

Advancing Student Achievement Through Interactive Literacy

A Strategic, Hands-On Approach to Enhancing Instruction



Introduction

Most teachers, principals, and other school administrators are undoubtedly aware of the periodic pendulum swings, or shifts in approaches, to literacy instruction. Over the years, educators have taught children to read using Whole Language, Phonics, Balanced Literacy, and a host of other methods. Many districts and schools have chosen to adopt basal reading programs, while others use a combination of supplemental resources alone or in conjunction with their basal pieces. Regardless of the debate over the effectiveness of any one instructional approach or set of materials, one fact remains consistent: Students across the country continue to struggle with reading.

According to the 2005 Nation's Report Card published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), approximately 36 percent of fourth grade students across the nation cannot read at a basic level. This statistic increases to 54 percent in the population of low-income fourth grade students. In its historic 1999 report to Congress, "Teaching Children to Read," the National Reading Panel stated that "reading instruction is complex. Children come into the classroom with different levels of preparation, as do their teachers." The Panel further indicated that "the best results will be achieved...when teachers are able to use a combination of [instructional] strategies."

With contributing factors such as the *diversity of learning styles and abilities* within each classroom, a *widening achievement gap* that prevents children from being able to "catch up," and the *varied experience levels of teachers*, it has become clear that a one-size-fits-all method

of literacy instruction simply doesn't work in today's schools with today's students.

There is, however, a unique instructional approach that teachers around the country are using to effectively meet these challenges. By combining compelling nonfiction and fiction reading materials with active hands-on learning experiences—an approach which supplemental publisher ETA/Cuisenaire calls "Interactive Literacy"—teachers are able to achieve powerful results. This timeless approach to instruction complements any method of teaching literacy, seamlessly fitting into basal programs as well as other types of reading curriculums.

The Challenges

Visit any first-grade classroom in America today and you will likely meet—

- Kate, who learns best when she can read materials;
- Michael, who learns best from lectures, discussions, talking things through, and listening to what others have to say;
- Jasmine, who learns best through moving, doing, and touching.

Each child possesses a unique learning style: visual, auditory, kinesthetic (or tactile). Though every child may display a tendency toward one particular learning style, children often exhibit characteristics of multiple learning modalities.

Upon visiting Kate, Michael, and Jasmine's classroom, you will also meet Ms. Brown, the teacher charged with addressing not only their individual needs, but the needs of the other students in the class. The challenge facing

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Ms. Brown and the additional 1.5 million+ elementary school teachers in the United States is daunting. They routinely have classes of 25 students or more—even in the early grades. Each student comes to school with a different socioeconomic background, level of preschool or school readiness experience, and learning style. Teachers are expected to help all of these students build the literacy skills—particularly the five Elements of Reading Instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Text Comprehension)—that will serve as the basis for all other learning. Ultimately, if Kate, Michael, Jasmine, and their classmates are unable to read, they will experience difficulty learning history, social studies, science, and math. Furthermore, teachers face mounting pressure to increase students' performance on standardized tests and demonstrate AYP—Adequate Yearly Progress—a mandate of the Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Ms. Brown must reach Kate, Michael, Jasmine and the other children, despite their diverse learning styles and abilities, before they fall behind. Once an achievement gap emerges, it becomes increasingly difficult to reverse. In fact, if students fail to catch up before leaving first grade, they are less likely to ever “catch up.” Research shows that “a child who is a poor reader at the end of Grade 1 will remain a poor reader at the end of Grade 4.”¹

One important key to success in school is having a well-prepared teacher who knows what to teach and how to teach it. The good news is that all but a very small percentage of reading problems are preventable and the “major prevention strategy for them is excellent instruction.”² Making sure every classroom has a highly qualified teacher is not only common sense, it is another mandate of NCLB. Given that today's elementary teachers bring diverse levels of experience to their classrooms, an approach to literacy instruction that provides sufficient support, professional development, and materials is essential to achieve effective results.

How Interactive Literacy Makes a Difference

Hands-on learning with manipulatives has been utilized for many years to help students understand abstract math concepts. For over 40 years, ETA/Cuisenaire has served as a

trusted source of such materials including one of the most recognizable and widely used math manipulatives, **Cuisenaire Rods**[®]. Strategic resources that intertwine content and hands-on activities continue to be popular with teachers who recognize the value of an interactive approach in boosting student achievement in math.

