EMERGENT LITERACY, MULTILINGUALISM AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD)

Position paper prepared for the Education Sub-Committee of the Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG)

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1. Introduction

In South Africa many children grow up without a sufficient grasp of reading and writing in any language for literacy to become useful in their lives.
The 1992 **NEPI Early Childhood Educare** report states that between 25% and 35% of coloured and African children drop out of or repeat Sub A.
In **Falling at the First Hurdle**, Nick Taylor says: "....almost one - quarter of African children who enter the first grade (SSA) do not reach the second grade (SSB) the following year. Many of these children disappear from the formal schooling system altogether at this stage" (Taylor 1989:1).

This survival rate has not changed substantially in 32 years. It is lowest among African children, survival rates for 'coloured' children are lower than those for 'white' and "Asian" children. Children who fail a grade either drop-out or repeat a grade.

The reasons for this are many and complex but it is widely believed that an important factor is that most children have not had access to any early childhood education which is seen to prepare them for the formal education they will receive at primary school. This view is reflected in the CEPD World Bank Executive Summary of the **South African Study on Early Childhood Development** report: "It is widely agreed that one cause of repetition in the primary school years is inadequate preparation of children at school entry" (April 1994).
The **NEPI Early Childhood Educare** report cites two sets of factors which contribute to poor educational performance. The one set relates to issues such as overcrowded classes, lack of resources, poor teacher training, while the other "relates to the readiness of children for school and for life" (NEPI 1992: 3).
Up to now between 9% and 11% of children below age 6 have access to ECD[1] provision (Department of Education **Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development** . February 1996).

[1]Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the terminology which replaces Educare (ECE). While ECE referred to children below formal school age (birth to 6), ECD follows international trends
and refers to the phase from birth to 9, thus establishing continuity between non-formal and formal education and between preschool and primary school.

In many countries, improved access to early childhood education has not led automatically to a satisfactory fall in drop - out and repeat rates. Some countries have begun to pay attention to teaching approaches to literacy in the early years, and it is acknowledged that there is often a great need for change. In India, for instance, Krishna Kumar argues that one of the reasons that elimination rates in India remain so high, is that *the school pedagogy fails to enable children to become literate* (1993:105). The essentially meaningless way that children are expected to learn literacy, Kumar believes, while not negating the negative effects of poverty on learning, may contribute substantially towards the problem.

In reference to the situation in Latin America, Emelia Ferreiro says:

" During the past fifteen years, a series of research studies has begun to show that the socio-economic factors are not the only ones to contribute to the failure of initial literacy acquisition. It is also necessary to look at what goes on within schools to unveil the institutional mechanisms and conceptual frameworks which prevent children's access to the written word" (Ferreiro 1993: 42).

She describes how
"...traditional school practices reduce the child to someone who is not able to think and who can only receive, associate, and repeat. It also reduces the object of the learning process - the writing system - to a school object, divorced from its social purposes and functions" [1992:149].

While greater access to pre-school ECD is essential, without changes to the way literacy is approached in early childhood, it is very likely that in South Africa we might find that the improvements are not as substantial as we would like them to be.
We need to be clear about how ECD actually can best fulfill it's role in enabling children's literacy to develop. Hand in hand with this, we need to decide in which ways to develop the biliteracy and multiliteracy potential which is inherent in our society.

2. Present and Impending Language and ECD Policy

The Department of Education **Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development,** February 1996 makes provision for a reception year for all 5 and 6 year old children, although actual implementation will be slow due to lack of funds.

The Discussion Document of the Department of Education, **Towards A Language Policy In Education**, November 1995, proposes an education policy based on the principles of additive bilingualism. Unfortunately it omits language policy for the reception year and below in the ECD phase. Policy for literacy at any stage of education is absent.
The ECD document includes a paragraph from the Language Policy In Education Discussion Document, (November 1995) to the effect that each primary school should offer at least 2 languages of instruction from Grade 1. Further to this, it says that the language policy for ECD is yet to be specified.

These omissions highlight starkly the need to move into a phase of relevant language/literacy exploration in order to establish a sound framework for progress in the future.

