
TEACHING LISTENING, SPEAKING, READING AND WRITING: SEQUENTIAL OR SIMULTANEOUS?



Many teachers believe that children should be taught language sequentially – first, listening (L), then speaking (S), then reading (R), and finally, writing (W). When they are asked to teach all four of these simultaneously, they get confused and worried. Shouldn't young children be first made to listen and speak before they read and write? Shouldn't they first learn to read and then to write?

Studies on young children's language and literacy development tell us that children should be engaged simultaneously with the LSRW capabilities, because they are highly interconnected and inter-dependant. Most of all, they all draw upon the children's basic developmental capabilities as meaning-makers and symbol users (Dyson, 1990; Sulzby & Teale, 1988; Wells, 2009).

In the following exchange, a Facilitator (F) addresses the questions of a group of practicing teachers (P) about teaching LSRW simultaneously to young children.

F: How did we acquire our first language?

P: By listening to other people speaking in our environment.

F: OK, then, let's create an environment for 18 months where an infant is exposed to people who are speaking to each other. The child is made to listen to this from her birth till she reaches 18 months. The child is not allowed to make any sounds or noises, to utter any words. Will the child learn language?

P: No!

F: Why?

P: The child will automatically try to make the sounds of the language she hears around her! You cannot ask her to simply listen and not try to respond!

F: Yes, you're right. Only when a child responds in various ways can she make progress in her development. By remaining passive she will not learn or grow.

Let's talk about language development -- language is learnt in a context. When a child is learning a language, she is not just listening to words or spoken language, but is at the same time trying to make sense of each of the words and to relate them to her life and surroundings. She is trying to understand relationships, to observe and explore the objects around her, and to use all the senses to help her understand the world around. In doing this, she also simultaneously tries to "join in the conversations", that is, she tries to speak.

You must have seen children who are not yet speaking like older children/adults do, but are trying to communicate their needs to adults, are demanding, and so on. They communicate with others around them through gestures, smiles, crying, babbling, and so on. So, even when a child is not able to produce conventional 'language' her babbling and coos are her ways of seeking attention, communicating needs, or responding. When the child starts producing a few words, she is already conversing. Thus, not only listening and 'speaking' (expressing) but engaging with the people, objects and idea in her context, all go hand in hand.

The child assumes an active role in learning a language. So, when we say that children learn the language by listening, then it is undermining language learning as a complex cognitive activity; and also the efforts that a child puts in learning a language, which is a part of larger exploration and development. Thus, one cannot say that language is learnt only by listening.

We can understand this better when we understand that learning words involves understanding what these words mean. In other words, the child is developing concepts along with language.

Let me give you some examples.

Example 1: A 10-month old child calls both water and milk ‘mum’. The mother thinks that the child is asking for milk and starts pouring white liquid into the child’s bottle. The child immediately indicates by gesture that she does not want this ‘mum’ but the other one. The child points to water, the mother gives her water and says ‘paani (water)’. There are specific properties of water and milk which the child has already grasped. She also knows that at this moment she needs water and not milk. This requires observing, comparing, remembering the different experiences of these two liquids. Later, this child will produce the word paani for the colourless liquid, but conceptually, she has already understood that these are different in nature. Having said that, the concept of water continues to evolve with more experiences with it.

Example 2: When Vasu was nearly 2 years old, he started going to a day care. He called the caretaker there ‘naani’ (grandmother), may be because she was wearing a sari. At his day care, he was guided to call the care taker, ‘aunty’. At home, Vasu started calling his naani, ‘aunty’. It took some time for him to understand that every lady who wears a sari is not ‘naani’, and that his ‘naani’ is not ‘aunty’.

Imagine the kind of cognitive process Vasu would have gone through to figure this out. If it was a simple association, Vasu would not have shown this confusion. Learning to use words appropriately is a part of larger cognitive activity that a child undertakes. Grasping the words is just one step in overall exploration.

Example 3: After a child saw a flyover and learned its name, he kept thinking about it. Look at the flyover the child made later at home (see Figure 1)!



Figure 1

Thus, when children learn language, they are not just learning words and grammar. They think with and through their language and use language to learn about and relate to their world. Their active attempts at making sense of their world gets manifested in their talk, their questions, the roles they play, the games they imagine, the drawings and objects they make, the stories they hear or read or write, and so on.

Activity: *Observe children of 1 to 3 years of age and note your observations. Analyse these observations with respect to the process of language learning.*

F: Let us now think about language teaching in school. When do we say that a language taught in school is learnt by this child?

P: When that child is able to read, write, understand and converse in that language.

F: So, how do they learn this?