The same approach is true in literacy instruction. Teachers can purposely and seamlessly integrate manipulatives into their core reading curriculums to reach every student; they don't need to set aside the basal readers or disassemble their classroom libraries of leveled texts.

Applying this multi-faceted approach allows teachers to differentiate literacy instruction for their students and to design lessons that complement each student's own personal learning style. Using manipulatives and print materials, teachers can design standards-based lessons that are enjoyable and effective to teach. Research shows that when teachers are excited about what they are teaching, students build an enthusiasm for learning.

For students in an Interactive Literacy classroom, each school day becomes an exciting and motivating experience. Rather than simply sitting at their desks, reading aloud or silently to themselves, they see, touch, hear, and actively construct literacy through innovative activities that build their confidence and love of learning.

An Approach Where All Students Succeed

Because Interactive Literacy addresses the diversity of students' learning styles and strengths, all children have the opportunity to succeed. For example, if a lesson is teaching the parts of a sentence, Kate, who is a visual learner, grasps the concept when reading from a basal text, supplemental print materials, or using interactive software. Michael, the auditory learner, catches on when the teacher leads the whole class in a lesson, in a small group discussion, or from listening to information at an audio learning station. When Jasmine picks up a reading manipulative and moves words around, she quickly learns where the verb goes in a sentence because, as a kinesthetic learner, she is now able to see and touch the information. *All* students benefit from

***Interactive Literacy**—an approach that enriches reading instruction through the integration of hands-on materials with nonfiction and fiction texts—allowing students to see, touch, hear, and actively construct literacy.*

Interactive Literacy because the lines between learning styles *all* intersect. Michael may be a visual learner at times, Jasmine may sometimes gain more from classroom discussion, and Kate occasionally may need to manipulate information in a concrete way to learn it. By integrating the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities into literacy instruction, a teacher can ensure that all students are learning in the most effective way.

What the Research Tells Us

The Interactive Literacy approach is grounded in research that shows the use of hands-on instructional tools to be effective in the classroom. The National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum, in a review of 14 studies, concluded that the “use of manipulatives compared with traditional instruction typically had a positive effect on student achievement.”³

Another study, issued over a decade ago, indicated that “manipulatives help students make the leap from intuitive to logical thinking, from the concrete to the abstract.”⁴

Specific research into the use of reading manipulatives further supports these conclusions. In a recent study (see Tables 1 and 2), 534 first and second graders in 14 elementary schools in a major metropolitan school district used a manipulative-based language arts program, called **Reading Rods® Phonics**.⁵ The study concluded that the program “helped students achieve significantly higher early literacy test scores on the Illinois Snapshot of Early Learning Assessment (ISEL).”⁶ The program helped students who were performing below Target in the fall of the school year catch up and exceed the Target score at a higher rate than students who did not use the manipulative-based resource. Students using **Reading Rods Phonics** outperformed students who did not use the program on 8 out of 10 ISEL subtests including Phonemic Awareness, Letter Sounds, Spelling, Word Recognition, and Passage Reading. Further, the study showed that teachers who used the program featuring the **Reading Rods®** manipulative more often had students with larger gains in achievement than teachers who used the manipulative less frequently.

Finally, teachers support what research says: Manipulatives are a key component of a strong instructional program. A 2002 survey by the National Education Association revealed that 85 percent of elementary school teachers and 67 percent of teachers of combined grade levels rated manipulatives as “highly effective.”⁷