3. Current Approaches to Literacy In ECD

Initial literacy teaching has long been viewed as a central responsibility of formal schooling. Many different teaching methodologies have developed, with different aspects of the literacy learning process being stressed by the various methodologies. Underlying the methods promoted by teacher educators in South Africa and used by many primary teachers, is an understanding of literacy as a set of largely mechanical skills, which are somehow separate from the socio-political, cultural and linguistic contexts in which we live. It is believed that these skills must be carefully selected and taught before reading and writing can actually be used for real reasons. Children have generally been taught to read using graded readers which involve restricted language, and there has been an emphasis on phonics and on developing decoding skills. With writing, there is an emphasis on small muscular co-ordination, letter formation and the development of neat handwriting.
Wendy Flanagan describes this behaviourist approach by saying that

"Teachers who hold this view believe that there are major skills in reading and that each of these major skills can be broken down into sub-skills. Some of these skills are more difficult than others and so children are taught the skills in a particular order" (Flanagan 1995: 14).

Very generally, early childhood education in South Africa follows a child-centred, informal approach, with emphasis on active learning through play. The view has long been held that pre-school ECD[2] is not the place for formal learning, so in most early childhood environments, written language has been excluded from the curriculum.

However, as already mentioned, the role of pre-school ECD is seen to be one which prepares children for school, and in the year before Grade 1 (now the reception year) teachers do 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' exercises with the children which develop skills thought to be the necessary precursors to formal reading and writing instruction[3]. These include visual and auditory discrimination, visual and auditory memory, rhyming, letter recognition, visual matching, developing listening skills and recognising sound letter correspondence. Writing readiness involves pre-writing skills such as tracing over existing shapes, copying, doing patterns, colouring in etc.

In South Africa, pre-school ECD has a history of deep commitment to parent and community involvement. Both parents and pre-school ECD teachers are deeply concerned about young children's literacy development. Generally they accept the view passed down from formal schooling that reading and writing initially involves learning skills which junior primary teachers will teach to children when they are 'ready'. Quite some time of the beginning of Grade 1 is, in any case spent on reading and writing 'readiness' programmes.
The role of parents and pre-school ECD in this has thus generally been limited to two areas: Encouraging a love of stories and setting in place, the 'pre-reading ' and 'pre-writing' skills (**see Appendix A**).

4.Research Findings

[2] This document uses the term 'pre-school ECD' in reference to what used to be ECE, ie below Grade 1.

[3]Up to now there has not been a specific set curriculum for pre-school ECD. However, the year before Grade 1, was known as the preschool year or preprimary year, and a significant part of that year was taken up with school readiness exercises. On entry to Grade1, children were (up to this year), tested for school readiness.

The notion that literacy is simply a set of skills has been challenged from many angles over the past 30 years. Research has come from different disciplines, such as anthropology, linguistics, sociology and education. These have brought various mutually benefitting perspectives which have contributed towards a significant shift both in theory and practice.

4.1.Whole Language

A whole language philosophy grew from research in America, Canada and Britain by theorists such as Frank Smith (1978) and Kenneth Goodman (1986) into language learning and teaching. Rather than emphasising differences, and thinking of written language as completely separate from oral language, recognition was given to their similarities and to how easy and 'natural' learning is out of school, and how fragmented and disempowering school learning is (**see Appendix B**) .
In the 'second language' field the failure of traditional methods to address high failure and dropout rates of minority students in America led educators to try a whole language perspective (Freeman & Freeman 1992).

Research into young children's spontaneous engagements with written language before school-going age led to many new insights about the literacy acquisition process. 'Emergent Literacy' is a term which has come to be used to describe becoming literate as a process which emerges as reading and writing are experienced by the individual in socially significant and personally meaningful ways. An emergent literacy perspective sees reading and writing as interrelated, developing together in everyday play and other activities as children come to realise that written language makes sense.
It recognises that young children often begin to develop understandings about literacy long before they enter school as they interact in their homes and community. Rather than "getting ready to do it", they are already actively engaged in a process of interacting with and constructing the written language system.

4.1.1 Relationship between Spoken and Written Language

While it has always been inconceivable that children could learn to talk separately from learning to listen, in schools barriers between related aspects of language are still being broken down today. Don Holdaway (1979:14) explains how

"One of the reasons for ease in oral language acquisition is clearly the wide range of powerful functions to which language is put by young children - it's versatility is immensely rewarding, bringing power that must seem almost magical to the infant learner. Literacy skills, on the other hand, tend to be taught using language for a narrow range of purposes instead of exploiting its functional richness".

Profound and useful principles about successful learning and development come from understandings about how babies interact with the people around them as they become talkers .

