and pride in one’s work. In addition, it helps create a healthy community where learners can come together, build each other up, and learn as a whole group.

Writing workshop has become quite successful in the classroom. One study revealed that writing workshop increased student motivation to write during free time (J. Jasmine & W. Weiner, 2007). After using writing workshop for quite a while in this particular study, the students became less dependent on teachers for topics to write about and starting coming up with their own ideas (J. Jasmine & W. Weiner). The students became proud of their stories and were eager to share with the rest of the class (J. Jasmine & W. Weiner). One child even expressed that “I want other people to ask me more questions so I can add more details to my story” (p. 138). It is reasons like these that writing workshop should be included in a balanced literacy system for writing skills to develop. Writing workshop encourages students to care about the quality of their written

documents. Not only is the workshop developing self aware and self responsible learners in a positive manner; it is building on the foundational essentials that children need in order to write correctly. Since writing is one of the most fundamental skills for success, writing workshop would enhance a balanced literacy system.

Literature Focus Units

Teachers make strong impacts on students' lives, whether good or bad. Choosing literature for classroom use that is not well written, disinteresting, and not relatable will decrease any motivation to read. Along with literature circles and reading workshop, literature focus units promote reading skills for the purpose of developing and motivating a generation of young people to become life-long readers.

Literature focus units provide various high quality genres to strengthen the literacy development of students (Moss, 1984, p. 3). J. F. Moss insists that "Children who have learned how to get meaning from written language and to enjoy reading and exploring the world of books as an integral part of their life experience, have acquired the power for growth through active learning outside of and beyond formal schooling" (1978, p. 483). Furthermore, these focus units instruct students concerning the pre-reading, reading, responding, exploring, and applying phases of reading (Tompkins, 2010). Teachers use mini-lessons as a way to introduce these phases and other additional reading strategies (Tompkins, 2013). For example, if the students are learning about a particular genre like historical fiction, then the teacher will teach a mini-lesson that focuses on the specific aspects that form the basis for what is considered historical fiction. Or if the unit is focusing on an author, the teacher may teach a mini-lesson on the author's biographical information and contribution to writing.

In order for focus units to be successful, teachers need to organize their units in detail before presenting them to the class. The focus units span over a certain amount of time, so excellent planning is essential. Since focus units are mainly teacher directed, a vast amount of prep work is involved (Tompkins). Before lesson plans are created and literature is selected, an objective should be decided by the teacher (Moss, 1984). The objective is vital because everything included in the unit will revolve around it. Once this is completed, literature selection process begins (Tompkins, 2010).

The teacher will select a piece of literature and find multiple copies and other materials to support the unit (Tompkins). Teachers can decide to read the book as a class, in groups, or individually. Not every focus unit will require the same amount of time, because of the variety of unit topics (Tompkins). A teacher can decide to create a unit on a picture book, a novel, a specific genre, or author (Tompkins). When featuring a genre or author, multiple books will be implemented into the unit, which will take more time. However, it is important to keep the unit fresh and interesting by scheduling it no longer than one month (Tompkins).

Students are not given reading materials just for the purpose of reading. As stated earlier, responding to literature is a key component to focus units (Tompkins, 2013). Responding encourages reading comprehension and student connection to the text (Bushman & Hayes, 2006). For literature focus units, reading logs and class discussions are used as forms of responding (Tompkins, 2013). An additional piece that is included in focus units is usually a project that encompasses what the students have learned (Tompkins). When implementing a balanced literacy system, differentiation is crucial. Focus units give students the freedom to express knowledge using a variety of projects.

For example, students can present a poster, power point presentation, write a poem, or perform a puppet show (Tompkins). One author even suggested creative writing as a fun way for students to show what they have learned in a unique manner (Moss, 1984). These projects do not only serve as an excellent tool to learn about how to make effective presentations but also to assess what students have learned. Therefore, focus units are a beneficial way for students to learn and for teachers to gather data for assessment purposes.

Thematic Units

Throughout the school year elementary teachers are constantly creating, editing, and revising lesson plans for all the subject areas. These teachers also attend school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, grade papers, and do much more. Due to loss of time, some subjects may be taught less than others out of necessity. It is extremely important to provide knowledge of all the subjects to young learners. In order to provide all the knowledge necessary, it is beneficial to use thematic units in the classroom. Thematic units open an opportunity to "...integrate language arts with social studies, science and other curricular areas" (Tompkins, 2013, p. 37). Instead of just focusing on reading and math the teacher can use literature and language arts in the other subject areas. In addition to using the subject textbooks, students read other texts like magazines, picture, story, and nonfiction books for further enrichment on the focused subject and language arts (Tompkins).

To begin, teachers select language arts standards and find the various texts they wish to use in the thematic unit (Tompkins). Then, planning and correlating language arts activities with the textbook occurs (Tompkins). After this, students use graphs, charts and

learning logs to record what they have discovered, learned, or are curious about pertaining to the topic in focus (Tompkins). One chart in particular, known as K-W-L, is a great tool to use for pre-assessment, formative assessment, and questioning throughout a thematic unit (Tompkins, 2010). The teacher places the chart on a wall in the classroom and asks students what they know, what they want to know, and what they have learned about the topic (Tompkins). This chart is not expected to be completely filled out until the last day of the unit, because learning should be done progressively (Tompkins). It is a great way to actively promote student engagement throughout the thematic unit.

