

Nurturing Early Literacy at Home

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Overview

- Nurturing Early Literacy
- Fostering Oral Language and Reading
- Positive Teaching
- Home-made books, reading and writing
- Bilingualism: Summary and Considerations

Introduction

- Nearly all children take about 5-7 years, apparently without formal teaching, to accomplish the remarkable feat of learning a language, sometimes more. Young children can learn two languages – seem painless in comparison with adults' difficulty of learning a second language.
- This talk is based on the knowledge currently available but it needs to be borne in mind that there are still controversies and no clear cut answers.

Observational studies show that...

- children can become bilingual through regular attendance at play group/nursery/kindergarten or through being in contact with a carer or babysitter. If this consolidated in school, the child can become a competent bilingual.
- conversational second language in the street playing or by attending Sunday school is not enough to cope with all language situations, e.g. school.

Some observations about bilingualism

- Children develop at different speeds in bilingual development.
- Success is only partly due to ability and there is little correlation between language growth and success in school. Some academically bright children are slow in bilingual development.
- Interest in language also important.
- It is rare that the bilingual is equally fluent in all situations in both languages.

At the very beginning...

- Babies do hear and learn language patterns while in the womb. They can easily identify their mother's voice at birth, and show a marked preference for language that mimicks the patterns spoken by the mother.
- Babies can tell when a new language is being spoken not only by listening but by merely watching the speaker's mouth. Exposing them to a second language by the age of ten months can make a significant difference in their ability to recognize and mimick distinctive sounds later.

Early language development

- For most of the first year, babies are not yet mobile but they can listen and absorb all the sounds (and visual stimuli) around them. This early stage seems extremely important for listening and categorizing sounds as “native” (dominant) and “non-native” (other).
- They can mimick simple sounds (e.g. mama, baba).
- They typically develop from crying, cooing, babbling to one-word sentences, two word sentences, simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences.

Language and social development:

- Newborn infants can focus upon and respond to the talk around them. By three months they are beginning to initiate and maintain social interaction and attention.
- By the end of their second year, children are already able to recognise and use role-play in spontaneous play situations
- The vocabulary and language structures acquired in learning to talk lay the foundation for reading and later, writing and social development.

FAQ 1: Should there be a dominant language, a ‘mother tongue’ at this early stage?

Available research evidence indicates that it is beneficial to have a clear strong primary language for children growing up in a bilingual environment.

What seems important is having the chance to distinguish between the main language *and all others*. So a third or fourth language does not seem important at this stage as it means the main language is heard less often.

FAQ 2: Does technology help at this stage?

Prior to about age three, language learning requires face-to-face interaction with the speaker. Many studies show that during screen time (via television, DVDs, etc.), children are not absorbing the subtleties of language nor are they receiving cues by mimicking a sound and having the speaker respond positively or present the same sound more clearly.

NURTURING EARLY LITERACY

Parentese (Motherese)

- higher pitch
- exaggerated intonation
- short sentences
- usually close eye contact
- simple sentence structure (mostly nouns and verbs)
- content focus on here and now
- vocabulary more concrete
- repetition
- turn taking and conversational patterns and pauses
- responding for the child
- endearing tone
- joint attention

- Parentese in episodes of joint attention
- Neurologists support this style of interaction
- They consider it to be extremely positive for brain growth and development (the neurons and synapses or "wiring system flourishes") and can optimise language and brain development in the first years of life.

Factors Supporting Language Acquisition

- Children motivated to talk and listen in familiar environments. It is important to have lots of input from a trusted one within a shared experience.
- Adults and peers often recast or expand on children's utterances to enhance meaning -- provide support and scaffolding of complex task.
- Learning is best done in relaxed and enjoyable experiences. Anxiety can interfere with language learning.

NURTURING LITERACY AT HOME

- Provide plenty of experiences with books and other print and e-materials
- Enable ownership of books
- Provide opportunities for literacy activities
- Show children that you read and enjoy reading.

Specific Literacy Activities

- Build up a rich literacy environment
- Tell children stories
- Model reading and writing from birth through to teens
- Talk to children
- Read to children
- Listen to children read
- Select high interest books

FOSTERING ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING

- More basic than learning ABCs
- Quality of book-reading interaction between an adult and child is highly related to the child's vocabulary skills at 4 - 7 years of age. There is also an effect on the child's enjoyment, motivation and reading.

An adult's supportive and emotionally positive presence during book reading is more important than either home background or parents' education.

How to get quality interaction

General Tips:

- Assess children's interest and comfort with the pace of reading during story sessions,
- recognise what is unfamiliar to children, e.g., words, concepts
- respond to and build on the children's responses.
- Find ways to relate the story to the child's personal experiences.
- Read books with expression.
- Praise whenever new concepts are learned.

Child-oriented behaviours

The adult should follow the child's lead, pace and topic.

Responsive adults focus on the child's object of attention, commenting on the child's focus or pausing to allow the child to initiate.

Example

Child: *Mary pick flower*

Responsive Adult: *Yes, Mary is picking some flowers, mmm... they smell good.*

Non-responsive adult: *Look at the stone on the ground*

Encourage children to ask questions.

Interaction-promoting behaviours

Different questions

- Open-ended questions encourage children to hypothesise, reason, predict. Example: Why is the old man picking all the carrots? What do you think the little boy will do next?
- Wh- questions (who, what, when, where, why).

Repeat what child says

Child: *The old lady is pulling on the turnip*

Adult: *Yes, the old lady is pulling on the turnip.*

Sensitive acknowledgment of the child's contribution to the conversation.

