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Five, Oops, I Mean Six Big Ideas of Literacy

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Five, *Oops*, I Mean Six Big Ideas of Literacy

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Literacy continues to be an elusive goal for all students in the United States. If one traces the history of our current quest for all children to be literate by the end of third grade, one finds that this discussion in modern times has come from many different fields. In the early 20th century, Dr. Hinshelwood, an ophthalmologist, and Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist, were both interested in understanding why some individuals had significant

struggles learning to read. Psychologists and educators such as William Gray, Marianne Monroe, and Jeanne Chall developed theories for how students learn to read as well as developed diagnostic tools to assess children who struggled in learning to read. Helmer Myklebust and Hollis Scarborough, both psychologists, theorized and described multiple processes and pathways to skilled reading. It is important to acknowledge the contributions from many different

fields of study in regards to the understanding of literacy development. Our goal in this article is to highlight the importance of oral language as the foundation for the “Five Big Ideas of Reading” as laid out in the National Reading Panel Report (2000).

Five Big Ideas of Reading

As part of this debate about how students become literate citizens, volumes have been written. In the 1990s, the National Institute of Health commissioned a panel of experts in the field of literacy to conduct a meta-analysis of the literature on how students become literate. This report known as the National Reading Panel Report was published in 2000. Based on the meta-analysis of the empirical literacy literature, the major findings of this report were “Five Big Ideas of Reading”. These five big ideas were phonological awareness, alphabetic-phonetic principles of decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. These five Big Ideas were culled from the literature based on each big idea being predictive of a more advanced literacy skill; also, each big idea had to be teachable. The review of literature revealed that when classroom instructional time was devoted to the five big ideas, reading achievement increased.

The Forgotten Big Idea

While we agree that these “5 Big Ideas” are supported in the literature, we would contend that the first “big idea” is missing from the report of the National Reading Panel. That “big idea” is oral language. Oral language serves as the foundation for all other forms of language, and we would contend that read language, written language, and even mathematics is dependent

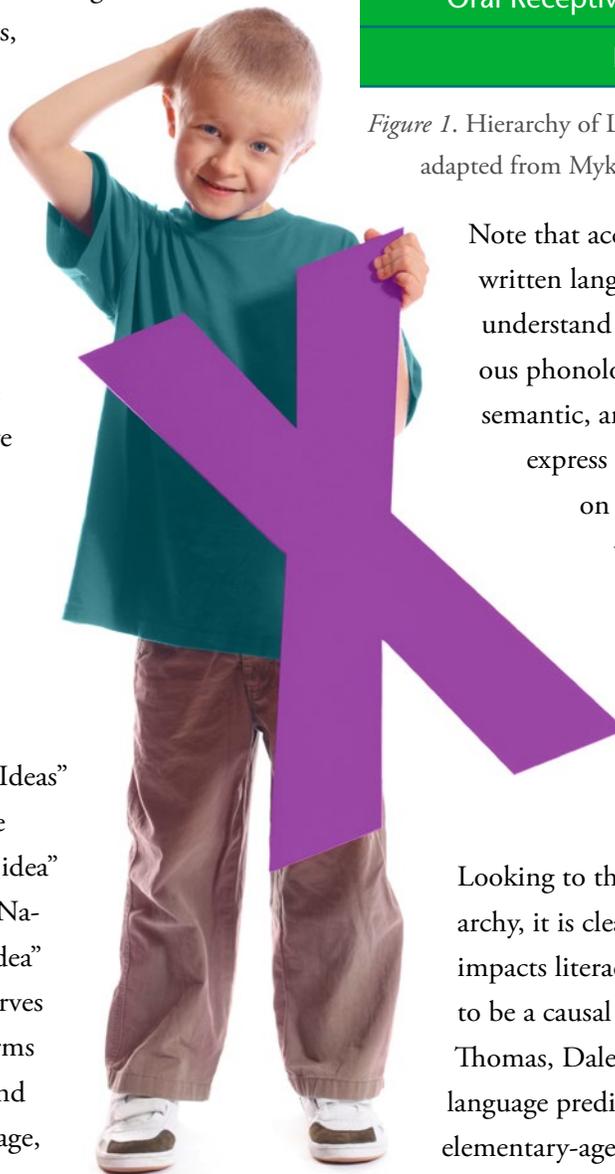
on the development of oral language. To substantiate this claim, we would cite Myklebust (1965) and his hierarchy of language development. In this hierarchy, Myklebust posits that human beings develop language in a hierarchy that starts with what he termed Inner Language. Inner language is the development of thoughts that begin in the womb. This level is certainly theoretical in that it cannot be tested nor can it be taught. However, the next four levels on the hierarchy can be assessed and taught. These levels are as follows (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hierarchy of Language Development, adapted from Myklebust (1965).

