

Montana ELA Standards Revision: Brief 3

Stages of Emergent Literacy and Language Development

April 2024

Introduction

For the third of five briefs, REL Northwest summarized research and common theoretical frameworks to respond to the following question: *What are the stages of emergent literacy and language skill development?*

The set of briefs aims to provide the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) with relevant research to help their English Language Arts (ELA) standards development team generate actionable, evidence-based state standards that will form the foundation for literacy instruction.

The brief is organized into three sections:

1. Overview of emergent literacy
2. Emergent literacy components and their progression
3. Evidence-based practices that support the development of emergent literacy skills

Throughout the brief, REL Northwest has defined key terms to establish shared understandings of relevant concepts and has embedded guided questions that prompt the reader to pause, reflect on what was read, and consider how the information presented can be used to inform the standards revision process.

As sources for evidence, this brief draws upon

- **Institute of Education Sciences (IES) practice guides** developed by the U.S. Department of Education to synthesize hundreds of individual studies and translate the available rigorous research evidence over the past few decades into actionable recommendations for practitioners;
- **IES fact sheets** developed by REL Northwest that summarize large meta-analyses of emergent literacy research curated by federally funded sources such as the Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, the Center for Early Literacy Learning, and the What Works Clearinghouse; and
- **individual peer-reviewed research studies and research reviews** on underlying theoretical frameworks, extensions and considerations for reading instruction, and additional evidence identified by subject matter experts or included in other briefs within this series.

Overview of emergent literacy

This section defines emergent literacy and outlines theoretical perspectives that can be used to understand children’s development within this earliest stage of literacy development. It pulls from a variety of commonly cited seminal articles on emergent literacy, identified by subject matter experts, that provide theoretical support around phases of literacy development.

Understanding emergent literacy

Emergent literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of learners that develop before—but are related to—conventional reading and writing (McNaughton, 1995; Reese et al., 2003; Rhyner et al., 2009; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children’s literacy development

exists on a continuum, with emergent literacy being the starting point (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Although emergent literacy is generally understood as developing within the first five years of life for typically developing children, there is considerable variation in the age and sequence of acquisition of emergent literacy knowledge and skills over this time period (Rhyner et al., 2009).

Theoretical models of reading development refer to the emergent literacy stage in different ways. For example, Chall (1983) refers to the start of reading development as the “pre-reading stage” in which learners develop basic language skills, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary through exposure to spoken language. Furthermore, Ehri (2005) divides emergent literacy into a series of pre-, partial-, and full-alphabetic phases that emphasize the gradual development of phonemic awareness, letter-sound relationships, and word recognition skills. Despite different typologies, the common thread among models is the premise that learners simultaneously develop oral and writing language skills as they learn about the functions and forms of literacy through active exploration of language through print that is often scaffolded and modeled by adults (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Emergent literacy is considered the first stage of literacy development; however, there are no definitive endpoints between emergent, early, and conventional literacy, and there is variability in the rate at which learners develop emergent literacy skills (Justice, 2006; Rhyner et al., 2009). Learners likely begin developing literacy skills from birth, and typically developing learners tend to remain in the emergent literacy stage until age 5 (Justice, 2006; Rhyner et al., 2009; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Perspectives on emergent literacy

There are three main categories of perspectives on the emergent literacy stage: developmental perspectives, components perspectives, and child and environmental influences perspectives.

- **Developmental perspectives** describe changes in a learner’s conceptual knowledge about literacy and emergent skills and highlight a hierarchy of skills in which learners first recognize different forms of print, then learn that print carries meaning, and then learn how to join what they know about the form and function of print to manipulate it (e.g., turning pages of a book, following words on a page, decoding texts, retelling stories using a book; Goodman, 1986; McCormick & Mason, 1986; Rhyner et al., 2009; Strommen & Mates, 2000).
- **Component perspectives** identify specific knowledge and skills and how those skills reinforce one another. For example, one theoretical model separates print-related skills (e.g., print concepts, emergent writing, alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness) and oral language skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge) and emphasizes the reciprocal effects of each set of skills during the emergent literacy phase (Rhyner et al., 2009; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Another theoretical model stresses distinct but interrelated skills that involve context, meaning, orthographic, and phonological processing (van Kleeck, 1998; 2003).
- **Child and environment influences perspectives** highlight that emergent literacy must take into account the influence of child-level factors (e.g., language proficiency, interest in literacy, attention) and situation-level factors (e.g., access to literacy materials and experiences, quality and type of adult-child relationships) on learners’ literacy development (McNaughton, 1995; Rhyner et al., 2009; Wasik & Hendrickson, 2004).

