

10. Supporting First Language Development: Key Elements of the Requisite Integrated Approach to Literacy

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Traditional understandings of the term 'literacy' merely focusing on skills of the written word are first considered here. The alternative integrated perspective of literacy development, comprising a strong emphasis on the development of oracy in conjunction with the written language skills, is outlined. The reality that this is the understanding espoused by the various Irish programmes and syllabi at primary and secondary level is also illustrated and discussed. In conjunction with this emphasis on oracy, two further elements emerge as crucial in the overall context of an integrated holistic language and literacy development programme. Explicit work on vocabulary development and on comprehension strategies, skills which transcend listening, speaking, reading and writing, have recently been acknowledged as pivotal to overall language and literacy development. The paper concludes with the understanding that the development of all language skills, as outlined, should always be conducted in the context of meaningful experiences and texts.

Introduction

In order to promote efficient literacy development among learners at every level, it is vitally important to be clear as to the current understandings and dimensions of the literacy concept. At a basic level, it is clear that literacy involves skill with language and, by default, with its four constituent sub-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. There is general acceptance that, in talking about any one of the language skills we are, by

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implication, talking about some element of all the others, due to their inherent connection and integration. However, since these language skills 'are among the most complex cognitive processes managed by the human brain' (Harrison 2004:83) it is not surprising that a unified and agreed definition and theory of literacy development still does not exist.

Towards a definition of literacy

Traditional understandings of the term literacy have centred on its association with the written word. Literacy is thus commonly defined as the ability to master the skills of reading and writing. This definition is entirely consistent with the Standard English dictionary definition of the term as 'the ability to read and write' (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2002: 828). Thus, Kress (1997) uses the term literacy to signify 'the mode of lettered representation, and...the products which result, which are fashioned in its use' (Kress 1997:116) and such an interpretation would be representative of a common understanding across the literature. Such definition of literacy merely in terms of the ability to read and write have had implications for the teaching of literacy in schools. Whitehead (1994) speaks of 'an old and deep-seated myth that there is just one unambiguous set of literacy skills, which schools must pass on' (Whitehead 1994: 89). Schools have thus operated on a 'product' focused model of literacy practice, emphasising the 'basic literacy skills' of reading and writing in order to equip children for survival in the world.

Defining literacy in terms of reading and writing abilities clearly emphasises literacy as a language process. Thus, if literacy is a language process, consideration must be afforded to all language skills, including spoken language skills, to fully understand the concept. Basic spoken language skills are closely related to the development of reading and writing abilities, as highlighted by Smith and Elley (1998) who point out that:

the strategies we use in oral language – either in speaking or listening – are the same underlying strategies that we use in reading or writing. Without an understanding of language we cannot read.

Smith and Elley 1998:72

It would thus seem imperative that any understanding and definition of literacy would acknowledge this reality. Whitehead (1990) speaks of the complex interrelationship of listening, speaking, reading and writing as a major aspect of any understanding of literacy and is emphatic that 'literacy in the written form is only one sort of literacy' (Whitehead, 1990:192). However, it is Garton and Pratt (1998) who actually take the step of redefining literacy in broader, more inclusive terms as the mastery of spoken language as well as reading and writing. Literacy is thus seen as a process or ability that 'underlines the continuities between spoken language and written forms of language' (Garton and Pratt, 1998:1). This reality is highlighted by the fact that literate people are expected to show mastery of spoken language, to speak fluently as well as showing competence with the written word.

Oral language as a core element of literacy development

The primacy and centrality of oral language development to all learning has rarely been in dispute. Whitehead's (1994) contention that for more than twenty years there has been 'broad agreement in Britain and much of the English-speaking world that spoken language is the basis from which all areas of learning, including learning and teaching in schools, develop' (Whitehead, 1994: 95) recognises this reality. Thus, even at a general level of understanding of learning, oral language is clearly a vital component of literacy. When literacy is acknowledged as an integrated language process however, the role of oral language is seen to impinge even more on the development of reading and writing skills.

It was perhaps the central role accorded to spoken language in the development of literacy by The Bullock Report (Department of Education and Science 1975) that established oral language as a core element of many literacy programmes. The importance of this Bullock Report (1975) recommendation is emphasised by Whitehead (1994) in terming it 'a perspective of incalculable significance' (Whitehead, 1994:91). This central role of oral language in the development of literacy is given further support by the work of Wells (1985). In his longitudinal study of children's linguistic development, he found that slow oral language growth in the pre-

school years frequently meant slow reading and literacy growth at school. It is in this light that Dowling (1992) claims that oral language ‘underpins all developments within written language.’ (Dowling 1992: 85). Evidence appears to point to an inextricable link between oral and written language.

