

# Literacy Development and Literacy Activities

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## 1. Introduction

Learning to read and write enables children to be socially and culturally literate and empowers them to be economically independent with career stability and success in the future. Recently, literacy development has been getting much attention in early childhood education. In complexity, no process of development compares to the one of learning to read and write. In the case of foreign languages, the process is influenced by many different factors, such as educational experiences, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, cognitive strengths, and the type and quality of the literacy instruction.

Japan now faces the challenge of implementing this complex process of teaching a foreign language, English, in early childhood education. In Japanese elementary schools, English will be taught as a compulsory subject starting in 2020 (MEXT, 2017). Students in fifth and sixth grades will be expected to learn the basics of reading and writing in English, starting with the names, sounds, and symbols of the letters of the alphabet. This basic knowledge is essential to build up future abilities in reading and writing, and it is the key to success for improvement in other skills, including speaking and listening. These four skills are all correlated in language development. In English as a native language (ENL), it is also recognized that alphabet knowledge is a predictor of achievement in literacy; therefore, English teachers in ENL countries apply alphabet instruction in early childhood education. There must be some way for Japanese English teachers to adopt this instruction in elementary schools, keeping in mind the features of reading and writing development, the differences of learning environments, and developmentally appropriate teaching. This study discusses literacy

development in early childhood education in ENL environments as well as introductory literacy instruction practiced in ENL environments in order for English classes in EFL countries, like Japan, to draw on these ideas and launch an effective beginning instruction in reading and writing.

## **2. Difficulty in Learning Written Language**

Learning written language is much more difficult for children than learning spoken language. Written language functions as symbols to represent meanings. In spoken language, meaning is made by sounds, or phonemes. Through the experience of interacting with the language used in the environment, children find out which symbols stand for which concepts in the language. That is a natural part of child development. Reading and writing with the alphabet require children to raise their awareness of the letters of the alphabet and the phonemes. In speaking and listening, they sequence phonemes in spoken words at an unconscious level; however, in written language, it is necessary to pay attention to the phonemes and the sequences of letters to represent the meanings.

Written language is decontextualized since written communication, most of time, goes beyond time between the writer and the reader. Unlike spoken communication, the information from context is often very limited. This goes against the children's cognitive style based on the "here and now" concept. Therefore, children must start having contact with written language using grammatical and informative tools, such as picture books or objects in their living environments, which offer visual information and make them exercise their imaginations and help them understand meaning through storyline and context. Support from adults can compensate the absence of writers who share the same time and space and make the burden of written communication lighter. In addition to handling phonemes and letters, overcoming decontextualization in

reading is hard work and an intellectual challenge for children.

From the point of view of the interface position suggested by Krashen (1982), knowledge gained by learning is never turned into acquired knowledge that enables learners to actually use the language. This position suggests that written language skills are always learned and never reach the level of acquisition. These days, most, but not all, researchers probably do not realistically take this hypothesis at face value; however, the hypothesis also implies how difficult and complex it is to develop and acquire literacy skills, unlike speaking and listening skills that are unconsciously acquired in a natural environment.

### **3. Emergent Literacy as a Natural Part of Child Development**

For literacy development, children's brains have to be proficient at phonological processing. Early literacy development occurs as children become increasingly proficient in cognitive processes that support skilled reading (Blair, Protzko, and Ursache, 2011, p. 20). Specifically, phonological ability needs to be proficient enough to be associated with alphabetical characters.

In terms of cognitive developmental science, children construct a knowledge base, which facilitates them to become readers and writers from an early age. They learn spoken words and sounds to communicate their intentions with the people surrounding them. In English-speaking countries, pre-school children aged 3–5 usually start getting interested in the alphabet. First, they understand the connection between printed words, speech, and real experience in their daily lives, for example, seeing their parent reading picture books to them or holding the books turning the pages on their own. What they actually do at first is to imitate reading and writing as they have seen others do. Their first writing often shows pictures with strings of letter-like figures from left to right, but the strings are not alphabetic and do not relate to the sounds of words they

want to express. This writing proves that children know the strings of letters represent something in their world, but they are not aware that the letters match the sounds of words. So, they need to develop phonological awareness by learning the alphabet and attaching the sounds to the letters.

Their awareness and interests finally lead them to identify the names of letters, read their sounds, and develop one-to-one matching between spoken words and written words. They gradually tell what the strings of letters mean as words and finally learn to read and write them, receiving support from adults. The oral language foundation helps them develop emergent literacy.

It is true that most children at an early age generally have a very short attention span; therefore, they also lose their interest very easily and sometimes even reject the intentional support offered by adults. In the case of English as a native language (ENL), children cannot avoid all the natural input of the alphabet from their living environments, including books, newspaper, fliers, food packaging, billboards, etc. Just the sight from the car on their way to kindergarten provides ample exposure to the alphabet for children. Everything surrounding them is an unconscious learning material. That is why emergent literacy is just a natural part of child development. In many cases, children in ENL countries exposed to alphabetical environments are familiar with symbols of alphabets before the introduction of formal alphabet instructions. It is also one of the biggest differences from their counterparts in non-English-speaking countries.

