

Chapter 2. Foundations of Early Literacy

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“No one is born a writer; literacy is a peculiar mode of being, but I was all about stories from a very early age, before reading.” – Rebecca Solnit



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Children need to know so much more than the ABCs in order to read books in English (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Many caregivers and teachers tend to focus too much attention on letter names and letter sounds when it comes to teaching their children to read. Even in countries where they do not speak English as their first language, they often start with teaching the ABCs to their young children if they want to teach them English as a second language. However, knowing the names and sounds of the letters is just part of learning how to read in English. Let's say children successfully decode the word *don*, a fairly easy word to decode. It is entirely possible that they do not understand what it means, as it is not a frequently used word among young children. The word *don*, which means “to put on,” is known by fewer than 40 percent of American children by the end of grade six in the United States (Biemiller, 2010). The bottom line of reading is comprehension (Shea, 2016), understanding what you read. The most important foundation for reading is *oral language development*, because it can help children make meaning out of reading in English.

Learning Objectives

- Explain how alphabet knowledge, print concepts, phonological awareness, and oral language development are foundation for literacy development.
- Define alphabet knowledge, print concepts, phonological awareness, and oral language development.
- Define phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Distinguish phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics.
- Explain how phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension work for reading.

(All learning objectives in this chapter are aligned with InTASC standard #4: Content Knowledge)

The emergent literacy stage

You might observe children pretending to read, even before they start formal reading instruction. Perhaps they might hold a favorite book like *Hush Little Baby* by Sylvia Long upside down while making up their own story. Before children are able to say recognizable words, they might hold a book just like you do while cooing or babbling. These pretend behaviors with books are considered by educators to be part of emergent literacy. Sulzby and Teale, who first used the term *emergent literacy*, explained the concept:

“Emergent literacy is concerned with the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally. The term emergent literacy signals a belief that, in a literate society, young children – even 1- and 2-year-olds – are in the process of becoming literate” (1996, p.728).

Therefore, you can observe the process of children’s literacy emerging, including the aspects of oral-language development, phonological awareness, the print concept, and alphabet knowledge.

Before reading is taught formally, children have to know the language that they are trying to decipher. Oral language is not just knowing the meaning of words. It involves the grammar that combines the words correctly. It means having appropriate language for different social contexts, such as school or a party. Let alone understanding the meaning of a word, just being able to say its smallest part, like the phoneme /m/ in *Mom*, is something that takes a newborn baby a

long time, hearing it repeated by caregivers, siblings, and neighbors. It is a long journey to

acquire the sounds used for the first language and learn to distinguish them from foreign-language or animal sounds. Oral language is an important foundation for future reading development.

Important terms

- **Alphabet Knowledge:** The knowledge of letter names and sounds. It involves recognizing, writing, and identifying the names and sounds of the letters in the English alphabet.
- **Print Concepts:** The awareness of how print works to convey a message
- **Phonological Awareness:** The awareness of how various sound structures of speech work in a language
- **Oral Language Development:** The development of skills and knowledge used for listening and speaking. It is an important foundation for reading comprehension and writing.
- **Phonemic Awareness:** A subcategory of phonological awareness which focuses on the individual phonemes
- **Phonics:** An instructional approach that teaches the letter-sound relations
- **Fluency:** The ability to read with accuracy, automaticity, natural prosody, and stamina
- **Vocabulary:** The words that are understood and used
- **Comprehension:** The understanding of what is read by decoding and meaning making

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is “the ability to pay attention to, identify, and reflect on various sound structures of speech... Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness and refers to the ability to identify and reflect on the individual phonemes” (Johnston et al., 2015, p.58). A phoneme is the smallest audible unit of any language, not only English. Simply explained, phonemes refer to individual sounds. For example, *pen* consists of three phonemes: /p/, /e/, and /n/. Phonological awareness is an important foundation for future formal reading instruction, in which children will decode all of the individual sounds in a word and blend them together to make meaning out of the word.

Learning Activities

Making compound words is a fun phonological-awareness activity that you can do with the children when you are driving in the car for a short distance.

Say, “What word do you get if you put the words *sun* and *flower* together?” If the children answer, “*Sunflower*,” you affirm them and ask another question: “That’s right, the word *sunflower* consists of the words *sun* and *flower*.”

