LANGUAGE : CREATING A LITERATE ENVIRONMENT FOR READING AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This writing provides some information about how to create a literate environment for reading and writing instruction. Hopefully, it will be useful for the general and special education teachers of kindergarten and primary level pupils. The inclusion is a discussion of those aspects of the preschooler's rich literate environment which promote reading and writing development and specific suggestions for teacher modeling for organizing and managing the classroom, and for providing a range of meaningful reading and writing opportunities. Instruction which incorporates these suggestions is intended to extend and refine children's written language skills acquired prior to school and to provide a transition from the informal instruction offered in the home environment to the formal instruction found in the school.

Keywords: *literate environment, special education, language skills*

1. Introduction

Most children begin to discover print and initiate reading and writing related activities shortly after they learn to talk (Allen et. al., 1986). Early reading activities begin as children encounter

books and other forms of print in their environment. Even very young children demonstrate knowledge of books by holding the book upright, turning pages individually from front back, and "reading" the pictures or telling a story they have heard many times. Later, these youngsters learn about the directionality of print and that words, not pictures are read (Chall, 1983).

Early reading involves knowledge of books. Children as young as three years of age may recognize common signs, brand names of familiar food and drink items, and other words they face frequently in their home and surrounding environment. At first, children may recognise these words only when they occur in context (e.g., when "candy" appears on the box), but these children gradually acquire the ability to identify many words without the contextual cues (Hierbert, 1998).

Writing-related activities first may be observed at about age two when children learn to manipulate a variety of writing materials and begin to scribble. These children may have a repertoire of markings including vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines, circular shapes, zigzags and dots. By age three years, many children can make recognizable circles, squares, and triangles and then combine them into designs. These markings give way to human figures, animal, trees, houses and drawings of other items in their environment as children enter their fourth year. They may tell stories about their drawings, dictate stories from adults to write,

"write" their own captions or stories and put their names on their artwork (Allen et. al., 1986).

Interestingly, most children acquire these early reading and writing skills without being directly taught. Unfortunately, far too many children are unable to build on these early developing skills when they face formal reading and writing instruction in the kindergarten and primary grades. Because reading and writing are so important to learning, the academic performance of pupils who fails to develop nature reading and writing skills is almost certain to be adversely affected. Such difficulties may have far reached effects on pupil's academics progress as requirements for independent reading and writing increase during their adolescent years (Chall, 1993). The negative impact of poor reading and writing skills is likely to persist into adulthood as these individuals attempt to function in our literate society.

Many educators who have investigated the cause of reading and writing problems suggest that the sources of the difficulty may be, in part, the instruction often occurs in an isolated environment, in which oral language is extracted, opportunities for encountering and practicing reading and writing skills are limited, individual sub skills are emphasized instead of the whole acts of reading and writing, and tasks appear meaningless and lack purpose (Hiebert, 1998). Consequently, some children may lack or be

unable to use their knowledge of the world and or oral language which serve as the foundation for written language development.

The purpose of this writing is to provide some suggestions in developing more effective instructional programs for teaching reading and writing. Specifically, the focus will be on methods for creating a literate environment for reading and writing instruction in the schools which approximates the informal environment where children learn early oral and written language skills. Implementation of these suggestions will assist teachers in creating classrooms which are reaching the real world and oral language experiences and in which meaningful, functional reading and writing are repeatedly modeled and practiced. Instruction in these classrooms is intended to extend and refine the reading and writing skills acquired prior to school and to provide a transition from the more informal instruction offered in the house environment to the formal instruction found in the schools. However, the concepts presented in this article are applicable to the teaching of all children and, if implemented in both general education and special education classrooms, may enhance the progress of general education students and actually help prevent learning difficulties in some children. Although instruction methods used are important to student success at any age, this article will focus on reading and writing instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades.

2. Creating a literate environment

As stated in the instruction, literate environment immerses children in both spoken and written language. Children are viewed as active constructors of knowledge. The role of teacher is to provide pupils with the evidence, support, and guidance they need to learn (Wells, 2001)

This part presents suggestions for creating a literate environment conducive to written language development through teacher modeling, organizing, and managing the classroom, and meaningful reading and writing opportunities.

