

Creating Learning Environment for Young Language Learners (Reading & Writing)

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Abstract: *The early environment where young children live will help determine the direction of their brain development. Children who have severely limited opportunities for appropriate experiences will be delayed; this may permanently affect their learning. But, children who have the opportunity to develop in an organized and appropriate environment are challenged to think and use materials in new ways. The relevance of scientific work is that students will engage their home and society environment into the activities. In this article the readers are able to understand and create a learning environment for young language learners and optimize their reading and writing skill.*

Key words: Phonemic awareness (graphic-phonics), decoding and spelling, semantics, syntax.

The first step in creating an appropriate environment for infants, toddlers, and preschool children is to examine how young children learn and develop. Each stage of development has unique characteristics that influence how a child will experience his or her environment.

Reutzel and Clark (2011) explain that the physical arrangement and organization of a classroom can be powerful and supportive of effective literacy instruction. Literate environments should motivate students and emphasize the importance of speaking, reading, and writing (The Access Center, 2007). Creating a literate classroom environment where students feel well, productive, energized, and safe requires design knowledge (Roskos & Neuman, 2011). Below you will find practical, helpful suggestions and a picture to aid you in designing a literate environment to benefit literacy development for your students. Suggestions are based on the work of Reutzel and Clark (2011), Roskos and Neuman (2011), and The Access Center (2007).

1. Reading

The nature of Reading

‘An estimated 122 million youth globally are illiterate, of which young women represent 60.7% - 67.4 million children are out of school ... deficient or non-existent basic education is the root cause of illiteracy’. (UNESCO)

Imagine what your life would be like if you didn't know how to read. Approximately only 80% of the world's population is reported to be able to read (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Reading is a fundamental skill for learners, not just for learning but for life (Traves 1994) with reading being defined as —...the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 9).

Why we need to develop reading skills?

L1 literacy leads to L2 literacy development awareness. Reading itself builds on oral language levels and key factors that influence (L2) reading skill development include the ability to comprehend and use both listening and speaking skills because you need to:

Hear a word before you can **say** it;

Say a word before you can **read** it;

Read a word before you can **write** it (Linse 2005).

What this tells us is that young learners need a firm foundation in auditory and oral skills before they can become proficient readers and writers of ANY language. Learning to read and then to write means the young learner has to link what they have heard or spoken to what they can see (read) and produce (write).

How to explore reading with young learners

Early literacy strategies

Phonemic awareness (graphic-phonics)

Young learners of English need explicit instruction on the link between the symbols (letters) in English and the sounds they make. They need to be taught that there is a direct link between the phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters) in order to be able to start 'blending' or sounding out simple words, e.g. vowel consonant (VC), followed by consonant vowel consonant (VC). The UK National Literacy strategy "Letters and Sounds" is a good place to start for ideas on not only the order of letters and sounds to be taught but also the methodology to be used. Once a young learner has mastered blending sounds together, they can be taught how to "segment" the sounds in words they can say. These skills of putting together and separating sounds will help them with both "decoding" and spelling.

The whole point of human beings inventing symbols is to pass on information to each other. They have done this in many different ways, consider the Ancient Egyptians with their hieroglyphics, Chinese pictographs, Arabic text and Roman text to name a few. There are not just differences in symbols but also in directionality. These all have to be taught explicitly because they are man-made and not intuitive.