The 'natural' way that young children learn to speak, is valued and accepted by parents who interact with them, supporting them in their endeavour to communicate and make sense of their environment. **(See Appendix C)**

4.1.2 The Importance of Stories

Margaret Meek (1985:44) describes an important step in learning how to read as the discovery of "the tune on the page" . Even before children can read what is written, they take up this 'tune' - and make the book 'talk'. Meek considers the part played by the emotions to be crucial to the development of this kind of knowledge, and says that 'first time' encounters with words are unique and powerful moments for young children because of the feelings that are an integral part of these encounters. When young children have stories told and read to them, these act as what she calls first time feelings, which when repeated, can be experienced many times. Hearing stories also allows children to learn about narrative structure and discourse and genre conventions.

In Britain, Gordon Wells' research into young children's language and literacy development concludes without doubt that of all the activities which contribute to becoming literate, listening to stories is the most crucial to later competence. It was also found in his study, that the single most important factor accounting for differences between children's later educational development, was how much they understood about literacy on entry into school (Wells 1987).

4.1.3 Developing "Roots"

It is when young children become aware that written language makes sense, and when they start asking how it makes sense that reading and writing begins. This awareness develops as a result of not only exposure to print in their environment, but also through observing in which ways the print is useful and provides access to enjoyment, through having their questions answered, and being encouraged and extended in their attempts at making it work for them.

Slowly they develop what Yetta Goodman (1986:2) terms "the roots of literacy" which begin when a young child spends time interacting in an environment where people read and write in their daily lives and becomes aware that literacy is meaningful:
"The soil in which the roots of literacy grow has significant impact on each child's development . The ingredients in this soil include the amount of functional literacy that children encounter in the environment and the quality of those encounters: the attitudes and values about literacy expressed by other members in the social group: children's intuitive awareness of the symbolic nature of oral language, art, music and dance: and children's own oral language"(Goodman 1984: 103).

Children's understandings of the value of literacy depend on the different literacy practices in their homes, communities, and wider environment, and the different literacy events which form part of their daily lives (Taylor 1983).

From an emergent literacy perspective, young children *actively construct* or build the written language system for themselves in very similar ways to how they develop their speech. In a

longitudinal study of 4 to 7 year old children from widely differing backgrounds conducted in Argentina, it was found that all children in literate societies develop concepts about print as they test their own self-generated hypotheses against the socially transmitted information they receive about the nature and conventions of written language (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982).

This ability of young children to generate hypotheses is illustrated by a local example of a 5 year old child in Cape Town who asked his mother what the words 'Win and Spin' which he noticed in a magazine, said.
When he was told, he disagreed, pointing to the 'W ' saying, "It can't say win , because that's a 'w' (doubleyou) and 'w' begins with a 'd' (duh), so then it must be 'Din' and Spin!".

The role of teachers and other adults, well documented by researchers (Bissex 1980), becomes that of observer, supporter and extender of young children's exploration of written language. Children are encouraged to be active learners in the true sense of the word because it is they who are in control of their own literacy learning. In schools, teachers can create print rich classroom environments and facilitate contexts for children to come to use literacy and talk about literacy as part of social interaction. This provides for some and extends for others opportunities for children to be immersed in using reading and writing in meaningful ways.

4.2 A Social Conception of Literacy

Recognition and a growing positive acknowledgement of the multicultural and multilingual nature of many countries has engendered research which emphasises the social and cultural nature of literacy. This has involved a move away from thinking of literacy as a skill which can be given to people, towards what Brian Street calls a "social conception of literacy" (1990: 55). From this perspective literacy is viewed as " the social practices of reading and/or writing" (Street 1984). This implies that we need to find out how people actually use reading and writing in the daily activities within their cultures and communities. Rather than referring to one single literacy, there are different literacies which are used for different purposes and which form part of the political, social and cultural realities of people's lives (Brice-Heath 1983). Among other things, this kind of research has led away from a focus on how to ensure that literacy gets taught to those who lack 'it', to facilitating the gathering of information about how reading and writing are used in various communities, and how to build on this information.

4.3 Discussion

As with all other meaningful learning, the motivation which comes through wanting to achieve something, is central for success in becoming literate. Babies and young children are from birth, involved in the social and cultural practices of their family and immediate community, and literacy or literacies may form a greater or lesser part of these practices. Children are deeply motivated to find out how their world works. If the uses and enjoyment of written language are seen to be significant, then young children will, given encouragement and support, set out to discover for themselves the 'secrets' of how reading and writing works, in ways that are appropriate for their stage of development.

