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The Oral Language Foundations of Literacy

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Reading is language! Learning to read and write is embedded in learning to speak and understand. In fact, in some very important ways, babies begin learning to read the moment they “hit the air” and are exposed to the language they will learn to speak and comprehend. Literacy is dependent on a child’s well-developed oral language abilities. Developmentally, language learning and literacy are actually reciprocal. The relationship between the two is dynamic and changes over time with each influencing the other at different developmental stages. Despite the interrelation of oral language and literacy, there are significant differences between them. Oral language occurs naturally and spontaneously for most children. The creation of literacy skills, from basic to more abstract levels, requires instruction. Oral language and literacy are the result of hugely complex processes, which make reading much more than speech written down.

The components of oral language evolve over time to become crucial aspects of literacy - reading, spelling, and written language. Listening and speaking as essential skills, evolve to reading and writing as literacy skills. Reading involves two crucial components: decoding and comprehension. **Decoding** is the skill of analyzing the sound-symbol relationship of letters and the speech sounds they represent, and then pronouncing aloud the words seen on a page. In fact, reference is often made when referring to early literacy acquisition, as “cracking the code” or *decoding*. **Comprehension** involves determining the meaning and intent of the words, which have been decoded. A child has not fully *read* unless meaning has been derived. Reading comprehension is the combined product of decoding ability, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, paragraph comprehension, and ultimately text comprehension.

One effective means for considering the language system is to view it as a dynamic process of interrelated functions that are rule-governed. Conceptualized by Bloom and Lahey (1978) as *content, use and form*, these interactive systems allow for an appreciation of language that is simultaneously expressive and receptive while encompassing conceptual, communicative and formatting demands. Each oral language component has its parallel in the

development of literacy skills.

Language *content* is often referred to as **semantics**. It is the aspect of language that is most concerned with meaning. People talk or write to communicate meaning just as they listen or read to determine meaning. Concerned with the meanings of words and the relationship between and among words as they are used to represent knowledge of the world, word knowledge grows continuously throughout life as world knowledge expands. Meaning can be represented in a word, in a sentence, or across sentences, as well as in nonlinguistic ways. Not only do children know words, they know about the words. Knowing a lot of words has an important correlate – how much you know about them. Children may know definitions, synonyms, antonyms, multiple meanings, figurative uses, restrictions on how the words may be used and grammatical aspects of words. Words are related to experience, so how a child acquires, stores, understands and uses the words he or she knows is strongly influenced by experience. Thinking of a three year old girl whose mother was very strict about eating “junk” food, you can understand why when she was offered a cookie, she announced “No! Cookies are junk!”

The power of word knowledge can be seen most clearly in its impact on listening and reading comprehension, as well as in writing. There is an unquestioned strong connection between vocabulary knowledge, depth and breadth of word meanings and reading comprehension. Further, familiarity with a broad array of words facilitates decoding, as meaning cues, support word recognition. Written language skill is in part based on word choice and the combination and coordination of skillfully chosen words to communicate both ideas and intentions. The logic of the relationship between word knowledge and reading is intuitive. Stop now and think about what you have just read. You will know what you read if you know the meaning of the words!

Language *use*, often referred to as **pragmatics**, is focused on the purposes and intentions with which language is used. It encompasses the communicative aspects of language including discourse skills, such as conversational and narrative (story-telling and understanding) ability. From very early on, babies make sounds and gestures that communicate different meanings, even when they are not aware of those intents. By the time first word forms emerge between 10 and 15 months, a child uses those sounds and gestures intentionally to communicate to

the adults nearby. This vocalization process evolves to verbalization with the use of actual words, phrases and sentences. Intentions at this stage are: attention-seeking, requesting, greeting, protesting or rejecting, responding/acknowledging, and informing. As toddlers become preschoolers, conversational skills become more complex. Discourse skills include: telling stories, describing things with increased clarity and recounting personal experiences. Preschoolers use language more effectively to express opinions and for meaningful conversational interactions. As language skills grow, language can be used for an increasing number of school related skills, such as instructing or reasoning. The language of the classroom must be mastered as well, since instructional discourse varies significantly from everyday conversation.

It is easy to wonder how intentional communication, conversational and story-telling skills are related to literacy. The connection between oral language, pragmatic skills and literacy is most strongly observed in regard to reading comprehension. For some children whose oral language skills are age appropriate when they enter school, early literacy acquisition and accommodation to school discourse may not be negatively affected. However, as the demands of the curriculum escalate, these same children may not have developed enough linguistically to meet expectations. Skills that were adequate in early grades when the emphasis was on decoding and when instruction was more experiential in nature, are now insufficient as reading to learn becomes the expected mode. Moreover, as the curriculum expands, topics become less familiar; new vocabulary and more complex sentences, paragraphs and texts must be analyzed and interpreted; more reading and writing are expected; and the cognitive demands become more abstract.

The pragmatics of oral language also has clear parallels to writing. Written language can be used for a variety of purposes with different intentions. In writing, one can request, create, solicit, inform, educate, entertain, describe and persuade, among a lengthy list of other purposes. For the reader, the mandate is to discern the communicative intent of the author in nonfiction and of the author and characters in fiction. When children have vulnerabilities in determining a speaker's intent in oral discourse, they are clearly at risk for failing to determine the author's print intent. Reading and writing have another layer about which a child must learn. When involved in conversation, there are physical cues which help a child understand what the person he is talking to means or is thinking, for example, facial expressions or tone of voice. When you are reading, it is not possible to see or hear the author. The reader has to rely on punctuation, italics and vocabulary to determine the intentions which can be more obviously discerned when you are speaking face to face. Still another key issue in the transformation of the pragmatics of oral language to print, is the ability to self-monitor. This metacognitive process involves thinking about your own thinking. Reading with the intent to understand requires monitoring your own comprehension, so that there is recognition, when the

text has not been understood.