How about the words *air* and *plane* together?” There are many compound words such as *basketball*, *cowboy*, *doughnut*, and *inchworm*. Whenever you bump into compound words in a book that you are reading aloud with the children, you can use the opportunity as a teachable moment.

Inch by Inch, written by Leo Lionni, would be a good context for you to talk about *inchworm* as a compound word.

Rhyming words

Attention to rhyming words also contributes to phonological awareness. When two different words end with the same sound, as in *school* and *cool*, we call them *rhyming words*. Dr. Seuss’s classical children’s book *Hop on Pop* presents a great number of pairs of rhyming words. Pairs such as *cup-pup* and *house-mouse* with humorous illustrations give you and the children fun moments to laugh together. *Mouse* and *house* are written in phrases: “Mouse on house,” on the verso page, is natural and not so surprising; however, “House on mouse,” on the recto page, is unnatural, impossible, and surprising. The illustration is humorous. The spelling patterns of these word pairs (*cup-pup*, *hop-pop*, and *mouse-house*) have identical endings. There are other rhyming words that end with different spellings. For instance, *fox* and *socks* are rhyming words whose endings are spelled differently. Reading Dr. Seuss’s book titled *Fox in Socks* would be a good context for mentioning this fact.

Learning Activities

Syllable counting by clapping and identifying words with the same beginning (or ending) sound are other ways for you to assess and train children in phonological awareness.

Ask them, “Which word sounds longer, *caterpillar* or *ant*?” Then you can clap four times for *caterpillar*, as there are four syllables. *Ant* needs only one clap because there is one syllable in the word.

When you count syllables in words, do it only by listening and talking, not by looking at the spellings.

Phonological awareness training should not be based on visual images or spelling but on sound. You can use some clip-art images, though, when you do syllable counting or identifying words with the same sound. For example, display images for *mop*, *hop*, and *top*; then show the children a map. Ask the children which word in the first group (*mop*, *hop*, and *top*) has the same beginning sound as *map*.

Print concepts

Oral language development and phonological awareness do not necessarily require written texts. However, print concepts, alternatively called *concepts about print* or *print awareness*, do involve them. They do not necessarily refer to sound and letter correspondences. Print concepts refer to the awareness of how print works to convey a message. The directionality that the written text flows is one of the print concepts for a language. English text is read from left to right, whereas Arabic and Hebrew flow in the opposite direction. The concepts of spaces between words and knowing the roles of authors and illustrators belong to print concepts. There are many more print concepts, such as how to hold a book and turn a page correctly. Basically, print concepts are acquired over time through all of the read-aloud experiences that children have from the first day of their lives. While you might not need to explicitly teach them all of these concepts, during a read-aloud you can say something like, “The author of this book is Donald Crews. The author is the person who writes the words. Donald Crews actually drew the pictures too, so he is also the illustrator.”

Alphabet knowledge

Alphabet knowledge includes both letter names and letter sounds. Knowing what sound each letter makes is essential for decoding, as children will need to blend the component sounds to say a word. However, knowing the letter *names* can help children communicate with their caregivers and teachers who are giving them formal reading instruction. There are many alphabet books of different types which can help you teach letter sounds and names. One type just identifies words that start with each letter, accompanied by illustrations for them. Elizabeth Doyle's (2015) *A, B, See!* and Suse MacDonald's (1986) *Alphabatics* are great examples of this type. In *Alphabatics*, the letters do acrobatics on the verso pages. Then the letters turn into things that start with those letters on the recto pages. For example, the lowercase *n* turns upside down in four steps on the verso page. Then it becomes a nest on the opposing recto page. You can simply say the name of the letter and explain the word that begins with the letter. Then add what sound that letter makes. "The name of the letter is *N* (pronounced 'en'). The word *nest* starts with the letter *N*, which sounds like /n/." There are other types of alphabet books that have more narrative, with themes or information, such as *Miss Bindergarten Takes a Field Trip with Kindergarten* by Joseph Slate (2004), Tasha Tudor's (2012) *A is for Annabelle*, and David McLimans's (2006) *Gone Wild: An Endangered Animal Alphabet*. You and the children can create an original alphabet book as a project. As reading and writing are developed simultaneously, you don't need to wait until the children master reading to make one.

This section has discussed the emergent literacy stage, which is the one before formal reading instruction takes place. In the next section, the early literacy stage will be explained as the one that follows the emergent stage. During formal reading instruction in the early literacy stage, concepts such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency become more important than alphabet knowledge or print concepts. Vocabulary and comprehension are still important, though, and are taught more explicitly.