They begin to weave literacy into their play, when the important people in their environment not only read and write regularly, but also provide opportunities, encouragement and support for them. In such an environment, adults are there to help children understand how reading and writing works by facilitating a kind of apprenticeship relationship between themselves and the children.

By not enabling real explorations with reading and writing in the pre-school ECD years, millions of young South African children are put at a serious disadvantage to the small number of children from highly literate homes. The latter have abundant opportunities to come to know what reading and writing are used for in their homes and communities during their preschool years. In addition, the language/literacy relationship is generally one involving the same language for oral and written language. In school, they are usually quickly able to fit what their teacher presents them with the crucial understandings they have already developed about written language.

Most children however, live in communities where the literacy they encounter may be in a foreign language, and the uses of written language may be different ones from those which are taken as 'normal' by those who hold effective power in society (Brice Heath 1983). In some communities, getting things done may not involve reading and writing at all. When these children start primary school, not only are they faced with a lack of stories for reading in many of their home languages, but also with obstructive teaching methods. The exercises they do have little or no connection with either their own words or any other real, purposeful reading and writing that is done in social and cultural contexts that they are familiar with and care about.
In the years when children begin to explore reading and writing, ways must be found to weave the different literacies from 'out there' in the world into the daily play and other activities of classrooms, in linguistically, culturally and socially meaningful ways.

5. Additive Multilingualism and (Emergent) Literacy / Biliteracy

In South Africa, literacy has mainly been developed in what used to be the two official languages, English and Afrikaans. If the development of African languages is important, literacy in these languages needs to be actively encouraged.
Nancy Hornberger tells us that:

"The term biliteracy refers to any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around written material. An individual, a situation and a society can all be biliterate" (1995:177).

She poses a question which provides a useful reference point for decisions which must be taken about developing literacy in schools and in the wider society. Rather than asking how to develop literacy, she suggests we should ask ourselves which literacies should be developed and for what purposes?
In other words we need to look at literacy usage within particular social contexts. As schools try to reflect and enhance both the multilingualism and multiculturalism of the local communities, they will need to think about how languages, both oral and written are used at home, and how they are used in school. Catherine Wallace quotes Fishman who, referring to how bilinguals used language in certain communities, suggested asking "**who** speaks **what language**, **to whom** and **when**" (Fishman 1965 in Wallace 1988:10).

She suggests that we can apply the same question for reading behaviour. In South Africa, this kind of question can be asked about reading and writing, both in local and broader societal contexts to arrive at some insights for the appropriate development of various literacies.

Facilitating multilingual education means providing opportunities for biliteracy, and for children the process of valuing, respecting and engaging with written language begins with good language/literacy/biliteracy models, bilingual teachers and volunteers[4] in a print-rich environment[5].
In which ways should we proceed to facilitate the biliteracy acquisition process in the early years of education?

With additive multilingualism, the learning context enables the primary language of the child to be supported, extended and never dropped , while adding on a second or third language. By extension, the same principle should apply to biliteracy development, particularly from a whole language perspective. The starting point for building up concepts should be in children's home languages, in the languages that their thoughts and feelings are expressed in. From a whole language perspective, there are strong arguments for beginning literacy in children's primary languages. If we want children to discover that reading and writing can be powerful and meaningful in the contexts of their lives, then their primary language should be the base from which to explore other languages.
In this way, we can build on children's strengths by using the language they have used to communicate in and learn about the world. By providing opportunities for meaningful reading and writing in the primary language, schools indicate that they find this language important and worthy.

Research by Cummins suggests that knowledge of literacy transfers from the L1 to L2. Cummins has argued that although surface aspects of different languages like pronounciation and word order are obviously different, there is an underlying cognitive and intellectual proficiency which makes it possible for children to transfer what they know about literacy across languages (Cummins 1984).

With regards to learning a second or third language in early childhood there is often a focus on oral language development before introducing written language. However, all four modes of language, speaking, listening, reading and writing are important for learning and for academic development, and written language contributes significantly to the development of a new language. Oral language development preceeds written language when learning a first language, but this does not *necessarily* have to apply for learning a second or third language.

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[4]A popular multilingual classroom strategy is to use volunteers to assist in daily activities in a variety of ways, negotiated together by the teachers and volunteers. The volunteers generally speak one or more of the languages used in the classroom. They can be parents, or other trusted members of the community.
[5] A print-rich environment in a multilingual classroom is one which welcomes, displays and makes available a wide variety of reading and writing materials in different languages for use by the children and adults in the classroom. These would include newspapers, magazines, pictures with captions, posters, the words of rhymes and songs, the children's own stories written down as well as commercial materials. It is useful to collect a variety of real written language materials from the homes and communities of the children and teachers, which reflect their reasons for reading and writing, and provide possibilities for further exploration and use. Such an environment develops over time, and involves the ongoing participation of teachers, children and family members.

