

# TEACHING ENGLISH LITERACY TO CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

The topic of literacy is of special interest among language scholars and educators. Again and again the discussion returns to the question of how to best teach literacy. Despite the controversy over the methods of teaching literacy, the contemporary literature on literacy repeatedly describes teachers as having the power to make a change. This paper discusses what teachers need to know about teaching literacy and how to do the teaching to children.

**Key Words:** *Literacy, Teacher, Written Language, Oral Language*

## INTRODUCTION

Literacy is the term commonly used in the educational literature to describe the knowledge and skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening children need to be able to function effectively in the society (Hill, 2006, p. 3). Today, the term 'literacy' continues to be defined by different writers in different ways. In South Australia, for example, literacy is defined as "the ability to understand, analyse, critically respond to and produce appropriate spoken, written, visual and multimedia communication in different contexts" (South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework, 2001; as cited in Aschberger, 2008). Although many definitions of literacy exist, it is important to note that there is no single correct definition.

In attempting to understand literacy, language scholars have conducted a myriad of studies at various times around the world. Much of the research has resulted in significant findings. While Stubb (1980; as cited in Smith & Elley, 1998, p. 11) estimated that a surprising percentage of the world's population were illiterate (40% in writing and 25% in reading), the Department of Education and Children's Services (2006; as cited in Aschberger, 2008) reported that 8.6% of South Australian students enrolled in government schools were categorised into the students with disability policy.

These results indicate that the topic of literacy has been and should be of great concern to us all. While parents have high expectations for their children's literacy development, teachers should provide different students with a great variety of literacy experiences in the school environment. As far as the diversity of literacy instruction is concerned, I think Bayetto (2008) is true when she says that teachers of today are not only "looking at somebody's child; they are also looking at many of somebody's child".

## TEACHER AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

While children's language patterns are shaped by their home environment, the school setting is seen to be a place where children could refine their language use (Aldridge, 2005, p. 177). As children come to school with a variety of language backgrounds, a teacher should notice these differences to be able to transform their language. In this regard, a teacher plays a vital role in determining students' literacy success (Hill, 2006, ix). Improvement in teaching and problem-solving in the classroom lie in the hands of a teacher who is willing to learn new

concepts, explore current approaches and experiment with different strategies (Freeman, 2000, p. 83).

## **LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

One of the basic concepts that teachers should understand is the relationship between language development and literacy. Literacy development is often associated with children's language development during pre-school and school years (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994, p. 83). While having good basic skills of language, pre-school children demonstrate positive behaviours towards their language development. When they see adults talking, they try to understand the rules that govern the language use, internalise them and practice their own language (Owens, 2005, p. 305).

When entering school, children develop a high degree of language and literacy skills during their language contact and social practice with teachers and peers in the school setting. As with the development of oral skills, the written skills of a child also increase from preschool to school periods. Given that home language and school literacy support each other, it follows that language and literacy develop in a parallel and interactive way (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994, p. 96).

In addition to first language acquisition knowledge, it is also important for teachers to understand theories concerning second language acquisition. While a research by Cummins (1981) shows that a high degree of proficiency in the first language has a positive impact on the second language acquisition (as cited in Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 94), children who come from different cultural backgrounds will feel valued and comfortable to learn when their native culture and language are highly appreciated by the teacher (Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 94). Thus, being both an ESL teacher and a father of two ESL students, I have found that the knowledge of language development, which includes first and second language acquisition principles, will assist teachers in identifying the literacy problems faced by students and in planning the content of language instruction.

## **LANGUAGE AND LITERACY PROBLEM**

With a good understanding of how children's language develops, teachers will notice that some students are low achievers compared to their peers. According to Bos and Vaughn (2005, p. 75), language delay could take two forms: comprehension and production. Comprehension has to do with receptive language, namely whether or not children understand what others are conveying. Production, on the other hand, is concerned with the ability to make people understand what we are communicating, or commonly called expressive language.

