

A Review of Theories of Reading and Writing Development in Literacy Instruction

Sitwe Benson Mkandawire

The University of Zambia, School of Education

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601295>

Received: 25 June 2026; Accepted: 30 June 2026; Published: 17 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This article reviews major theories of reading and writing that have shaped literacy instruction and examines their implications for classroom practice. It discusses influential perspectives in reading, including maturation theory, emergent literacy, family literacy, phonics-based and decoding theories, whole language, interactive models, the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, psycholinguistic accounts, metacognitive theory, constructivist perspectives, and sociocultural and critical literacy theories. In relation to writing, the article examines cognitive process theory, genre theory, sociocultural perspectives, and process-oriented approaches. The central argument is that no single theory sufficiently explains the complexity of literacy development. Rather, effective literacy instruction requires an integrated perspective that recognizes the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing, the need for explicit instruction in foundational skills, and the centrality of meaning-making, discourse, culture, and context. The review concludes that balanced, evidence-informed, developmentally responsive, and context-sensitive instruction provides a strong foundation for developing proficient, critical, and adaptable readers and writers.

Keywords: Theory, literacy theories, literacy development theories, literacy instruction

INTRODUCTION

Literacy instruction has long been shaped by competing and complementary theories of how learners acquire the abilities to read and write. These theories matter because they influence curriculum design, teacher preparation, assessment, intervention, and policy. In many educational contexts, debates about literacy instruction have often been framed as oppositions, such as phonics versus whole language, skills versus meaning, or direct instruction versus student-centered learning. However, contemporary research increasingly suggests that literacy development is multidimensional and that effective instruction draws from several theoretical traditions rather than adhering rigidly to a single model (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Reading involves the construction of meaning from written text and requires the coordination of multiple sources of information (Stanley, 2007). It is therefore a complex process that draws on cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural resources. Reading requires the integration of decoding, language comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, fluency, and background knowledge, while writing involves planning, transcription, revision, audience awareness, and rhetorical control (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Graham & Perin, 2007). Although these processes are often taught separately, scholarship has repeatedly shown that they are closely connected and mutually reinforcing (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Kim, 2020; Shanahan, 2006). This article reviews major theories of reading and writing in literacy instruction and considers how each contributes to an informed understanding of teaching and learning in contemporary classrooms.

Theories of Literacy Development and Instruction

Nkhata et al. (2019) define theory as "an idealized representation of reality that help us explain some natural phenomena." In literacy studies, theories explain how children and adults acquire reading and writing skills by highlighting the roles of cognitive maturation, social interaction, environmental exposure, language development, and instruction. These frameworks assist educators and parents in designing literacy instruction that responds to learners' developmental needs and social contexts. Because literacy theories often overlap,

evolve, and function as models, perspectives, and approaches, this section discusses major theoretical traditions and influential models commonly used in literacy education.

Maturation Theory

Maturation theory is associated with Arnold Gesell and was later applied to reading readiness by Morphett and Washburne (1931). The theory holds that literacy development is substantially influenced by biological maturation and age. From this perspective, children require a level of “reading readiness” that cannot be accelerated through instruction before sufficient cognitive maturity has developed. Historically, this readiness was associated with a mental age of approximately six and a half years. The theory therefore encouraged educators to delay formal reading instruction until children were considered developmentally prepared. Although this view influenced reading instruction until the mid-twentieth century, the assumption that children must reach a fixed maturational age before literacy instruction can begin has since been widely challenged. Nevertheless, the broader recognition that developmental readiness affects learning continues to inform literacy education.

Instruction informed by maturation theory emphasizes age-appropriate expectations and the selection of resources suited to children’s developmental levels. However, contemporary literacy research suggests that early literacy behaviours, including invented spelling, are better explained by broader developmental and social learning theories than by maturation alone.

Emergent Literacy Theory

Emergent literacy theory, pioneered by Marie Clay in 1966, proposes that literacy development begins before formal schooling through exposure to print, oral language, and writing. Nkhata et al. (2019) explain that emergent literacy includes the behaviours, skills, ideas, knowledge, and attitudes that children acquire informally before classroom instruction and that later support conventional reading and writing. The theory posits that reading, writing, and oral language develop simultaneously rather than sequentially. Children acquire print awareness, vocabulary, and an understanding of narrative structure long before they can read conventionally. In practice, this theory supports activities such as scribbling, shared book reading, storytelling, environmental print exploration, and engagement with picture books. Clay’s emergent literacy theory also emphasizes the relationship between instructional scaffolding and children’s developing reading, writing, and oral language skills (Clay, 1991). Her observation that “the essence of successful teaching is to know where the frontier of learning is for any one pupil on a particular task” (Clay, 1991, p. 65) aligns with the idea that educators should identify learners’ current capabilities and provide support that advances literacy learning. Thus, emergent literacy foregrounds the interaction between children, educators, print, language, and the social contexts in which early literacy practices occur.

Instructional practices that support emergent literacy include creating print-rich environments, reading and telling stories to children, encouraging play-based literacy activities, providing access to picture books, and allowing children to experiment with drawing, scribbling, and early forms of writing.

Family Literacy Theory

Family literacy theory is associated with Taylor (1983). Its central claim is that home environments, family practices, and parental involvement strongly influence children’s literacy achievement. Instructional applications include promoting shared reading at home, integrating family culture into literacy learning, and strengthening communication between schools and families. More broadly, family literacy refers to a set of ideas concerned with the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes that support literacy development among family members, the relationship between family literacy and student achievement, and the ways literacy is naturally used in the home.

Taylor proposed three actions to strengthen family literacy: (i) establishing a two-way relationship between parents and teachers to exchange information about literacy practices in the home; (ii) helping parents understand school culture and the skills students need for academic success; and (iii) supporting parents to identify practical ways of encouraging children’s literacy development at home. Classroom applications may include inviting

parents or community volunteers to read stories, organizing family literacy days, and introducing family reading challenges that strengthen the connection between home and school.

Theory of Literacy Development

Holdaway's theory of literacy development (1979) presents learning to read as a natural process closely related to children's oral language development. The theory identifies four key components: observation, collaboration, practice, and performance. Through observation, children encounter literacy behaviours modelled by others, such as being read to by a parent or teacher. Through collaboration, they interact with more knowledgeable readers who provide encouragement and support.

Through practice, they engage independently with literacy tasks, self-monitor their progress, and refine their skills. Through performance, they share their developing reading abilities with supportive audiences. Holdaway therefore emphasized rich home and classroom literacy environments, parent-child interaction, modelling of literacy behaviours, meaningful language experiences, shared reading, and the use of big books.

Instructional activities associated with Holdaway's theory include the use of big books and shared reading to foster natural literacy development. Big books can recreate the positive affective conditions of home story time while supporting oral language, print tracking, letter knowledge, and word awareness.

Stage Models of Reading

Stage models of reading development have been proposed by Chall (1983), Frith (1985), Ehri (1991), and Gough, Juel, and Griffith (1992). These models suggest that readers progress through increasingly complex phases of word recognition and text processing. Earlier strategies remain available as learners acquire more advanced skills, and students gradually expand the range of strategies they use during reading.

Stage models therefore provide educators with a developmental framework for understanding how readers move from visual recognition and partial letter-sound knowledge to more automatic and consolidated word reading (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 2002, 2005, 2014). Although the acquisition of reading skills is often described in phases, these phases should not be interpreted as rigid or uniform; learners may demonstrate overlapping behaviours and may move through them at different rates.

Pre-Alphabetic Phase: Children in the pre-alphabetic phase do not yet understand systematic letter-sound relationships and may not know all letters of the alphabet. They may, however, recognize familiar symbols, logos, or environmental print. Although such recognition is not conventional reading, it reflects an emerging awareness that visual symbols can carry meaning.

During this phase, children also begin to develop phonemic awareness, including the ability to segment and blend sounds in spoken words. Teachers can support learners by drawing attention to print directionality, helping them recognize that spoken words are represented by written symbols, and guiding them to isolate and pronounce initial, medial, and final phonemes in simple words.

Partial alphabetic phase: During this phase, children know many letter names and begin to associate some letters with corresponding sounds. They may use partial cues, such as the first or last letter of a word, to guess unfamiliar words, but they are not yet able to decode systematically. Instruction should therefore help learners recognize and name upper- and lowercase letters, develop letter-sound knowledge, and begin reading common high-frequency words by sight.

Full alphabetic phase: Learners move into the full alphabetic phase when they understand more consistent relationships between letters and sounds and begin to use this knowledge to decode words. Initially, decoding may be slow and effortful, but it becomes more automatic with practice. Teachers should support learners in demonstrating one-to-one letter-sound correspondences, producing common consonant sounds, and decoding regularly spelled one-syllable words.