This implies that while ECD classrooms should provide ongoing opportunities for oral language exploration, children who can already read and write in their primary language can learn both oral and written language of the second language simultaneously. Marie Clay (1993: 39)explains that

"....because they can already read and write in their first language, they already have some concepts about literacy which they can apply to reading and writing the new language. They do not first have to learn the second language orally before they begin on second language literacy .There are advantages in learning to speak, read and write all at the same time:learning in one activity can help learning in the others".

In pre-school ECD classrooms, while the emphasis should be on developing the primary languages of children, teachers should be encouraged to begin to think about the possibilities of allowing children to explore (in appropriate ways) both the oral and written forms of other relevant languages.

6. Implications

6.1.Teaching Practice

Opportunities at pre - service and in - service levels must be made for teacher educators and teachers in ECD to reassess their beliefs about, and practice with regard to literacy/biliteracy acquisition.
Language and literacy development is a central focus for young children's education, particularly in pre-school ECD and in multilingual situations such as ours. Careful consideration should be given to how to create enabling environments which will enrich and nurture children's language and cognitive development.
In a publication which deals with policy issues arising out of in-depth research around language and literacy in the pre-school years in several countries, Cazden et al (1990:48) describe such an environment as

"....an environment in which children have one-to-one interactions with adults as well as peers, in which adults attend to and respond to children's communicative attempts, in which a rich array of interesting topics of conversation is made available, and in which real communication (rather than language teaching) is the primary activity".

They also cite some factors which the research points to which constitute obstacles to optimal language development. These are:

- very large groups of children:
- high adult-child ratios:
- repeated failure of adults to respond to children's communicative attempts perhaps due to disinterest, or commitment to more adult-centred activity, or not sharing a common language:
- failure to value child's home language as useful and valid for communication:
- strong emphasis on teaching academic skills, like letters, colours, numbers etc which detracts from real communicative activities and language enriching conversations:
- an absence of appropriate books and materials (Cazden et al 1990:48).

6.2 Human Resources

Teachers have the challenge of creating interesting, relevant and supportive learning environments, ones which link home and school environments so as to make space for a variety of languages and cultures to inform the curriculum.
A key to the process will be a change in attitude towards parental and community involvement in education. Family members and the wider community will need to be invited to share in the responsibilty of helping children with literacy in different languages, both inside and outside the classroom. Families and community members will in turn, have to reassess their potential for being part of the process.

6.3 Reading and Writing Materials

One of the challenges is where to get resources for reading and writing. Creativity will have to be used to devise the best possible local solutions.
The skills to produce the materials which are needed to support multilingualism can be built up in communities throughout the country.
Parents and teachers need to recognise and act on the fact that the community provides an invaluable source of reading material in the different languages spoken by the children, of reasons for writing, and of people who will tell and read stories with small groups or individual children in classrooms. In this way, the print from the community environments will gradually form part of the curriculum.

Many publishers of books for children promote a skills approach to reading by restricting what they will publish to graded readers. This reinforces already entrenched ideas about the need for adults to restrict and simplify the language in texts which children read. Bold publishers should be urged to increase their publishing of real stories in real language for all children in the different languages of South Africa. There is also a need for books with simultaneous text in more than one language, as well as books in one language only.

Appendix A: Common views about literacy acquisition

Many of the popular views about literacy teaching and learning are myths which have been challenged and shown to be invalid by research studies. For instance, among other things parents are told that either reading must be taught before writing or writing must be taught before reading: that small letters are easier to learn than capitals and must be learned first or vice versa: and that children must be taught how to form their letters 'properly' before they actually write for real reasons. Children are also shown how to write their names because being able to write one's name is seen as an indication of 'school readiness'. However, often parents and teachers are cautioned against introducing capital letters, suggesting that there is a particular order for written language to be presented. Children's 'pretend' or emergent writing is at best, ignored, and at worst, discouraged.

