

Starting Your Bilingual Child on the Path to Biliteracy

Mary Nobuoka,

Anna Husson Isozaki, Susan Bergman Miyake

Edited by Jane Ward

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Preface

Some things shouldn't be left up to others. If you have a child in Japan and plan on raising and educating him/her in the Japanese school system, then the Japanese language will become the dominant one. Conscious decisions have to be made to nurture the minority language. Sure, it's natural for the child to pick up listening and speaking in a second or third language with the parent who uses it at home, but look out!

Reading and writing have to be taught. The minority-language-speaking parent has a gift to share, the gift of language that needs sharing early in life. It doesn't take a teaching professional to work on learning the ABCs. It doesn't take a professional teacher to read picture books every day with the child. What it does take is early practice with literacy skills. Just like a nutritious meal includes fruit and vegetables, a biliterate habit includes a daily dose of books in both languages. Both require constant effort.

If I can offer any advice, it would be to start reading and writing in the minority language early, in pre-school. If your child is learning English, do not rely on the Japanese public school system to teach English as a foreign language. You, the language model, can do a lot by yourself. There are many useful ideas in this guide that will help you understand the sequence of learning and how to get started on the journey. It was written by parents who found themselves in a similar place that you are in now. This was written to inspire you to raise the next generation of *completely bilingual* children, those who will have access to twice the information of their monolingual peers.

Jane Ward, editor

Note: This text includes hyperlinks. Clicking on the links will take you directly to the website or mentioned section within this monograph.

Special thanks to Diana Kaz for her game ideas.

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Introduction

“The more you read,
the more things you will know.

The more that you learn,
the more places you'll go.”

~ Dr. Seuss,
I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!

Full biliteracy for our bilingual children means wings: When they can read fluently, they can access the world of both stories and information under their own power. Their minds and learning spirits are set free. Usually, parents leave it to their children’s schools to build their children’s literacy skills. However, bilingual children in Japan will not get their minority language literacy in the early years of public education. If parents want to add literacy in a second (or third) language, they need to be proactive. This monograph is a guide that will help parents understand how to build minority-language literacy skills with their bilingual child.

There are many documented academic reasons for adding literacy skills in two or more languages:

- Reading and writing skills will support a child’s speaking skills;
- Adding biliteracy adds ‘value’ to the minority language” (Noguchi 2006);
- Reading builds vocabulary and internalizes grammar and other language features (Nation 2013);

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- Adding literacy skills in a second language increases academic performance of students, even when the child is attending a monolingual school in the majority language (Noguchi 1996);
- Biliteracy facilitates bilinguals' independent access to the literature and culture of both of their languages, and later increases choices in education and employment;
- Biliteracy boosts “employment and earning potential” (Noguchi 1996).

Sometimes adding reading and writing skills in the minority language can feel like an uphill battle, so keep these points in mind to help motivate you and your child to continue building their literacy skills.

Challenges

For parents raising bilingual (or multilingual) children, adding biliteracy to speaking can be a challenge. While many children learn to speak two or more languages rather naturally, very few will pick up reading or writing without instruction and a rich-literacy environment that needs to be created by parents. The latest research shows that our brains are wired for spoken language but not for reading (Gorissen, 2014; Pinker, 2002; Wolf, 2008). It takes learning and practice.

In her bilingual case study, Mary O'Sullivan (2007) writes about four challenges she faced teaching her two children literacy skills: “firstly, finding appropriate material, secondly finding time to study, thirdly managing two learners with different needs and abilities, and finally... finding ways to motivate them to study.”

Finding time and energy can be a challenge, but we hope this monograph will provide both parents and teachers with inspiration and some ideas to make the process a shared adventure and source of discovery. Reading is much more than spelling conventions and phonics drills. Literacy entails rich, varied experiences and meaningful self-directed exploration. Look for ways to connect your child's sense of self to the print around you (see more under [emergent literacy](#)).

