

Literacy Instruction for Young EFL Learners: A Balanced Approach

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Literacy instruction should be an integral part of an EFL program for young learners.

Developing literacy skills in a foreign language can begin as early as foreign language instruction begins. Although some EFL programs delay literacy instruction for young learners and only focus on oral language development, studies have shown that it is not necessary, or even recommended, to take this approach. First, it is widely known that literacy skills in the native or first language (L1) can be transferred to reading and writing in a foreign language, such as English. Remember that “One only has to become ‘literate’ once” (Shin and Crandall, 2014, p. 160), so English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers can tap into students’ understanding of print and strategies for making meaning from text that originate in their L1 as a starting point for building literacy in English. Even further, research supports that literacy skills can be transferred bidirectionally—that is, both ways between L1 and L2—and the language of initial literacy does not necessarily need to be the L1 (Dlugosz, 2000; Lenters 2004/2005; Verhoeven, 1994).

Even preschool-age children who are not yet literate in their L1 can still engage in early literacy activities that build reading readiness and phonemic awareness. Teachers can read big books with print aloud and use songs and rhymes to focus on the sounds of English. They can also engage students in writing readiness exercises like tracing, connecting the dots, and coloring. These are fun and effective activities for building early literacy with young EFL learners.

Integrating literacy instruction can assist in oral language development.

Although EFL teachers usually have limited time in class, sometimes only 3–5 hours a week, they should incorporate literacy instruction and not just oral skills development for young learners, especially because learning to read is also proven to assist in oral language development. As Dlugosz (2000) states, “...including the teaching of reading in language programs will benefit all young beginners, including preschoolers, i.e. children who have not yet been taught to read in their native

tongue. Depending on the country, this group will include children below the ages of five, six, or seven. If reading is emphasized in their curriculum from the very beginning of their language education, these young children will progress faster not only in learning to read, but also in understanding and speaking the language” (p. 285). If students progress faster when reading is part of language instruction, EFL teachers of young learners should use a curriculum that integrates all four language skills and provides a balanced approach to literacy instruction.

EFL literacy instruction should be meaning-focused and balanced.

Children learn language through meaningful exposure and practice rather than through explicit instruction that only focuses on isolated parts of language (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006; Shin and Crandall, 2014). Although bottom-up processing skills that focus on decoding text through knowledge of a language’s sound-symbol relationship are a necessary part of literacy instruction, it is not effective to focus on decoding skills isolated from meaningful texts. Making meaning from print also requires top-down processing skills, such as utilizing background knowledge and knowledge of different text types. Many EFL teachers focus first on bottom-up processing skills, especially when the native language has a different writing system from English. However,

teachers should try to embed phonics instruction within a realistic context to help young learners use these bottom-up skills in conjunction with top-down reading strategies. This will strengthen their ability to make sense of printed text and make the class more engaging and motivating for children.

For example, a teacher can model how to use both top-down and bottom-up skills while doing a read-aloud or shared reading using a big book, such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. First, the teacher can think out loud while previewing the cover of the book, pointing at and commenting on the picture of a house, three bears, and a girl running away. She might point at each part of the picture and ask “What is this?” or “Who is this?” and have students identify the house, the trees, each bear, and the girl. The teacher can tap into students’ prior knowledge of the story since some students may have read the same story in their L1. She could ask students what the title of the story is. Maybe students say the title in the L1 or try to say it in English. Then she can point at the printed title and run her finger along the bottom of the words as she reads it aloud “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” The teacher might try to emphasize decoding the title one syllable at a time asking students “What is this sound?” while pointing to the “G” and cue them like this “G-G Gol...” After reading the whole title emphasizing the letter-sound relationships, she can repeat the title while pointing to the corresponding pictures on the cover.

In this example, the teacher is trying to model top-down skills by previewing the cover and tapping into students' prior knowledge as well as bottom-up skills in the context of this story. The key is to have a balance between top-down and bottom-up skills and show students how to utilize both to gain meaning from text. This is the most authentic way to teach literacy since making meaning from print requires a dynamic process of using both processing skills.

Five helpful building blocks for an effective EFL literacy program.