2.1 Teacher Modeling

Providing opportunities for pupils to observe others reading and writing is important to written language development, especially for young and poor readers and those from different language or deprived environment (Bridge, 1999). Because exposing children to reading and writing is so important, teachers in the literate classroom frequently model these tasks for their pupils. This section provides suggestions for teacher modeling which focus on fluency, the pleasure and purposes of print, and the processes and strategies necessary for successful reading and writing.

2.1.1 Fluency

One characteristic of skilled reading and writing is fluency (Sindelar, 1987). Since young children who are just learning to

read and write are rarely fluent, adult modeling is a primary mechanism by which they experience fluent reading and writing. Modeling may be especially important for poor readers and writers because the only individuals they typically observe are other pupils who also are experiencing difficulty.

As teachers model reading and writing, they should avoid the tendency to perform at a slower rate. When reading aloud, teachers should read at their normal pace and use appropriate inflection. If there is concern that pupils may not be able to follow the material, teachers can discuss it in advance or review and explain it after they have finished reading. Pupils should also observe teachers writing at their usual rate. As the teachers write, they can show how writing speed varies according to task demands (e.g., as they organize their thought, reread their work, and make corrections.) (Wells, 2001).

2.1.2 Pleasure and Purposes of Print

Teachers can let pupils experience the joy of reading and writing by modeling these tasks in the context of pleasant and warm atmosphere. For example, teachers can select attractive, interesting books and read aloud for at least 15 minutes each day (ridge & Lemmon, 1999) during a regularly scheduled time such as after recess. As teachers engage in various written language activities, teachers can create attractive displays using charts containing poems or songs, articles from magazines or newspaper containing

text and pictures regarding animals, plants or other interesting top-ics and pupil made or commercial posters about books. Pupils un-derstand more about the unique function of print when classroom rules and procedures and other important information such as stu-dent birthdays are publicly posted.

2.1.3 Processes and Strategies

According to Hall (1992), reading involves prediction by using the three language cueing systems of graph phonics, syntax, and semantics. Skilled readers have knowledge of these systems and are able to apply all three systems simultaneously and to shift focus among them as the situation dictates. During reading, teach-ers can model how to use these systems by asking themselves questions aloud when they come to unknown word. For example, they might ask. "What word makes sense here?". Teachers can also model self-questioning techniques used to aid comprehension, such as "What will happen next?" or "Who does the word "he" refer to?"

During writing, teachers can model the ongoing interactive processes of planning, translating, and revising. By problem-solving verbally, teachers can show pupils how to decide on a topic and organize the content, implement strategies for coping with problems encountered during the translating stage (e.g. uncertainty about spelling or punctuation), and ask appropriate questions dur-ing revision. Asking questions aloud during writing, such as "Will

my reader understand this?" helps pupils learn how to write for different audiences.

Although the selective use of strategies is a developing skill, teachers can begin modeling the differential use of strategies according to the demands and purposes of the tasks (Allen et. al., 1986). For example, teachers may read directions in order to complete a science experiment carefully, but choose to skip an unknown word when reading for pleasure. During writing, teachers might attend more carefully to handwriting and other level skills in writing a list which is posted for the class than in writing a list for their own use.

2.2 Classroom Organisation and Management

The organisation and management of the classroom can facilitate the development of variety of skills important to reading and writing development. This section contains suggestions for determining level pupil involvement, classroom rules and procedures, instructional arrangements, and interest centers which are conducive to the literate classroom.

2.2.1 Pupil Involvement

Unlike the teacher directed environment of some traditional classrooms, pupils in the literate classroom are actively involved in their own learning (Hall, 1992). They have a range of choices concerning topics and learning activities which allows them to pur-

sue their own interests, communicate with teachers, and peers as both speakers and listeners; accomplish a wide range of purposes. These activities may involve first-hand experiences in which students go on field trips, participate in activities and experiments, and work in various interest areas or learning centers. Various experiences may include having students watch film strips, see displays, listen to speakers, and take part in discussion.