Furthermore, Bos and Vaughn (2005) describes language problem as occurring in the contexts of content, form and use. To illustrate this point, they point out how language problems vary from student to student. Monica, for example, encounters difficulty when adjusting her home language to suit the school language. Malik is subject to word-finding problem in his effort to say a word or remember an object and Antoine could only communicate using simple words within simple contexts (pp. 69-70). From the descriptions, it could be inferred that students with language difficulty need explicit instruction in the areas of content, form and use.

## **AREAS OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

One common fact about language areas and language development is that they are interdependent. In other words, progress in one area has an impact on others. Students who experience difficulties in the use of language appear to have limited knowledge and understanding of content and form (Owens, 2005, p. 345). Given that language delay takes place in three aspects of language Bos & Vaughn (2005, p. 71), I agree that language and literacy instruction should address the areas of content, form and use.

Content is usually termed as semantics, that is a branch of linguistics which study concepts and word meanings. As students under disability policy tend to possess less vocabulary than their normal peers (Gerber, 1993; Wiig & Secord, 1998), it is recommended that the instruction of content be emphasised on teaching the vocabulary of certain concepts or how one concept is related to another (as cited in Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 76).

Form refers to the sound and structure of words and is connected with three disciplines: phonology (sound rules), morphology (word formation), and syntax (word order). In a series of studies, researchers (Blachman, 2000; Catts & Kahmi, 1999; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994) have demonstrated that teaching letter-sound connection to children could increase their ability to recognise unfamiliar words when they read or spell (as cited in Vaughn & Bos, 2005, p. 72).

Another important aspect of language is use or pragmatics. Pragmatic skills deal with how a child could communicate effectively in home, community and school environments. Several writers (DeStefano, 1978; Olson, 1977; Ruddell & Haggard, 1985) posit that children who are constantly exposed to language experiences exhibit better skills in language function than those from language-poor backgrounds (as cited in Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994, p. 88).

## **ASSESSMENT AND LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

As noted earlier, the diversity of language and literacy backgrounds requires teachers to consider the fact that they learn and communicate at different levels. Thus, before choosing the focus and content of instruction, teachers need to assess their students' current ability. One example of this assessment is the Abecedarian Reading Assessment developed by Wren and Watts (2002, pp. 1-3). The abecedarian test comprises 6 knowledge domains which include letter knowledge, phonological awareness, phoneme awareness, alphabetic principle, vocabulary, and decoding.

Despite the evidence that these six language features are predictive of reading success, Wren and Watts point out that the information obtained from this test will help teachers design relevant literacy programs for their students. In addition, this pre-assessment will also enhance the metalinguistics of students, that is an awareness about how language works and functions. To quote Bos and Vaughn (2005, p. 99), "teaching students with learning disabilities to understand how language operates is important for their success as language users".

So, while it is clear that instruction begins with assessment, Assessment Reform Group (2002) also underlines the importance of ongoing assessment. Continually observing and assessing children's ability and progress will give teachers valuable information about what and how to teach in the future. Together with assessment, language principles should also guide literacy instruction if teachers are to achieve the desired outcomes in a differentiated classroom. In this regard, teachers need to have theories or approaches that underpin their teaching practice. An understanding of major principles in language teaching is essential in the making of lesson plans, classroom activities and teaching techniques for students with a variety of language and literacy backgrounds (Brown, 2000, p. 202).

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

In our daily communication, we are constantly using words (Fromkin, Rodman, Collins & Blair, 1996, p. 3) both in the aural mode and visual mode. When we speak or write, we encode words to express meaning; and when we listen or read, we decode words to interpret meaning. While both oral and written communication are language based, research shows that students who have oral language difficulty are likely to face the same condition in their written communication (Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 71). This statement is consistent with what Aschberger (2008) wrote, “students with speech and oral language difficulties are at risk of both reading and writing difficulties”.