Consolidated Alphabetic Phase: In this phase, children become increasingly automatic in word recognition. Rather than sounding out every letter separately, they begin to recognize recurring letter patterns, spelling units, and morphemes such as prefixes, suffixes, and common endings. Instruction should therefore include common consonant digraphs, final sounds, vowel-team conventions, syllable patterns, and word analysis strategies that help learners decode longer and more complex words.

Automatic Phase: At this stage, children read many familiar words fluently and no longer need to decode them sound by sound. This phase aligns with LaBerge and Samuels' (1974) Automatic Information Processing Model, which argues that reading involves limited cognitive capacity. When decoding becomes automatic, more working memory becomes available for comprehension. Learners in this phase can therefore manage greater demands related to meaning-making, fluency, and interpretation.

Teachers should support learners in reading grade-level prose and poetry with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression, and in using knowledge of letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, morphology, roots, and suffixes to read unfamiliar multisyllabic words in and out of context.

The reading development phases are not distinct, but continuous. Also, children may demonstrate skills associated with different phases concurrently. Similarly, the standards listed are merely examples and are not intended to be an exhaustive list of all standards that align with each phase. While some children can potentially learn to read simply through exposure alone, most will require explicit instruction. All students can benefit from direct, explicit instruction with a phonics-based approach.

Frith Stages of Reading Acquisition Theory

The Frith Stages of Reading Acquisition Theory is part of the stage models of reading. Literacy experts also use a stage model to describe children's literacy progressions. Although the various stage models of reading have some distinctions and focus on different elements of reading processes, they all share an approach which focuses on children moving from one stage to another with increasing complexity and include features that build on the previous stage. One literacy model is Uta Frith's theory of reading acquisition.

In Frith's theory, children acquire literacy by moving through particular stages that are developmental and associated with both age and experience. Frith includes three stages of reading acquisition in her model (see Figure 3.2). The first stage, the logographic stage, is characterized by instant recognition of symbols, images, or words. Children demonstrate emerging logographic understandings when they read out familiar logos like Target's bullseye or McDonald's golden arches.

In the second stage, the alphabetic stage, children begin to use letter symbols to represent the sounds they hear in individual words. Children in this stage demonstrate an emerging understanding of sound and symbol relationships, such as writing /kt/ for cat. The child may hear the beginning sound and ending sound of cat, but the internal vowel sound is not yet recognized. These early approximations demonstrate that they can hear sounds and represent them, but not always completely or correctly.

The third stage, the orthographic stage, involves the internalization of spelling patterns and children begin to recognize and reproduce words with increasing automaticity. In this stage, readers do not need to sound out familiar words, though they pause when confronting new words or letter combinations. For example, a child may quickly read the word "kick" but pause to consider how to read the more complex word "knife" because the /k/ is silent. In each of these stages, children master greater complexities of thought and language and teachers must adjust their approaches in order to best foster the child's growth (Frith, 1985).

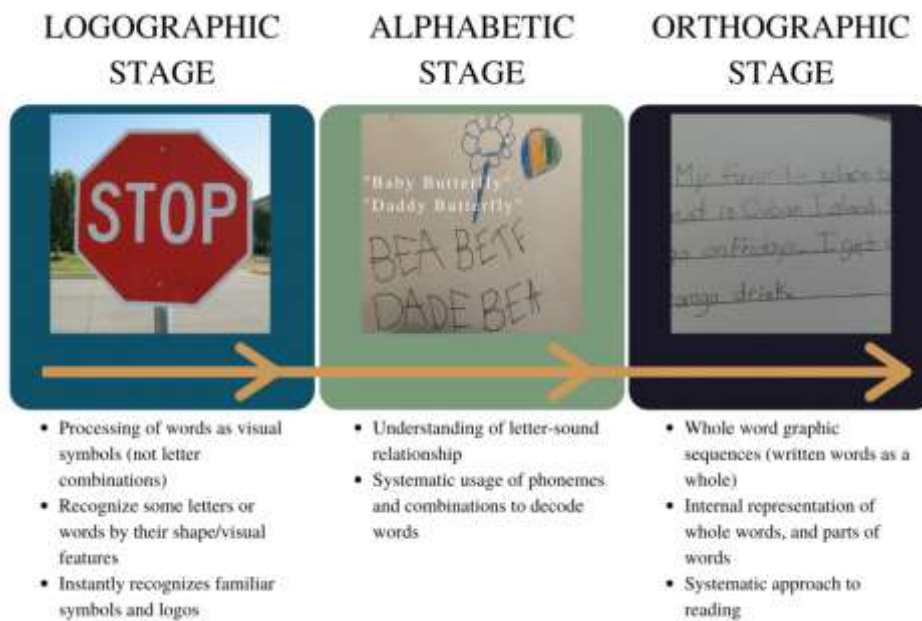


Figure 3.2 Frith Theory of Reading Acquisition

Constructivist stage models are often represented as stair steps, spirals, or upward-sloping progressions. In each case, the visual metaphor suggests that children acquire new skills by building on earlier capacities and moving toward more complex forms of literacy understanding. These stages are developmental and successive, but earlier skills remain available as new ones emerge. Stage theories therefore emphasize the importance of repeated exposure to environmental print, letters, letter sounds, and meaningful literacy experiences before children become conventional readers.

Piaget's and Frith's stage theories both emphasize movement from simpler capacities to more complex forms of thought and language. They also highlight the importance of observing children's behaviours and skills in order to infer their current level of understanding. This perspective is useful for educators because it supports developmentally responsive teaching and helps identify the next appropriate steps in literacy instruction.

In summary, Frith proposed that reading acquisition involves three broad stages. In the logographic stage, children recognize words visually as whole units, much as they recognize familiar logos. In the alphabetic stage, children begin to understand the alphabetic principle by linking letters with corresponding sounds for decoding and spelling. In the orthographic stage, readers increasingly recognize words automatically through internalized spelling patterns and stored word representations. These stages remain useful for understanding reading development, although they should be interpreted flexibly rather than as fixed and universal sequences.

Theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget's theory of cognitive development proposes that children's intellectual growth occurs through sequential stages, each associated with particular forms of thinking and learning. In literacy education, this theory suggests that instructional content and activities should correspond to learners' cognitive development. The major stages are the sensorimotor stage (birth to two years), the preoperational stage (two to seven years), the concrete operational stage (seven to eleven years), and the formal operational stage (approximately eleven years to adulthood).

Sensorimotor: Birth – 2 Years of Age

During the sensorimotor stage, children explore the world primarily through their senses and actions. Literacy-related activities may include board books with brightly colored pictures, books with sounds, textured materials, and other resources that stimulate sensory engagement.

Preoperational: 2 Years of Age – 7 Years of Age

The preoperational stage is characterized by rapid language development and increasing symbolic thought. Literacy instruction at this stage may include letter sounds, phonics, phonological awareness, word awareness, oral language development, print knowledge, pre-reading, and pre-writing activities.

Concrete Operational stage 7-11 years

During the concrete operational stage, children begin to use concrete objects and organized representations to support more logical thinking about abstract concepts. Literacy activities may include graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams and flow maps.

Formal Operational 11 years of age to adulthood

During the formal operational stage, learners can use language in more abstract and hypothetical ways. Literacy activities may include metacognitive reading strategies that help students reflect on their thinking before, during, and after reading, such as making inferences and summarizing.

Psycholinguistic Guessing Theory

Psycholinguistic guessing theory is associated with Kenneth Goodman (1990), who described reading as a “**psycholinguistic guessing game**.” In this view, readers sample textual information and use language knowledge and context to predict meaning rather than processing every letter in sequence. The theory influenced **whole-language** approaches and meaning-centered instruction. Classroom applications include encouraging reading for meaning, using authentic texts, emphasizing context clues, and allowing learners to draw on prediction and cueing systems. Its strength lies in highlighting the active role of the reader and the importance of language and context. Its limitation is that struggling readers often require more explicit decoding instruction than the theory provides.

Psycholinguistic Guessing Theory can be applied in classrooms by encouraging learners to predict, test, confirm, and revise meaning while reading. In practice, teachers may begin by activating learners’ prior knowledge through pre-reading predictions, titles, pictures, headings, and key vocabulary so that learners approach the text with purposeful expectations. Activities such as picture walks, cloze passages, context-clue exercises, think-aloud modelling, and confirm-and-revise routines help learners use linguistic, visual, grammatical, semantic, and contextual cues to construct meaning. For example, learners may infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word from surrounding sentences, predict what may happen next in a story, or revise an earlier interpretation when new textual evidence becomes available. These strategies promote active meaning-making, strategic reading, and metacognitive awareness because learners are encouraged to reflect on how they arrive at meaning. However, such activities should be used as part of a balanced literacy approach and should not replace explicit instruction in phonics, decoding, spelling patterns, and word recognition, especially for beginning readers and learners who experience reading difficulties.