Note that according to Myklebust, read and written language involves the ability to first understand and use oral language in its various phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic patterns and then to express or use these various patterns. Layered on top of oral language is read language which is the ability to understand or comprehend the written symbols of the language. The most complex step in the development of literacy is the ability to write or express ideas using the symbols of the written language.

Looking to the foundational levels of the hierarchy, it is clear that oral language acquisition impacts literacy development, and has been found to be a causal relationship (Harlaar, Hayiou-Thomas, Dale, & Plomin, 2008). In fact, oral language predicts reading comprehension in early elementary-aged children, and predicts both decoding and reading comprehension in middle and



high-school aged children (Skebo, Lewis, Freebalm, Tag, Ciesla, & Stein, 2013). The crucial role of oral language in reading is highlighted more recently by Scarborough (2002) through the use of an illustrated rope made of multiple strands. With this illustration, one strand of the rope encompasses language comprehension which includes background knowledge (i.e., knowledge of facts and concepts), vocabulary knowledge, the understanding and use of a variety of syntactical structures, the ability to verbally reason, and knowledge of basic concepts of print and different types of text. Another strand in Scarborough's rope is a word recognition strand wherein one has an understanding of phonological awareness, an understanding of decoding (which includes being able to apply alphabetic-phonetic principles to read words and to apply phoneme-grapheme correspondences to spell), and the ability to read words automatically or by sight. Over time these two strands merge to create a skilled reader who can read text fluently and comprehend what is read.

What Does this Mean for Teachers?

For teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers, understanding Myklebust's Hierarchy of Language Development (1965) and Scarborough's rope (2002)



has the potential to improve literacy instruction for all students. While it is easy to write about this topic, teaching to the needs of the variety of students that one finds in today's classrooms presents a difficult challenge. Children who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), may need instruction in understanding and using the five parameters of language as they relate to Standard American English (i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics).

The key for educators is to first have a knowledge base of these six big ideas; if we never address oral language, we are doing a disservice to those students who require instruction in that area.

Secondly, a knowledge base is not enough.

Educators need explicit, systematic, research-based strategies and routines to be effective in teaching their students using these six big ideas. Several literacy experts have shown that differences in teacher knowledge about reading can lead to differences in student development of reading and writing skills (McCutchen, Abbott, Green, Beretvas, Cox, Potter, Quiroga, & Gray, 2002; Moats, & Foorman, 2003). Specifically, Moats (1994) showed that even veteran teachers had limited knowledge about the structure of spoken and written language. Moats

pointed out that just because teachers can read and spell does not mean that they these same teachers possess explicit knowledge of phonemes. The point is that teacher educators and teachers could be more effective in teaching all students if their knowledge base about the structure of the English language was increased. We are not advocating that every school aged child be explicitly taught this structure as it is clear that a majority of

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K-12 students do develop literacy skills without some of this direct and explicit instruction. However, if our goal is to increase the percentage of students who are literate by the end of third grade, we would suggest, as Moats (1994) did, that both teacher educators and K-12 teachers increase their knowledge of the structure of the oral and written language. It is difficult to teach what one does not know.