All of these restrictions arise from a genuine concern that children might become confused and that primary teachers will have to 'unteach' bad habits.
These ideas come about through thinking of literacy as a set of skills which professionals need to carefully select and teach in a particular order, and that *before* it is possible to actually *use* writing, children must have certain skills in fairly advanced working order.
Referring to the teaching of reading, Wendy Flanagan says:

"A consequence of this understanding of 'reading readiness' is that the educational system, the schools and the teachers expect all children to complete satisfactorily a readiness programme before they are ready for formal instruction. As a result, some children will be identified as 'not ready' and they will be kept on 'reading readiness' programmes for a long time. Very often children who are not identified as 'not ready' are children who have had no pre-schooling or do not come from a home where there is an established book culture. With this understanding of reading readiness, you must be made 'ready' for books before you can have a book. And tragically, this means that these children are kept from handling books for far too long" (1995: 23).

It follows that there are many restrictions about written language learning in the early years of education.
For instance because it is accepted that children should be encouraged to grow to love stories,teachers should read stories, teach rhymes and songs. But because this is viewed as different and separate from the formal exercise of learning how to read, the extent to which teachers should explore written language with children is restricted.So the childrens own stories are not generally encouraged, or written down, nor do adults urge children to try and write for themselves.
Thus, early on, language in education is fragmented into different bits. Rather than moving children's knowledge of oral language on to include written language, speech becomes distanced from written language, and written language is splintered into reading, comprehension, spelling, handwriting and creative writing.
Ironically young children's strength lies in their incredible drive to creativity and imagination. Instead of tapping into these powers, they are neglected as energy is concentrated into basic skills control.

Appendix B: Assumptions about learning

The following two sets of assumptions about learning highlight the differences in teaching approach between proponents of Whole Language and the beliefs of other teachers who are guided by 'commonsense'.

Commonsense Assumptions

Learning proceeds from part to whole
Learning is the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil so lessons should be teacher centred
Lessons should prepare students to function in society after schooling
Learning takes place as skills are practiced and habits are formed
Oral language acquisition preceeds the development of literacy in learning a second language
Learning should take place in the target language to facilitate it's learning
The learning potential of bilingual pupils is limited

Principles of Whole Language

Learning moves from the whole to part
Children actively construct knowledge, so lessons should be pupil centred
Lessons should have meaning for pupils now

Meaningful social interaction promotes learning
In a second language, oral and written language are acquiured simultaneously
Emphasis should be on first language learning to build concepts and facilitate learning another language
Teachers need to trust in the learners potential
(Freeman & Freeman 1992:7)

Appendix C: Learning oral and written language

There is now greater understanding about the relationship between developmental 'natural' learning and literacy. There are many similarities between the way that children engage with and come to understand how to use written language and the way that babies and toddlers learn to talk.
Parents and other adults have a crucial role in this, if there was no talking and communicating around them, babies would not become talkers. Parents and other caretakers generally provide condusive conditions for speech to develop. They go about their daily business, and in so doing, act as models for their children to watch and learn from, and they give children opportunities to speak because they are together trying to communicate with each other, supporting and extending every effort made by their child.
Reading and writing too as part of language are forms of communication and need very similar conditions as speech to thrive in. Like babies want to speak, young children (in an environment where people around them read and write) set out to find out why people are doing it, what purposes it serves, and then work out strategies for doing it themselves.

Catherine Snow (1991:225) points to the fact that while it is now widely accepted that working class and minority children use language differently from the way middle-class children use it, their use of language is equally complex and there are not social class differences in language skill. However the same conclusion has not been reached with regards to literacy. It is generally minority and working class children who do not become literate, despite the recognition that language and literacy are closely related.

Often, what is different about learning oral and written language is emphasised with one of the main points of dissimilarity being seen to be that learning to speak is understood to be something that occurs naturally, while learning to read and write needs formal teaching. Snow sees this as a statistical rather than an absolute difference, pointing to the significant minority of children who become literate without any formal instruction. She argues that language acquisition, while it appears natural, is actually pedagogical, and that although most children are taught to read and write, evidence that children acquire literacy from the same kinds of interactions that support language acquisition implies "a greater similarity than dissimilarity between the processes at this point" .

With rare exceptions, all children learn oral language, but many children below, on, or above average ability do not become literate. Snow (1991:226) explains this in terms of contextualised and decontextualised language use: "while it is true to say that most children learn to talk without explicit instruction, the language skills achieved naturally by children constitute the highly contextualised skills of communication, not the decontextualised use of language such as presenting monologues, doing abstract verbal reasoning, and giving metalinguistic judgements".

Our education system ensures that most of children's literacy experiences are highly decontextualised, and if initial oral language learning was as decontextualised, it too would be difficult to accomplish.

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