TOWARD A RENEWED FOCUS

literacy in early language programs

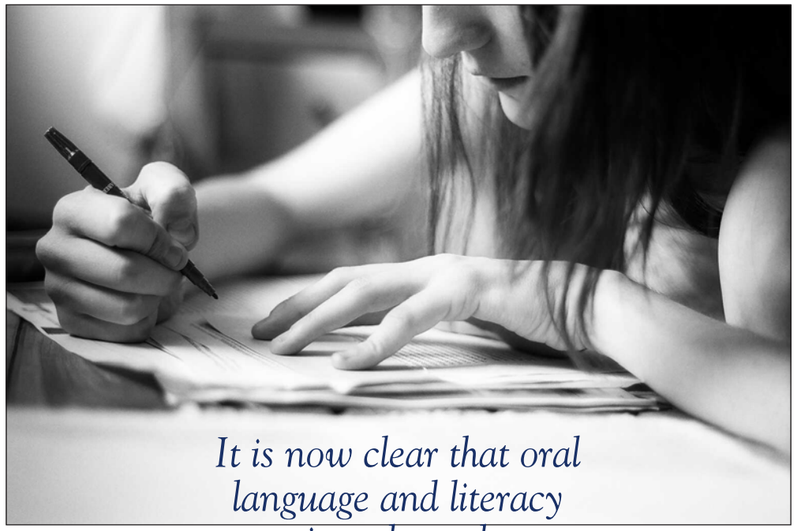
by Mimi Met

Literacy is a powerful tool for learning new language. We frequently think of comprehensible input as language that we hear, but we can also access comprehensible input from print.

Research has shown that reading has a powerful impact on language learning: much of the vocabulary that educated adults know has been developed over time through reading. Reading also exposes language learners to a range of structures and forms that can lead to insights on how the language works and allow learners to have multiple exposures in meaningful contexts—an important factor in language development.

Moreover, there are aspects of language that are far more frequent in written text than in oral communication. Even books written for young children contain vocabulary that is low frequency in oral language (e.g., porridge, thicket, duckling). Studies of the frequency of certain grammatical structures have shown that some are more likely to occur in print than in speech. For example, native speakers of Spanish use double object pronouns far less frequently in speech than in writing. Similarly, the past tense tends to occur more frequently in print than in oral language. For students who need to become familiar with past tense forms, and in languages where there is more than one way of expressing events in the past, reading is a major contributor to developing recognition of the forms used to express the past and also develops sensitivity to how different past tenses are used to communicate information related to aspect.

When I was just starting my work in elementary school foreign languages, most programs offered either Spanish or French. It was commonly thought that we should not introduce reading and writing until our students had a firm mastery of the sound/symbol correspondences in English in order to avoid any possibility of interference. As a result, we focused heavily on oral language, working to give our students the tools to communicate about everyday topics important to them.



It is now clear that oral language and literacy are interdependent. Oral language helps students know the meanings of the words they encounter in print. Print, in turn, exposes students to far more language than they can meet in the classroom, or even in social interaction outside the classroom.

Today, whatever form early language learning takes, many language professionals are introducing literacy early in the curriculum, reporting no negative impact on students' emerging literacy in English. In fact, there may be some mutual reinforcement between English and the target language, particularly in the area of foundational skills such as awareness of print, understanding of the alphabetic principle, and phonemic awareness. Just as they are expected to do in their English reading development, young second-language readers learn to use their emerging reading abilities to make meaning from common environmental print and follow along in their own text or in a big book as the teacher reads aloud. As they become more skilled readers, both in their first and second languages, young learners identify the characters, setting, and problem/resolution in narrative texts; they identify the beginning, middle, and end of a text; they must use reading as a tool for gaining information, such as from grade level informational texts; and they are expected to retell stories or information (verbally or non-verbally) using supporting details.

This mutual reinforcement has become particularly significant as we support students in attaining the outcomes detailed in the Common Core standards, which of course include literacy. Fortunately for us, the Common Core outcomes align well with our own standards and expectations for language learners across the K-12 grade span. The Common Core places heavy emphasis on reading informational texts. Students in immersion and other types of content-based programs can learn new reading strategies or apply those learned in English to gain additional practice in an important aspect of their literacy development. Reading contemporary narratives can also expose students to examples of how children in the target culture interact linguistically with one another—something often hard to do when direct contact with peers is limited or non-existent.

Although reading is what most often comes to mind when discussing literacy, writing is also a key literacy tool for improving language. Students use writing for a variety of purposes that are both common to everyday life and also academically important. Writing is a tool that helps us remember, whether we are making lists or taking notes. In schools, writing is often a way that we demonstrate our learning to teachers or others. Writing has also been shown to push learners to deeper and more precise control of knowledge or concepts. It isn't until we try to express our ideas in words that we confront the gaps in our knowledge or where our thinking is fuzzy. In schools, whether writing formally (such as reports or papers) or informally (such as journals or completing graphic organizers), writing can improve academic knowledge.

Writing can be used in language classrooms to scaffold oral production. Some teachers ask students complete a graphic organizer prior to pair or group work. This kind of writing gives students time to think about what they want to say and what language tools they will need. Similarly, using note cards can help students remember main ideas or key language when making a presentation. (Of course, there is a difference between reading from brief notes and reading aloud a prepared script.) Online chat has been shown to have many similarities with oral interaction. As a result, teachers can extend interpersonal communication beyond the classroom. Students can continue to build their fluency and comfort using the target language through synchronous communication with the teacher or peers.

We know more about language development than ever before. New research on how literacy promotes the growth of their native language for our English-speaking students can inform the decisions that we make for target language curriculum and instruction. It is now clear that oral language and literacy are interdependent. Oral language helps students know the meanings of the words they encounter in print. Print, in turn, exposes students to far more language than they can meet in the classroom, or even in social interaction outside the classroom. Print—student writing—can support the growth of fluency and push students to produce longer and/or more complex utterances. Because we will never have enough time to move our students as far as we would like, we can use our knowledge of high leverage literacy practices to move our students along the proficiency pathway.