Phonics Theory / Code Emphasis Theory

The phonics approach, also known as code-emphasis theory, emerged historically from earlier alphabetic and syllabic approaches to reading instruction and gained prominence between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Rodgers, 2001). The theory emphasizes the direct relationship between graphemes and phonemes and holds that successful reading depends on understanding the **alphabetic code**. Rodgers (2001) notes that code-emphasis perspectives privileged the teaching of alphabetic print through sound rather than meaning. In contemporary literacy education, however, phonics is best understood not as a rejection of meaning but as a necessary foundation for accurate word recognition. Reviews of reading research show that systematic phonics is particularly important for beginning readers and for learners who experience word-recognition difficulties (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). Instruction begins with sound-symbol correspondence and gradually progresses to blending sounds into words and decoding increasingly complex spelling patterns. This theory informs foundational literacy instruction, structured literacy programmes, early grade reading, intervention programmes, and science-of-reading approaches. Teachers apply it by explicitly teaching sound-symbol relationships, blending, segmenting, decoding, and the sequential movement from simple to more

complex spelling patterns. Its strength lies in the substantial research support for early literacy and intervention; its limitation is that, when taught in isolation, it may neglect comprehension, motivation, and authentic reading.

Classroom activities under the phonics approach should provide explicit, systematic, and sequential practice in connecting sounds with letters and using these relationships to read and spell words. Teachers may begin with phonemic awareness activities, such as identifying initial, medial, and final sounds in spoken words, before introducing letter-sound correspondences through modelling, repetition, and guided practice. Learners can then engage in blending activities, where they combine individual sounds to read words, and segmenting activities, where they break spoken words into separate sounds for spelling. Other useful activities include word-building with letter cards, sorting words according to common spelling patterns, reading decodable texts that contain previously taught sound-symbol relationships, and practising high-frequency words alongside regular decoding. These activities strengthen learners' understanding of the alphabetic principle and support the development of accurate word recognition, spelling, and reading fluency. However, phonics instruction should be connected to meaningful reading and comprehension so that learners understand that decoding is a foundation for making sense of texts rather than an isolated mechanical exercise.

Whole Language Approach or Theory

The whole language approach developed mainly between the 1960s and 1980s as a meaning-centred response to phonics-dominated approaches to reading instruction. It is associated with Kenneth Goodman, Yetta Goodman, Frank Smith, and other literacy educators who emphasized meaning-making, authentic texts, and the integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The approach is closely linked to the language experience approach, which became popular in the mid-1960s and emphasized the knowledge and oral language experiences that children bring to reading (Hempenstall, 1996). Within this perspective, oral and written language are viewed as strongly connected, as reflected in Weaver's statement that "Anything I can say, I can write; anything I can write, I can read" (1988, p. 44).

Whole language theory argues that reading develops most effectively when learners are immersed in meaningful and authentic literacy experiences. Rather than treating reading as the mastery of isolated subskills, it emphasizes real books, genuine communication, learner choice, and the purposeful use of language. In classroom practice, this orientation supports literature-rich environments, shared and independent reading, storytelling, class discussions, reading and writing workshops, and writing for real audiences and purposes. Through these activities, learners are encouraged to construct meaning, express ideas, connect texts to their own experiences, and develop literacy through natural language use.

In this approach, the teacher functions primarily as a facilitator who provides rich literacy materials, encourages student choice, and creates opportunities for meaningful communication. Its major strength is that it promotes motivation, engagement, comprehension, and purposeful literacy use. However, a common limitation is that it may provide insufficient systematic instruction in phonics, decoding, and word recognition, particularly for beginning readers and learners who experience reading difficulties. For this reason, whole language activities are most effective when balanced with explicit teaching of foundational reading skills.

The cognitive theory of writing

The cognitive theory of writing frames composition not as the simple transcription of pre-formed thoughts, but as a complex and recursive problem-solving process. It examines how writers use mental resources such as working memory, metacognition, planning, generation, and revision to produce text. The foundational framework for this perspective is the **Cognitive Process Model** developed by Linda Flower and John Hayes, which identifies three interacting components of the writing process.

The Task Environment

The task environment includes factors external to the writer, such as the rhetorical problem, audience, purpose, assignment constraints, and the text already produced. As a document develops, the emerging text shapes and limits what the writer can say next.

The Writer's Long-Term Memory

The writer's long-term memory stores knowledge of the topic, understanding of the audience, and familiarity with writing plans, genres, and conventions.

The Writing Processes

Rather than moving mechanically through pre-writing, drafting, and editing, cognitive theory argues that writers move recursively among planning, translating, and reviewing. **Planning** involves generating *ideas*, organizing information, and *setting* both broad rhetorical goals and immediate sub-goals.

Translating: The cognitive act of putting meaning into visible language. It involves transforming abstract ideas into coherent, grammatically structured text.

Reviewing: The process of evaluating and improving the text. This includes *evaluating* (reading the text to spot issues) and *revising* (making changes to better fit the writer's goals).

The Role of the "Monitor"

The Cognitive Process Model also introduces the **Monitor**, an executive-control function that acts like an internal director. The Monitor regulates the writing process, allowing the writer to jump between planning, translating, and reviewing based on the demands of the task.

Cognitive Load & Expertise

Later expansions of the theory, including the work of Bereiter and Scardamalia, emphasize cognitive load. Novice writers often experience *cognitive overload* because transcription, spelling, sentence construction, and immediate corrections consume working memory. **Expert writers**, by contrast, have automated many mechanical aspects of writing, leaving greater cognitive capacity for rhetorical planning, organization, and meaning-making.

Schema Theory

Schema theory states that comprehension depends on readers' existing background knowledge structures, or schemas. Rumelhart (2005) argues that when readers' schemata are incomplete or insufficient for interpreting incoming textual information, comprehension becomes more difficult. Readers understand new texts by linking them to what they already know. In classrooms, schema theory supports prior-knowledge activation, vocabulary development, prediction, inference, brainstorming, KWL charts, connections to real-life experiences, and pre-teaching of key concepts. Its strength is that it explains the importance of background knowledge in comprehension; its limitation is that learners with limited relevant knowledge may struggle to understand a text even when their decoding is adequate.

Classroom application of schema theory involves helping learners connect new texts to their existing knowledge, experiences, language, and cultural backgrounds before, during, and after reading. Before reading, teachers can activate learners' prior knowledge through brainstorming, questioning, picture discussion, anticipation guides, KWL charts, and brief conversations about the topic of the text.

They may also pre-teach key vocabulary, concepts, and background information that learners need in order to understand unfamiliar content. During reading, learners can be guided to make predictions, form mental images, ask questions, identify connections between the text and their own experiences, and revise their understanding as new information appears. Graphic organizers such as concept maps, story maps, timelines, and Venn diagrams can help learners organize new information and relate it to what they already know.

After reading, teachers may use discussion, summarising, reflective writing, and comparison tasks to help learners consolidate new knowledge and integrate it into their existing schemas. These activities are especially

useful in multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms because they allow teachers to recognize learners' home knowledge as a resource for comprehension. However, teachers should also be careful not to assume that all learners possess the same background knowledge; where relevant schemas are weak or absent, direct explanation and carefully selected supplementary materials are necessary to support comprehension.

Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theory emphasizes that meaning is not located solely in the text but is created through interaction between the reader and the text. Different readers may therefore produce different, defensible interpretations depending on their experiences, perspectives, and purposes. The theory is especially relevant to literature teaching, discussion-based reading, interpretive reading, and personal response activities. Classroom applications include response journals, group discussions, and questions that invite students to connect texts with their own experiences. Its strength is that it promotes engagement and critical thinking; its limitation is that it may underemphasize close attention to textual evidence and foundational reading skills.

Classroom application of reader-response theory involves creating opportunities for learners to engage personally, emotionally, intellectually, and critically with texts. Instead of requiring a single fixed interpretation, the teacher encourages learners to explain how a text connects with their experiences, values, questions, and prior knowledge. Practical activities may include response journals, reading logs, literature circles, small-group discussions, role play, personal reflection, open-ended questioning, and creative responses such as letters to characters, alternative endings, or visual representations of key ideas.

During these activities, learners are encouraged to share their interpretations, compare responses with peers, and recognize that different readings may be valid when they are supported by evidence from the text. The teacher's role is to guide discussion by asking probing questions, helping learners return to specific words, events, images, or themes, and encouraging them to justify their views rather than offering unsupported opinions.

This approach promotes engagement, confidence, empathy, interpretive thinking, and appreciation of literature because learners see reading as an active process of meaning-making. However, classroom use of reader-response theory should be balanced with close reading, vocabulary development, comprehension instruction, and attention to textual evidence so that personal response does not replace careful analysis of the text.

Transactional Theory of Reading

Transactional theory, associated with Louise Rosenblatt, argues that reading is a transaction between reader and text. Meaning emerges from this interaction and is shaped by context, purpose, and prior experience. The theory informs literary interpretation, reflective reading, and personal and critical engagement with texts. Teachers may apply it by encouraging aesthetic and efferent reading, discussing readers' purposes, and using response journals and dialogic teaching. Its strength is that it recognizes the roles of emotion, purpose, and experience in reading; its limitation is that it is more useful for explaining comprehension and interpretation than for explaining decoding.