At its most general level, the close relationship between oral and written language is evident from the fact that, in both skills, the structures of language must be learned and applied successfully to communicate and to achieve understanding. Thus, ‘through their experience as speakers and listeners, children are familiar with syntactic, semantic and phonic strategies as ways of processing language when they learn to read and write’ (Browne, 1996: 31). The development of written language is linked to the development of spoken language, with the former being parasitic on the latter (Garton and Pratt, 1998). Equally, however, the development of written language skills influences spoken language ability when new written language structures and functions are adapted for speaking purposes. The relationship between the oral and written language skills can thus be termed symbiotic, a perspective that is far more complex than the traditional understanding merely that ‘printed letters and words have oral equivalents’ (Browne, 1996:31).

It is clear that spoken language is acquired and learned in natural situations, in contrast to the skills of reading and writing, which have traditionally been formally taught at school. This formal teaching is required since, according to Donaldson (1993), we are biologically equipped for learning and using spoken language, whereas we have no such natural facility for communicating with written language. Notwithstanding this reality, it is still accepted that all literacy skills, including oral language skills, need to be taught and developed in school, since:

Children’s spoken language development is not complete on their entry to school...Children 3-8 still have many of the structural aspects of language to master...The years from 5 onwards must be regarded as a time when language skills are consolidated and mastered.

Garton and Pratt, 1998:118

There is no disputing that, in order for children to become confident, articulate and sensitive users of language, the oral language skills of listening and speaking need to be an important part of the literacy and English curriculum in the early years (Browne, 1996). This emphasis accorded to spoken language skills is vital to the development of metalinguistic awareness, which in turn, according to Tunmer and Bowey (1984), is a vital pre-requisite for being able to read and write. Without this metalinguistic ability, they claim, children would not be able to discover the properties of spoken language that are central to the correspondences between its spoken and written forms.

Notwithstanding this inter-relationship, the differences between the oral and written aspects of literacy must also be acknowledged. There are clearly differences between the two modes in terms of form, as well as in terms of situational, social and intellectual functions and the ways in which ideas are linked. Furthermore, although many of the acquisition processes in language, reading and writing are apparently the same, the extent to which these processes are of relevance for reading and writing will depend on the socio-cultural and historical value placed on them. Clearly, different groups in society place differing values on the literacy skills of reading and writing. This is in marked contrast to spoken language, which can be acquired through interaction regardless of cultural values and expectations (Garton and Pratt, 1998; Kress, 1997). As a result, a heavier onus is placed on the school to develop the reading and writing aspects of literacy in cultures where these skills are prioritised. Furthermore, in contrast to the aforementioned perspective of Tunmer and Bowey (1984), Donaldson (1978) sees learning to read as being responsible for the development of metalinguistic awareness and for the further development of oral language skills. This perspective clearly views the skills of written literacy as central to the further refinement of spoken language skills.

The most reasonable position would seem to be a middle-ground perspective, which acknowledges oral language skills as integral to the definition and development of literacy and which further acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between these oral language skills and the development of reading and writing skills and *vice versa*. This perspective

thus incorporates good teaching and learning practice. It is, after all, only by assisting children 'in using what they already know and can do as speakers, listeners, readers and writers, [that] we expand their spoken and written competencies' (Neuman 1999: 269). Such a perspective also accommodates the reality that the process of learning to use written language raises children's awareness of language in general (metalinguistic awareness) and increases their ability to exercise greater control over its use in both the spoken and written domains. This is vital since 'the development of this control is central to the achievement of literacy' (Garton and Pratt 1998: 258).

This middle-ground perspective also reasserts social interaction as a vital ingredient for facilitating overall literacy development, including oral language skills. The presence of an interested adult interacting with, and providing the necessary support and guidance to, the learner has been noted as readily facilitating the acquisition of all literacy skills (Smith and Elley 1998). This emphasis on the role of social interaction in the acquisition of literacy, involving young children in talking and thinking in partnership with supportive adults was highlighted in the work of Vygotsky (1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), such interaction enables children to operate at the leading edge of their potential in a zone of proximal development. At this level children 'are enabled to go well beyond the limitations of what they can do alone' (Whitehead, 1994:100). The central role of the teacher in the development of literacy skills is thus clearly reiterated and emphasised.

The above discussion has placed oracy at the centre of an integrated and holistic literacy development programme. Irish curricula at primary and post-primary level clearly embrace this perspective as will be illustrated below.