Language *form* is the means via which language meaning and intentions are communicated. Language *form* includes the rules for the combination of sounds (*phonology*), the structure of words (*morphology*), and the order of words in sentences (*syntax*).

Phonology is the sound system of a language. It is comprised of two major divisions: the suprasegmental and segmental. Several suprasegmental aspects of phonology provide: the melody of speech, the intonation, stress, and rate of speech, all of which influence the way a speaker communicates and how a listener understands. Segmental aspects of phonology includes phonemes, or the sounds of the language, which are translated into print as vowels and consonants.

The suprasegmental features are significant in our ability to communicate emotions and attitudes. These suprasegmental features help us recognize different sentence types: declarative (*Jamal eats pizza.*), interrogative (*Does Joseph like ice cream?*), or imperative (*Sit down now!*). The suprasegmental aspects of phonology are influential in reading. When reading aloud, fluent readers read with full intonation, communicating an understanding of the intent of the author. Early readers who struggle to decode may read each word individually, then, having derived meaning, reread with appropriate inflection. Inefficient readers may pause with a downward intonation at the end of a printed line of words rather than at the end of the sentence. Thus, the suprasegmental features of language play an essential role in comprehension.

Vowels and consonants comprise the *segmental* features of language. Each language has a set of vowels and consonants, (phonemes) which may be combined to form words. A phoneme is the smallest linguistic unit of sound that can change meaning in a word. Consider the word family of *bat*. Changing any of the phonemes could produce a variety of new words, e.g. *sat*, *bit*, *ban*. The English language has many more phonemes than print. With only 26 letters to represent at least 44 sounds, approximately 15 of them vowels (with only five vowel letters!), the process of learning to decode can become a true challenge for many children. The way speech sounds are acquired, produced and understood is not an equivalent process to learning to decode them, even though the sounds being produced when decoding, are essentially the same ones used when speaking and understanding. The segmental aspect of phonology is a core skill in the development of phonological awareness skills, which precede decoding, as well as decoding ability, itself.

Language *form* also includes a set of rules for forming words. **Morphology** is the study of word formation or how *morphemes* (the smallest units of meaning) are combined to form words. For example, *cook* is a morpheme, or unit of meaning and can be combined with *-ed*, another unit of meaning, one which means the past tense. So words are morphemes and so are prefixes (un-, bi-, dis-) and

suffixes (-ing, -ful, -ment). Morphology is essential in learning to decode and spell, in building vocabulary and comprehension, and in the richness of written language. A combination of word structure, the suprasegmental and segmental aspects of phonology, as well as context, enable a reader to know how to pronounce the words being decoded. Think of the words *present* (as in an introduction, "Allow me to *present* Mr. and Mrs. Jones") and *present* (as in gift, "What a thoughtful *present!*"). Similarly, knowledge of morphological structure also influences spelling.

Syntax is the third aspect of language *form*. It is the system of rules that directs comprehension and production of sentences. Syntax (sometimes referred to as *grammar*) specifies the order of words and the organization of words within a variety of sentence types. Syntactic rules allow the user to combine words into meaningful sentences and to alter the form of a sentence; for example, *The boy is walking* may be transposed into *Is the boy walking?* Despite a finite set of sentence types, an infinite number of sentences can be understood and generated.

Children acquire the basics of syntax early in the language acquisition process. As they progress beyond the basic forms of noun phrase and verb phrase, children master the variety of sentence types common in preschool language: negative, interrogative and imperative. Subsequently, they begin to develop the earliest forms of basic complex sentence structures, which generally emerge at approximately 3 years of age, with mastery by age 5 or 6. Complex

sentence development continues through the school years with some complex forms mastered as late as 11 years. The ability to deconstruct and analyze sentences for comprehension, or construct them for writing to convey meaning, is dependent on knowledge of syntactic rules.

For children who have difficulty with expressive or receptive syntax, the impact on literacy may not become obvious until later elementary school when the emphasis shifts from decoding to comprehension. As with all aspects of language, there is a continuum that reflects both a developmental sequence and degree of complexity (from single words to complex sentences).

The elements of language form (phonology, morphology, and syntax), have clear relationships to one another as one aspect of the foundation on which literacy is built. Decoding is strongly connected to phonological knowledge, as is the later development of spelling. Morphological knowledge adds to the skills required for spelling and comprehension. Later reading development, fluency, and comprehension have their roots in morphology and syntax while continuing to rely on efficient phonological processing.

Oral language abilities are one of the pillars upon which literacy stands. They involve expressive (or spoken) language and auditory comprehension, in combination with factors such as: memory, sensory and motor function, environment and culture, all of which form the basis from which literacy evolves.

The accompanying table summarizes the aspects of oral language and their literacy correlates:

Oral Language	Literacy
<p>Content: meaning component of language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary (words you know) • Lexicon (all you know about words) <p>Use: purposes and intentions of language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicative functions and purposes • Styles and codes of communication • Discourse: conversational and narrative skills <p>Form: means of forming sounds, words and sentences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - intonation - sounds - speech - phonological awareness • Morphology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - word formation • Syntax <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - comprehension and production of sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decoding Comprehension Richness of writing Reading with intention Purposes for reading and writing Monitoring comprehension Essence of decoding Pronunciation Changing meaning Spelling Variety in writing Reading comprehension Writing

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