Classroom application of transactional theory of reading involves designing activities in which learners actively negotiate meaning with the text rather than merely extract fixed information from it. Teachers can begin by helping learners identify their purpose for reading, distinguishing between efferent reading, where attention is directed to information to be carried away, and aesthetic reading, where attention is directed to feelings, images, associations, and lived-through experiences during reading.

Practical activities may include response journals, reflective reading logs, literature circles, paired discussions, open-ended questioning, dramatization, and written reflections in which learners explain how a text interacts with their experiences, values, emotions, and prior knowledge. During discussion, the teacher should encourage learners to return to specific words, events, images, and themes in the text so that personal responses are supported by textual evidence.

This approach is useful because it allows learners to recognize that meaning develops through the relationship among reader, text, and context, and that interpretations may change as readers reread, discuss, and encounter new perspectives. In multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms, transactional activities can also validate learners' different linguistic and cultural resources while guiding them toward deeper comprehension and more disciplined interpretation. However, the approach should be balanced with explicit instruction in vocabulary, decoding, fluency, and comprehension strategies so that personal engagement with texts is supported by strong reading skills.

Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading proposes that reading comprehension is the product of decoding and language comprehension. This means that readers require both the ability to decode print and the ability to understand language; weakness in either component can impair comprehension. The model is used in literacy assessment, diagnosis of reading difficulties, and instructional planning. In classrooms, it helps teachers distinguish between decoding difficulties and language-comprehension difficulties and supports targeted interventions that coordinate phonics, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension instruction. Its strength is its practical value for identifying learner needs; its limitation is that it simplifies the full complexity of reading development.

Hoover and Gough's Simple View of Reading provide a theoretical framework for explaining reading acquisition in beginning readers. It proposes that reading comprehension depends on both decoding and linguistic comprehension, often expressed as $RC = D \times LC$. According to this view, learners cannot become effective text comprehenders without adequate word-recognition skills, and comprehension also fails when linguistic understanding is weak.

The model is useful in multilingual and second-language contexts because it helps explain why learners may decode a language without fully comprehending it or possess strong oral language skills in a familiar language without yet developing sufficient decoding ability. In many African contexts, where children may enter school with strong oral competence in a home language but limited exposure to the language of instruction, the model highlights the need to coordinate decoding instruction with language comprehension development.

Classroom application of the Simple View of Reading requires teachers to plan instruction around both major components of reading: decoding and language comprehension. In practice, this means that teachers should assess whether learners' reading difficulties arise mainly from weak word recognition, weak oral language and comprehension, or a combination of both. For learners with decoding difficulties, classroom activities should include explicit phonemic awareness instruction, systematic phonics, blending and segmenting practice, word reading, spelling activities, decodable texts, and repeated reading to build fluency.

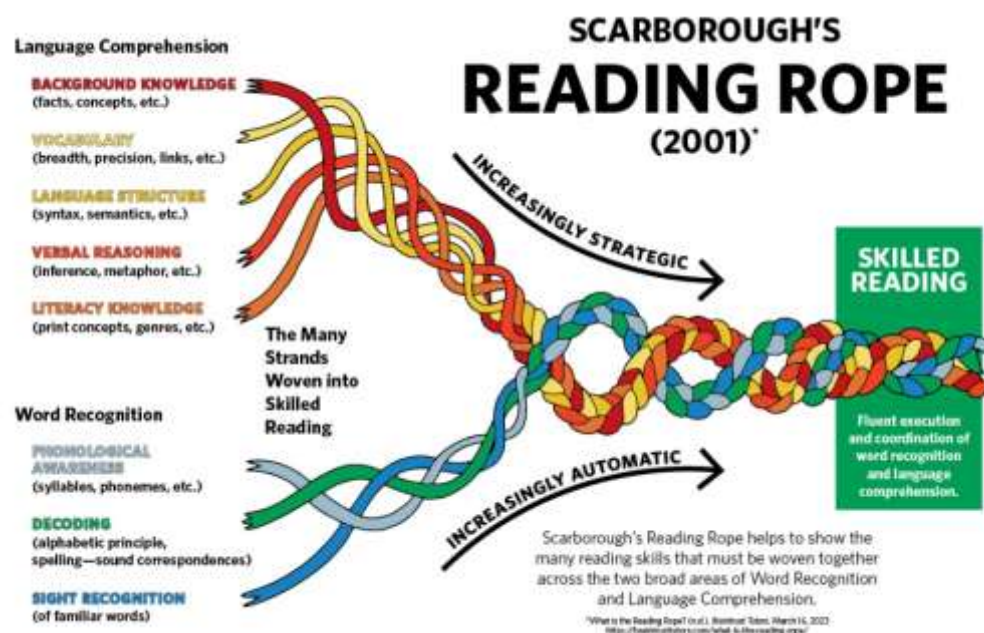
For learners whose decoding is adequate, but comprehension is weak, teachers should strengthen oral language through vocabulary development, listening comprehension, discussion, background knowledge building, sentence-level language work, and comprehension strategies such as questioning, summarising, predicting, and making inferences. The theory also supports differentiated instruction because learners may need different kinds of support depending on whether the main barrier is print recognition or language understanding.

In multilingual classrooms, teachers should pay particular attention to the language of instruction, since some learners may decode words accurately while still struggling to understand unfamiliar vocabulary, syntax, or concepts. Therefore, classroom application of the Simple View of Reading involves coordinating code-based instruction with rich language and meaning-based activities so that learners develop both accurate word reading and deep comprehension.

Scarborough's Reading Rope

Scarborough's Reading Rope, developed by Hollis Scarborough in 2001, proposes that skilled reading depends on the coordination of word recognition and language comprehension. It extends the Simple View of Reading by representing reading as multiple intertwined strands. The word-recognition strand includes phonological

awareness, decoding, and sight recognition of words, while the language-comprehension strand includes background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge.



These strands gradually become increasingly coordinated, enabling fluent and skilled reading. The model is useful in teacher education, structured literacy planning, early intervention, and curriculum design because it reminds educators to address phonics, fluency, vocabulary, oral language, syntax, background knowledge, and comprehension strategies. Its strength is that it offers a fuller representation of skilled reading development; its limitation is that it is a conceptual framework rather than a complete teaching method.

Classroom application of Scarborough's Reading Rope requires teachers to plan literacy instruction that develops both the word-recognition strands and the language-comprehension strands in a coordinated way. For word recognition, teachers may provide explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, decoding, spelling patterns, sight-word recognition, and repeated reading so that learners gradually read words accurately and automatically. At the same time, language-comprehension activities should build background knowledge, vocabulary, oral language, sentence structure, verbal reasoning, inferencing, and knowledge of text types. In practice, a lesson may therefore combine sound manipulation, decoding of target words, reading of decodable or appropriate texts, discussion of word meanings, teacher read-alouds, questioning, summarising, and opportunities for learners to connect the text to wider knowledge. The model is particularly useful for classroom assessment because it helps teachers identify which strand is weak when a learner struggles: some learners may need stronger decoding support, while others may require vocabulary, oral language, or comprehension development. In multilingual classrooms, Scarborough's Reading Rope also reminds teachers that fluent reading depends not only on pronouncing words correctly but also on understanding the language, concepts, and cultural knowledge carried by the text. Therefore, effective application of the model involves balanced, explicit, cumulative, and meaningful instruction that gradually weaves all strands together into skilled reading.

Sociocultural Theory of Reading

Sociocultural theory of reading views reading as a social practice rather than only a cognitive skill. It argues that reading is shaped by culture, language, identity, community, power relations, and classroom interaction. The theory informs culturally responsive teaching, multilingual education, critical literacy, and community-based literacy programmes. Classroom applications include using culturally relevant texts, valuing home languages and local literacies, encouraging collaborative reading, and examining how texts represent power, identity, and society. Its strength is that it situates literacy within real social and cultural life; its limitation is that it may provide less direct guidance for teaching early decoding skills.

Classroom application of sociocultural theory of reading involves organizing literacy instruction as a socially meaningful practice that connects school reading with learners' languages, cultures, identities, families, and communities. Teachers can apply this theory by selecting culturally relevant and locally meaningful texts, encouraging learners to draw on their home languages and prior experiences, and creating opportunities for collaborative reading through pair work, group discussion, literature circles, peer tutoring, and guided dialogue. In such classrooms, reading is not treated only as an individual act of decoding but as participation in shared meaning-making, where learners negotiate interpretations, ask questions, explain ideas, and learn from more knowledgeable peers and adults. The teacher's role is to scaffold learning by modelling strategies, asking open-ended questions, connecting texts to learners' lived realities, and gradually transferring responsibility to learners as their competence increases. Sociocultural applications may also include community-based literacy projects, storytelling, interviews with elders, analysis of local print materials, and discussion of how texts represent social values, identity, power, and culture. These practices are especially valuable in multilingual classrooms because they recognize learners' linguistic resources as assets rather than barriers. However, sociocultural reading activities should be balanced with explicit instruction in decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension strategies so that meaningful participation in literacy is supported by strong foundational reading skills.