Irish school programme perspectives on literacy

The curriculum at primary level is emphatic in its understanding of the integrated nature of literacy development.

The acquisition of literacy is a principal concern of the English curriculum and this reflects stated national policy...language learning is an integrated process in which it is difficult to separate the functions of oral language, reading and writing...each draws from and feeds into the other in a host of interconnections to form an integrated process of language learning.

Department of Education and Science and NCCA, English, 1999:2-3

This integrated understanding of literacy, comprising an equal emphasis on oracy and written language is espoused and consistently reiterated across the post-primary English curricula at junior and senior cycle levels. At junior level the syllabus outlines that

The development of skills in speaking and listening should play as important a role as reading and writing skills in this English programme. Fostering an awareness in the student of the interrelationship of these skills, and of their central role in the learning and thinking processes, is an integral element of personal growth through English.

Department of Education and Science 1999a:1

A similar approach is envisaged at senior cycle level as outlined in the Leaving Certificate English Syllabus:

The aims of this syllabus are to develop in students a mature and critical literacy to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life in all contexts...a respect and appreciation for language used accurately and appropriately and a competence in a wide range of language skills both oral and written

Department of Education and Science 1999b:5

It is clear that the official understanding of literacy development for Irish schools envisages the aforementioned dual approach, affording attention to the development of oracy in conjunction with the traditional emphasis on the written language skills of reading and writing. Oracy should thus form

a core feature of any integrated and holistic programme of language and literacy development. Corresponding classroom practice should incorporate ‘the use of talk and discussion as a central learning strategy in every curriculum area’ (Department of Education and Science and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, English, 1999:15). Such an approach necessitates that the predominant mode of interaction in classrooms will typically comprise ‘methodological approaches which emphasise dialogue, group discussion, oral presentations and performances’ (Department of Education and Science, 1999b:7). Students should be encouraged to express their opinions, speculate and engage in argument to foster their capacity to think well and in order to facilitate the requisite language-rich learning environment appropriate to an integrated, holistic development of language and literacy.

Other elements of an integrated/holistic approach to literacy development

Recent research on reading and literacy development (e.g., Kamil *et al.*, 2000 and Snow *et al.*, 1998) displays consistency in clearly identifying further requisite features of successful literacy development programmes. As well as the central importance of oral language and discussion as outlined above, the ‘three traditional p’s’ in literacy development of *print exposure*, *practice* and *phonics* emerge again as core elements of programmes which seek progress in learning to be literate in any alphabetic language beyond an initial level. These facets of literacy development have been features in some manner or another of the two main ‘top-down’ (meaning) and ‘bottom-up’ (skill-based) models of literacy development (see for example Smith and Elley, 1998; Browne, 1996) and will not form part of this particular discussion.

Two further specific elements have recently emerged as particularly significant in fostering improvements in literacy achievement (Kamil *et al.*, 2000). Both the teaching of vocabulary and the teaching of comprehension strategies that afford learners control over procedures for monitoring and repairing misunderstandings are put forward as particularly worthwhile and necessary features of an integrated approach to the development of literacy, in that they permeate, integrate and positively impact on all four

language skills. The key dimension of the practice of vocabulary and comprehension development appears to be that both skills should always be developed in a meaningful context through a classroom learning environment that is rich in language, discussion, interaction, text and print.

Vocabulary development in the integrated/holistic approach to literacy

The research of Lunzer and Gardner (1979) was particularly significant in highlighting the central importance of word and vocabulary knowledge, and word and vocabulary knowledge in context, to the development of literacy. While there has been general acceptance of this position, consensus has been less clear on whether this vocabulary development should be achieved through incidental exposure to language or through direct teaching. The review carried out in the U.S. by the National Reading Panel (2000) outlines the position that both the direct and indirect approaches to vocabulary development should be used and integrated into all elements of literacy instruction. It thus calls for 'a mix of definitional and contextual approaches' and similarly for 'rich extended instruction and multiple exposures towards' (National Reading Panel 2000: 4-23). This integrated approach is based on the understanding that the more connections made between oral language and print material and vice versa, the greater the effect and overall impact on the learner in terms of their literacy development.

Strategies abound in relation to how this direct and indirect development of vocabulary should occur in the classroom (Davidson *et al.*, 1996; Ruddell, 1994). Central to both approaches is use of the concrete context of meaningful texts. Some of the strategies suggested across the literature include:

- reading and re-reading of stories and texts,
- discussion of text highlighting use of certain vocabulary,
- specific preparation and treatment of vocabulary chosen by teacher and pupils from texts,
- definition of selected vocabulary by both teacher and pupils,
- pupil revision of text highlighting specific vocabulary, and

- applying, using and recycling vocabulary learned in other contexts across the four language skills as frequently as possible.