Learning Challenges

Some children seem to absorb information and learn with ease; others find learning more difficult and need extra support and patience. Normally developing bilingual children may at times seem different from their monolingual peers. It is quite common for a child who is learning two languages to be more comfortable in one language than the other depending on the context. Maybe they do math or cooking in one language, while they engage in children's games and drama in the other. Sometimes there may what appear to be "gaps" in the child's knowledge because they have not yet acquired the vocabulary from that context in one of their languages because it is something they do in their other language. But that doesn't mean they are "behind" because they may already have mastered similar concepts and vocabulary in their other language; or they may be processing at a different (but normal) pace than their monolingual peers. They are acquiring two languages (and, often, cultures) so in a sense the knowledge they are acquiring is deeper and broader than a child with exposure to only one language. However, the parent, educator, family or friend of the child who is not used to interacting with or assessing bilingual or bicultural children may be worried about how much they don't know in one language, perhaps because they don't know the child's other language or because they consider something "common knowledge". Instead of focusing on what they haven't learned in one of the languages, it may be a good idea to focus on what they can do. Learning disabilities by definition impact both languages in all contexts of a child's life; if a child is a proficient reader, for example, in one language but not the other, then there is no learning disability and far less reason for concern than it would be if the child is struggling to process either language. Maintaining an awareness of your bilingual child's "can do" linguistic skills that you can share with teachers can thus be an important way to advocate for your child in case you do encounter a concerned but uninformed educator.

However, be aware that some children may also need the help of professionals. Identifying developmental delays, sight or hearing impairments at an early age is imperative but can sometimes be overlooked or not recognized by parents or even professionals. If you suspect any problems or delays, consult a specialist who works with bilingual children. Specialists without professional experience and

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understanding of the linguistic and cultural development of a bilingual/bicultural child may misinterpret or misdiagnose.

Be aware that the professionals may carry their own set of cultural assumptions. It may be worth seeking second or third opinions; do not settle for labels, but rather proactive help that you see truly benefiting your child. Understanding is growing slowly and options for interventions are rapidly increasing around the world, so researching learning issues and available therapies can help us be effective advocates for our children.

If you are concerned about your child's language development, a good place to ask for referrals is Tokyo International Lifeline ([TELL](#)). They have support in several languages. Depending on where you live, it may be necessary to travel some distance to get the help you need. When language barriers (e.g., when parents do not speak Japanese) or lack of services in your area are an issue, you may need to carefully research the option of taking your child back to your home country to get testing, diagnosis or treatment. For more information on learning challenges see the [Bilingualism SIG](#)'s monograph 14, *Bicultural Children with Developmental Differences* (2007). It has stories from several different families whose children had various learning challenges. Also included are two articles from Tokyo-based, bilingual speech and language pathologist, Marsha Rosenberg, MA, CCC-SLP, and Yokohama-based, American-trained and educated clinical psychologist and child neuropsychologist, Ron Shumsky, Psy., D. The U.S.-based National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders has [a checklist](#) of developmental milestones (for English speakers) that can help parents determine whether there is a need for testing.

Mindset

In the last four decades, many teachers and parents were influenced by psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden's advice that showering children and students in praise would build their confidence and help them perform better (Bronson 2007). However, since the 1990's research into motivation suggests this strategy brings at best short-term results and can likely be damaging to your child's self-esteem (Dweck 2013). Psychology professor Carol Dweck discovered in her research on attitudes about

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intelligence and learning that children who think intelligence is “fixed” or never-changing tend to perform more poorly over time, whereas children who believe (or learn) that intelligence can grow perform better over time (2013). In fact, the latter has been proven in research: With effort and learning, children and adults can “grow their intelligence” (Dweck 2013).

Parents can foster this mindset in their children at any age. One way to do so is to let children know that intelligence does grow over time as we make efforts in learning. Emphasize effort. Explain and exemplify the way improvement comes from hard work. As children come to understand that it is through their efforts that they can succeed rather than whether they are “smart” or not, they will be motivated to do more. It is important that parents and teachers “praise process”, not intelligence (Dweck 2013). Instead of saying, “Wow! You’re so smart!” say, “Wow! I can see that you put a lot of work into this!” or “Good job!”/“Good effort!”

