Making the Words Roar

Reading strategies aimed at multiple intelligences can make literacy come to life for all students.

Thomas Armstrong

Most people know the story of “The Blind Men and the Elephant.” In this ancient tale, an Indian prince who had just received a gift from a neighboring raja sent a blind man to examine the gift and report back to him. As we all know, the gift was an elephant. But the blind man, after touching the side of the beast, reported to the prince, “It’s a wall.” Not satisfied, the prince sent another blind man, who felt one of the elephant’s legs and came back to report that the gift was a pillar. The prince then sent a third blind man, who encountered the elephant’s tail and ran back shouting, “It’s a rope!” A fourth blind man, who only touched an ear, insisted that the gift was a piece of cloth. The men began arguing among themselves about the true nature of the raja’s gift, not realizing that each of them possessed a part of the truth.

Fewer people are familiar with another story, which I call “The Blind Educators and the Literacy Lion.” In this tale, a king asked several blind educators to examine a new beast that had just come into his kingdom. The first educator approached the Literacy Lion and then ran back to the king, shouting, “This beast is made up of whole words! Yes, all sorts of words! Words like ‘thumb’ and ‘sprinkle’ and ‘haddock’ and ‘joust’ and thousands more!”

This didn’t satisfy the king. He sent another blind educator, who came back excitedly and exclaimed, “This beast isn’t made up of whole words, it’s made up of sounds! Many different kinds of sounds, like ‘buh’ and ‘ay’ and ‘th’ and ‘juh’ and ‘mmm’ and many more. I counted them all, and there are exactly 44!”

A third blind educator was sent, and returned saying, “This beast isn’t made up of whole words or sounds! It’s constructed of stories, and fables, and songs, and chants, and poems, and storybooks, and Big Books, and board books, and novels, and plays, and whole libraries full of living, exciting tales!”

A fourth blind educator was sent to the scene. This one declared, “They’re all wrong! This beast is made up of whole cultures, and people crying out for freedom and power. It’s about understanding who we are and what we’re capable of, and how each of us can speak, read, and write with our own voices and contribute to the liberation of all peoples!”

With this final pronouncement, the four blind educators began a heated discussion that has gone on to this very day.

This parable portrays what has been happening in the field of reading
instruction during the past several decades. Beginning with the publication of Rudolf Flesch’s best-seller Why Johnny Can’t Read in 1955, educators, researchers, and other stakeholders have fought about the best way to teach reading. In this ongoing debate, each combatant claims that his or her particular approach is the best one for all students.

It’s time we put an end to these reading wars. The Literacy Lion is a powerful, complex, and mysterious beast. Each description of it that we receive—from educators, psychologists, brain researchers, and other professionals—enriches our understanding of this powerful beast and gives us new knowledge about how best to introduce it to our students. As it turns out, each position has a piece of the truth. Our job as educators is to see as much of the whole in the reading process as possible, using a wide range of strategies to meet the needs of our diverse student population.

**Strategies for Multiple Intelligences**

I find it helpful to use Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, not as another entrant into the reading wars, but as a template with which to view the many different aspects of the reading process. Linguistic intelligence is not the only building block for reading competence. Multiple intelligences theory can help us generate reading strategies specifically tailored to students who learn in different ways. The following ideas are just a small fraction of a much broader group of strategies that can open new possibilities in reading instruction.

**Spatial Learning**

In order to read, we have to “see” the words (Braille excepted) using visual-spatial intelligence. The eye sends information about the visual forms on the page to the visual cortex. The brain decides, Is this a picture or a letter? Young children often look at letters as pictures.

As a child, I watched “The Pinky Lee Show” on television. Every Wednesday, Pinky would put a letter on a flip chart and turn it into a picture. For example, he turned an A into a house with a chimney, window, and door. Pinky was playing with the parts of the brain that make distinctions between letters and pictures, and I loved it!

After a child visually registers the symbols as letters, he or she begins to use the letters to create meanings in the appropriate area of the brain: the angular gyrus in the left hemisphere. The reader often needs to visualize the word or passage to make the meaning clear. If teachers would simply ask students to close their eyes and visualize what they’ve just read, reading comprehension would improve, especially for picture-smart children.

**Kinesthetic Learning**

Students also experience physical responses to the material as they read. Recent brain research suggests that the cerebellum—an area of the brain whose function was previously considered primarily bodily-kinesthetic—is actually involved in reading (Fulbright et al., 1999). We also know that deaf people who use international sign language employ linguistic areas of the brain.

We need to pay far greater attention to the role of physical movements in reading. It would be a real plus for body-smart students, for example, if some ambitious educator could create a physical gesture for each of the 44 phonemes in the English language (or have the students create the gestures). If teachers would have students act out their reading material more frequently, we would see fewer referrals for “reading disabilities” and more motivated readers.

**Logical Learning**

Another important aspect of reading is its logical dimensions. Back in the 1950s, linguist Noam Chomsky startled the academic world by explaining that children seem to possess an innate understanding of the logical transformations that can be made in creating sentences. If we tell a young child, “Here is a wug. Now there are two of them. There are two,” the child, not knowing what a wug is, can provide the correct answer: “There are two wugs” (Pinker, 1994). Beginning readers make similar logical evaluations as they decode words or comprehend passages.

