

Early literacy instruction around the world

Blog

Literacy and reading

“Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

(Frederick Douglass)

This quote rings true—reading and writing are the fundamental skills that unlock so many other forms of independent learning. A great deal is already known about literacy acquisition in developed countries. But do the same lessons hold true in developing countries, and are we doing an effective. These were the questions addressed in our recent report published by USAID and the Global Reading Network, The [Landscape Report of Early Grade Literacy](#) (Kim, Boyle, Zuilkowski, and Nakamura, 2016).

Early grade literacy has received tremendous attention in the context of developing countries in the last decade. Many exciting and innovative projects have reached millions of children, families, and communities around the world. The main goal of the Landscape Report was to review available evidence from these projects, make evidence-based recommendations, and identify gaps and future directions. We screened and reviewed numerous documents and reports on student-level factors, the home environment, instructional approaches, and system-level factors that influence literacy acquisition.

What does it take to develop reading and writing skills?

Learning to read and write is not as simple as it might appear. In fact, literacy acquisition involves complex sets of processes involving language, thinking (cognition), and socio-emotional regulation. On a broad stroke, learning to read requires two necessary skills: word reading/decoding and listening comprehension.

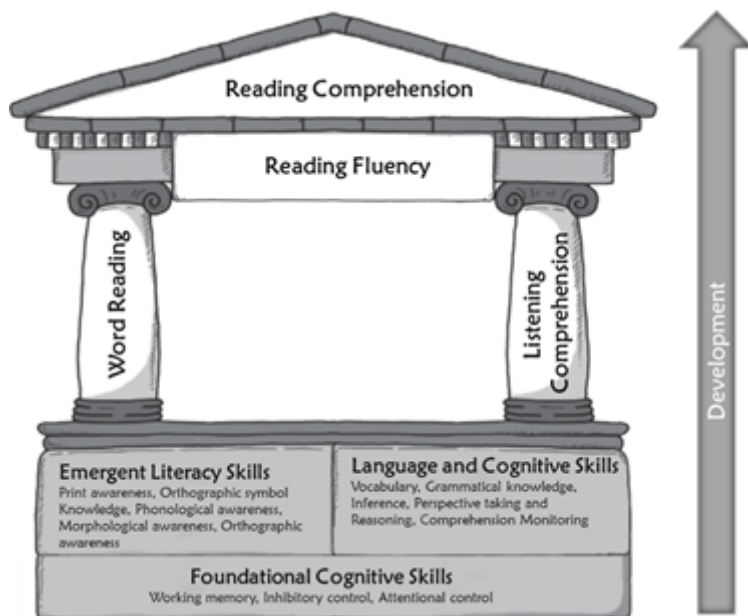


Figure 1: Essential component skills of reading comprehension, Kim, 2016, printed with permission (please do not copy or reproduce without express permission from the author)

In other words, children need to be able to read or decode words in print and comprehend the words they have read. Complexity arises from the fact that developing each of these abilities depends on many underlying skills.

For word reading, children need to develop knowledge of letter sounds and allowed letter sequences, as well as the ability to manipulate speech sounds (phonological awareness) and small meaning units (morphological awareness). Listening comprehension, also called oral language development, is even more complex. It draws on foundational cognitive skills such as working memory and attentional control; foundational oral language skills such as vocabulary and grammatical knowledge; and higher-order cognitive skills such as making inferences, understanding others' perspectives, and monitoring one's comprehension.

Teaching reading and writing also requires simultaneous consideration of other foundational aspects. These include securing instructional time for literacy, establishing effective instructional routines, developing instructional materials and assessments, and utilizing ICTs (information and communication technologies) effectively as teaching and learning tools.

All of these fundamental skills, and all of these foundational conditions must be met in order for learners to acquire reading and writing abilities. But to what extent do these best practices transfer to developing country contexts?

The findings of the landscape review

Our review revealed great strides made in many of these aspects, but large gaps still exist. In studies that have been conducted in developing countries, there is strong evidence about how to improve word reading and moderate evidence about how to improve reading fluency. Explicit instruction on phonics (teaching letter-sound correspondences and sound structures) consistently improved children's word reading and reading fluency, and the size of improvement was impressive in many contexts.

In contrast, evidence is limited and less clear about how to promote the development of oral language and reading comprehension. Many projects we reviewed included instruction on vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction. However, their effect was largely inconsistent across projects and contexts. Moreover, there is virtually no evidence about writing development and instruction in developing countries.

Our recommendations for future work include greater explicit and systematic attention to oral language, reading comprehension, and writing. The ultimate goals of literacy acquisition, after all, are skilled reading comprehension and effective communication through writing.

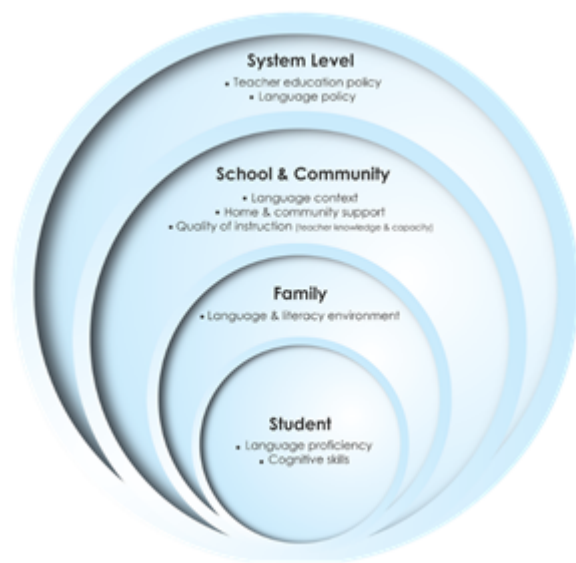
Particular lessons for multilingual contexts

Oral language proficiency is a complex and highly important matter, particularly in multilingual contexts. Millions of children in developing countries acquire literacy in more than one language and/or in an unfamiliar language. Learning in a language a child does not understand adds even more difficulties to an already challenging task of literacy acquisition. In contrast to the widely-held belief that instruction in the mother tongue (L1) is unfavorable for the second language (L2) acquisition, the evidence is clear that ensuring language and literacy in a familiar language (L1) promotes language and literacy acquisition in subsequent languages (L2, L3, L4, etc.).

Our recommendations for successful literacy acquisition in multilingual contexts include: (1) providing quality instruction in a language most familiar to the child; (2) bridging into an L2 by building L2 oral language proficiency; (3) creating curricula, standards, assessments, and instructional methods that reflect the language systems; and (4) building teachers' language proficiency in the language of instruction.

It takes more than a village to promote literacy acquisition

One of the things I emphasize to pre-service and in-service teachers is that it takes a village to promote successful literacy acquisition. But the truth is that successful literacy acquisition requires more than a village. As the diagram below shows, literacy acquisition requires engaged children; home and community environments that promote language and literacy; competent teachers; schools with resources; and local and national policies aligned with real on-the-ground needs.



Opportunities and challenges at these multiple levels are many and critical, particularly for the sustainability of literacy development initiatives. Our review addresses some of these key issues and challenges. More details can be found in the [Landscape Report](#).

Bookmark this

[View PDF](#)