Pause and reflect

How does the emergent literacy stage inform your understanding of reading development?

Emergent literacy components and their progression

This section describes the developmental progression of five emergent literacy components that lay the foundation for later literacy development and contribute to school success (REL Northwest, 2023a; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Emergent literacy skills: At a glance

- Background knowledge
- Oral language and vocabulary
- Book knowledge and print concepts
- Alphabet knowledge and early writing
- Phonological awareness

This section is primarily informed by two recent IES fact sheets developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest entitled *Programs and Practices for Supporting Early Cognitive, Language, and Literacy Development Among Children Ages 0–3* (Regional Educational Laboratory [REL] Northwest, 2023a), which summarizes 22 research-based resources on emergent literacy development; and *Resources to Support Best Practices for Literacy in Preschool through Grade 3* (Regional Educational Laboratory [REL] Northwest, 2023b), which includes 7 separate research-based resources on emergent literacy development. It also includes information from peer-reviewed articles and seminal reports identified by subject matter experts that provide theoretical support and practical considerations around literacy development.

Background knowledge

Background knowledge refers to the information that learners store into memory—including information about themselves, other people, objects, and the world around them (NCECDTL, n.d.-b). Background knowledge is important for literacy development because it helps learners build upon what they know to comprehend new information that they hear or read (Neuman et al., 2014).

The development of background knowledge begins in infancy as learners build what have been called “funds of knowledge” as they observe and interact with the world around them (Moll et al., 1992). Information can be built from the beliefs, values, rules, and expectations in learner’s families, cultures, environments, and languages, as well as knowledge gained through personal experiences, second-hand experiences, movies, TV shows, podcasts, books, or other mediums (Gee, 2017; Moll et al., 1992). In the years prior to formal schooling, adults guide the development of background knowledge by modeling, explaining, reading, and planning intentional interactions for learners (NCECDTL, n.d.-b). As learners enter school, they continuously draw on their background knowledge to recognize words, understand what they read, share what they know, engage in learning new things, and integrate what they have learned into their ever-expanding fund of background knowledge (Neuman et al., 2014).

⇒ To learn more about the development of content-specific literacy, see Brief 5, entitled *Disciplinary Literacy Processes and Procedures*, within this series.

Oral language and vocabulary

Oral language includes learners’ spoken language knowledge and skill—both speaking (or expressive language skills) and listening (or receptive language skills; NCECDTL, n.d.-d). Infants and toddlers develop receptive language—even before they can express it themselves—by listening and observing the contexts in which specific words are being used. Infants and toddlers also begin making their own sounds, signs, words, phrases, and sentences to communicate their needs, feelings, and interests (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2012).

The development of oral language leads to the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar, which is important in the concept of emergent literacy because learning new words, their meanings, and usage in context helps learners understand new information (Harris et al., 2011; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005).

As learners grow, they produce increasingly longer, more complex speech and continue building and using new vocabulary, which contributes to skills with listening and reading comprehension (Lonigan et al., 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000). Not all learners develop oral language skills in the same way, with some showing slow, steady development and others experiencing developmental spurts in which they experience rapid growth. Furthermore, some learners are more inclined to share what they know, while others may share less (National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, n.d.).

Pause and reflect

How might the development of background knowledge, oral language, and vocabulary contribute to later disciplinary literacy?

Book knowledge and print concepts

Book knowledge involves understanding how books work (e.g., turning pages, reading from left to right), while print concepts refer to understanding how print works (e.g., that print is speech written down; NCECDTL, n.d.-c). Helping learners engage with print and learn about its forms and functions through shared reading and book handling (e.g., pointing out the differences between print and pictures, demonstrating directionality of words on the page, sharing books with different purposes) can facilitate transitions into reading and writing (Justice & Piasta, 2011; NCECDTL, n.d.-c; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013).