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Table 1

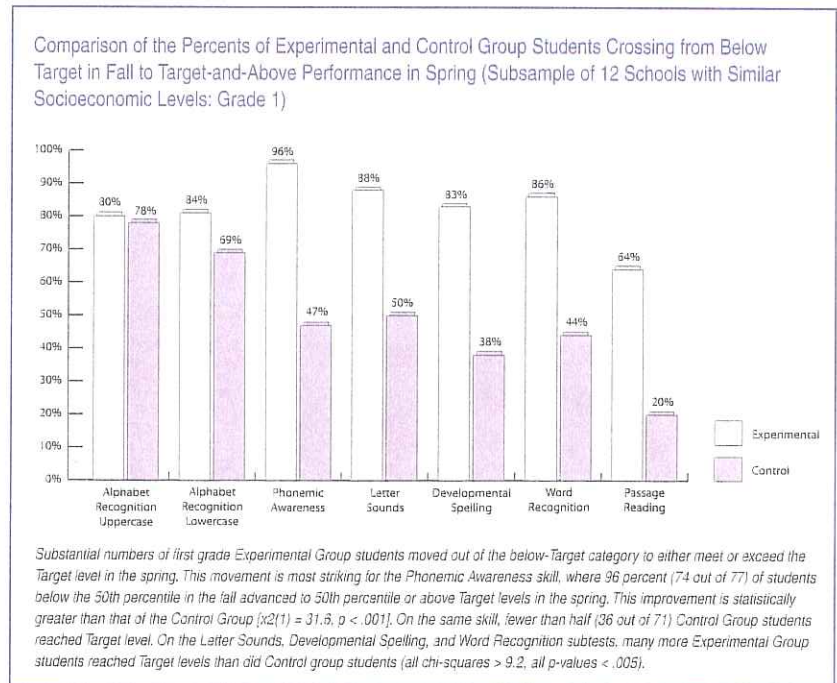
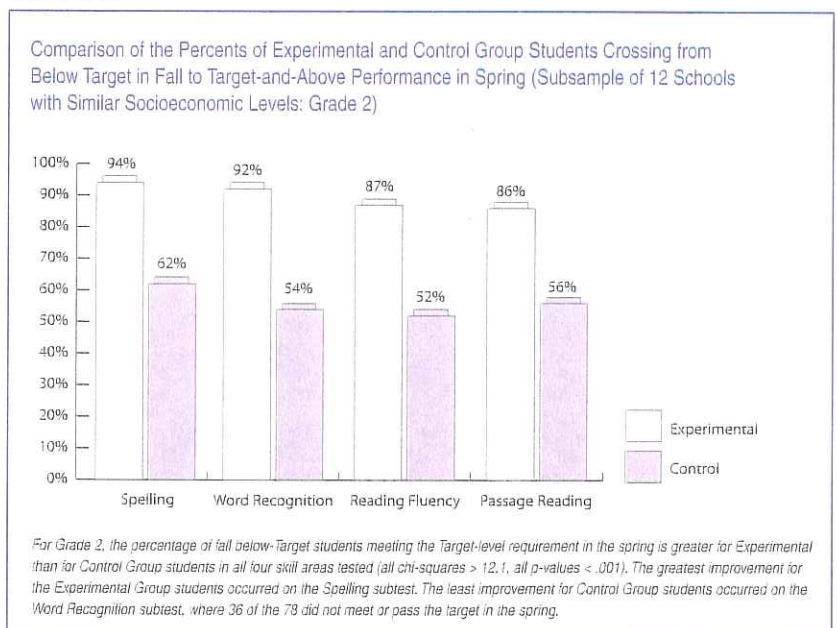


Table 2



Pioneering Interactive Literacy

Interactive Literacy is helping teachers and students of all abilities and learning styles achieve positive outcomes. As the leader in manipulative-based education, ETA/Cuisenaire is the only company in the literacy arena to strategically integrate books and hands-on learning experiences together and align them to current curriculum standards. To support teachers in implementing the Interactive Literacy approach in the classroom, the company offers a full suite of products designed to supplement and reinforce what's already being done. The company also provides the professional development support needed to make integrating these resources simple and seamless. Interactive Literacy products give depth to regular classroom instruction—individual, small group, and whole class—as well as being ideal resources for intervention, offering students who have trouble grasping a skill through a traditional method of instruction a different way to experience and learn.

The company was founded in 1965 as Educational Teaching Aids (ETA), to meet the needs of preschool and elementary educators seeking quality hands-on products that developed children's perception, motor discrimination, and eye-hand coordination skills. Initial success with these early childhood materials prompted expansion beyond this specialized niche to provide supplemental interactive products that build key skills in major curriculum areas, including mathematics, science, reading, and language arts.

In April 2000, ETA acquired Cuisenaire Company of America, and became ETA/Cuisenaire, a move which expanded ETA's leadership in manipulative-based mathematics education.

Expansion into the reading and language arts market actually began two years earlier in 1998 with the launch of **Reading Rods** and the **Reading Rods Phonics** programs. Introducing the company's effective, hands-on instructional approach to literacy, these products met with success and provided strong impetus to expand into supplemental text publishing, with series such as InfoTrek™ content-area readers for grades K–3, and SunSprouts® leveled books for grades K–3.