#### **4. Model of Literacy Development**

According to the literacy developmental model by Henderson (1981), there are five stages showing the integration or synchrony among reading, writing, and spelling. The model is used to identify in which stage each learner is located. The main ideas of each

stage in reading and writing follow. In the first stage of reading and writing, Emergent, children pretend to do reading and writing. They have a concept of words. In the second stage, Beginning, children try to read aloud to themselves and are engaged in word-by-word and finger-point reading. Writing is also word-by-word, starting with a few words to a paragraph. The third stage is Transitional: it approaches fluent reading in phrases or expressions in oral reading. Children can read most single-syllable words and many two-syllable words. Based on their word knowledge, they can read unfamiliar words with modest fluency. Their reading partly shifts from oral reading to silent reading, and then at the end of this stage, they mostly read silently. In the Transitional stage, a reader's word knowledge is sufficient for fluency in reading (Bear & Smith, 2016). In this stage, writing skill is also approaching fluency with more organization and several paragraphs. From the fourth stage, Intermediate, to the fifth stage, Advance, the readers are fully fluent with expressions as they learn to develop a variety of reading styles. Vocabulary also grows with reading experience. Writing skills become fluent enough to build expression and voice. Writers experience different writing styles and genres. Writing shows personal problem-solving and personal reflection. The literacy model describes how reading emerges and develops along with word recognition and enables children to develop writing.

## **5. Language-Rich Literacy Activities**

The developmental model introduced in the previous section represents a normative process of literacy in typical children. It is, however, only feasible with appropriate support and activities to facilitate the progress, because learning to speak a language develops in orderly progression without systematic intervention. There should be some essential opportunities for emergent literacy learners: (a) experience focused, explicit, and short lessons, which develop phonological awareness skills, such

as rhyming, hearing individual sounds in words, and blending, (b) learn the letters of the alphabet and begin to explore the sounds they represent, (c) develop oral language proficiency, including vocabulary knowledge, in English, (d) practice connecting oral language to print, and (e) learn to read a core group of important high-frequency words to use in practice reading (Helman, 2016, pp. 146–147). Helman (2012) also suggested the activities of RRWWT to incorporate phonological and alphabetical knowledge, language learning, and practice reading and writing in literacy class. The activities of RRWWT will be elaborated in the following section.

The first “R” is the Read To activity. This means that someone reads aloud to learners. Learners hear the rhythm and flow of the language and learn the fluent way of reading sounds. This activity also offers new vocabulary. The material can be many kinds, including poetry, charts, stories, and picture books of any genre, etc. It is important to choose the content and language of read-aloud material at the level of listening comprehension.

The second “R” is the Read With activity. Learners are encouraged to read along or reread familiar materials. This facilitates their awareness to the shapes of words and letters as well as the connection of phonological and alphabetical features of words, and learners develop their vocabulary through rereading materials which are very simple and almost memorized. They begin to recognize high-frequency words, letters, and sounds in the material.

“W” indicates Writing With. Writing with students aims at helping learners connect spoken words and their representation in print. According to Genishi and Dyson (2009), this activity includes shared or modeled writing with students and encouraging students’ own writing using developmental spelling and taking dictations of students’ narratives. The former one, modeled writing, takes place when teachers write on the board and think aloud about their way of writing at the same time. This is how students can see and understand how to write. The latter one is called

developmental writing, in which learners are encouraged to write by trying any measures to express their stories or ideas: using figures, letters, and sounds are acceptable when they do the best they can at the moment. The writing provides a teacher with information about a student's orthographic knowledge, understanding of print concepts, word boundaries, use of sight words, and alphabetical knowledge.

The second "W" indicates Word Study. Learners study sounds, letters, and words that are important and common in their lives. Word study takes many different styles: it can be a lesson focused on language or words studied in a content-based class, such as social studies, science, or math. Word Study includes various styles of instruction: alphabet studies, phonological activities, concept sorts, and sight words.

Finally, "T" indicates Talk With. This is considered to be essential and fundamental for children to be successful in the stage of emergent literacy. This activity provides them with chances to converse with other people in the lesson. This activity can be done with the other activities, which can be shared in class or pairs through interaction and which strengthens their learning and knowledge.

These activities are practiced in much language instruction without using these specific names of activities and are commonly integrated into another activity instead of being conducted as a separate one.

## **6. Application to EFL Children**

Japanese elementary school learners who will take compulsory English classes starting in 2020 will be mature enough to be readers in the "Advanced" level in the model of literacy development discussed in the previous section. They have been developing their literacy level of their native language by going through all the beginning stages in Japanese language learning. Having literacy in a native language has a facilitating effect to acquire one in another language since learners know what

writing is and how written words function to make sense. Japanese elementary school students are expected to raise learners' awareness and curiosity to the written words in a new language.