An effective literacy program is meaning-focused while still maintaining a balance between top-down and bottom-up processing skills. The following are five useful building blocks for successful EFL literacy instruction.

- *Immerse students in print and literature:* Young EFL learners should be surrounded by print in their classroom environment. If possible, teachers should put environmental print on the walls and make available a variety of texts appropriate for children. Children should participate in a variety of reading experiences using picture-book stories, non-fiction and content-area books and texts, poetry, basal textbooks, and Internet materials.
- *Utilize and build students' background knowledge:* Young EFL

learners may have prior experience with different topics and text types from their L1 and can tap into their background knowledge to help make sense of text. Teachers can use content-area texts on science and social studies topics, which can help students make cross-curricular connections and aid in comprehension of text. In addition, English is a global language and connected to cultures around the world. Building cultural knowledge helps prepare them to be effective readers and writers of English across cultures.

- *Model and teach various reading and writing strategies:* Young EFL learners need a variety of strategies to help them understand and create different types of texts. This includes recognizing and using text structure, such as stories that have a beginning, middle, and end; previewing text by examining the surrounding pictures and headings; predicting what happens next; writing for a particular audience and purpose; etc.
- *Build vocabulary and automaticity of high frequency words:* Young EFL learners need lots of vocabulary instruction, particularly of high frequency words. Studies have shown readers need to know at least 95% of the words in a text to gain comprehension independently. Consider that the 100 most frequently used words (e.g., the, does, said, are) represent 50% of all

written text. Automatic recognition of these words and content-area vocabulary instruction will help children comprehend and create text more fluently.

- *Give explicit instruction in phonics:* Young EFL learners need to build automaticity in bottom-up skills such as phonics to decode and spell words. Remember that English has 26 letters representing 44 sounds with more than 500 ways to spell them, so even native speakers of English need explicit instruction to handle decoding English. The specific kind of phonics instruction and amount of time spent on it may differ depending on the writing system and literacy practices of the L1.

Young EFL learners should be actively involved in the learning process.

Children learn by doing and need to be actively participating in literacy activities. Not only does this mean participating in the actual reading and writing activities themselves, but also engaging in discussions about texts, comprehension strategies, and the writing process. They should feel they can take risks and experiment. For example, they may not always make the right predictions when reading or invent spelling based on how they sound out a word, such as spelling “sed” instead of “said.” Teachers should give feedback to students in order to improve their literacy skills

and strategies while valuing students’ ideas and encouraging them to keep taking risks.

Young EFL learners need effective scaffolding to become independent readers and writers.

Children learn language through social interaction and need appropriate scaffolding (Shin and Crandall, 2014). This social constructivist view of learning is the foundation for developing a *To/With/By approach* (Cappellini, 2005; Mooney, 1990; Walter, 2004).

- Reading and writing **TO** students
- Reading and writing **WITH** students
- Reading and writing done **BY** students

This approach is an easy way to remember how to scaffold literacy instruction and can provide children with the guidance they need to build their literacy skills step-by-step. The goal is to help students become independent readers and writers. Below are some suggested *To*, *With*, and *By* literacy activities commonly used with young EFL learners.

Reading and Writing TO Students: Modeling comes first!

Teachers first need to model the skills and strategies students need to use.

- *Read-alouds:* The teacher reads aloud while modeling how to use

reading skills and strategies. It is a great opportunity for students to see and hear how to read fluently and with expression. The teacher is not only modeling skills and strategies but also interest and enthusiasm for reading.

- *Writing think-alouds:* Teachers should model how to write through think-aloud demonstrations. Children can watch as the teacher writes on a board, flip chart paper, or an interactive white board. The teacher should write big enough for everyone to see and think out loud, so students know exactly how to complete the writing task.

Reading and Writing WITH Students: Gradually give students more responsibility.

After modeling, the teacher can start to ease students into reading and writing with them.

- *Big book shared reading:* Teachers can use a big book to do a shared reading with the whole class. The teacher should model reading strategies and skills while encouraging children join in when they can, especially if there is a repeated line in the story. For example, in *Chicken Little*, the teacher and students can enjoy repeating the line together: “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” The teacher can also ask students questions to encourage participation in reading skills and strategies, like

the example of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* above.