Recommendations for the Classroom

Oral language is the system through which we understand and use spoken words. Oral language can be broken down into five areas: phonology (the study of sounds; /p/, /th/), morphology (the study of meaning units; pre-, -ing, slip), syntax (rules that govern word

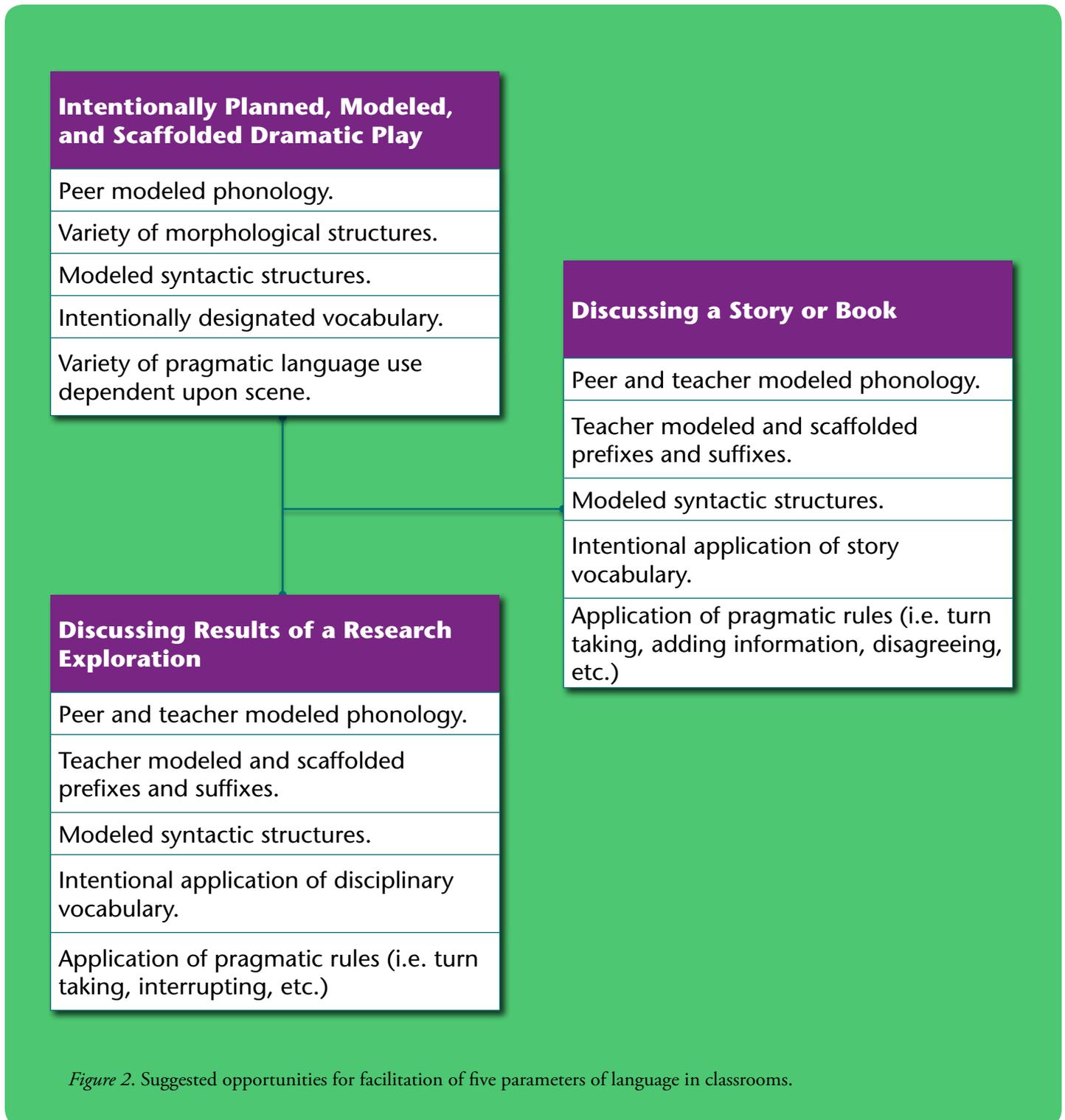


Figure 2. Suggested opportunities for facilitation of five parameters of language in classrooms.