P: OK, you have convinced us that listening, speaking and thinking go hand in hand. But, we still believe that listening and speaking should precede reading and writing; and that writing should follow reading.

F: You are right that usually when a child learns a new language, some amount of listening and speaking do precede reading and writing. But, I will point out something. When children come to school, there are differences between children who have been raised in homes that are literate versus homes where there is no literacy – even though children from both kinds of homes have not yet learned to read or write.

P: Yes, there are big differences!

F: Yes, this is because children from literate homes have learned a lot about reading and writing already – even before they learn how to read and write *aksharas* and words! They have learned that print has uses in life, they have learned different ways in which the adults around them use print in their lives (e.g., to read newspaper, to read signs, to make lists, to fill forms, etc.). They have also learned many things about print – e.g., the direction in which it moves, how to read it to find meaning, and so on. So, even though we can't say that these children have learned to read and write conventionally, they have already begun learning to read and write – even as they're learning to speak and listen!

F: Now, let's look at how we teach reading in schools – how do you introduce children to reading and writing in schools?

P: For reading children should identify letters/*aksharas*, read words and sentences.

F: And, what is writing?

P: Once children know the letters/*aksharas*, they can write them down, then they will learn to write words, and then sentences. Hence, first they should recognise letters/*aksharas* and then write them.

F: What is the purpose of reading and writing?

P: Children should be able to understand what is written and also communicate their thoughts in writing.

F: How long do children take to learn the *varnamala*/ English alphabet? When do you start teaching children to write words? How?

P: For the first three months we help them to practice *varnamala*, then give simple words without *maatras*, then we give words with *maatras*, and then short sentences.

F: Do *aksharas* have any meaning?

P: No, but when children put the *aksharas* together to form words, they understand the meaning of those words.

F: We've discussed earlier that a child explores, experiments and tries all that he/she can do to make sense of the environment in which he/ she is.

Suddenly in schools, why should that child, who has been busy seeking and making meaning, work for three or four or six months on writing *aksharas* that do not have any meaning in themselves? Why should we make them wait for next several months before they can really find meaning in the words they read and write?

Activity: *Make a list of sentences that the child already uses in day-to-day life. How many words in these sentences are without maatras?*

In brief, the whole process of teaching language in a sequential manner of first letters/aksharas, then words and then sentences, undervalues the child's cognitive abilities. During this process, children may lose interest in pursuing writing as a meaningful process.

F: Now, let us look at the question that reading should precede writing. What are the reasons for your thinking that this should be so?

P: Once children start identifying aksharas and can read small words and sentences they can start writing.

F: Do children write before you teach them the aksharas?

P: No!! How can they write until they know the aksharas?

F: Have you seen children drawing and when you ask them what have they drawn, they tell you a long meaningful sequence of activities, descriptions or some story cooked up by them?

P: Yes, but that is not writing!

F: Why doesn't this qualify as writing?

P: Because children can read their drawings and scribbling, but later if they are asked to read the same picture, they may read it differently. This is called "drawing" and not writing.

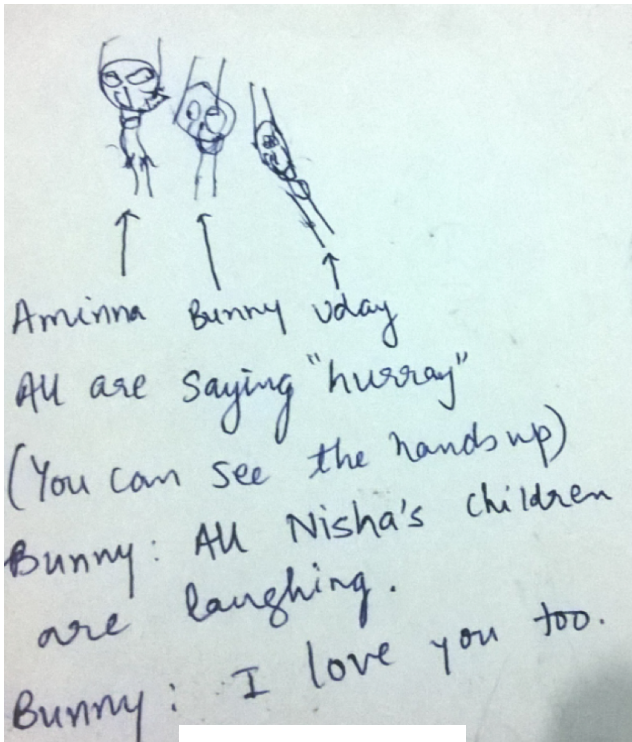


Figure 2

F: But, have you thought... what are they doing, when they are drawing pictures?