Another important attitude to develop is that mistakes are a natural part of learning. Students with the mindset of growing intelligence reflect on mistakes and setbacks and try to learn from them (Dweck 2013). Help your children go through this process positively in order to deepen their learning and build confidence to overcome obstacles in the future. As you read to your child, when you make a mistake, point it out to show that everyone makes mistakes and take a moment to reflect on why you made the error (e.g. perhaps the spelling was similar to another word or you made the wrong prediction).

Fostering the this mindset will help your child’s motivation to continue their challenging task of learning to read in a second (or third) language.

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Pre-literacy skills

Emergent Literacy

A lot of exciting work in recent years has documented the literacy knowledge and skills acquired by very young children, who demonstrate this knowledge through various observable behaviors, even before formal reading instruction has started. This is called “emergent literacy.” Young children are in the process of developing skills long before they formally start reading (and perhaps from birth) in a continuum of literacy development, rather than at any set starting point. This continuum includes the development of the oral narrative skills which are interconnected with reading and writing skills. Under an emergent literacy framework, the functions of literacy (ordering from menus, using recipes, checking to see who a letter is from, etc.) are as important as the forms (knowledge about letters, sentences). Small children’s active exploration of print in the environment (especially shared reading, following written instructions, etc.) are important opportunities for adults and older children to model literacy-related behaviors.

In modern literate cultures, small children can demonstrate their development of the literacy skills they are acquiring from a very early age. In literacy play for example, a preschooler may first scribble to represent their understanding of writing. Later on, the shapes of the scribbles may more closely resemble writing. In a later stage the same child may string together letters they’ve learned in random order and call it a “word”. Still later they may demonstrate some of their awareness of the connections between letters and sounds by writing the initial consonant of the word they are thinking of. A child may write “bk” to represent the word “book”. These attempts are evidence of a child’s emerging awareness of print. Praise the child’s efforts without making corrections.

Early family literacy activities and the environment often make an enormous difference in children’s future literacy success. In fact, children’s academic success can

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be predicted from the emergent literacy skills they possess when entering school. The children who struggle with learning to read in school often lack exposure to early literacy practices in the home; on the other hand children with high exposure to literacy before entering school often excel at reading, a child's interaction with their environment and opportunities to acquire and soak up literacy knowledge that is fundamental (*Reading Readiness*, 2012). First and foremost, when parents or others spend a lot of time reading both to and with children, ground-up literacy skills are being developed. Your child may be sounding out the words as they follow along visually, acquiring reading skills silently until they reach a point where it seems like they just take off flying.

Providing a print-rich environment may not enable children to learn to read without explicit reading instruction, but it will help every child acquire many of the emergent literacy skills.

There are many activities that parents and teachers can engage children in to help prepare them to learn to read. These include building vocabulary, singing songs, listening to nursery rhymes, playing with images, reading stories aloud to them and sharing audiobook listening. These should be for fun, and for enjoyment together, without explicitly trying to direct their attention or "teach". Imaginative games, stories, and make believe time that expand imagination and connect the child to the realm of possibilities will promote big "L" literacy. Imagination is at the heart of literacy; reading relies on our ability to imagine, and with our imagination, stories transport us to new places.

A preschooler's vocabulary size is the-number-one factor for future academic success (Linse, 2014). Therefore, a focus on enriching your child or students' vocabulary should be the primary goal in the preschool years. Teaching phonics or teaching reading to a child who has a limited vocabulary is not very effective; even though children can learn to sound out words, they will not understand what they are reading.

Vocabulary learned at home or in the minority language will "enhance learning in any other language" (Linse, 2014). New words can be acquired through daily conversations with children. Most parents know that using open-ended questions ("wh-" or "information questions") increases the amount of language output from the child. Another great phrase to use with children is "Tell me more..." to encourage the child to

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elaborate on a topic and utilize their active vocabulary. The more that parents talk with their child the larger vocabulary the child will have.