Having achieved popularity with teachers across the country, the 240-title SunSprouts leveled book series has expanded into an Interactive Literacy "System" that includes dual-language titles, comprehensive assessments for reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as software that allows students to interact with text and build skills. The company's newest series for the upper elementary and middle grades is **WorldScapes®**. This groundbreaking leveled literacy series offers teachers a single resource that both supports reading instruction and introduces students to standards-based content through photography and stories of different countries, cultures, and global topics. Explicit teacher's notes for each title support development of a wide range of comprehension strategies, build fluency and vocabulary, and incorporate the use of **Reading Rods** in extension activities to make the process of learning reading skills more interactive and meaningful.

ETA/Cuisenaire also offers professional development consultation, training and resources to assist teachers in adopting the hands-on techniques and tools of Interactive Literacy for their classrooms. The **Comprehensive Literacy Resource** series by literacy expert Miriam P. Trehearne includes four volumes for Preschool, Kindergarten, Grades 1-2 Teachers, and Grades 3-6 Teachers, and puts the philosophy behind Interactive Literacy into practical action. Designed to help bridge the literacy achievement gap, the books tie the latest research to assessment and instruction. The series is supported by the **Learning Place® for Literacy**, a classroom package of student books, manipulatives, and teacher support for implementing Trehearne's research-based lessons and ideas. Trehearne's classroom-proven strategies also provide the instructional framework for **CenterStage® Literacy**, fifteen ready-to-use, portable literacy stations for kindergarten through second grade that promote hands-on guided practice of core literacy skills. By ensuring that its classroom materials are research-based and supported by professional development resources, ETA/Cuisenaire offers teachers a full continuum for implementing Interactive Literacy successfully in their classrooms.

With an emphasis on professional development, ETA/Cuisenaire offers teachers a full continuum of resources for implementing Interactive Literacy successfully in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Today ETA/Cuisenaire is recognized as the premier publisher and pioneer of Interactive Literacy and manipulative-based education, with more than 6,000 supplemental reading, math, and science resources. Aligned to state and national standards, these products offer hands-on educational opportunities that make learning fun for students and teaching more effective for educators.

Based on the belief that reading is undeniably the foundation for success in society,⁸ ETA/Cuisenaire is dedicated to helping students become good readers at a young age, so that the world literally becomes an open book to them. Using an Interactive Literacy approach to instruction that combines hands-on learning experiences, nonfiction and fiction texts, and research-based instructional strategies and professional development support, teachers are achieving powerful results with students of all learning styles and abilities. ETA/Cuisenaire continues to develop innovative products to support its Interactive Literacy approach to instruction, supplement reading curriculums, and help students build the strong literacy skills that are essential for success in school and in life.

¹ Juel, C. 1998. "Learning to Read and Write: A Longitudinal study of 54 children from first to fourth grades." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(4), 437–447.

² Snow, C.E., Burns, S. & Griffin, P., Eds. 1998. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. National Academy Press: Washington, DC.

³ Ruzic, R., and K. O'Connell 2001. "Manipulatives." National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum.

⁴ Hartshorn R. and S. Boren 1990. "Experiential Learning of Mathematics: Using Manipulatives." Mart, TN & Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

⁵ Reading Rods Phonics is a supplemental reading program that combines color-coded, interlocking manipulatives with Instruction and Activity Books, Activity Cards, Readers, and other components. Rods are color-coded to define the functions of the letter, word parts or words. An earlier study showed results of using Reading Rods were "faster acquisition of phonemic awareness, a visual memory of word parts and syllables and a great comprehension of text."

⁶ Weldon, W. and J. Bristow 2005. "The Effects of the Use of Reading Rods Manipulatives on Early Literacy Learning." Vernon Hills, IL: ETA/Cuisenaire.

⁷ National Education Association. 2002. 2002 Instructional Materials Survey: Report of Findings: <http://www.publishers.org/press/pdf/2002%20Instructional%20Materials%20Report.pdf>

⁸ Reading First. <http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/faq.html>

The Reading Rods® teaching method is covered by U.S. Patent Nos. 6,685,447 and 7,018,210. Other patents pending.

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