When Japanese children expand their interests and attention to English written words, what happens? They fully know what reading and writing are, so they jump to the beginning level of literacy development, skipping the first emergent learners' level: they attempt to do word-by-word reading and identify words by connecting meanings, sounds, and letters. This is the very beginning level, but it is never easy. Word reading is expected for Japanese elementary school students in English, and the fluent reading in the next stage is beyond the scope of elementary school English.

In phonological terms, they are also the very beginners; therefore, they face a triple task of learning meaning, sounds, and letters of words, which can overwhelm their capacity of cognition. Elementary school teachers share the idea that the students should be thoroughly familiar with the sounds and meaning of English words before they start reading and writing in English. However, the level of familiarity is very limited in EFL context.

Even just for word-by-word reading, many Japanese elementary school teachers recognize the importance of phonics instruction by introducing ABC phonics songs and chants, etc. It is surely helpful for students with a mora-based language to figure out the connection of sounds and letters in English. Their instructions are usually the introductory level in phonics, which fails to teach some digraphs, such as *ph* and *au*. When learners expand their vocabulary in the future, they soon face the limitation of the effects of introductory level of phonics instruction.

The challenge Japanese elementary schools face is not only a matter of instruction, but also learning environment, which completely lacks authentic written English and natural sounds. The whole language approach is often discussed as something different from the phonics approach, which breaks down the sounds of a word individually. In



the whole language approach, young learners take words at face value and associate them with concepts previously gained and kept as knowledge. The whole language vs. phonics debate is often discussed in teaching reading and writing. Moore (2004) referred to some surveys on children's literacy and claimed that phonics instruction is more effective than whole-language-based teaching in generating better readers. However, it cannot be generated in all language learning environments; as mentioned, Japan is not in a whole language environment like English-speaking countries where the surveys were conducted. When many written English words exist in the learners' living environment, even without any instruction based on the whole language approach, they subconsciously benefit from it. Phonics is not necessarily a panacea for Japanese learners of English; it cannot be concluded that English teaching in Japan should depend only on phonics by referring to the reason of success in other countries. It is necessary to create an environment which is blessed with written English words to take the essence of whole language effects. Any word lists, posters, charts, etc. on the classroom board can be helpful. Artificially English-rich environments should be taken into consideration along with systematic phonics instruction.

How about literacy activities? Read To is commonly used in Japanese elementary schools, especially the use of picture books to teach the meanings and sounds of words and expressions. Picture books are rich resources of Word Study, too. Now, it is necessary to expand these activities to the other three activities: Read With, Write With, and Talk With.

Being literate in a language means that one can read independently. Of course, at the level of elementary school English, students are not required to read independently, but the expectation is that they read words aloud, drawing knowledge of the sound image of learned words and the meanings with support of a teacher. They also should start paying attention to alphabetical features of words.

Writing in English will be a skill required for elementary school students in the

new curriculum. They will be expected to copy words correctly, following the shape of letters, the space between letters in a word or between words, and the order of words in a sentence. Students have to be carefully guided and controlled by a teacher providing a written model word and sentence in a work sheet. They are also expected to gradually grow out of mimicking models to writing words in correct order to form a simple sentence on their own.

The last activity, Talk With, is the most familiar, but it is an important activity for Japanese elementary school students since they can make sure that what they read and write is communicable with their peers. English has been taught using the phonological approach, so most activities have focused on oral communicative activities. Literacy instruction should be built on the base of phonological abilities that students have already developed. As in RRWWT activities, literacy activities should not be solo ones in which learners are individually engaged in reading and writing to improve their abilities. They are supportive activities in which teachers scaffold learners' reading and writing by modeling. Reading and writing skills take time to be acquired; however, supportive instruction with carefully designed activities, which consider students developmental stage, can facilitate their learning.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study discussed English literacy development of children, showing the developmental model and also introducing some of Helman's literacy activities to support and facilitate emergent literacy. Many English literacy instructive activities have been established and practiced for children in ENL countries. With the differences of ENL and EFL environments, some ideas from those activities in ENL countries may be applied to EFL children.

In Japan, for the introduction of reading and writing instruction in English classes

in elementary schools in 2020, it is very important for teachers and researchers to explore ways to develop children's literacy. As mentioned previously, literacy skills are intellectual challenges for children, and literacy in a non-native language is even more challenging. This notion makes teachers wonder how to follow the new requirements. As children progress in oral communication with phonological proficiency, their cognitive abilities and brain functions are ready to read and write letters, and their interest in written words naturally emerge. Activities that support emergent literacy are necessary to facilitate development. English teaching in Japanese elementary schools still has much to explore and improve in literacy development. Further studies should explore balanced literacy activities integrating the phonics approach and whole language approach and fitting the context of the Japanese learning environment.

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