An important point for parents to remember is that children will also learn as much, if not more, vocabulary from overhearing their parents (or other adults) speaking with each other (Linse, 2014). Parents should engage in stimulating conversation together, preferably role-modeling comfort in both languages if possible -- even if they think their child is not listening. For example, a boy who is role-modeling on his Japanese father may benefit in attitude and motivation toward using the minority/maternal language with his mother if he observes his father positively using that minority language (without worrying about mistakes) upon occasion.

Also, enjoying added “input” and rich vocabulary from high-quality audio options is a great source for building language storage, and, eventually, ability to express themselves in the minority language, even if it appears to be “just background music” for the child in the first few months or years. Rather than news channels, and rather than playing one language while speaking in another language (Fadiman, 1997), sharing the audio version of a good story in the minority language when the parent from that language background and the child are having some “downtime” together builds shared, happy memories, and substantial storage of the minority language as well. Patience and repetition (good audiobooks are worth listening to again) may be rewarded after a few months, when a parent hears vocabulary or phrases from the story appear in the child’s speech.

Visual skills

Reading requires the processing of visual information into the language we hear and speak (Gorissen, 2014). Therefore, it is helpful for children to have keen visual skills. After all, words and their component letters are made up of shapes. For fun, teach your child to locate and identify various printed shapes and colors on a page or in your daily environment (riding on the train, for example) as a precursor to reading, or while starting to learn to read. Use family photographs to talk about and process visual information. Spotting the differences in pictures and photos is another way to develop visual skills in young learners.

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Use “search and find” books like *I Spy*. These books have lots of pictures and the reader has to find certain items listed on each page. Please note that when reading these types of books, learners do not need to learn to read the words, unless they wish to do so. The focus should be on finding the picture because this skill is connected to learning to read. In doing so, children will also be building their vocabulary.

I Spy is available on computer games and free apps. However, screen technology, including television, is a poor substitute for the interaction between a caregiver and a child for language development in the early years (Kuhl, 2011). Zimmerman and Christakis, Barr, et al (2010) write that increased exposure to television “was associated with worse reading comprehension and recognition scores at age 6”. When using any screen-based technology, be sure to do so while interacting with your child.

Citing their own and others’ research, Barr et al (2010) state that developmentally appropriate television programming designed specifically for children, such as *Sesame Street*, *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*, *Blue’s Clues* and *Dora the Explorer* had a positive effect on school readiness (attention, vocabulary, etc.), in contrast to children’s shows such as *Teletubbies*, which had a *negative* effect. Adult-directed programs, created for adult audiences, also showed a negative effect on school readiness (Barr et al, 2010). Parents should also be aware that DVDs, such as *Baby Einstein* have also been connected to “lower concurrent language scores” (Barr et al, 2010). One of the reasons this may occur is that placing a child in front of the TV reduces the quantity of interaction between the baby and caregiver. Kuhl (2011) shows that direct human interaction is imperative for developing language and that television does nothing to support language development in infants.

Rhyming

Alliteration and rhyming are inherent parts of learning to read English, especially for the beginning stages of reading (Goswami & Bryant, 1990). Good building blocks abound in, for example, anything by Dr. Seuss, from the rhyming throughout *The Cat in the Hat* to the fantastic alliteration in *Dr. Seuss’s ABC*. A child who knows how to rhyme and sense alliteration can more readily acquire reading skills. Rhyming can be learned by using rhyming games (please see the rhyming [games](#) section for suggestions),

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children's songs, rhyming picture books, poetry and nursery rhymes, as well as by reciting poems together or guessing the rhyming word at the end of a sentence or line.

Music

Music and dance should be a part of any preschool program or playgroup and can be done anytime at home. The melodies and rhymes of music make words easy to remember. Many children's shows feature songs, and it is good to put on some children's music while your child is playing. Many famous children's songs can be watched on YouTube, or listened to with the screen off. For these activities, having seasonal, weekly, or monthly themes can help with repetition of key vocabulary.