In infancy and toddlerhood, learners observe how written language is used in the environment (e.g., seeing letters on a street sign) and attend to books that interest them. As learners grow, they pay more attention to print, recognize that print carries meaning, understand that print produces the same meaning over multiple readings, pretend to read, and ask and answer questions about books that are read to them. By elementary school, learners use what they know about books and print concepts to enjoy print and motivate reading (NCECDTL, n.d.-c).

Alphabet knowledge and early writing

Alphabet knowledge involves recognizing, naming, and identifying the sounds of letters, and early writing involves mark making, scribbling, and drawing to represent meaning (i.e., concepts, words, sounds, letters). Alphabet knowledge and early writing are important aspects of emergent literacy because these skills help learners understand how written language works, solidify the connection between print and language, and provide a way to communicate and express ideas (NCECDTL, n.d.-a).

In infancy and toddlerhood, learners may explore writing tools and practice making marks on surfaces. As learners grow, they become more readily able to recognize meaningful letters like those in their names, learn more letters, and couple letters with the sounds they make (NCECDTL, n.d.-a).

They may also practice writing through scribbling, with writing looking more like conventional writing (i.e., with words and letters) over time. As learners progress through elementary school, they use alphabet knowledge to read, to continue developing conventional writing, and to see themselves as emerging writers (Zurcher & Stefanski, 2022).

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness focuses on the sounds of letters and words that learners hear versus the written symbols they see. Phonological awareness skills include the ability to hear, identify, make, and work with the sounds and sound patterns of spoken language (NCECDTL, n.d.-e). Phonological awareness skills are essential emergent literacy because they allow learners to be able to move from spoken word to written word and vice versa. These skills then set the stage for decoding, blending, and, ultimately, for word reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Infants and toddlers develop phonological awareness by listening to and imitating the sounds they hear. As learners grow, they begin recognizing and playing with alliteration, rhymes, syllables, and individual sounds. Through elementary school, learners use phonological awareness to decode new words that aid in learning how to read and how to read fluently.

Pause and reflect

How does family, school, and community impact literacy development?

Evidence-based practices that support the development of emergent literacy skills

This section is a synthesis of evidence-based instructional practices for supporting the development of emergent literacy skills, both prior to the start of kindergarten and during early elementary school (i.e., kindergarten through grade 3).

This section primarily pulls from three IES practice guides: *Preparing Young Children for School* (Burchinal et al., 2022), which provides recommendations based on 49 causal studies focused on instructional practices, including language and literacy, for children in preschool (i.e., schooling that takes place in the year or two before children enter kindergarten); *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade* (Foorman et al., 2016) which includes recommendations based on 56 causal studies on instructional practices for supporting foundational skills development in kindergarten through grade 3; and *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014) which includes 15 causal studies on instructional practices for supporting English Learners' literacy development.

Where appropriate, additional resources identified in IES fact sheets and by subject matter experts provide additional nuance when developing learners' emergent literacy skills in different contexts.

Supporting emergent literacy skills development prior to kindergarten

Several practices support emergent literacy skills **prior to the start of formal schooling**, whether in preschool or home settings. Broadly, these practices demonstrate the importance of planning intentional and engaging instruction and/or activities, providing ample opportunities for interaction and conversation, and supporting learners' backgrounds and experiences.

Families and practitioners can support emergent literacy skill development in a variety of ways:

- **Intentionally plan activities to build learners' vocabulary and language** by focusing on three to five vocabulary words per week, introducing new words and their meanings, giving learners opportunities to practice using new vocabulary, and having conversations

with learners to reinforce or solidify understanding of vocabulary words (Burchinal et al., 2022).

- **Build learners’ knowledge of letters and sounds** by initially focusing on listening for sounds in words, intentionally introducing new letters and their sounds, using materials that allow learners to practice identifying letters and their corresponding sounds, and creating print-rich environments and opportunities to discuss letters and sounds (Burchinal et al., 2022).
- **Use shared book reading to develop learners’ oral language and vocabulary, print concepts, and background knowledge** by selecting a variety of developmentally appropriate informational and narrative books that reflect learners’ interests or experiences (e.g., going to the dentist), rereading the same book for different reasons (e.g., looking for rhyming words, recalling a story, describing settings), discussing content of a book before reading it aloud, and planning activities related to what was read (Burchinal et al., 2022).
- **Affirm and reflect cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds of learners** by providing learning materials (e.g., books, toys, songs) and planned reading and writing activities that celebrate diverse student experiences, encourage positive self-identity, and support multiliteracy (Burchinal et al., 2022; Rowe, 2022; Salmerón, 2022). Support for multiliterate learners may include exploring and making cross-language connections, providing access to a variety of interesting and high-quality multiliterate texts, and facilitating opportunities to function in multiple languages and/or writing systems (Morrell & Lopez, 2020).