Critical Literacy Theory

Paulo Freire (1985) defined critical literacy as the capacity to analyze, critique, and transform social, cultural, and political texts and contexts by having a thorough understanding of the experience of the student. Freire went on to suggest that in order to truly reach students, one must be aware of their problems, struggles, and aspirations, while also considering the power dynamics implicit in the ideas and materials they are exposed to and the relationships they develop. Critical literacy theory teaches that reading involves questioning how texts represent power, inequality, ideology, identity, and social justice. Readers are encouraged not only to understand texts but also to critique them by asking how they reflect, reproduce, or challenge social conditions. The theory is used in advanced comprehension, social studies literacy, critical discussion, and democratic education. In classrooms, teachers may ask who is represented or silenced in a text, compare different viewpoints, analyse bias and purpose, and encourage learners to challenge unjust assumptions. Its strength is that it develops critical thinking and social awareness; its limitation is that it is most appropriate when foundational reading skills are already developing.

Classroom application of critical literacy theory involves helping learners read texts as social and ideological constructions rather than as neutral sources of information. Teachers can apply this theory by selecting texts that invite discussion about representation, identity, power, inequality, culture, gender, class, language, environment, and community life. Learners may be guided to ask critical questions such as: Who produced this text? Whose interests does it serve? Whose voices are included or excluded? What assumptions does it make? What alternative viewpoints are possible? Practical activities may include comparing news reports on the same issue, analysing advertisements, examining images and headlines, rewriting a text from a marginalized perspective, debating controversial themes, identifying stereotypes, and discussing how language can influence readers' attitudes. In such activities, the teacher's role is to create a respectful and evidence-based classroom dialogue in which learners support their interpretations with textual evidence while also connecting texts to broader social realities. Critical literacy may also lead to action-oriented tasks, such as writing letters, creating posters, developing awareness campaigns, or producing alternative texts that challenge unfair representations. This approach strengthens critical thinking, social awareness, democratic participation, and learners' ability to question taken-for-granted meanings. However, it should be balanced with explicit instruction in vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and close reading so that learners have the linguistic and analytical skills needed to critique texts responsibly and accurately.

The Dual Route Theory of Reading (Critical Tradition)

Dual Route Theory of Reading explains word recognition as a cognitive process involving two distinct but interacting pathways: the **lexical route** and the **non-lexical, or sub-lexical, route**. The lexical route enables readers to recognize familiar and irregular words directly from memory, whereas the sub-lexical route supports the decoding of unfamiliar, regular, or pseudo-words through grapheme–phoneme correspondences. In this sense, the theory accounts for how readers process regular words such as *go* and *hat*, as well as irregular words

such as *choir*, whose pronunciation cannot be derived reliably from simple letter-sound rules. The model further suggests that skilled reading depends on the flexible coordination of these two pathways, with readers drawing more heavily on one route or the other depending on word familiarity, spelling regularity, and the orthographic depth of the writing system. Dual route accounts therefore provide a useful framework for understanding word recognition, spelling development, reading difficulties, and cross-linguistic differences in literacy acquisition (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). Written language processing is consequently understood as the product of two complementary procedures, commonly referred to as the lexical and non-lexical routes (Rapcsak, Henry, Teague, Carnahan, & Beeson, 2007). The theory also highlights the importance of orthographic transparency, since beginning readers' progress is shaped by the consistency of letter-sound relationships in the language they are learning (Aro, 2006; Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003). Transparent orthographies tend to support more predictable decoding, whereas less transparent orthographies, such as English, place greater demands on memory, pattern recognition, and flexible decoding strategies. Overall, Dual Route Theory helps explain why some words are easier to read than others and why learners may follow different developmental trajectories across languages with different spelling-sound systems.

Classroom application of Dual Route Theory of Reading requires teachers to support both the lexical and non-lexical pathways used in word recognition. To strengthen the non-lexical route, teachers should provide explicit instruction in grapheme-phoneme correspondences, blending, segmenting, syllable patterns, decoding of unfamiliar words, and the reading of regular and pseudo-words. These activities help learners apply sound-symbol knowledge when they encounter new words. To strengthen the lexical route, teachers should provide repeated exposure to familiar words, high-frequency words, irregular words, and meaningful word patterns so that learners gradually store words in memory and recognize them automatically. Activities such as word sorting, word building, repeated reading, dictation, spelling practice, sight-word review, and contrastive analysis of regular and irregular spellings can help learners understand when to decode systematically and when to rely on stored word knowledge. The theory is also useful for assessment because teachers can observe whether learners struggle mainly with decoding unfamiliar words, recognizing familiar words automatically, or reading irregular words. In multilingual classrooms, teachers should consider the transparency of the languages learners are reading, since learners may find regular local-language orthographies easier to decode than English, where many words require flexible use of both routes. Therefore, classroom application of Dual Route Theory involves balancing systematic phonics instruction with repeated meaningful exposure to words so that learners develop both accurate decoding and automatic word recognition.

Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory

Although Dual Route Theory has been influential in explaining word recognition, reading development, dyslexia, and spelling proficiency, it has been criticized for treating orthographic processing too narrowly as a lexical-sub-lexical distinction. Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory, proposed by Ziegler and Goswami (2005), addresses this limitation by arguing that readers rely on orthographic units of varying sizes, ranging from letters and graphemes to rimes, syllables, morphemes, and whole words. The theory identifies three major challenges in learning to read: the availability of mappings between print and sound, the consistency of those mappings, and the granularity or size of the units that must be learned. These challenges are especially important in comparing transparent and opaque orthographies. In transparent writing systems, such as many Zambian languages, consistent letter-sound relationships allow beginners to decode more predictably once the alphabetic principle is mastered. In contrast, English presents greater difficulty because its inconsistent spelling-sound correspondences require learners to use larger and more varied grain sizes. Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory therefore offers a useful framework for explaining differences in reading achievement across languages and for designing literacy interventions that are sensitive to orthographic transparency, bilingual learning, and the specific decoding demands faced by learners in African contexts (Aro & Wimmer, 2003; Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005; Kaani, 2014).

Classroom application of Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory requires teachers to help learners process written language at different levels of orthographic detail, from individual letters and sounds to larger units such as rimes, syllables, morphemes, and whole words. In transparent orthographies, instruction can initially emphasize systematic grapheme-phoneme correspondence, blending, segmenting, and syllable reading because sound-

symbol relationships are relatively consistent. In less transparent orthographies such as English, learners also need explicit attention to larger grain sizes, including common spelling patterns, word families, onset-rime units, prefixes, suffixes, roots, and irregular word forms. Practical classroom activities may include sorting words by spelling patterns, breaking multisyllabic words into syllables and morphemes, comparing regular and irregular spellings, building word families, and reading connected texts that reinforce taught patterns. In multilingual classrooms, the theory encourages teachers to compare the grain-size demands of learners' familiar languages with those of the language of instruction, thereby helping learners transfer useful decoding strategies while recognizing differences across writing systems. Its classroom value lies in guiding teachers to move beyond single-letter decoding and to teach flexible word-recognition strategies that match the orthographic structure of the language being learned.

Metacognitive Theory of Reading

Metacognition refers to awareness and regulation of one's own thinking. The metacognitive theory of reading emphasizes that proficient readers monitor their comprehension, notice confusion, use strategies, and repair meaning when understanding breaks down. Klein et al. (2004) note that strategic readers identify the purpose and type of text before reading, consider the features of the text, select appropriate reading strategies, and make predictions based on prior knowledge and textual information. Pressley (2002) similarly argues that good comprehenders actively coordinate strategies such as predicting, questioning, summarizing, visualizing, and monitoring comprehension while reading challenging texts. Classroom applications include teacher modelling through think-alouds, self-questioning, summarizing, predicting, inferring, clarifying, and reflecting on strategy use. Its strength is that it promotes independent and strategic comprehension; its limitation is that it addresses comprehension control more directly than initial decoding.

Classroom application of metacognitive theory of reading requires teachers to make reading strategies explicit and to help learners monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own comprehension. Teachers may model strategic thinking through think-alouds, showing how proficient readers set purposes, preview texts, make predictions, ask questions, identify confusion, reread difficult sections, summarize key ideas, and check whether meaning has been achieved. Learners can also use reading journals, self-questioning guides, comprehension checklists, reciprocal teaching, and reflection tasks to become aware of the strategies they use before, during, and after reading. In this approach, the teacher gradually transfers responsibility from modelling and guided practice to independent strategy use. Such instruction is valuable because it develops self-regulated readers who can recognize comprehension breakdowns and apply appropriate repair strategies, although it should be supported by adequate vocabulary, decoding, fluency, and background knowledge instruction.