order in language; S+V+O), semantics (vocabulary), and pragmatics (rules that govern supralinguistic interaction, or social interaction). To begin, educators need an awareness and understanding of the different parts of oral language. Once an understanding is reached, there are many different strategies, methods, and tools available for addressing all five areas. The most efficient way to address oral language in the classroom is through intentional talk.



Teachers can act as facilitators of child and adolescent language by creating opportunities in the classroom for certain types of language to occur (see Figure 2).

In sum, teachers can facilitate oral language development in the classroom by allowing students to talk and express themselves.

Language develops through interaction and use. Children need to learn how to understand and use language so that they may use it as a foundation to support and advance their literacy skills.

Phonological Awareness is the awareness that words are made up of sounds.

This skill involves the ability to detect and produce rhyme, isolate the segments and sounds in an orally dictated word, blend orally presented individual segments and sounds to pronounce a word, to segment or separate sounds in an orally dictated word, and to delete sounds in different positions from orally dictated words.

Detect Rhyme: “Which two words rhyme?” Rug, Bat, Mug

Produce Rhyme: “Tell me a word that rhymes with bat.”

First Sound: “Tell me the first sound in the cap, chin, rat, etc.”

Blending: “Put the following sounds together to pronounce a whole word. /p/ /a/ /t/.”

Segmenting: “Say the sounds in this word. sat, ship, blue, etc.”

Deleting: “Say the word bake, now say it again, but don’t say /b/. Say the word tease, now say it again but don’t say /z/.”

Please note that the above examples of phonological/phonemic awareness tasks are assessment items. Teachers need to describe and model these activities for the students who are not independently successful.

Phonics is the visual representation of sound. There are many programs that teachers may use to teach the alphabetic phonetic principles of English. Some programs are classified as synthetic approaches and others are classified as analytic. The synthetic approaches to

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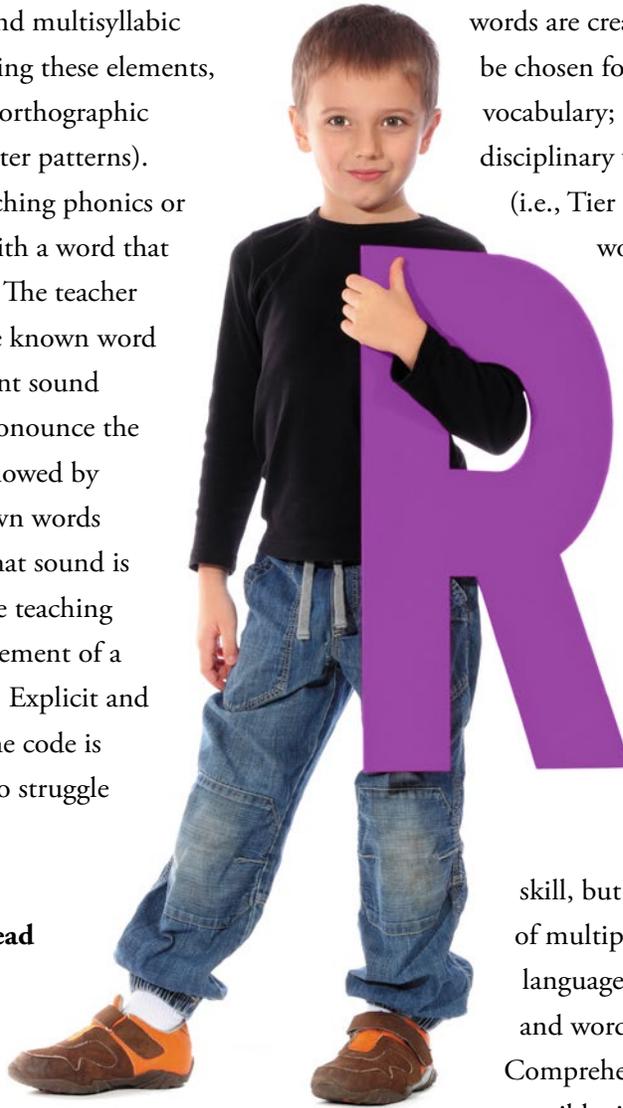
teaching phonics begin with instruction in letter-sound or grapheme-phoneme relationships. Elements included in synthetic programs include, consonant sounds, onsets