Storytelling

Telling your own stories and sharing childhood memories with your child is a rich emotional, social and linguistic activity. Humans are hardwired for narratives (Boyd, 2009). Enjoying telling stories, even without any print involvement is a rich basis for vocabulary and literacy development. Wordless books can also be a great way for your young child to tell stories to you. Ask them to describe the happenings in the pictures as you follow along or have them retell it to you after an initial telling. Children are often imaginative storytellers. Encourage this. You might write down some of the tall tales, dreams, or silly stories your child comes out with and read them together (or have your child read them to you) later. Or, have your child draw a picture and then ask them to describe what it is about. Make captions based on your child's description for the picture. Put their pictures together, and you have a book. Your child simultaneously gains an entrance ticket to the world of literacy as an author and as an expert on their subject matter. By finding meaningful ways to invite your child into the social world of literacy you will also be passing on a personal connection and a motivation to learn about writing.

Words Around Us

Books are not the only source for learning to read in early childhood. There is print all around us, and parents should take advantage of it. Our very young child is gaining knowledge about the written language even before they formally learn to read or write. The baby who reacts excitedly to various symbols or logos is already demonstrating the ability of the human brain to recognize and create meaning from symbols at a very early age. In the same way that children expand their verbal vocabulary through context, they also learn about the meaning of print from context -- in stores, on signs, on labels and wrappers, etc., in “ambient print”. Bilingual kids may be at a disadvantage as most of the ambient print will not be in the minority language, and sometimes when the minority languages do appear, they are used incorrectly. However, since English is also prevalent in Japan, it is another tool for parents to be aware of and something to try to maximize in the home. Studies on preschool children internationally have shown that toddlers play “writing” already takes on some of the shapes characteristic of their written language (i.e. toddler doodles resembling Roman alphabet vs. Chinese characters or other script), so even before they start “reading” in a formal sense they are already in the process of absorbing and acquiring an understanding of the character of written languages around them.

You can create an “ambient print” environment:

- Put alphabet magnets on the refrigerator with names and words spelled out. Beware of younger children who might put these letters in their mouths and possibly choke! But for three years of age or older, let the children have access to the letters to play with and arrange.
- Put print labels on objects in their classrooms or homes.
- When out and about, walking along the street or out shopping, play *I Spy* for letters.

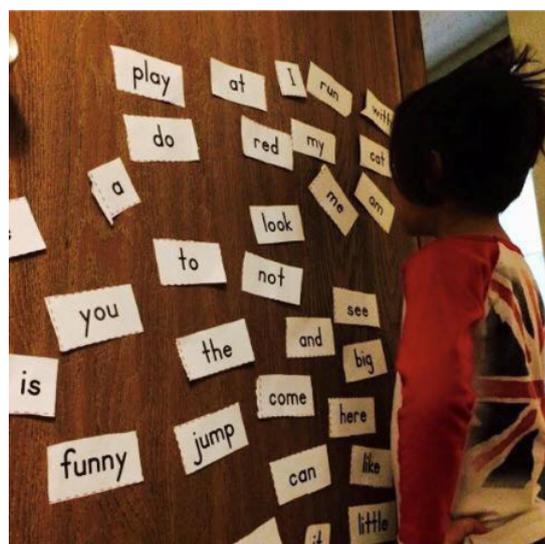


Photo courtesy of Nikol Sekoguchi

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- Where possible, request an English menu at restaurants and let your child “read” it; point out and say the words/names of various foods.
- Other pre-reading letter and word identification opportunities include making shopping lists together, reading aloud a recipe from a cookbook when making cookies together, addressing envelopes or checking to see who sent a letter (or email, e-card, etc.).
- Sing or read musical scores, or sing English songs with English subtitles at karaoke.
- In imaginative play activities, make signs, labels or invitations to bring your play “store,” “school” or performance to life.
- Make up original games or playing cards with your own characters and describe them for your own original version of *pokemon* (or whatever the current fad is).

Reading to your child

Reading stories to learners is one of the top language-learning activities (Nation 2013; Gorissen 2014). Children’s books offer a rich vocabulary and internalization of grammar structures. The attention given to the printed aspect of the book will help familiarize children with the way that reading works. Use pictures to help children understand the story as well as to create mini-conversations as you read.