Constructivist Theory of Reading

Constructivist theory states that learners actively construct meaning rather than passively receive it. Reading involves integrating textual information with prior knowledge, purpose, and interpretation. The theory informs student-centered literacy instruction, inquiry-based learning, discussion, interpretation, and collaborative meaning-making. In classrooms, teachers facilitate discussion, encourage inquiry, connect reading to experience and problem solving, and allow students to co-construct meaning. Its strength is that it supports active learning and understanding; its limitation is that it may be too general unless paired with explicit skill instruction.

Classroom application of constructivist theory of reading involves creating learning conditions in which learners actively build meaning from texts through inquiry, interaction, prior knowledge, and reflection. Teachers may use open-ended questioning, problem-based reading tasks, collaborative interpretation, literature circles, prediction activities, concept mapping, and discussion to help learners connect new information with existing understanding. Rather than presenting meaning as fixed, the teacher guides learners to test interpretations against textual evidence, compare ideas with peers, and revise their understanding as they encounter new information. This approach supports active engagement, deeper comprehension, and learner autonomy because students participate in constructing knowledge rather than merely receiving it. However, constructivist reading activities should be balanced with explicit instruction in vocabulary, text structure, decoding, and comprehension strategies so that learners have the linguistic and cognitive tools needed to construct accurate and defensible meanings.

Top-Down View of Reading Theory

Top-down theory views reading as a **meaning-driven process** in which readers use prior knowledge, context, expectations, predictions, and overall meaning to interpret text. The reader does not rely solely on decoding; rather, the brain anticipates meaning and confirms or revises predictions during reading. The theory informs comprehension instruction, prediction activities, prior-knowledge activation, contextual guessing, and the use of whole texts rather than isolated words. In classroom practice, teachers may ask students to predict before reading, use picture walks, activate background knowledge, and encourage inference and meaning construction. Its strength is that it supports understanding, engagement, and critical thinking; its **limitation is that**, if overused, students may guess words inaccurately rather than decode them carefully.

Classroom application of the top-down view of reading emphasizes activities that activate learners' background knowledge, purposes, predictions, and expectations before and during reading. Teachers may begin lessons with brainstorming, picture walks, title analysis, anticipation guides, pre-reading discussion, and prediction tasks that help learners approach the text as meaning-makers. During reading, learners can be encouraged to infer meanings, confirm or revise predictions, use contextual clues, connect ideas to prior experience, and discuss the overall message of the text. These practices are useful for strengthening comprehension, engagement, and inferential thinking, particularly when texts contain familiar themes or culturally relevant content. Nevertheless, top-down activities should not encourage uncontrolled guessing; they should be combined with careful attention to textual evidence, vocabulary, sentence meaning, and decoding so that learners' interpretations remain accurate and grounded in the print.

Bottom-Up View of Reading Theory

Bottom-up theory views reading as a process that begins with the **smallest units of print** and moves toward larger units of meaning. Readers identify letters and sounds, combine them into words, process sentences, and then construct meaning from the text. Nunan (2003) observes that reading can be understood as the decoding of written symbols into their aural equivalents in the effort to make sense of text. Bottom-up theory informs the teaching of **phonemic awareness, phonics, word recognition, fluency, and** early decoding skills. In **classrooms, teachers apply this theory** by teaching letter-sound relationships, blending, segmenting, and the systematic decoding of unfamiliar words. It is particularly useful for **beginning readers** and learners who experience word-recognition difficulties. Its limitation is that it may overemphasize formal features of language, such as letters, words, and structure, while underemphasizing meaning, background knowledge, and reader interpretation.

Classroom application of the bottom-up view of reading focuses on systematic instruction that moves from smaller units of language to larger units of meaning. Teachers may begin with phonological awareness, letter recognition, grapheme–phoneme correspondence, blending, segmenting, syllable reading, word recognition, and sentence reading before guiding learners toward connected text comprehension. Activities such as sound manipulation, letter-sound drills, decoding practice, word building, dictation, reading of decodable texts, and repeated oral reading help learners develop accuracy, automaticity, and fluency. This approach is particularly useful for beginning readers and learners who experience difficulties with word recognition because it provides clear and sequential instruction in the alphabetic principle. However, bottom-up instruction should be linked to vocabulary, oral language, comprehension, and meaningful reading experiences so that learners understand that accurate decoding is a pathway to constructing meaning rather than an end in itself.

Balanced Literacy Approach

Balanced literacy is not strictly a theory but a broad instructional approach informed by several theoretical traditions. It seeks to combine phonics and word study, comprehension, guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, and writing instruction. Many school systems use it as a framework for combining skill instruction with authentic literacy experiences. Classroom applications include mini-lessons, guided practice, independent reading, comprehension strategy instruction, writing workshops, and varied literacy activities. Its strength is that it attempts to avoid extremes by balancing skills and meaning; its limitation is that its

effectiveness depends on **how** the balance is implemented, and in some contexts phonics instruction may remain insufficiently systematic.

Classroom application of balanced literacy involves combining explicit skill instruction with meaningful reading and writing experiences. In practice, teachers may organize lessons that include systematic phonics and word study, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, read-alouds, comprehension strategy instruction, vocabulary development, and writing workshops. The approach encourages teachers to move flexibly between teacher modelling, guided practice, collaborative learning, and independent application so that learners receive both direct instruction and opportunities to use literacy for authentic purposes. Balanced literacy is most effective when the “balance” is intentional rather than incidental, ensuring that foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency, and spelling are taught explicitly while comprehension, motivation, oral language, and writing are also developed. In multilingual classrooms, balanced literacy can support learners by integrating local language resources, culturally relevant texts, and structured instruction in the language of schooling. However, its classroom value depends on whether teachers implement the skills component systematically and use assessment evidence to adjust instruction to learners’ needs.

The Science of Reading Perspective and Structured Literacy

The science of reading is not a single theory, but an evidence-based perspective informed by research in literacy, linguistics, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and reading studies. It emphasizes explicit and systematic instruction, particularly in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and language comprehension. This perspective is consistent with major syntheses that identify phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as central components of effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000), while also recognizing that skilled reading involves motivation, self-regulation, background knowledge, morphological awareness, and bridging processes that connect word recognition and language comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The perspective informs teacher education, curriculum reform, literacy and dyslexia intervention, and early literacy policy. In classrooms, it supports direct and sequential teaching of foundational skills, cumulative review, assessment of reading components, and deliberate support for language comprehension and knowledge building. Its **strength** is its strong research base, especially for learners at risk; its limitation is that, if interpreted narrowly, it may neglect motivation, identity, cultural relevance, and authentic text engagement.

Classroom application of the science of reading requires teachers to use research-informed instruction that systematically develops the major components of skilled reading. Lessons should include explicit teaching of phonological awareness, phonics, decoding, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, oral language, background knowledge, and comprehension, supported by cumulative review and regular assessment. Teachers may use activities such as sound manipulation, grapheme–phoneme mapping, blending and segmenting, decodable text reading, repeated oral reading, vocabulary discussion, morphology instruction, read-alouds, and structured comprehension tasks. The approach also requires early identification of reading difficulties and targeted intervention based on evidence of whether learners struggle with decoding, fluency, language comprehension, or a combination of these areas. In multilingual contexts, teachers should attend to the relationship between learners’ home languages and the language of instruction, especially differences in orthographic transparency, vocabulary knowledge, and oral language proficiency. Properly applied, the science of reading supports explicit, diagnostic, cumulative, and responsive instruction while still allowing teachers to use engaging texts and meaningful literacy activities that build motivation and comprehension.

Cognitive Process Theory

Cognitive process theory of writing conceptualizes writing as a problem-solving activity that involves planning, translating ideas into language, reviewing, and revising. This perspective, associated with influential cognitive models of writing, shifted attention away from writing as a finished product and toward the mental processes writers use while composing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Writing development, from this viewpoint, depends on the coordination of working memory, topic knowledge, rhetorical awareness, transcription skills, and self-regulation. In instruction, this theory supports explicit teaching of planning strategies, drafting routines, revision

techniques, goal setting, and reflection. It also explains why novice writers often struggle when lower-level demands such as spelling, handwriting, or sentence construction consume cognitive resources needed for idea generation and organization.

Process-oriented writing instruction drew heavily on this theoretical tradition. It emphasizes that writing is recursive rather than linear and that students benefit from opportunities to draft, confer, revise, edit, and publish for real audiences. Research on writing instruction also supports explicit teaching of writing strategies, summarization, collaborative writing, goal setting, sentence combining, prewriting, inquiry activities, study of models, and writing-to-learn practices (Graham & Perin, 2007). Such instruction has been especially valuable in demonstrating that young learners can develop as writers when given time, ownership, feedback, and meaningful purposes for communication. Nevertheless, process approaches can be weakened when they fail to provide explicit teaching in sentence construction, genre features, vocabulary, and transcription skills. Contemporary writing instruction increasingly attempts to combine process pedagogy with direct instruction in the component skills required for successful composition.