Video Example



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Learning Activities



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Reflection Questions

- What can you do to promote young children’s emergent-literacy development?
- How can your oral language support young children’s literacy development?

The early literacy stage



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Comprehension is the bottom line of reading

Once children start formal literacy instruction at school, they learn to pay attention to the sounds in a word. They analyze the individual sounds, then they put the sounds together to make the word. Once children understand this system, we try to help them automatize the process so they can read fluently. Fluent reading with adequate speed can help children focus more on the meaning of the text. Since the bottom line of reading is comprehension, all of the discrete skills emphasized in formal literacy instruction (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary) should have the child's meaning-making success as their aim. Therefore, this chapter will show you how to focus on meaning-making and comprehension while you tutor them in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary.

Vocabulary

Let's start with vocabulary. There are three kinds: receptive, productive, and sight-word. *Receptive vocabulary* is the words whose meanings are understood. When you read a sentence or listen to someone speaking, you can make sense out of it because you have an adequate receptive vocabulary. *Productive vocabulary* is the words that can be readily used to generate speaking and writing. Even if you understand some difficult or fancy words when you see them, you may never use them for your own speech or writing: so they are not in your productive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary develops earlier than productive vocabulary. *Sight-word vocabulary* is the volume of printed words that are recognized without a decoding effort. A large sight-word vocabulary would seem to be helpful for reading fluency, but it's useless if the reader doesn't know what the words mean. Early literacy development is comprised of teaching children to understand and use vocabulary words in reading and communicating.

Word selection for vocabulary teaching should be intentional. Sometimes there are words in children's picturebooks that adults don't even know. Words like *lackadaisical* and *languid* in Eric Carle's (2002) *Slowly, Slowly, Slowly, Said the Sloth* could be unfamiliar to caregivers, particularly to non-native speakers. It might not be a good idea to focus on your own difficulties in selecting the words to teach. Instead, focus on the words that are useful for the children you teach. When you pre-read a book before introducing it to the children, choose just two or three vocabulary words, because you don't want to spend the whole read-aloud time teaching vocabulary.

While vocabulary teaching *can* be fun, there are many other fun conversations that you can have with the children about other aspects of a book. When choosing the words to teach, then, think about three points. First, consider the usefulness of the words in the children’s everyday lives. See if the children can use them easily in a conversation. See if you can also increase their exposure to these words in other contexts. *Driver* would be a good vocabulary-word choice from Mo Willems’s (2003) *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*. While it might not be a difficult word for you, it might be new to the children whom you teach, and it is a useful word for the children’s everyday conversations. Second, consider the concreteness of the words. As a general rule, focus on more concrete ones, which will be more useful to the children. Third, consider the amount of repetition in the book of the target words. If they appear multiple times, the child will see them in different contexts, which is helpful for learning nuances. You can also look for opportunities to teach some important homonyms (e.g., the verb *hide* meaning “keep out of sight” and the noun *hide* meaning “animal skin”).

Reading aloud is a great context for children to learn vocabulary in. They can see the words and hear them when you read them aloud and when you talk about the story. Then you can explicitly teach child-friendly definitions for the target words, asking the children to repeat the words and use them in sentences, or act out their meaning.

Fluency

Fluency is reading with accuracy, automaticity, natural prosody (e.g., intonation), and stamina. More succinctly, fluency means reading like you talk. When you hear children reading “Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?” with good fluency, *brown* should have a higher tone than *bear*; and the children will take a short breath before saying “...what do you see?” On the other hand, reading with several awkward pauses and unnecessary repetitions like, “Brown...brown bear, brown,...brown bear, what do...ya,...you see?” does not sound like how you talk in English.

Making connections between oral language and reading is significant for fluency development. When you or another fluent reader reads a book to the children, it is an opportunity for them to perceive connections between oral language and the text. They can hear you demonstrating the intonation, rhythm, and flow of the sentences written in the book. Another important way to develop children’s fluency is to let them read easy books lots of times. For instance, if a child’s Guided Reading Level for instruction is H, books at levels C and D would be good fluency builders.

