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Components of Literacy

As an early childhood teacher, you know the importance of language and literacy learning in your program. You know that literacy learning depends upon more than teaching the ABCs, introducing children to environmental print, setting up a Library Area, or clapping out syllables in a word. Language and literacy are tools for thinking and communicating. When teachers plan meaningful ways for children to use language and literacy as tools, children are motivated to become readers and writers, and they learn about the features, forms, and functions of written and spoken language.

Young children seek to be part of a social group and to communicate with the important people in their lives, first orally and later through print. While young children may not use sophisticated communication strategies, they are definitely eager to share urgent thoughts, ideas, needs, and feelings. This desire to communicate and participate in the classroom community motivates young children to persist in the often challenging tasks of early literacy. Because it is based on continuous interactions with knowledgeable adults, literacy learning is integrated into the overall, comprehensive program in a *Creative Curriculum* classroom.

This approach recognizes that play is an essential part of learning for preschool children. The skills children learn through purposeful, productive, and high-level play—skills in verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, problem solving, observation, empathy, imagination, assuming another’s perspective, using symbols, and learning to cooperate with others—are foundational skills for all cognitive development (Olfman, 2003). A teacher in a *Creative Curriculum* classroom knows how to maximize children’s learning opportunities as they play by thoughtfully observing children, reflecting on what children are doing, and planning ways to guide and extend learning. This process is also used to plan appropriate direct instruction.

In order to create a high-quality literacy program, teachers must understand the components of literacy. The components of literacy described in this chapter and in the research literature are the basis for the intentional teaching strategies and activities described later. An understanding of the components is necessary in order for teachers to observe children effectively and to analyze and evaluate their development. Then the teacher can decide which strategies and activities will best support the literacy development of a particular child or group of children. These are the seven components of literacy: literacy as a source of enjoyment, vocabulary and language, phonological awareness, knowledge of print, letters and words, comprehension, and books and other texts.

Vocabulary and Language

Oral language is the foundation of literacy. Literacy learning begins with listening and speaking. Infants listen to familiar voices and then learn to babble and later speak. Through speech, children learn to organize their thoughts and ideas. They construct their own understanding of the rules of language as they interact with adults and others in meaningful exchanges. They gradually learn the rules for ordering sounds and using language in standard forms. To acquire literacy skills, children transition from oral language to written language. Written language, both reading and writing, requires a well-developed vocabulary and a good understanding of the rules and structure of oral language. Literacy learning also requires the insight that written language is different from spoken language.

Language is a system of words with rules for their use in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language can be divided into two areas: *receptive language* and *expressive language*. *Receptive language* refers to the language that a person takes in, the language one hears and reads. *Expressive language* is the language that a person speaks and writes. Children acquire language by moving through predictable stages, but the pace differs from child to child.

There are four kinds of vocabulary:

- 1) *Listening vocabulary*—the words we need to know in order to understand the language we hear.
- 2) *Speaking vocabulary*—the words we use to express ourselves orally.
- 3) *Reading vocabulary*—the words we need to know in order to understand what we read.
- 4) *Writing vocabulary*—the words we use to express ourselves in writing.

When children are learning to read, they use their listening and speaking vocabularies to make sense of printed words. Later, their experience with reading and writing helps them to expand all of their vocabularies.

Vocabulary and Language

Children learn new words and learn about the structure of language in four different ways:

- talking with peers and adults throughout the day through informal and guided conversations
- songs, rhymes, fingerplays, and movement activities
- hearing new words to describe what they are experiencing firsthand
- listening to print read aloud and talking about new words

These important experiences can encourage the rapid language development of children who come to preschool with limited language skills. When teachers guide conversations and use particular words to describe children's experiences, they intentionally teach the vocabulary and language rules that children need to think and communicate more effectively.

If you have children whose primary language is not English, recognize that a strong base in a first language promotes school achievement in a second language (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). English language learners are more likely to become readers and writers of English if they understand the vocabulary and concepts in their primary language first. These children need special attention to increase their vocabularies and other language skills. The long-term goal is for children to be able to understand, speak, read, and write in both the primary language and English. You therefore want to support children's first language as you help them acquire proficiency in English.

What Does Research Say?

Vocabulary development

Children learn the meaning of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. In addition, there are times when teaching children the meaning of words directly can be effective (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Conversations matter when children are young. Talking with children provides them with experiences that are important to both their cognitive and their social/emotional learning (Hart & Risley, 1995).

When children are engaged in tasks in which they are learning vocabulary, they have larger vocabulary gains (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Senechal, 1997; Drevno et al., 1994; Daniels, 1994, 1996).

Exposing children to new vocabulary words often and in various ways can have a significant effect (Senechal, 1997; Leung, 1992; Daniels, 1994, 1996; Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995).