Genre Theory and Discourse Approaches

Genre theory understands writing as a socially organized form of communication shaped by audience, purpose, and disciplinary expectations. Rather than treating writing as a universal skill detached from context, genre-based approaches show that different kinds of texts such as narratives, explanations, arguments, reports, and reflections have distinctive structures, language features, and rhetorical aims. In literacy instruction, genre theory supports teaching that makes text structures visible, models exemplars, and apprentices students into the valued ways of writing used in school and society. This approach is particularly useful in helping learners understand that strong writing depends not only on personal expression but also on control of the conventions that govern communication in different contexts.

Sociocultural theories of writing complement genre theory by highlighting collaboration, apprenticeship, identity, and the role of communities in shaping written expression. Writing is viewed not simply as an individual cognitive act but as participation in socially recognized practices. Students learn to write through interaction with teachers, peers, families, and texts, and through engagement with the cultural tools of literacy. These perspectives remind educators that writing instruction should not focus solely on correctness or form; it should also create opportunities for dialogue, feedback, voice, cultural relevance, and participation in meaningful discourse communities.

Reading–Writing Relationships in Literacy Theory

Although reading and writing have often been studied and taught separately, a growing body of scholarship conceptualizes them as interconnected aspects of literacy development. Integrated models propose that reading and writing draw on shared knowledge sources, including oral language, vocabulary, syntax, discourse structures, background knowledge, and orthographic knowledge (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan, 2006). Learners who read widely are exposed to text patterns, language structures, and vocabulary that support writing, while learners who write regularly deepen their understanding of text organization, authorial choices, and communicative purpose. This reciprocal relationship suggests that instruction in one domain can strengthen performance in the other when designed intentionally.

Recent integrative frameworks argue that reading and writing develop dynamically across time and are influenced by both common and distinct component skills (Kim, 2020). This view is educationally significant because it challenges fragmented literacy curricula. For example, teaching students to analyze how texts are organized can improve both comprehension and composition. Likewise, explicit instruction in sentence construction, morphology, and academic vocabulary can strengthen both reading understanding and written expression. An integrated theory of literacy therefore supports coordinated instruction in decoding, comprehension, oral language, sentence-level writing, text structure, and critical response.

Implications For Literacy Instruction

Theories of reading and writing should not be treated merely as abstract academic debates; they provide practical guidance for classroom decision-making, curriculum planning, assessment, intervention, and teacher professional development. A major implication is that literacy instruction should be evidence-informed, systematic, developmentally responsive, and contextually relevant. Beginning readers require explicit and cumulative teaching in phonological awareness, phonics, decoding, word recognition, spelling, and fluency, but these skills should be taught alongside rich oral language development, vocabulary instruction, background knowledge building, listening comprehension, and engagement with meaningful texts. In this sense, effective instruction requires teachers to coordinate foundational skills with comprehension, interpretation, writing, and purposeful communication rather than treating them as separate or competing priorities.

A second implication is that literacy instruction should be organized around diagnostic knowledge of learners. The reviewed theories show that learners may struggle for different reasons: some may have weak phonemic awareness or decoding skills, others may decode accurately but lack vocabulary or oral language proficiency, while others may have trouble with comprehension monitoring, background knowledge, text structure, or written expression. Teachers should therefore use assessment not only to rank learners but to identify the specific components of literacy that require support. Informal reading inventories, phonics checks, oral reading fluency tasks, spelling analyses, vocabulary assessments, comprehension discussions, writing samples, and observation of classroom participation can help teachers determine whether instruction should emphasize decoding, fluency, language comprehension, genre knowledge, writing processes, or critical response.

A third implication concerns the need for explicit instruction without reducing literacy to mechanical skill practice. Code-emphasis theories, the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, Dual Route Theory, and the science of reading all point to the importance of explicit teaching in the alphabetic principle, word recognition, spelling patterns, morphology, and fluency. However, meaning-centered, schema-based, transactional, sociocultural, and critical literacy theories remind educators that reading and writing also require meaning-making, interpretation, identity formation, cultural knowledge, and social participation. Instruction should therefore combine structured lessons in print, sound, word, sentence, and text features with opportunities for learners to read whole texts, discuss ideas, compose meaningful writing, and connect literacy to real communicative purposes.

A fourth implication is that reading and writing should be integrated across the curriculum. Theories of reading-writing relationships indicate that learners develop literacy more powerfully when reading and writing are planned as mutually reinforcing activities. Reading should expose learners to vocabulary, sentence patterns, text structures, genre conventions, rhetorical choices, and disciplinary knowledge. Writing should then give learners opportunities to use these resources to explain, narrate, argue, summarize, reflect, and critique. For example, learners may read a narrative and then write an alternative ending, analyze an informational text and then write a report, study persuasive language and then compose an argument, or read critically and then produce a reflective response. Such integration helps learners understand literacy as a connected set of practices rather than isolated school tasks.

A fifth implication is that writing instruction requires sustained attention. Cognitive process theory, genre theory, and sociocultural perspectives show that learners need support not only in handwriting, spelling, grammar, and sentence construction, but also in planning, organizing, drafting, revising, editing, audience awareness, and genre control. Teachers should model writing processes, provide writing frames where necessary, use mentor texts, teach sentence combining and paragraph development, support peer review, and create opportunities for learners to publish or share their writing. Such instruction helps learners view writing as a recursive and purposeful process rather than a one-time product produced for correction.

A sixth implication is that literacy instruction must be culturally and linguistically responsive. Learners enter classrooms with different home languages, dialects, oral traditions, family literacy practices, cultural experiences, and degrees of exposure to print. In multilingual contexts, teachers should deliberately connect learners' home language resources with the language of instruction, while also teaching the vocabulary, syntax,

text structures, and academic language needed for school success. This may involve using familiar oral narratives, local texts, translanguaging strategies where appropriate, comparison of sound-symbol systems across languages, and discussion of culturally relevant themes. Such practices help learners see their linguistic and cultural identities as resources for literacy rather than obstacles to be overcome.

A seventh implication relates to classroom organization and pedagogy. Effective literacy classrooms require a combination of teacher modelling, guided practice, collaborative learning, independent reading and writing, discussion, feedback, and reflection. Teachers should gradually release responsibility to learners by first demonstrating strategies, then guiding learners through practice, and finally supporting independent application. This approach aligns with developmental, cognitive, constructivist, and sociocultural perspectives because it recognizes that learners need both explicit support and opportunities for active participation. Classroom routines such as read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading, word study, writing workshops, literature circles, vocabulary discussions, and conferencing can create a coherent literacy environment when they are intentionally linked to clear instructional goals.

An eighth implication is the importance of early identification and targeted intervention. Learners who experience literacy difficulties should receive support before difficulties become entrenched. Intervention should be based on evidence of need and should be intensive, explicit, cumulative, and closely monitored. For learners with decoding difficulties, intervention may focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, blending, segmenting, and decodable text reading. For learners with fluency difficulties, repeated reading, guided oral reading, and phrasing practice may be useful. For learners with comprehension difficulties, instruction may focus on vocabulary, background knowledge, oral language, inferencing, text structure, and metacognitive monitoring. For learners with writing difficulties, support may focus on transcription, sentence construction, planning, revision, and genre features.

From a scholarly standpoint, the strongest instructional models are those that avoid false dichotomies. Effective literacy instruction is neither exclusively skills-based nor exclusively meaning-based. Instead, it integrates explicit teaching of foundational skills with sustained engagement in comprehension, discussion, composition, inquiry, and critical literacy. Such an approach is particularly important in diverse classrooms where students vary in linguistic background, prior knowledge, reading experience, and access to literacy opportunities. A robust model of literacy instruction must therefore combine cognitive, linguistic, social, cultural, and critical dimensions. It should prepare learners not only to decode and encode print accurately, but also to comprehend deeply, write purposefully, evaluate texts critically, and use literacy for learning, participation, and transformation in school and society.

Key Takeaways

Several key conclusions follow from this review. First, literacy theories provide educators with conceptual tools for understanding how learners acquire, develop, and refine reading and writing abilities. Rather than functioning as abstract academic positions, these theories guide decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, intervention, and classroom organization. They help teachers explain why some learners struggle with decoding, why others experience comprehension difficulties despite accurate word reading, and why writing development depends on both cognitive processes and social participation.

Second, no single theory fully accounts for the complexity of literacy development. Code-based theories, such as phonics, bottom-up processing, dual route theory, and the science of reading, clarify the importance of explicit instruction in phonological awareness, decoding, spelling patterns, word recognition, and fluency. However, meaning-centered, constructivist, transactional, reader-response, sociocultural, and critical literacy theories demonstrate that reading and writing are also interpretive, social, cultural, and ideological practices. Effective literacy instruction therefore requires theoretical integration rather than allegiance to one approach.