- *Language Experience Approach:* In this shared writing activity, the teacher and students create text together. First, there should be a shared experience that the teacher and students can write about, such as watching a short video with a funny performance of *The Muffin Man* song by Scratch Garden (Scratch Garden, 2013). Students can report who the characters are (Muffin Man, Pie Man, Donut Man), where they live (Drury Lane), and what happened in the song. The teacher facilitates their discussion and writes their ideas into correctly formed sentences on flip chart paper or the board. After the text is complete, it will be a good model of writing that students can read out loud and copy into their notebooks for practice.

The level of student participation can gradually increase and the reading and writing process becomes more interactive. Young learners do more of the reading and writing themselves as they continue to work with the teacher during activities.

- *Choral reading and Readers Theater:* Choral reading means that children (individually, in pairs, or in small groups) take turns reading the text out loud. Students should each have their own copy of the book or text. If the text is a story, children can do a dramatic reading, which is

known as *Readers Theater*. Students act out a story like a play and read the lines for each character. They can dress up as the characters and mime their actions as they read their part out loud. Many children's books are already written with a narrator and character lines in quotes. If not, the teacher could prepare a script.

- *Interactive writing*: This activity is similar to shared writing activities like the Language Experience Approach, but the teacher does not do the actual writing. The responsibility is passed to the students although it is still heavily scaffolded and the teacher still facilitates the discussion. Students will take turns writing on flip chart paper or board while the teacher and classmates supervise the process.

The next step is guided reading and writing, which moves students towards more independence as they collaborate with one another and work in small groups.

- *Guided reading*: Students read unfamiliar texts in small groups based on their reading level using the reading skills and strategies and the language (i.e., vocabulary, grammar) they have learned. The teacher selects the text and provides guidance when necessary. For guided reading to be effective, all students must have their own copy of the book.
- *Class book*: Students work in collaboration to produce a class

book. They can contribute one page with both pictures and text to contribute to a recipe book, an animal encyclopedia, a fashion magazine, etc. The teacher can provide a structure for students to follow if needed (e.g., sentence starters, fill-in-the-blank) and closely monitor students' progress. The final product with all student contributions can be read out loud as a fun interactive reading activity and kept in the class library for independent reading.

Reading and Writing Done BY Students: Children can read on their own now!

Finally, students should be able to read independently and begin learning to read for pleasure and for the purpose of getting information.

- *Literacy centers*: To encourage students to read and write independently, teachers can set up literacy centers that have designated space in the room for various literacy activities. One section of the room might have a bookshelf with appropriate books (e.g., a set of readers connected to the curriculum, a variety of age-appropriate children's storybooks) and comfortable chairs or cushions where students can read quietly. There could be space with paper, crayons, markers, and pens that students can use to draw, color, and/or write independently. There could also be a small table and chairs where the

teacher can facilitate guided reading groups or students can participate in *literature circles*.

- *Literature circles*: This is an activity similar to a book club when a small group of students all read and discuss the same book. In order to facilitate the discussion, which can be challenging for young EFL learners, the teacher could give some choices for a group project related to the story to complete. It could be a poster of the characters and plot or a collaborative book with illustrations.
- *Research project*: Students are given a project to research a topic and create a poster or mini, illustrated book about it (e.g., a country, animal, holiday, season, etc.).

EFL teachers should use a balanced literacy approach that integrates all four language skills and provide a language rich environment with lots of opportunities for reading and writing meaningfully in English. It should also include explicit instruction in reading and writing skills and strategies and plenty of modeling and guidance by the teacher. With a variety of activities, literacy instruction can be engaging and interactive, balancing fun and effectiveness for both the teacher and students.

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Dr. Shin is a Series Editor, with Dr. JoAnn (Jodi) Crandall, for *Our World*, National Geographic Learning's primary series for young learners of English, *Explore Our World*, a light and lively version of *Our World*, *Welcome to Our World*, a preprimary series for very young learners of English, and *Impact*, for teenage learners of English.

She is also a co-author for National Geographic Learning's professional development title *Teaching Young Learners English*, also with Dr. Crandall.

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Further Reading

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