Language-modeling behaviours

Labeling: gives a name to a concept the child doesn't have mastery over yet, e.g., while reading:

This letter g is in your name. Uses words in the Big Book to introduce a print concept.

Goal is exposure - child not obligated to respond or participate.

Extension: builds on something the child says, e.g., Child: *The cat is running away.* Adult: *Yes, the cat is running away from the dog. OR The cat is running away from danger).*

Adult models a more sophisticated vocabulary or construction.

SUMMARY: DO NOT...

- Ask too many closed or yes/no questions
- Always choose the topic of discussion
- Rush children to respond and not pause long enough for children to initiate their own involvement
- Only have single word responses (minimal opportunity for language practice or enhancement).

Questioning

- All children naturally ask questions, starting from finger pointing, to ‘Wazzat?’ to the pestering ‘Why...?’
- In early stages of language learning, adults ask the questions (e.g. open and closed).
- But children should be encouraged and taught to ask questions.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity”

Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

As easy as learning ABC?

- The alphabet is a way of organising letters that adult readers use.
- Learning letters of the alphabet does not occur in alphabetical order.
- It is quite easy to learn to sing the alphabet song but visual recognition of letters builds up slowly in young children.
- Children learn from alphabet books, magnetic letters, blocks, and from simple things written for them to copy.
- Most children learn 1 or 2 'easy to see' or 'easy to write' letters this way and a few more from their scribbling, from labels around the house, on important belongings and food packages, and on mail that arrives from important people (e.g. grandparents)

Learning can be at any one, some or all the levels

- Individual letter/sound
- Letter/sound clusters e.g. cl, br.
- Syllables e.g. but-ter-fly
- Words
- Phrases
- Paragraphs
- Whole stories/texts
- Intertextual - across stories/texts

POSITIVE LEARNING

Learner needs to be clear about expectations

Feedback must be

- clearly specific
- in terms that children can understand
- must not create a tension

Child says “That plane?”

- Is that a plane flying by?
- Do you call that flying thing a plane, not a bird nor a butterfly?
- Is my sentence structure right?
- Am I pronouncing the word right?
- Can I call it ‘plane’, I don’t have to say aeroplane?

Would you be able to give better feedback for these examples?

Example 1

Child: He is dancing.

Adult: Wrong, he is running.

Example 2

Text: This is a donkey.

Child: This is a horse.

Adult: No silly, that’s a donkey.

Simplifying for learning

- Reduce it to the simplest level, e.g. letter, letter clusters, etc.?
- Simple language?
- Phonic regularity?
- Words with very few letters?

May make learning less interesting and more difficult

Writing

Learning to read and write

Importance of reading is well established, but the importance of writing is not so well known. Extra power comes from writing in learning to read.

- Reading and writing should happen side by side and opportunities should be created for children to write. Writers have to know how to do certain things with language that overlap with things that readers have to know or do.
- Writing is more valuable than spelling lists or sounding out words. Children should be working on real reading/writing tasks (especially open-ended tasks) to discover new things they have not attended to before.

Early writing influences reading by...

- Directing the learners’ attention to print, which prevents learners from overlooking many things they must know about print and reveals the learners’ way of working.
- Getting the learner to attend closely to the features of letters to distinguish letters, one from the other. The learner has to construct words from sounds (but not in single separate units)

Composing stories

- Not by copying words, nor by mimicking texts from stories, children need to learn to compose and write their own stories by going from ideas to spoken words to written/printed messages
- The adult supports by talking with the child as in a conversation – getting an utterance whether it be a word, a phrase or a sentence.
- At the beginning, the adult acts as scribe, writing all or inviting the budding writer to write some part/s.

Talking, Reading and Writing

- Learning in one language area enriches the potential for learning in the other areas.
- Most learners can get a circular exchange working well between the language activities.
- Learning should be more powerful if it is planned so that oral language, reading and writing are linked together so that they move forward together.

General Tips for Supporting Literacy Development

- Include drawing and writing in your everyday activities. Involve your children in writing shopping lists and letters and drawing pictures to send to friends and relatives.
- Develop your children's visual discrimination and fine motor skills by doing such things as puzzles and Lego construction.
- Help to develop your children's upper body strength and coordination through visits to playgrounds and participation in physical games and sports.

BILINGUALISM: SUMMARY AND CONSIDERATIONS

Clear Language Policies (UNESCO, 1992)

To designate different language for different functions: public administration, technology and trade, home and social-cultural activities.

Realistic outcomes that can be expected: Bilinguals almost never attain native like competence in the total range of language functions in both languages.

Important considerations

- Language is about communication and identity – we need language to communicate information, build relationships, play games, tell stories, work in groups
- Most important is to help children see language learning as a positive and enjoyable experience, valuing 2 languages and 2 cultures and becoming bilingual, bi-literate and bi-cultural.
- Children need encouragement continuously – so show delight at small steps.

The role of assessment papers in learning a language

- We can and should prepare children for examinations / tests
- But exams and tests can only measure small samples of children's knowledge. If we teach only to those samples we limit what children can learn. Over-emphasis on examinations leads to "teaching to the test", narrowing the curriculum and reducing educational achievement.
- This would obviously lead to lowering of educational quality and standards (Graves, 2000).
- Examinations are high stakes assessment but there should be a balance so that school life is not filled mainly with exam practice papers, the daily slog of which would turn most students off books and education in general.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. What do you look out for in books to foster reading and language learning?
2. What are the benefits of knowing another language?
3. Explain more about how parents can help in developing bilingualism.
4. Can technology help in language learning?
5. Is it easier for younger children to learn a second language?

SOME REFERENCES

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