### Strategies In Teaching Oral Language

The importance of oral language in the development of literacy skills has been emphasised by many authors (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; as cited in Rivalland, 2004, p. 143). These results should encourage teachers to focus on the area of oral language instruction to improve school literacy (Aldridge, 2005, p. 177). According to Bos and Vaughn (2005), some strategies that may be useful in promoting oral language development include the practices of modelling, conversation, language elaboration, and generalisation (pp. 81-86).

While children are mostly modelled after their teacher, student may also benefit from using computer software as a language model. Talking programs like *Talk Time with Tucker* or *Tiger’s tale* could help students with speech recognition and stimulate their expressive language. In line with this, I agree with Polkinghorne (2008) on the idea that “assistive technology does improve natural ability and help with learning”. As students play and work, teachers should provide them with opportunities to be involved in meaningful conversations. Asking children to participate in a discussion group about a common topic may stimulate their speech as they feel connected to their real world.

However, it is important to note that teachers should not correct students’ mistakes in a judgmental way as this may result in their hesitance to talk in the future (Vaughn & Bos, 2005, p. 83). Instead, teachers could enrich the content of the child’s language by elaborating it (Seefeldt, 2004; as cited in Aldridge, 2005, p. 179). By doing this, students will not think that their teacher is correcting them.

Another helpful strategy is called generalisation. The advantage of generalisation lies in the way it enables children to learn new ideas and concepts in a variety of contexts. Children will feel valued when they could practice and use their language skills both in the home environment and in the school setting (Seefeldt, 2004; as cited in Aldridge, 2005, p. 179).

### STRATEGIES IN TEACHING WRITTEN LANGUAGE

As with oral communication development, a child’s written communication also develops as they enter school. Despite the opinion that there are more challenges in learning written skills than oral skills due to their differences (Smith & Elley, 1998, p. 16), Cambourne (1988) suggests that problems in writing could be solved by using similar principles and conditions which make oral learning successful. He goes on to explain that if the acquisition of speaking and listening skills could be natural, then it must be possible for children to acquire their writing and reading skills in the same manner. Conditions like immersion, demonstration and engagement are some of the natural factors which lead to children’s literacy success. As the home setting provides little opportunities for children to

learn to read and write, teachers need to make the nature-based conditions available for children in the school environment (pp. 32-42).

Therefore, while children need to experience immersion in all types of texts, demonstrations of how those texts are structured and used are also needed. Research shows that children who are poorly exposed to print are likely to have problems with writing conventions (Smith & Elley, 1998, p. 13) and that children's degree of phonemic awareness enhances as they read more books and come across new words (Moustafa, 2000; Perfetti et al., 1987; as cited in Westwood, 2001, p. 5). It is worth-noting that as reading and writing are generative processes, parents could act as a co-teacher in facilitating immersion and demonstration after school hours. Children are more likely to learn new ideas and concepts when they could practice and use them in a variety of contexts and with different people (Bos and Vaughn, 2005, p. 86).

However, immersion and demonstration are not enough. I have found that teachers need to create a pleasurable situation which could engage their students in reading and writing sessions so that the students believe that a task is achievable, meaningful and has connections with the real world (Cambourne, 1988, p. 35). Reading online through the internet, for example, could "engage readers of all ages and abilities" (Malloy & Gambrell, 2006, p. 482). Children usually find it more intriguing to explore written texts using interactive white board, talking computer software or picture writing rather than being given a single book to read or a blank piece of paper to write. It is important to remember that "when children engage in the reading and writing processes for real purposes" (Hill, 2006, p. 306), they are actively involved in the so-called four resources model of literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990; as cited in Kearney, 2006, p. 4) as a code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst.

## CONCLUSION

Within the school context, improvements in teaching literacy grows from within; from teachers who continuously assess themselves and their students. A sufficient understanding of language background, development, obstacle, principle and strategy will assist teachers in determining the relevant content of literacy instruction. In addition, while using differential instruction to suit students according to their abilities; eclectic teachers should engage students both in oral and written sessions which are meaningful so that they could function effectively in a variety of linguistic and literacy contexts.

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