Third, developmental responsiveness remains central to literacy teaching. Stage theories, maturation perspectives, emergent literacy theory, and cognitive developmental theory remind educators that learners do not acquire literacy uniformly or at the same pace. Teachers must therefore observe learners carefully, identify their current literacy behaviours, and provide instruction that moves them toward the next level of competence. This

includes supporting early print awareness and oral language, teaching alphabetic knowledge systematically, building automatic word recognition, and gradually extending learners toward independent comprehension and written expression.

Fourth, literacy instruction should balance explicit teaching with meaningful engagement. Foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, spelling, handwriting, fluency, and sentence construction require direct, systematic, and cumulative instruction. At the same time, learners also need rich opportunities to read authentic texts, discuss ideas, write for real purposes, respond to literature, build vocabulary, and connect texts to their lived experiences. A balanced approach is therefore not simply the inclusion of many activities, but the deliberate coordination of skills, meaning, motivation, and context.

Fifth, reading and writing should be taught as mutually reinforcing processes. The review shows that reading strengthens writing by exposing learners to vocabulary, text structures, genre conventions, sentence patterns, and authorial choices. Similarly, writing strengthens reading by helping learners analyze how texts are organized, how meaning is constructed, and how language choices influence readers. Instruction should therefore integrate reading and writing through activities such as shared reading followed by written response, genre analysis followed by composition, vocabulary study linked to sentence writing, and critical reading linked to argumentative or reflective writing.

Sixth, context is essential in literacy development. Learners bring diverse linguistic backgrounds, cultural knowledge, home literacy practices, identities, and community experiences into the classroom. Family literacy, sociocultural theory, schema theory, and critical literacy all show that literacy learning becomes more meaningful when it connects school texts with learners' social worlds. In multilingual contexts, teachers must also attend to the relationship between learners' home languages and the language of instruction, including differences in vocabulary, oral proficiency, orthographic transparency, and cultural familiarity.

Seventh, assessment and intervention should be diagnostic rather than general. Models such as the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, Dual Route Theory, and the science of reading help teachers identify whether a learner's difficulty lies mainly in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, oral language, background knowledge, comprehension monitoring, writing transcription, or genre control. Such distinctions matter because learners who struggle for different reasons require different instructional responses. Effective intervention therefore depends on careful assessment of specific literacy components rather than broad assumptions about poor performance.

Finally, the review suggests that effective literacy instruction is comprehensive, evidence-informed, culturally responsive, and socially meaningful. Teachers should combine the precision of structured instruction with the richness of authentic literacy practices. They should teach learners how to decode and spell words accurately, but also how to comprehend, interpret, critique, compose, and use literacy for participation in academic and social life. In this sense, the strongest implication of the reviewed theories is that literacy education should develop not only technically proficient readers and writers, but also thoughtful, strategic, critical, and adaptable language users.

CONCLUSION

This review has shown that theories of reading and writing have moved beyond polarized debates toward more integrated, evidence-informed, developmentally responsive, and context-sensitive understandings of literacy development. Code-based perspectives, including phonics, bottom-up processing, Dual Route Theory, the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, and the science of reading, demonstrate the importance of explicit and cumulative instruction in phonological awareness, decoding, spelling, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and language comprehension. At the same time, meaning-centered, constructivist, transactional, reader-response, sociocultural, and critical literacy theories show that literacy is not merely a technical skill but also an interpretive, social, cultural, and ideological practice. Similarly, cognitive process, genre, and sociocultural theories of writing emphasize that written expression develops through the coordination of mental processes, discourse knowledge, audience awareness, social interaction, and purposeful communication. Taken

together, these perspectives confirm that no single theory is sufficient for explaining or guiding literacy instruction. Effective literacy education requires a comprehensive framework that deliberately coordinates foundational skills, meaning-making, motivation, context, and authentic literacy engagement rather than simply combining many activities. For teachers, this means observing learners' developmental progress, using diagnostic assessment to identify specific literacy needs, providing explicit and systematic instruction, integrating reading and writing across the curriculum, valuing learners' linguistic and cultural resources, and intervening early when difficulties emerge. Ultimately, the goal of literacy instruction should be to develop learners who can decode and encode print accurately, comprehend deeply, write purposefully, think critically, and use literacy confidently as thoughtful, strategic, adaptable, and socially engaged language users.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.
2. Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 5–51.
3. Chall, J. S. (1983). *Stages of reading development*. McGraw-Hill.
4. Clay, M. M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Heinemann.
5. Duke, N. K., & Cartwright, K. B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the Simple View of Reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(S1), S25–S44.
6. Ehri, L. C. (2002). Phases of acquisition in learning to read words and implications for teaching. In R. Stainthorp & P. Tomlinson (Eds.), *Learning and teaching reading* (pp. 7–28). British Journal of Educational Psychology Monograph Series II.
7. Ehri, L. C. (2005). Development of sight word reading: Phases and findings. In M. J. Snowling & C. Hulme (Eds.), *The science of reading: A handbook* (pp. 135–154). Blackwell.
8. Ehri, L. C. (2014). Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 18, 5–21.
9. Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*. Bergin & Garvey.
10. Frith, U. (1985). Beneath the surface of developmental dyslexia. In K. E. Patterson, J. C. Marshall, & M. Coltheart (Eds.), *Surface dyslexia: Neuropsychological and cognitive studies of phonological reading* (pp. 301–330). Erlbaum.
11. Goodman, K. S. (1990). The reading process. In P. L. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. E. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive approaches to second language reading* (pp. 11–21). Cambridge University Press.
12. Fitzgerald, J., & Shanahan, T. (2000). Reading and writing relations and their development. *Educational Psychologist*, 35(1), 39–50.
13. Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 365–387.
14. Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 7(1), 6–10.
15. Gough, P. B., Juel, C., & Griffith, P. L. (1992). Reading, spelling, and the orthographic cipher. In P. B. Gough, L. C. Ehri, & R. Treiman (Eds.), *Reading acquisition* (pp. 35–48). Erlbaum.
16. Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools*. Alliance for Excellent Education.
17. Hempenstall, K. (1996). The whole language approach to reading: An empiricist critique. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 1(3), 22–32.
18. Holdaway, D. (1979). *The foundations of literacy*. Ashton Scholastic.
19. Hoover, W. A., & Gough, P. B. (1990). The simple view of reading. *Reading and Writing*, 2, 127–160.
20. Klein, M. L., Peterson, S., & Simington, L. (2004). *Teaching reading in the elementary grades*. Pearson Education Canada.
21. Kim, Y.-S. G. (2020). Interactive dynamic literacy model: An integrative theoretical framework for reading-writing relations. In R. Alves, T. Limpo, & M. Joshi (Eds.), *Reading-writing connections: Towards integrative literacy science* (pp. 11–34). Springer.
22. LaBerge, D., & Samuels, S. J. (1974). Toward a theory of automatic information processing in reading. *Cognitive Psychology*, 6, 293–323.

23. Morphett, M. V., & Washburne, C. (1931). When should children begin to read? *The Elementary School Journal*, 31(7), 496–503.
24. National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
25. Nkhata, B., Simui, F., & Mkandawire, S. B. (2019). *Teaching literacy in the primary school*. University of Zambia Press.
26. Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. McGraw-Hill.
27. Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. International Universities Press.
28. Pressley, M. (2002). Metacognition and self-regulated comprehension. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (3rd ed., pp. 291–309). International Reading Association.
29. Rapsak, S. Z., Henry, M. L., Teague, S. L., Carnahan, S. D., & Beeson, P. M. (2007). Do dual-route models accurately predict reading and spelling performance in individuals with acquired alexia and agraphia? *Neuropsychologia*, 45(11), 2519–2524.
30. Rodgers, G. (2001). *The history of beginning reading: From teaching by sound to teaching by meaning* (Vol. 2).
31. Rumelhart, D. E. (2005). Toward an interactive model of reading. In H. Singer & R. B. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (5th ed., pp. 1149–1179). International Reading Association.
32. Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press.
33. Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading disabilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 97–110). Guilford Press.
34. Seymour, P. H. K., Aro, M., & Erskine, J. M. (2003). Foundation literacy acquisition in European orthographies. *British Journal of Psychology*, 94(2), 143–174.
35. Shanahan, T. (2006). Relations among oral language, reading, and writing development. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 171–183). Guilford Press.
36. Smith, F. (1971). *Understanding reading: A psycholinguistic analysis of reading and learning to read*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
37. Stanley, S. (2007). An analysis of Rx for Discovering Reading RTM for elementary students below average in reading. ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
38. Taylor, D. (1983). *Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write*. Heinemann.
39. Weaver, C. (1988). *Reading: Process and practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
40. Ziegler, J. C., & Goswami, U. (2005). Reading acquisition, developmental dyslexia, and skilled reading across languages: A psycholinguistic grain size theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(1), 3–29.