

## The Case for Literacy

By James A. Tucker, Ph.D.  
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Have you noticed the recent dramatic increase in published interest in literacy? I keep asking myself, Why now? The deterioration of reading achievement in the United States has been noted for decades, and the many attempts to correct this decay have been unsuccessful. Indeed, instead of reversing the decline, there have been only *claims* of a solution. The issue is not just a political one because every resident of the Whitehouse for the past 50 years has initiated an educational agenda to address the problem, and still the level of reading achievement continues to fall. So, again, why now?

Why, in current publications, is “literacy” often semantically strengthened by pairing it with “science”? Titles such as the following are only a few examples: “The Science of Reading: A Defining Guide” (Defining Movement, 2021); “What Is the Science of Reading” (Ordetx, 2021) and “The Settled Science of Teaching Reading” (Stukey et al., 2021). Simply referring to the “the science of reading” certainly does not reflect either the understanding of or universal agreement about what the term means. An online search of “the science of reading,” underscores the confusion. Such a search, however, also reveals that there is an immense amount of excellent information available, much of which suggests that American education systems, in general, are not teaching reading effectively.

And why, over the past several decades, has the simple school subject called “reading,” been replaced by the word “literacy”? In my early days as a teacher, the term “literacy” was reserved for use in describing the level of social and academic competence in various parts of the world. Now we not only have “literacy” in common use to describe what we used to just call “reading,” but the use of the word has gotten more complicated by adding the “the science of” literacy. Yet, a least “44 million adults [in the United States] are now unable to read a simple story to their children” (Bernard, 2017).

What is going on? This decline in reading achievement was happening well before the COVID pandemic, so the educational effects of the virus are not to blame. In fact, it is quite possible that this global emergency has brought critical issues to the surface, including the ongoing lack of adequate levels of reading achievement in the United States. Perhaps the recent drastic drop in overall school achievement that has, in fact, been highlighted by the pandemic, is at least partially responsible for making us aware of just how far we have fallen. A cultural change is occurring that seems to have

more to do with the state of society in general than a specific outcome of the pandemic. We are finally appreciating that the quality of education in the United States has been deteriorating for decades. One initiative after another has claimed to be the solution to this slide, but to date there has been no significant general change in the trajectory, and we continue to read the reports of the negative effects of lower reading-achievement.

Just for the sake of being as comprehensive as possible in analyzing the question, I also realize that the incredible developments in technology may be partially responsible for our oversight. We have been led to believe (consciously or unconsciously) that the technological advances will increase our basic ability to learn and apply knowledge. While this is true on one level, it has had a negative impact on literacy and our ability to apply it. The details of this are beyond the scope of this essay, but basically, the increased dependence on screen-based inquiry has caused “students to miss much of the information, the smaller details that contribute to a holistic, deep-reading brain” (Chavous, 2021, para 11).

The long-term effect of our current trajectory is dire indeed. Here in Tennessee, the Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation (n.d.) has recently reported the following data:

- According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) of all juveniles who interface with the juvenile court system function at a low rate of literacy.
- Juvenile incarceration reduces the probability of high-school completion and increases the probability of incarceration later in life.

Why have we not fixed this problem long before now? The argument that there is insufficient research-based evidence to give us direction is simply not supportable. Over the past half-century, there have been endless theoretical interpretations of just what the best way to teach reading is. The debate—called “the reading wars”—has raged for decades and is proof enough that the issues are not functional; they are conceptual. I will not go into the issues involved here, because the literature is packed with the arguments. And still there is no evidence from any of the positions that any of them present the needed solution. Basically, then, there is no magic to the so-called “science” of literacy.

One of the best statements that I *have* seen to date is the strong position taken in *The Science of Reading: A Defining Movement* (Defining Movement, 2021). “The science of reading is *not*:

- An ideology or philosophy
- A fad, a trend, a new idea, or a pendulum swing
- A political agenda
- A one-size-fits-all approach

- A program of instruction
- A single, specific component of instruction, such as phonics” (pp. 3-4).

In the same document is a suggested definition of the science of reading: “The science of reading is a vast interdisciplinary body of *scientifically-based research* [ital. added] about reading and issues related to reading and writing” (Defining Movement, 2021, p. 3). When I translate the word “reading” into its current use as “literacy,” I am comfortable in defining *literacy* as the ability to decipher text and to understand (comprehend) what it means. Understanding what it means can also be defined as a *competency*.

A competency is two-fold—the knowledge of the concept *and* the ability to apply it. So, literacy can be defined as a conceptual competency, and it is one of the most practical competencies that support a healthy collaboration of communities that we call a country. So, where do we look for a solution to the problem?

Principles of learning and effective instruction are based on critical research done over the past century. Because these principles are so well established, no further research is needed. Why, then, are all teachers not being routinely taught to use them to teach all subjects? For example, in 1984, in describing the essence of good teaching, the University of Minnesota researcher S. Jay Samuels told us,

In many ways, good athletic coaching and good classroom teaching have much in common, and principles of coaching applied to the classroom can help students master the basic skills. In essence, to master the basic skills either in sports or the classroom, three elements are necessary: 1. Motivate the student, 2. Bring the student to the level of accuracy in the skill, and 3. Provide the practice necessary for the skill to become automatic (p. 27).

Samuels (1984) provides further wisdom on the subject by relating that “even modest IQ levels, within the 50 to 70 range of educable retardation, seem to be sufficient for mastering the basic skills . . . . Why then, one wonders, if the basic skills can be acquired with IQs in the 50 to 70 range, are there so many children who fail to master them despite having levels of intelligence substantially higher?” (p. 18). Good question!

Basically, the fundamental principle of learning anything is that everything that we learn, we learn on the basis of what we already know. And therein lies what is perhaps the most overlooked element of effective instruction—the assessment of prior knowledge to establish instruction at what Emmett Betts, as far back as 1946, defined as the *instructional level*.

Finally, then, to answer the question that I started with—Why now? Apparently, we finally have come to understand that we cannot survive as a progressive culture if our citizens cannot read, and we are moving toward an illiterate society faster than anyone realized. We need to act! Now! We need to

immediately apply the following principles, principles that we have known for nearly a century:

1. Understand that all children are born motivated, with the desire and ability to learn. And almost all of them have the intelligence to master this basic skill.
2. Start at birth, surrounding children with as much verbalization as possible (Suskind, 2015).
3. Because all learning is based on what we already know, the first step in effective instruction is to assess the prior-knowledge level of the learner.
4. When the base level has been established, present new information in small increments to enhance the ability of short-term memory to maintain it. (This is called mastery.)
5. Remember that adequate repetition of mastered learning is essential until the correct response is automatic.
6. Continue to apply learned skills when adding additional learning.

Like all science, the science of reading is evolving, and there is an increasing awareness of the best ways to teach. But until we start with what is known and build on that, we are ignoring the very basis of how we learn. We need to build our reading instruction around the basic learning-principle that although every learner is unique, simple principles of learning exist that can be applied to maximize results. Meet the learners where they are, regardless of background or age, and build systematically to mastery at what is possible for all of them.

From a national learning perspective, I cannot imagine a more urgent priority.

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