The context in which new vocabulary words is learned is critical. Vocabulary words should be words that the child will find useful in many different contexts (McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985; Kameenui, Carnine, & Freschi, 1982; Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995).

Children with larger vocabularies have more developed phonological sensitivity (Wagner et al., 1993, 1997), and this can be noticed early in the preschool years (Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Chaney, 1992; Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000).

Children benefit from teacher-child conversations that include varied vocabulary and deal with topics that challenge children's thinking (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Reading development

The majority of reading problems could be prevented by, among other things, increasing children's oral language skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

There is a positive correlation between individual differences in oral language skills and later differences in reading (Bishop & Adams, 1990; Butler, Marsh, Sheppard, & Sheppard, 1985; Pikulski & Tobin, 1989; Scarborough, 1989; Share, Jorm, MacLean, & Mathews, 1984).

Vocabulary is critically important in oral reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000b).

Vocabulary is the strongest predictor of later reading and literacy ability (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990).

Reading aloud

Storybook readings help teach children meanings of unfamiliar words (Robbins & Ehri, 1994).

The frequency of a target word in a story influenced the occurrence of the word in the child's retellings, and read aloud events seemed to help children to learn new words by incidental learning (Leung, 1992).

For 4- to 5-year-old children, one single book reading was enough to significantly improve new expressive vocabulary of ten target words in the story (Sénéchal & Cornell, 1993).

Teacher talk associated with storybook reading has an impact on the amount of child-initiated analytic talk important for vocabulary gains (Dickinson & Smith, 1994).

Repeated readings of a story to prekindergarten children enhanced vocabulary gains. Children learned more from answering questions during readings than they did when simply listening to the narrative (Sénéchal, 1997).

■ What Is the Teacher's Role in Promoting Vocabulary and Language Development?

The best way to help children increase their vocabularies and learn other language skills is to provide opportunities for them to hear different forms of language. You do this by modeling language, having extended conversations, and reading aloud. While most children learn the language they hear easily, some children do not. For these children, more direct teaching is necessary.

Serve as a good language model.

When talking with children, use complete sentences. Expand children's language by building on what they say. Use the child's words and add more of your own. If a child says, *Go outside*, respond by saying, *Would you like to go outside today? We'll go outside right after we finish cleaning up.*

Give children something to talk about.

Provide interesting experiences that spark children's curiosity and wonder. Include many first-hand experiences where children can use their senses to explore and use language to communicate what they are thinking and doing. To encourage children to talk, make changes in the environment, bring in natural items, and share your own experiences. These give children important background knowledge for later learning.

Repeat and reinforce new words.

When a new word has been introduced to the children, use it in different contexts throughout the day. For example, after reading aloud the story *The Enormous Turnip*, talk about having an enormous appetite or how enormous a tree seems.

Observe, wait, and listen.

Pay close attention to what a child is trying to tell you or show you. Ask questions. Be patient and wait for the child to respond. Then listen attentively to what the child says so you can answer and model language appropriately.

Talk frequently with children.

Spend lots of time listening to what children have to say and then responding appropriately. Strive for at least five exchanges in each conversation with children, to encourage them to carry on lengthier conversations. During conversations, clarify the meaning of words and encourage higher-level thinking.

Go beyond the here-and-now in your conversations.

Discuss things that happened yesterday and last week and that might happen in the future. Invite children to use their imaginations and think creatively. Talk with children and pretend to be in another situation at another time. For example, ask a child, *If you could be any animal, what would you be? What would you do?* Challenge children's thinking.

Use open-ended questions and prompts.

Open-ended questions are those that can be answered in a number of different ways. They can't be answered with a simple yes or no. Prompts such as, *I wonder what would happen if...*, encourage children to think creatively and express their ideas.

Read to children daily and talk about the story before, during, and after reading.

Discussions while reading aloud not only help children practice their language skills and increase their vocabularies, but they also aid comprehension. Make sure you read aloud two or more times a day to individuals, small groups, and/or the whole class

Include songs, rhymes, and fingerplays throughout the day.

By doing so, children learn new words, hear different forms of language, and develop an awareness of the rhymes, rhythms, and patterns of language.

Play language games and provide language materials.

During small- and large-group activities, play games that focus on language. For example, a game of "20 Questions" helps children learn how to ask questions while also developing reasoning skills.

Offer models for children to hear their own language.

If you are not fluent in all of the languages spoken in your classroom, try to find people who are proficient in them. This could be your assistant, family members, resource persons, or volunteers. Encourage these individuals to converse, play, read, and sing with children who are learning English. Communicate with families about topics of study and activities and encourage them to discuss these topics with their children in their home languages.

Share informational books that relate to the children's particular interests.

Such books offer opportunities to introduce children to new ideas and information and extend children's vocabulary and language about topics that go beyond the here-and-now.