A variety of materials should be put into effect when using a thematic unit. For instance, word walls should be used so that students can learn the vocabulary found in the textbook or other supporting texts (Tompkins, 2013). Although one may think implementing a thematic unit as difficult, it will be worth it in the long run because of all the learning experiences the students will encounter. Through using different materials such as technology resources, students can be exposed to and experience subject matter in a whole new way (Tompkins). Additionally, diverse materials benefit the assorted learning styles of those in the classroom. It is the teacher's goal to present information in a differentiated way (Tompkins). Near the end of the thematic unit, students complete projects to show what they have learned (Tompkins). These can be oral, written, or visual projects (Tompkins). In fact, some teachers allow their students to come up with creative projects of their own choosing (Tompkins). Thematic units empower students to learn important subject matter while developing language arts skills at the same time.

Balance

A balanced approach creates life-long learners. The approaches defined above can all be used in unison as a balanced approach. One teacher may decide to use two of the approaches like literature circles and writing workshop, while another may choose to integrate each one into a literacy curriculum. At least two approaches that touch on all language arts skills need to be part of the literacy design for it to be considered a balanced approach (Tompkins, 2010). Much of this depends on the needs of the students and the setup of the classroom. Some teachers have small class sizes, where others have a larger setting. One teacher may not have the same group of students throughout the entire week. Needless to say, each teacher has different variables to work with, which reiterates the point that no single approach can fulfill the vast needs of teachers and students around the globe. A balanced approach is necessary for the further development and continuation of literacy and language arts to occur in school.

The education system in the United States has needed a makeover for a long time. Throughout the years students have been prescribed a box. This box has been used to teach all students, regardless of independent strengths and weaknesses, at the same level. This style of teaching requires sitting, listening to the teacher, and filling out worksheets for the majority of each school day. J. E. Cowen claims that “Studies show that time spent filling out worksheets without teacher intervention has little impact on reading achievement and may even retard improvement” (2003, p. 34). This is ineffective because students are individuals with diverse backgrounds. In addition, the influx of non-native speakers in American schools has proven that differentiation is extremely important for class instruction (Cowen). This method should be replaced with active

learning and a variety of teaching methods, like those used in a balanced approach. A teacher's goal is not to slow growth but to increase learning and nurture students to reach higher levels in education.

Although the balanced approach is a relatively new concept, various studies have concluded its effectiveness compared to other approaches used in the past (Cowen). A question referring to which methods are most suitable for instructing spelling and reading was answered by one study. Instead of selecting one method, the study revealed that "The favoring of a more comprehensive program, which included phonics, reading meaningful text, and reading and writing for meaning, illustrates how the research findings in this study support a more balanced approach to reading instruction in contrast to the basal-alone approach" (Cowen, p. 17). Another study, known as NPR, concluded that there is a continual relationship between the development of fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Cowen). So, instead of focusing on one aspect of the whole, the balanced approach touches each important part of the English language for the benefit of students, teachers, parents, and school systems alike.

All of the studies compiled their results and concluded that multiple reading strategies including phonics should be used in the classroom to increase reading comprehension, fluency, and communication skills (Cowen). These studies determined that using a balanced approach is highly effective for literacy instruction's successful implementation to the classroom. In addition to this, these studies believe the balanced approach will put to rest the various controversies regarding the appropriate way to teach literacy. Cowen comments that "Fortunately, we have completed research on more than 30 years of beginning reading instruction to help settle the reading wars" (p. 82). As a

whole, these studies believe that the balanced approach is in fact the “silver bullet” that will create life-long learners and reader for decades to come (p. 82).

Conclusion

While any type of approach has its downfalls, the balanced approach is by far the most influential and essential when implementing language arts curriculum. In today’s America, students from various socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds are being placed into classrooms together. A teacher can choose to see this as a negative or positive opportunity for learning. If the students are taught correctly through the use of the balanced approach, the chances for growth will be high. However, the teacher that uses one method for the entire year will not fare so well compared to the teacher who uses the balanced approach to meet all the students.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, educators began looking for an approach that would include all the fundamental components of literacy into the classroom. The growing concern was that students were becoming illiterate because they were not receiving proper instruction to become skilled readers, writers, and communicators in a modern society. The balanced literacy approach not only includes the fundamental components necessary for creating a well-rounded and skilled individual in the realm of literacy, but it also represents instruction through differentiation. Teachers can choose from a list of approaches such as literature circles, reading and writing workshop, basal reading programs, literature focus units, and thematic units to create their personal balanced approach to meet the needs of their students. Teachers also use a variety of instruction strategies to further student learning. Student and teacher directed activities as well as group, individual, and whole class activities strengthen the balanced approach because it

creates an environment conducive to learning. The balanced approach has a prospective likelihood of transforming the educational system and potential to produce creative, intelligent, and literacy proficient citizens in society.

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