Pause and reflect

How can these practices be reinforced and supported among families and practitioners?

Supporting emergent literacy skills development from kindergarten through grade 3

Emergent literacy skills continue to develop as learners move through elementary school. In addition to the practices listed above, additional foundational skills instruction during **kindergarten through grade 3** aim to further develop emergent literacy and conventional literacy skills so that learners become stronger, more fluent readers. Broadly speaking, foundational skills instruction during this time period should be explicit, sequential, scheduled, and should support skill building (Foorman et al., 2016). Suggested practices are listed below:

- **Teach academic language skills and vocabulary knowledge** by engaging students in conversations that support the use and comprehension of inferential language, explicitly engaging students in developing narrative language skills, and teaching academic vocabulary in the context of other reading activities (Foorman et al., 2016).
- **Develop awareness of segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters** by teaching learners how to recognize and manipulate segments of sound in speech, teaching learners letter-sound relations, and using word-building activities to link learners’ knowledge of letter-sound relationships with phonemic awareness (Foorman et al., 2016).

- **Teach how to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words** by teaching learners to blend letter sounds and sound-spelling patterns from left to right within a word to produce recognizable pronunciation, instructing learners in common sound-spelling patterns; teaching learners to recognize common word parts, having learners read decodable words in isolation and in text, teaching regular and irregular high-frequency words, and introducing nondecodable words that are essential to the meaning of the text as whole words (Foorman et al., 2016).
- **Provide opportunities for learners to read connecting texts every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension** by providing opportunities for oral reading practice; modeling, scaffolding, and providing feedback to students as they read orally; and teaching students to self-monitor their understanding of the text and self-correct word-reading errors (Foorman et al., 2016).

Academic language refers to the words and formal communication structure that are common in books and at school (Foorman et al., 2016). These include

- **inferential language skills**, or being able to articulate ideas beyond the immediate context (e.g., asking and answering “why” and “how” questions),
- **narrative language skills**, or being able to recount or describe a series of events (both fictional and nonfictional), and
- **academic vocabulary skills**, or being able to use and understand academic vocabulary (e.g., contrast, compare, predict, summarize).

Pause and reflect

How does the focus of emergent literacy skills development differ as children progress through elementary school?

Considerations for emergent multiliteracy skills development

Learners develop emergent literacy skills in all the languages to which they are exposed, and—with support—can transfer skills developed in one language to another (NCECDTL, n.d.-d). In order to support multiliterate learners, it is important to understand how the languages within learners’ linguistic repertoires may differ from English. For example, some languages may have pictorial versus letter-based writing systems, some may have different sound systems (e.g., Spanish includes a trilled “r” sound that does not exist in English), and some may have different reading conventions (e.g., reading text from left to right as opposed to right to left) and expectations around how and when learners communicate (e.g., prioritizing oral as opposed to written language; NCECDTL, n.d.-c; NCECDTL, n.d.-d; NCECDTL, n.d.-e). Although languages and their structures may differ, there are many strategies that can help learners develop emergent literacy skills across different languages. Below are some sample strategies:

- **Provide language-rich experiences** such as exposure to speech and conversations in multiple languages, exposure to print written in different languages or writing systems in which children are exposed to new vocabulary, writing conventions, and sounds (NCECDTL, n.d.-d);
- **Teach sets of vocabulary words extensively** across several days using a variety of instructional activities across multiple modalities (e.g., writing, speaking, listening) and using word-learning strategies (e.g., cognates) that help learners independently figure out the meaning of words (Baker et al., 2014)

- **Plan regular, structured opportunities for students to develop oral and written language skills** while also providing language-based supports to facilitate students' entry into and development of writing and positive, constructive feedback (Baker et al., 2014)
- **Provide small-group instructional intervention** in foundational skills, vocabulary development, and listening and reading instruction for learners struggling in literacy and English language development (Baker et al., 2014)

Pause and reflect

How are practices for supporting multiliteracy skills development similar to those for supporting all students? How are they different?

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