Stories are social, so make reading a social activity. Try reading together three ways: *to*, *with*, and *by* your child. Reading aloud is a very important thing to be doing with all ages, from earliest babyhood on up through the teens. This can be especially empowering and important during the stage when some children are bored, frustrated, or even insulted by the simplicity of “See Spot run” type sentences that they may be limited to by their own independent reading stage. At this stage, they may be fully capable of understanding Harry Potter or Tom Sawyer or other complex works of fiction (or non-fiction!) when they are read *to* them. Then, you can feed their imagination, grow their desire to learn about the world, and increase their ability to forge connections without being blocked by their own limited understanding of decoding conventions. By listening to these more complex readings children are able to

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absorb and learn complex sentence patterns, vocabulary, and written grammatical conventions that they would not have been exposed to in ordinary conversation. The cultural points and idioms often stumbled over by minority language learners can also be absorbed and understood better in a narrative context than they might, for example, from decontextualized flashcards. When the child is ready to take on more complex passages during independent reading, the understandings they have already built this way will support their smoother reading.

When reading *with* your child, you may want to choose something just slightly above your child's level. Your child does not need to know every word in a story read to them, they just need to be able to follow the general storyline. Your child can follow along visually as best they can. You might use your finger to follow the text as you go to facilitate that process. Your child could read occasional words or sections of the text along with you where possible. When you encounter a word your child is unlikely to know, you should give the meaning of the word as you read and incorporate the definition naturally, rephrasing the difficult vocabulary. This is the fastest way for children to learn new words (Nation, 2013).

When your child is able, you can ask your child to read aloud to you, and enjoy readings *by* the child. You can check progress, (making mental notes rather than corrections – this is a time to avoid criticism), and can discuss the content and any interesting questions that may come up for either of you.

Vocabulary in written works far outstrips that in either daily spoken conversations or in television or movies. Indeed reading *to* your child may be the single most important thing a parent can do for their children's acquisition of the minority language. When the vast majority of the week is spent learning or socializing in the majority language, reading *to* may be the most time efficient and valuable input for vocabulary, grammar, or subject matter. For richer and more extensive vocabulary acquisition try a variety of reading genres. Fantasy, folktales, sci-fi, history, dinosaurs, biology, astronomy, jokes, manga, magazines, poetry, math – the possibilities are endless. Do not forget non-fiction. It is possible that the child who is mesmerized by horses or dinosaurs may be more interested in good material on the history or anatomy of those subjects than they would be with fairy tales. Choose subject matter that is meaningful and exciting to your child, whether fiction or non-fiction. If your children can choose for themselves from what interests them, that is even better. Visit libraries

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and bookstores when possible, (some libraries and high quality bookstores in Japan do include some children's books in English or other languages so it may be worth a look), and don't be afraid to let your child take the lead. If it is a fun, exciting and choice-filled process for your child, then a personal connection to reading will develop. This will also instill a philosophy and passion for learning that will benefit other areas of life including their other language(s).

Try listening to audiobooks for shared pleasure. Pop in a CD or podcast while you are on the train or in the car, or make it part of your family's downtime. There are many children's books from beginner level to full-length classics streaming on YouTube, available on CDs, or accessible for download on the Internet, which feature professional actors or the authors reading the books. Old radio plays, such as [Mercury Theater](#), are available on the Internet and are educational for older children and teens. Another great reading opportunity in the minority language is to have grandparents read via Skype or video. Even if the minority-language-speaking parent is not at home, with video, children can watch and listen to these stories repeatedly. Videos of grandparents, aunts and uncles telling their own childhood stories are treasures for children of any age.

Read to your child through elementary school – and beyond. Many parents stop reading to their children when the child becomes a confident reader. Don't! Keep on reading to each other. One fun way to continue reading into the teen years and beyond is to create a family reading time. Choose a day and time when the family sits together and reads (alone or to each other). Throw an occasional party! Invite friends and family. Include adults and kids both, a community activity that kids are invited into as full literary members. Make it exciting and decadent. Dress up or act as a character. Savor fun food and drinks and stay up to forbidden hours taking turns reading favorite passages or poetry or acting out stories.