The essence of the aforementioned approach to vocabulary development as an element of an integrated approach to literacy is summed up by Harrison (2004):

The general conclusion is clear: vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly, and teaching about vocabulary should be integrated into other types of reading instruction. In addition, the deeper the processing the better: the more connections a reader makes with other reading material or with oral language, the greater the effect.

Harrison 2004:89

Comprehension in an integrated/holistic approach to literacy development

Comprehension and understanding are at the root of all effective language use, transcending all four language skills. Thus, the ability to monitor, detect and repair comprehension is one of the key elements of efficient language and literacy use (Kintsch, 1998). The influential U.S. National Reading Panel (2000), in synthesising a wealth of research on the comprehension area, outlines extensive evidence that comprehension development (and thus, by default, literacy development) can clearly be enhanced and improved for all learners by particular categories of explicit strategy instruction. Overall, general principles regarding use of comprehension development strategies in the classroom have emerged.

At the heart of all comprehension strategy development is the equipping of learners with the skills to monitor effectively and enhance their own literacy behaviour. To this end, a consistent and integrated approach to literacy and comprehension development across all curriculum areas and subjects is advocated. It is envisaged that corresponding classroom methodology will be interactive, as previously outlined, but will also emphasise teacher demonstration and modelling of strategies, in conjunction with shared exploration and application of all strategies in co-

operative learning, small group, pair work and individual situations. A focus should be placed on activating, sharing, discussing and using the prior knowledge and experiences that the learner brings to any text or literacy activity. These principles are generally consistent across recent research on the area (Kamil *et al.*, 2000) and enjoy currency among the range of opinion on literacy development.

The specific comprehension development strategies advocated mainly focus on skill activities built around text. Oracy is embedded in the process of development through a continuing emphasis on the shared discussion and exploration of all text activity. Most of the specific strategies can be traced back to the work of Lunzer and Gardner (1984) and to their development of DARTs (Directed Activities Related to Text). Although DARTs may consist of 'variations on classroom activities which have been around for decades' (Harrison, 2004: 100), they are deemed to have a significantly positive impact on literacy development. Emphasis is on obtaining meaning but also making explicit the process of achieving this meaning. It is generally accepted that DART strategies are those generally used by successful literacy learners and should be explicitly developed with all learners. Furthermore, the reality that the teaching of DART strategies to weaker literacy learners has resulted in improvements in literacy performance (Pressley, 2000) provides added impetus to their inclusion in any holistic literacy development programme.

Harrison (2004) outlines some key DARTs that are deemed to impact on literacy development and are thought to be desirable in literacy classrooms at all levels. A core category centres around the use of graphic and semantic organisers, where learners organise and present key information gleaned from a text either in visual form through use of story maps, diagrams, flow charts or through the use of mnemonic strategies in order to recall key vocabulary, expressions or key points. Requiring the learner to independently highlight parts of a text, which are understood or not understood or which appear important, is also advocated. Completion of traditional cloze-type deletion or substitution activities (whether of single words, sentences, phrases or paragraphs in a text) but now solved through co-operative pupil-to-pupil discussion, selection and agreement of

replacements, rather than at an isolated and individual level, have also found favour in terms of developing comprehension in the classroom (Davies and Greene, 1984). It is also generally envisaged that such deletion and substitution activities should proceed to more advanced levels incorporating summarisation and prediction activities. Traditional comprehension questioning is still afforded a role, but current thought also highlights the importance of the generation and the sharing of comprehension questions, devised by the literacy learners themselves, at the pair and small group levels, ensuring that such questions are framed across the literal, interpretive and applied levels of language comprehension. Structured or open personal adaptation of, and response to, text for a variety of different audiences is also viewed as a very worthwhile completion activity to the overall efficient and purposeful handling of text.

Conclusion

The main intention of this paper has been to call for a reappraisal or refocusing of our approach to literacy development in light of some pertinent recent research. My contention is that an integrated programme of literacy development incorporating a focus on oral language, vocabulary development and comprehension strategies across the four language skills provides a solid foundation on which to support effectively further language and literacy development. It is not a call for a return to a narrow, isolated and uncontextualised development of discrete literacy skills in classrooms but rather for the continuous development of the requisite skills in the context of meaningful experiences and texts. The core requirement to support the achievement of this desirable practice is the provision of what I term a print-rich, interaction-rich, discussion-rich, language-rich and text-rich environment in all classrooms, whatever the context.

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