

Forming Firm Foundations for Literacy Learning

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Speaking and listening skills are the fundamental building blocks of all literacy programmes. The richer the language experiences of young children, the greater their chances are of learning to read, write and spell easily.

Young children learn best when they are actively engaged in activities. By creating opportunities for children to repeat behaviours they witness, their speaking skills, listening skills, concentration, memory and intellect are developed.

Activities involving naming, describing, categorising and discussing pictures are essential speaking and listening skills. Vocabulary generated from common objects seen by children daily can be successfully used to develop these skills. For example, show a young child a picture of a tray. Let the child name the picture and enact a situation where a tray is used. Finally ask the children to explain what a tray is. The child is likely to provide a better quality answer to the question because of the physical enactment of the word.

Challenging children to mime enhances thinking, reasoning and communication skills. Simple pictures or props can be used to stimulate such activity. An innovative listening, speaking and reasoning programme, that forms part of the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills) phonics programme, makes such activity easy for parents and teachers of young children. A book containing 120 pictures, a set of matching picture cards and a range of suggested teaching activities is included. By using questions with the resources, children are actively engaging with sophisticated language activities in a non-threatening and fun learning environment. Both adults and children share the role of questioner. For example, the question 'What do you think this is?' is asked as words such as 'rabbit', 'car' or 'ant' are mimed. As soon as the children have the idea, they assume the role of questioner and mime words for their peers or parents to identify.

Questions that promote categorising and reasoning skills provide children with invaluable language opportunities. Show the children two pictures and ask them to make a connection between them. For example ask, 'What is the connection between a duck and an egg? What is the connection between a duck and a fish?' Picture cards again can be used to promote and support such language.

Young children enjoy playing with words. Introducing them to the notion of compound words is simply done using pictures. Show children a picture of a dog. Let them say the word 'dog'. Now show them a picture of a watch and get them to say the word 'watch'. Place the two pictures alongside each other and say 'watchdog'. Ask the children what a watchdog does. There are more than a hundred compound words that can be explored using the THRASS pictures. Children, who understand the concept of compound words, can be encouraged to find as many of the combinations as they can. Humour can also be enjoyed while exploring language structures. Have the children make up crazy questions such as 'Have you seen a cow fish?', 'Have you seen a house fly?', 'Can a horse fly?'. Encourage children to listen for more compound words when listening to stories and in everyday conversation.

Questions that stimulate sentence making, such as 'Can you make a sentence using three of these pictures?' or 'What do we call the pointers that help us tell the time?' encourage children to use newly acquired language in meaningful contexts.

The 120 picture cards included in the THRASS phonics programme provide many opportunities for developing classification skills. Children can be asked to sort all or some of the picture cards into specific categories and later to generate their own categories for sorting. From such activities the language of justification can also be enhanced.

One of the most important skills young children can learn is to ask questions. Games such as 'Question me – Pictures' (where the one player thinks of a picture and the other player asks questions to establish what the picture is) provide children with opportunities to refine both speaking and listening skills. Good questions should elicit pertinent information that will get the questioner to the answer quickly. Children will discover this in the course of the game. Listening for information is also crucial.



Reception children, watched by their parents, engaged in mime to enhance thinking, reasoning and communication skills. Hollywood Primary School, Birmingham, England

Further useful information for parents, including animations, downloadable software and streamed video is available through the website www.phonics4parents.co.uk (ideally, using Broadband on a fast computer, though slower computers should do the same but with smaller images). In addition, a certificate course for parents is offered through schools, which will provide parents with hands-on work with the materials described above.

Sharing books, where an adult or older sibling encourages a deeper exploration of the text through discussion of illustrations and words used by the authors, make significant inroads

into providing the necessary foundation stones for vocabulary growth and a greater understanding of the reading process.

Read-aloud sessions with young children encourage an interest in words and the way they are written. Children's natural curiosity leads them to ask questions about print. Early on children encounter their names in print, often through the labelling of personal items at home or at school. Children soon start asking questions about the letters in their names, providing natural opportunities to introduce them to letter names and the number of phonemes (sounds) in their names. Discussions about whose names have the most letters or sounds provide a good base for phonics instruction at a later stage. Children transfer this knowledge of letters and sounds in words to asking questions about letters and words they see and hear in the read-aloud sessions. The beginnings of a sight vocabulary and phonic knowledge are being established at the same time.

Both parents and teachers can use read-aloud time to pass on to children incidental knowledge of the reading process and the related conventions of print. In these sessions children learn about the reading direction, sentence, word concept, letters, book handling and many other essential skills. The conversations around the reading of a favourite text are key to learning taking place. Again, questions can actively engage young children in the read-aloud session. Questions such as 'What do you think will happen next?' 'How do you think duck will get his truck out of the muck?' 'Why do you think the illustrator chose these colours to paint this picture?' and 'What is your favourite part of the story?' will begin to draw children into a deeper discussion of texts.

Visual literacy skills, too, are enhanced at the same time as language skills are developed. Children will learn by observing adult reading behaviour and participating in discussions about both story content and the illustrations. Quality children's literature provides a multitude of opportunities for language and listening skills development, as well as instilling in children a delight in reading.

Story Sacks (containing a variety of reading and language games, toys and dressing up clothes, which promote language usage and reading), either home-made or commercially produced, provide opportunities for even richer explorations of stories and texts in schools and homes.

Story Sacks containing a variety of games, activities and props for retelling and extending stories are invaluable in both homes and schools. Through playful retellings, suggested by the inclusion of masks, puppets or dressing up clothes in the Story Sacks, young children develop the ability to look beyond the surface structures of texts and explore issues embedded in the stories and their personal reactions to these.

Story Sacks have been used successfully in the Kwena Basin, Mpumalanga, South Africa with children who have had little or no exposure to books and read-aloud sessions prior to attending school. The games and activities in the Story Sacks have ensured that children learn that stories have meaning and can be interpreted on a personal level. Story Sacks have provided teachers in this area with resources in English, the additional language used in these particular schools. The activities included have provided new ways of approaching the learning of an additional language as well as introduced these children to new worlds through stories.

Children attending the farm schools in the Kwena Basin have enjoyed using props, puppets and masks to retell stories. A group of Grade 4, 5, and 6 children from Mobani School adapted a story they had been read in English, to reflect their Pedi culture. They included the blowing of an antelope horn to call a meeting of the animals to discuss a

problem, and ended with a celebratory rain dance when the problem caused by one of the animals in the story had been resolved. The new story was related to the younger children in the school, using a mixture of languages – English and Sepedi – depending on the language fluency of the individual children. The props and masks enabled more children to attempt using English in public than before. Through the inclusion of dance and drama, all children were actively involved, irrespective of their language level.



*A Grade 6 child playing the part of the crocodile in the telling of 'Please Frog, just one sip!'
Mobani School, Kwena Basin, South Africa*

Story Sacks developed round books written in rhyming text provide wonderful opportunities to explore sounds in words and word play, vital building blocks for later phonics learning. Games such as Rhyming Bingo, Rhyming Dominoes and Rhyming Snap! are easy to make and invaluable in developing the concept of rhyming, especially in children whose first language is not English and whose home language does not have a rhyming element, as is the case of SePedi speaking children in South Africa.

In conclusion, the importance of engaging children in language through games, picture exploration and reading cannot be emphasised enough. These activities build a wide speaking and listening vocabulary, which is a vital prerequisite for learning to read, write and spell. We believe that speech and drama activities form firm foundations for literacy learning.

References

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