Semantics

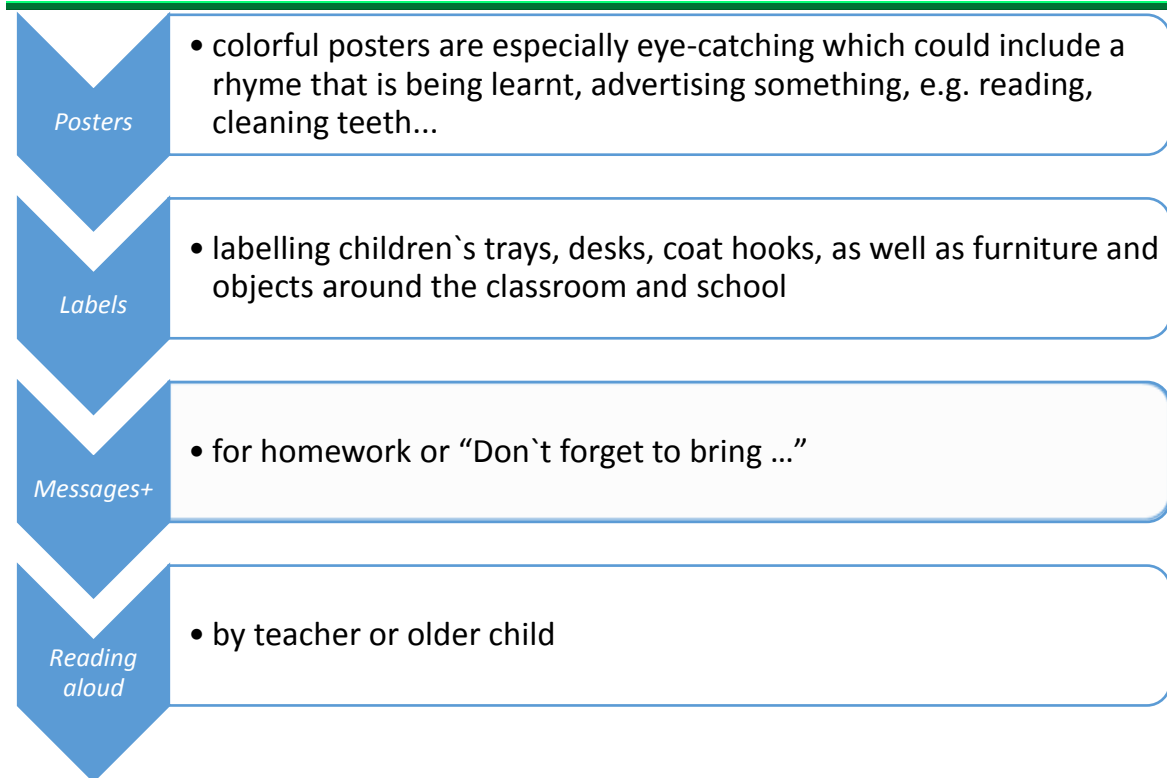
Being able to "decode" or read aloud is not useful on its own. The symbols carry meaning and so young learners need to be taught how to "encode" the symbols and visuals in order to find out the message being shared.

Syntax

In the same way that every language has differences in symbols, so they have in the "nuts and bolts" or arrangement of their symbols. The grammar or syntax of language is best "acquired" in the Krashen sense, rather than "learnt" explicitly. Acquisition will occur through multiple exposures to language usage in different contexts. Dissecting language is not very useful to a young learner, however, some simple metalanguage from the age of 10 years old upwards can be helpful, e.g. identifying nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles, pronouns and word order. The reason being that there may be differences between the L1 and English and being helped to "notice" these differences can help. A helpful publication to find out differences between 22 languages and English is edited by Swan and Smith (2001).

Developing literacy

You do not need access to a vast library or online literature to explore reading in your classroom. Techniques we have used, and ones which learners have enjoyed are shared for you below. It is important to remember that activating background knowledge when needed may be key to a comprehensible reading activity as; "Our background knowledge is like a lens through which we understand what we read" and it "allows teachers to unlock vocabulary before reading" (Anderson, 1999, p. 11). Cameron (2001) gives a very useful list of ideas for creating a "literate environment in the classroom" as this may be the only place young learners see print in the foreign language. This list includes:



Some other activities that will help to make reading “pleasurable” (Arnold 2009) which is crucial for success in literacy, include:

Focusing on reading fluency may include timed repeated reading (Nation, 2009). Running dictation (in pairs, so all learners are involved in reading). Learners making their own story books (or comics) to share with each other (Wright, 1997, p.114-130).

Creating backstories for character in a puppet family and creating a class binder to refer back to when reading peers stories about the family. This can be developed over a semester with learners taking in turns in small groups to create dramas to share with the class in written form, so peers read, and can be followed through with role plays.

Motivation – ask your learners to bring in materials they enjoy reading – whether it is football results, recipes or song lyrics, use these as a springboard for discussion and reading.

Make it purposeful – if learning food lexis, bring in packets / tins of food, read where different kinds of food originate from, and classify them by country or by noun basis (countable/ uncountable). (Ellis & Brewster, 1991, p.57).

Extensive reading is where learners read a lot of easy material in the new language. They choose their own material and read it independently from the teacher. (Krashen, 1988). This develops confidence in their abilities and promotes an enjoyment of reading for pleasure.

Writing

Writing and Young Learners

Writing can be an engaging, interesting and inspiring activity for young learners. Children are active learners and thinkers (Piaget 1965), learn through social interaction (Vygotsky 1978) and learn effectively through scaffolding by more capable others (Maybin et al 1992), who can be adults or peers. Collaborative and well-planned writing tasks encourage the context for all of these characteristics to be fully exploited in the young learner classroom.