Greater pupil involvement does not mean lack of organisation. Teachers obviously have certain instructional goals for pupils and must work within the constraints imposed by available time, space, materials and equipment and school regulations. Teachers should guide pupils by the selection of learning activities made available to students and by setting a general organisational framework for maintaining the classroom. Nevertheless, some flexibility in allowing pupils to pursue instruction should be available (Allen et. al., 1986). This can be accomplished by reducing the number of required instructional activities on their own or forming the various interest areas.

2.2.2 Classroom Rules and Procedures

The more experiential, individualised approach to instruction found in the literate classroom requires that teachers carefully develop classroom rules and procedures to facilitate classroom functioning. For example, care of newly acquired animals and plants can be added to the list of assigned classroom duties. It also

may be necessary to establish guidelines for behavior during large group and experiential activities such as cooking and group art activities. For students who have not participated in small group pupil-directed activities, a discussion concerning appropriate behavior may be required.

Literate classroom usually contains several interest areas where pupils can work. Procedures will need to be developed concerning how pupils may participate, and rules for using materials. To control the flow of pupils to interest areas, Bridge and Lemmon (1999) suggest the use of a self-schedule board containing the names of the interest area. When all pockets in an area are filled, pupils either wait or select an alternate area.

Teachers may need to revise certain classroom rules to ensure that they are consistent with the goals and operations of the literate classroom. For example, a "no talking" rule is oppositional to the goal of increased pupil communication. A more appropriate rule might concern talking quietly or taking turns in a conversation.

2.2.3 Instructional Arrangements

Literate classroom should contain seating arrangements which facilitate various kinds of communication interactions (Wells, 2001). For example, a traditional column-row arrangement which minimizes peer interaction and focuses attention on the teacher might be used for activities such as taking tests, completing

independent work, and listening to and observing teachers presen-
tations and demonstrations. Seating can be organized in cluster for
small group work, and pupils can sit in a circle on the floor or at
tables for whole class discussions. Although classroom space will
not permit use of all these arrangements simultaneously, teachers
in the literate classroom will typically offer some type of alterna-
tive to the traditional column-row arrangement. In addition, teach-
ers will demonstrate some flexibility in changing seating arrange-
ment for special activities (Allen et. al., 1986).

2.2.4 Interest Areas

Interest areas which promote development of world
knowledge and language skills and which create opportunities for
reading and writing practice are important facet of the literate
classroom (Bridge & Lemmon, 1999). Concrete experiences which
increase pupil's background knowledge can easily be provided by
having animals and plants in the classroom (Allen et. al., 1986).
Their presence not only enhances pupil's knowledge but may
stimulate some children to read and write about them. Hands – on
displays which are rotated according to current science or social
studies topics (e.g., a collection of seashells or display of clothing,
food, and artifacts related to a culture) also provide pupils with op-
portunities for concrete experiences. In addition, pupils can be en-
couraged to make display concerning hobbies or other interesting
topics.

A reading corner which contains a comfortable place to read and an attractive book display can introduce pupils to the pleasures of reading. The corner might contain a bean-bag or a colorfully painted refrigerator box where pupils can curl up with a good book (Stewart, 1987). The book display should offer a variety of fiction and non-fiction books representing a variety of writing styles and topics which are both commercially and pupils-made. Other books found in reading corner might include dictionaries and other reference books. Non-book print materials such as newspapers, magazines, captioned pictures, and film strips could also be made available.

Just as reading corner can entice pupils to read, an attractive writing area can encourage pupils to write (Stewart, 1987). The writing area should contain a variety of easily accessible writing materials such as chalk, crayons, markers, pens, and pencils of various types. Also included might be a collection of preformed felt, magnetic and wood numbers and letters.

The writing area should also have readily available various writing surfaces such as colored paper, lined and unlined paper in a variety of sizes, stationary, note cards, envelopes, notepads, a chalkboard and index cards.