Again, reading aloud is a great context for building children's fluency. You can informally assess their ability when they read aloud to you. They can hear their own reading, which is immediate feedback to their ears. When a book is relatively easy according to the children's reading ability, they can feel the rhythm and flow of the language better, which reinforces the connection between oral and written English. So, if you see 7-year-old children grab *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* once in a while, you don't need to discourage them just because their instructional level is at the Junie B. Jones books. Encourage them to read the text aloud. You can use some prompts for dialogic reading to talk about topics like healthy eating or the life cycles of different insects and animals.

Phonics

Phonics relates sounds to letters. It relates phonemes, the smallest sound units of a language, to graphemes, the letters or letter combinations that produce those sounds. For instance, *f* is the grapheme (symbol) for the phoneme /f/ (sound), as in the word *fat*. While this letter-sound connection is straightforward, many grapheme-phoneme relationships are more opaque. For instance, the letter *c* (not *k*) is the grapheme for the phoneme /k/ in the word *cat*. Moreover, there are multi-letter graphemes, such as the 2-letter grapheme "ph" for the phoneme /f/ in the word *phone*, and the 3-letter grapheme "igh" for the phoneme /ai/ in the word *night*. As there are many difficult letter combinations like this found in English phonics, it makes little sense to say phonics instruction should be completed in a short period of time. Rather, it should take place over a long time, so children can observe patterns in how sounds correspond to letters in simple/short words as well as complex/multisyllabic ones.

The simple letter-sound correspondences in themselves are insufficient to enable children to grasp the meanings of long words. Multisyllabic words usually consist of multiple meaningful parts. In terms of understanding, it is less useful for a beginning reader to break a long word like *unrealistic* down into phonemes than to break it into meaningful chunks like un-real-ist-ic. Perhaps a child below 2nd grade might not need to deal with too many multisyllabic words in their process of learning to read. However, observing patterns within words and sorting words into different families, like the -um family (hum, chum, gum, and glum), and the -am family (ham, jam, and clam), can help children process parts of words in bigger chunks and later deal more easily with longer words with multiple meaningful parts.

Children gradually become aware of the smallest parts of their language having meaning, called **morphemes**. There are two types of morphemes: free morphemes and bound morphemes.

A stand-alone word such as *apple* is a free morpheme. When free morphemes appear with other morphemes attached to them, they are the base or root word. Bound morphemes serve grammatical morphemes or derivational morphemes. Grammatical morphemes signal grammatical information such as number (e.g., *cat* vs. *cats*), tense (e.g., *walk* vs. *walked*), and possession (e.g., *Xavier* vs. *Xavier's*). They are always suffixes in English. Derivational morphemes make a new word by being attached to root morphemes, which change the meaning (e.g., from *happy* to **un**happy; from *sing* to **er**singer) or can change the syntactic category (e.g., from *beauty* to **ful** beautiful). They can be prefixes or suffixes. Most grammatical morphemes are mastered during early childhood, whereas derivational morphemes are studied in the later school-age years (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). Learning these morphemes during early and later childhood substantially increases vocabulary size. How excited the children are to figure out the meaning of a word they never saw before by deciphering the meaning units that they already know!

Phonemic awareness

To explain phonics, I used the term *phoneme* several times. Again, a *phoneme* is the smallest unit of sound in a word. It does not bear any meaning itself. However, it can make a huge difference when you replace one phoneme in a word with another. When you replace /k/ in the word *cat* with /b/, you make a totally different animal. Replacing *c* with *b* in the word *cat* relates to phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness was briefly explained under the umbrella of phonological awareness. Phonological-awareness training on bigger word parts (at least syllable-size) should take place earlier than phoneme-level training. For instance, *door* and *knob* make the new word *doorknob*, which is an example of phonological awareness at the word level. This is easier than putting the phonemes /p/, /e/, and /t/ together to make the word *pet*. Perhaps children might even be able to skip phoneme-level instruction in learning to read long words if they know how to analyze patterns within words. The focus of reading instruction should be on meaning-making, which is the big picture of literacy development.

Learning Activities



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Key Takeaways

- Alphabet knowledge, print concepts, phonological awareness, and oral language development are foundational skills to develop at the emergent literacy stage.
- Oral language development at early ages is the most important foundation for later reading comprehension.
- Vocabulary, fluency, phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension are five pillars for the early literacy stage.

Resources for teacher educators

- [Resources for Oral Language Instruction](#) from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- [Information about Phonics and Decoding](#)
- [Phonics resources](#)

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