The nature of writing

Writing is a complex skill to develop and master, focusing on both the end product and the steps to arrive there. Writing skills only develop when young learners are taught how to write and are given opportunities to practice these skills and strategies.

Why we need to develop writing skills with young learners

Writing tends to be somewhat neglected in the classroom, but it is an essential part of language development. Good writing skills are based on good reading skills, you need to recognize words in order to write and use them comprehensibly (Linse 2005).

A	Many young learners will not have fully developed their own L1 writing skills, and these strategies may not necessarily transfer to writing in English
B	Writing allows young learners to practice new vocabulary and structures
C	It allows for a high degree of personalization and creativity
D	It provides young learners to take risks and try out new language, with more “thinking time”
E	Writing skills equip young learners with a solid base for future development and learning
F	A focus on writing tasks in the classroom creates variety and caters for different learning styles
G	Teachers can diagnose learners` strength and areas to develop in terms of vocabulary, structure, spelling
H	Focusing on this area can instill the joy of writing from an early age

Theories to consider

Much of the theory behind L2 writing is based on research into the development of L1 writing skills. Two main approaches have emerged out of this research: writing as a process and as a product.

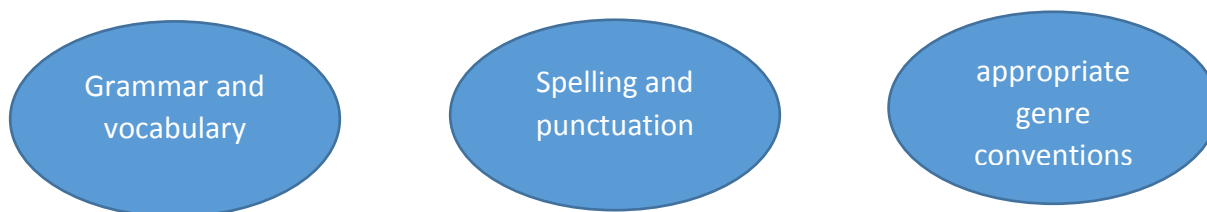
Writing as a process involves:

1. Thought-showering or “brainstorming” notes, ideas, words and phrases about a topic
2. Categorizing and ordering the ideas according to the task requirements
3. Writing a first draft
4. Revising the first draft by improving content and accuracy
5. Implementing the improvements in the re-written text

Writing as a product

The end goal is an authentic task e.g. writing to inform, to thank etc. Success is gauged by the accuracy of the content and accuracy of the text.

Accuracy focuses on:



Content focuses on:

1. Conveying information successfully to the reader
2. Providing enough detailed information
3. Logically ordering ideas
4. Using appropriate register
5. Originality of ideas

Considerations for classroom writing

Here are some “top tips” for encouraging more engaging writing tasks for young learners. Think about how you can employ these with your own young learner groups and try them out.

1. Encourage collaboration between young learners and provide opportunities during thought-showering, making notes, planning, revising etc.
2. Provide visuals, or ask the learners to draw their own pictures to provide the content for the tasks
3. Topics should be engaging for your young learners that are relatable and intrinsically motivating. Write about what they know e.g. games, friends, favorite activities etc.
4. Look at writing tasks from a different perspective e.g. rather than writing about their daily routine, they could write about their pet’s daily routine, their pet’s favorite activities, food etc.
5. Let young learners choose their own characters to write about
6. Set challenging but achievable tasks
7. Have extension activities available for fast finishers
8. Encourage pride in the presentation of their writing e.g. young learners can draw, annotate etc.
9. Respond to written ideas, not just language
10. Mark positively and give feedback on areas of content as well as language. Encourage learners to value writing.
11. Give clear and simple criteria and encourage self/peer correction of written tasks. Using a range of smileys can encourage young learners to record how they feel about different writing tasks.
12. After pair/group work, make time to share writing as a class e.g. read out good examples of writing (but don’t name names!).
13. Include presentation of learners’ work. This depends on the task type, but work could be compiled into short books, displayed in the classroom, school message boards etc. Young learners get a motivational “boost” by seeing their written work “on view.”

It is the teacher’s responsibility to develop writing tasks for young learners that are enjoyable, full of practice, meaningful, purposeful, social and supported (Reid 1998). Challenging your learners and exploiting collaborative opportunities all combine to provide a learning environment where writing is both valued and enjoyed.

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