Smith (1996) has suggested that readers are like scientists. They create
hypotheses about what they’re reading: *Is this story a mystery? Did the butler do it?* As they take in data (words), they confirm or restructure their theories: *No, this is more like science fiction. Actually, the butler’s cat did it.* We might help students with strong logical-mathematical brains by approaching word-attack skills as though we were dissecting a laboratory specimen or by treating reading comprehension as a time for hypothesis testing and logical problem solving.

**Musical Learning**

Students read within the context of a musical flow. You can understand this more clearly if you take any sentence and splatter it with punctuation marks. You; can see by this, kind of, interruption—that, rhythm and, music, are a natural—part—of the: reading; process. One of the most interesting and consistent findings in recent reading research is the difficulty that students labeled as dyslexic often have with nonsense words that rhyme: “blabit” and “slabit,” for example. They can’t hear the assonance (Shaywitz et al., 1998).

We need to pay more attention to the music of words. Some reading experts have created computer software programs that slow down sound patterns and match them with visual patterns to enable students who can’t hear these distinctions to better tune in (Greenwald, 1999). However, a musically rich reading program would accomplish the same thing in a more natural way.

Students can learn to read through song lyrics. Reading instructors should take courses in music education and learn how to tonally and rhythmically emphasize phonemes and words as they introduce them—by using percussion and tonal instruments, for example, to help students articulate differences between phonemes, make sound blends, do syllabification, or read dialogue in different rhythms. Sustained silent reading should include a special room for music-smart readers who need to sing or chant what they are reading.

**Intrapersonal Learning**

We often place so much emphasis on reading as a technical skill that we ignore another important dimension of the reading process: emotion. We may teach students to be excellent technical readers and to pass all their high-stakes reading tests, but end up manufacturing a nation of literate individuals—people who can read, but prefer not to.

When we teach phonics and blending, we should use comic strip words like “Bonk!”, “Scrunch!”, and “Thud!” These words have emotional vitality. So much of what we ask students to read is emotionally dead. Yet the limbic system processes word stimuli just as it does all other stimuli, and any reading class that provides no passion to feed this “emotional brain” is not providing research-based instruction. When students read a story, the teacher should ask, “When has something like this happened in *your* life?” We should always connect text to students’ intrapersonal intelligence—to their own emotions, memories, and personal associations.

**Interpersonal Learning**

No text exists in a social vacuum. Thus, reading instruction must also emphasize the interpersonal dimensions of literacy. Kids today are surrounded by all kinds of text, much of it from advertising. Yet few parents and educators actually help them decipher the underlying social context of a phrase like “Just do it!” or a text like “If you call in the next five minutes, you’ll receive this additional offer at absolutely no cost.” Teachers often treat the texts they use in reading class as definitive, and yet these texts, too, have an underlying social context.

We need to help students become critical readers right from the start and assist them in thinking about the social meanings of the texts they encounter. We also need to develop activities that put students in the shoes of the author, the narrator, or a character in the story, allowing them to see the world from those points of view.

**Naturalist Learning**

In a certain type of aphasia, the patient can recognize words found outdoors but not indoors; in another type, the patient can name living objects but not nonliving objects (Pinker, 1994). Such research suggests a certain primacy in the brain for words that relate directly to the natural world. Other research has suggested that humans may have been preadapted for reading by gaining the ability to read animal tracks (Varney, 2002). In fact, we use the term *tracking* to talk about a student’s ability to scan reading material.

This research suggests that beginning reading lessons, especially for nature-smart students, should put a premium on words relating to nature. Because our auditory discrimination faculties are better adapted to detect differences in nature sounds than in pedagogically chunked sound bites, teachers could assign each of the 44 phonemes a specific nature sound (for example, “ooo” for the sound of the owl, “sss” for the snake, “shhh” for the sound of wind). Instead of asking for the main idea of a story, readers might be asked to “dig up the seed idea.” In addition, we should conduct more reading classes outdoors, using nature-themed books.

**New Possibilities in Reading Instruction**

Reading is a miraculous act. It is also a relatively recent acquisition in human history, starting only 5,000 years ago. In this context, we should not be surprised
that so many students struggle with reading. Rather, we should be amazed that so many students actually learn how to read, given the bare-bones instruction they receive—lifeless workbooks and worksheets; rote drills; contrived reading materials; and the stress of grading, tracking, and testing.

As long as we see the Literacy Lion in terms of our own tunnel vision, we will be hampered in our ability to provide different kinds of learners with the experiences they need to become not just good, but wonderful readers. Let's turn our attention to developing vibrant reading programs that capitalize on what students already bring into the classroom: their capacity to move, gesture, visualize, draw, sing, chant, analyze, and celebrate nature. In this way, we will enable every student to directly experience the full majesty and power of the Literacy Lion.

References

Copyright © 2004 Thomas Armstrong.

Thomas Armstrong is the author of the ASCD books *The Multiple Intelligences of Reading and Writing: Making the Words Come Alive* (2003) and *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (2nd ed., 1996). He may be reached at P.O. Box 548, Cloverdale, CA 95425; thomas@thomasarmstrong.com; www.thomasarmstrong.com.