2.3 Meaningful Opportunities

Although most young children become aware of the functional uses of written language during the early stages of reading and writing development (Hierbert, 1998), many poor readers and writers do not (Chall, 1983). To ensure that pupils perceive reading and writing as meaningful, teachers can provide pupils with multiple opportunities to acquire practice the whole acts of reading and writing for a range of purposes, and acquire sub skills necessary for fluent reading and writing.

2.3.1 Opportunities for Practice

In the literate classroom, opportunities for reading and writing practice are frequent and carried (Steward, 1987). The abstract nature of most basal reading programs makes it important for teachers to supplement basal reading instruction with a variety of purposeful reading and writing tasks. Example of such task include recording class activities, exchanging notes with parents, teachers, and peers, writing letters to pen pals, publishing newsletters, keeping a diary or journal, reading or writing about research projects, and writing or acting out plays, poems, and songs (Sindelar, 1987). Workbook pages should be carefully reviewed and assigned only if they are purposeful (Stewart, 1987).

Creating opportunities for young and inexperienced pupils to practice real reading can be difficult (Steward, 1987). However, such practice opportunities can be provided by using predictable

materials (Halliday, 1998). Predictable or patterned materials contain repetitive or familiar structures such as words, phrases or sentences (e.g. number or letters), and events which enable pupils to predict the next word, line, or episode (Chall, 1983). To use this technique, teachers first carefully select a book and then read it aloud to the class several times. As they reread story, pupils are invited to join in on any parts they know. Most pupils become quite proficient at reading along with the teacher as they hear the story repeatedly. Adaptations for using predictable materials to improve sight vocabulary and prediction skills (Bridge et. al., 1999) have been developed.

Writing practice for young children can be very simple. For example, poor writers might begin by drawing a picture and writing a caption underneath, copying notes or stories previously dictated to the teacher, or writing numbers, letters, and other rote information. Using this technique, pupils first brainstorm concerning possible writing topics. Then they are instructed to begin writing on signal and to continue until they are told to stop. Pupils are urgent to focus on the content of their writing and not to stop moving their pencils to think about spelling, punctuation, or grammar rules. They are also instructed to keep moving their pencils even if they cannot think of anything to write by jotting down numbers, letters, or repetitive phrases. The writing period should be very brief (e.g., 2-3 minutes), and the signal to stop should be given

while most students are still writing (Stewart, 1987). It helps pupils fell free to write and the products of this activities are not reviewed or graded by teachers.

2.3.2 Range of Purposeful Activities

Being able to read and write to perform real functions provides a powerful, motivating force for learning (Allen et. al., 1986) and assist in the development of skilled reading and writing as pupils discover and practice the multiple uses of written language (Hiebert, 1998). As pupils participate in these varied activities, they face the need to communicate beyond the immediate time and space. Out of this need, they discover the special features of written language which make it more useful than oral language for accomplishing certain purposes.

Some educators suggest that classification system developed to describe language function such as the one devised by Halliday (1998) can be used in reading and writing activities. The seven language functions identified by Halliday (1998) include: (1) instrumental (the child's material needs are met), (2) regulatory (the child gets others to do what she wants them to do), (3) interactional (the child initiates or maintains an interaction with another person), (4) personal (the child expresses her/his individuality and self awareness), (5) heuristic (the child seeks knowledge about the environment), (6) imaginative (the child fantasizes), (7) informa-

tive (the child conveys information). Hall (1992) has added three additional written language functions: (1) divertive or puns, jokes, and riddles; (2) authoritative/contractualor statutes, regulations, agreements, and contracts; and (3) perpetuation or records, histories, diaries, notes, and scores.

2.2.3 Acquiring subskills

Fluency has been positively correlated with reading comprehension and with effective writing (Sindelar, 1987). Fluency is achieved by modeling and practicing real reading and writing activities and by establishing proficiency in lower level skills such as a word identification, spelling, and punctuation (Hall, 1992). Although many of these skills are acquired through repeated reading and writing practice, specific instruction likely will be required for mastery of subskills.

3. Summary

Teaching children to read and write may be greatest faced by the general education and special education teachers. This article presents suggestions for creating a literate environment conducive to written language development through teacher modeling, organizing and managing the classroom, and meaningful reading and writing opportunities.

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