and rimes, syllable types, and multisyllabic word analysis. When teaching these elements, teachers should emphasize orthographic patterns (i.e., vowel and letter patterns). Analytic approaches to teaching phonics or decoding typically begin with a word that the student already knows. The teacher then isolates a sound in the known word such as a vowel or consonant sound and asks that student to pronounce the new word. This may be followed by pronouncing other unknown words and asking the student if that sound is heard in the new word. The teaching of phonics is an essential element of a balanced literacy approach. Explicit and systematic instruction in the code is imperative for students who struggle in learning to read.

Fluency is the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression.

Fluency is an indicator of comprehension. As illustrated by Scarborough (2002), addressing linguistic components in combination with components of word recognition will lead to comprehension as observed through fluent reading. Wide and varied reading experiences and repeated reading can increase fluency discretely, but the ultimate goal of reading is to create meaning; therefore, the components of word reading and language comprehension (Scarborough, 2002) should carry more weight in the effort to increase fluent reading.

Vocabulary is the knowledge of the meaning of words and concepts across contexts. To deepen teacher-knowledge regarding vocabulary learning, we recommend the work of Nagy & Scott (2000) as well as the work of Pearson (2014). Instructional guidance can be gleaned from Beck, McKeown, & Kucan's (2013) work. They suggest using student friendly definitions, and that not all



words are created equally. Specific vocabulary should be chosen for instruction based on the utility of the vocabulary; the most frequently appearing cross-disciplinary words should be chosen for instruction (i.e., Tier 2 words such as energy). To learn Tier 2 words, students need many exposures to each word in multiple contexts and time to assimilate these words into their long-term memory. It is important to note that vocabulary instruction can and should begin before children are readers. Vocabulary development and instruction begins at the oral language level, as previously noted.

Comprehension is the ability of an individual to discern meaning from text and is the purpose of reading.

Teaching comprehension is extremely difficult in part because it is not a skill, but a process that involves the application of multiple skills and strategies. All levels of oral language combined with phonological awareness and word reading are involved in comprehension. Comprehension instruction should begin as early as possible; instruction does not have to wait until students become fluent decoders. Comprehension

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instruction should be purposeful and strategic in that teachers should explicitly describe and model their own mental processes for students. Discussion is also a key element in comprehension instruction. Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984), Paraphrasing Strategy (Schumaker, Denton, & Deschler, 1984), Strategies for Interactive Reading (Buehl, 2009), Text Based Discussions (Kucan & Palinscar, 2013), Multimedia Text Sets (Strop & Carlson, 2010), and use of graphic organizers to support text interaction and discussion are all examples of effective instructional methods and strategies for teaching comprehension,

Conclusion

This article alone cannot provide the knowledge that educators need in order to integrate, teach, and facilitate all aspects of the six big ideas of reading. It is our hope that teacher educators and educators become inspired to develop their knowledge of oral language development as well as continue to develop knowledge in the other five areas of reading. When educators at all levels have a secure knowledge base of the structures of oral and written language as well as the tools and strategies for instruction, reading achievement for all students should increase.

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