They are representing specific ideas in the form of pictures.

Look at this drawing made by a three year old (see Figure 2).

The child drew the three figures and said:

“The first one is Aminna, the second one is Bunny, and the third is Uday. All are saying Hurray! All Nisha’s children are laughing”.

The child has represented real world people and their happiness in the form of picture. This is called “symbolization”, where one thing stands for something else. For example, when a child draws a dog, the picture *represents* a real dog, but it is not the dog itself.

Let’s look at another drawing (see Figure 3). When asked about it, the child says that it is a dinosaur. The child has seen a dinosaur on TV. She has depicted that on the slate. Her depiction is not the dinosaur itself, it is a *representation* of a dinosaur she has seen on TV. The live dinosaur is being represented by a two dimensional picture on a slate. What aspects of this animal got her interested in it and how exactly she perceives it would be unique to her. Another child might represent it differently.

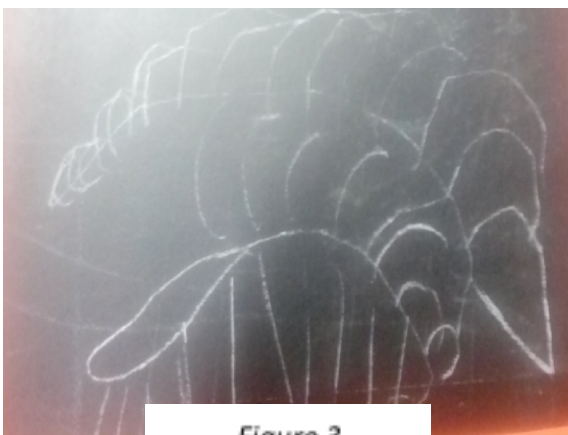


Figure 3

The next level of symbolization is when a child learns to use written letters instead of pictures, which we call learning to “read” and “write”. Unlike in drawings, different children can’t represent the same letters differently. All children have to learn to read and write symbols in the same way. Therefore, reading and writing use conventional symbol systems – systems that users of that script have agreed upon.

But, just like in drawing, reading and writing also involve the insight that symbols have meaning.

There are writing systems in the world which use logos (images) as a basic unit of writing rather than letters or *aksharas*.

As seen in Figure 4¹, a shape with two legs depicts person, two persons makes the word ‘follow’, three persons makes a word ‘crowd’, a person with arm stretched wide makes ‘big’ and a person in the mouth makes the word ‘prisoner’.



If we look at the *varn mala* (or the English alphabet) we notice that they are also composed of symbols. What do these symbols represent? They represent particular sounds in the oral language! When we see the symbol (*akshara*/letter), we know that it stands for a sound. We put these sounds together and we get words, which represent ideas from the world.

So, what is central in learning to speak, to draw, to read and to write, is that they all involve learning symbols. As a child learns language, she learns that symbols can be used to convey meaning.

What is very interesting is that educators who work with young children have noticed that when children first start reading and writing in preschools, they TALK a lot! They make gestures with their hands, they make sounds, they “act out” ideas – all the while trying to write or express an idea! They do not see drawing or writing as a separate independent way of making meaning, but they supplement this with their talk, gestures and so on. So, it seems like young children use all these symbol systems simultaneously – they don’t first listen, then speak, then read, and finally, write.

So, when it comes to listening, speaking, reading or writing, why should we teach them sequentially? We are often worried about children’s accuracy in writing, but moving from picture drawing/scribbling to conventional writing is a process of learning to symbolise. This process will take time and during the process there will be several phases in which pictures and conventional symbols will be mixed together...so it is important to give that time and space to children before we can expect them to produce accurate spellings.

Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bruceupbin/2013/04/25/learn-to-read-chinese-in-eight-minutes/#175ed4b31795>

To help young children master the process of symbolization, we must create spaces in our classrooms where children can participate in all four activities – listening, speaking, reading and writing simultaneously – and we should also permit them to talk, draw, enact. This is what we want young children to learn about language:

- ¥ What I can think about, I can talk about.
- ¥ What I can talk about, I can write.
- ¥ What I write, I can read.
- ¥ I can read what I write, and I can read what other people write.
- ¥ What we write and read, we can talk about.
- ¥ What we talk about, I can think about.

References

- Dyson, A. H. (1990). Symbol makers, symbol weavers: How children link play, pictures and print. *Young Children*, 45 (2), 50-57.
- Sulzby, E., & Teale, W. H. (Eds.). (1988). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*. Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Wells, G. (2009). *The meaning makers: Learning to talk and talking to learn*. Salisbury, UK: MPG Books.

Written By:

Nisha Butoliya
Shailaja Menon

Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, May 2017.