Before your child begins to read, there are some basic book-knowledge skills that children should be familiar with. Check to see if your child knows how to hold a book and orient it to the front cover, the title, the author/illustrator and the direction of the print (*Reading Readiness*, 2012). Noguchi (1996) reports essential concepts for children to be familiar with are “*letters, words, sentences, pages, front, back, top, bottom, cover, end, beginning, first, last, big word, little word, long word, short word, and syllable*, as

well as the convention of reading from left to right, the function of punctuation and spaces, and the social rules for reading lessons”.

Many of these skills will be absorbed by the child if the parent reads to the child often enough. If a preschooler seems to be unaware of these features, be sure to point them out and even compare the differences that exist between the languages they speak. For example, books in English are read from left to right, but many books in Japanese are written from right to left and read from top to bottom.

Reading Readiness

How do you know when your child is ready to start learning to read? From the emergent literacy perspective your infant is engaged in acquiring literacy skills from birth. In the early years children are accumulating and acquiring information about literacy in much the same way that they acquire speech – from the environment around them. In some cases, a child will suddenly start to read. Look for signs that a child is ready to formally begin reading instruction in preschool days between the ages of 3 to 6. By checking a child’s motor skills, parents will be able to assess reading readiness. Dr. Susan Johnson, a pediatrician in the U.S., suggests parents or caregivers check to see if a child can: stay balanced on one foot with arms raised in front of them and their eyes closed for 10 seconds or with arms to the side; count backwards from 10; jump rope both forwards and backwards; recognize the number 7 drawn on their back with a finger; and draw people with shapes rather than stick figures (Johnson, 2014). Promote activities that will help a child to develop motor skills. Motor and visual skills are one predictor of future academic success in both reading and mathematics (Son & Meisels, 2006).

The way to help develop these motor skills is through typical childhood play: “digging with a shovel, pushing a wheelbarrow, carrying groceries, moving rocks, pulling weeds, hanging from the monkey bars, circle games where their hands are clapping and feet are stomping, jumping, hopping, galloping, and skipping... walking the balance beam... singing, playing catch, doing meaningful chores, painting, coloring, playing hand clapping games, doing string games, cutting with scissors, and finger knitting” (Johnson, 2014). The above activities plus others such as swimming and

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dancing throughout the elementary school years will “strengthen bilateral integration pathways” (i.e., the connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain) and support building reading skills (Johnson, 2014).

Go at your child’s pace. Forcing a child to read before they are developmentally ready may cause problems later on. Countries which introduce reading programs at a later age, six or seven, generally have better literacy outcomes than ones, like the United States or United Kingdom, that start earlier (Clouder, 2003). While this fact points towards some benefits of delaying the start of schooling, it should not be interpreted to mean that literacy development of pre-school children should be ignored – rich meaningful “emergent literacy” activities make an enormous difference. It may be that Finland’s relatively homogenous population has a very rich emergent literacy environment for young children before they start school. Introducing formal learning or requiring that a child sit and concentrate for 20 minutes could cause problems or misdiagnosis of ADD (Johnson, 2014). Some children will be able to memorize words or features of words, but they will not be reading. If a child relies on this method, rather than learning to sound out the words, they may have difficulty switching over later, causing reading problems in the elementary school years (Johnson, 2014). In worse cases, children will develop a sense of failure, which can lead to “long-term underachievement, disaffection and even truancy” (Clouder 2003). One way to “test” a child to see if they are sounding out words, rather than just memorizing patterns, is to have the child read words forwards and backwards: stop/pots; straw/warts; smart/trams, etc. (Johnson, 2014).

During the preschool years, start by helping a child to develop their vocabulary. The best way to develop reading readiness is through active free play, especially outdoors, and person-to-person interactions during storytelling, singing and rhyming. Having fun in a relaxing environment with your child or preschool students is the best way to prepare them for future learning.



Photo courtesy of Mary Nobuoka

3

Learning to Read

When your child or student is ready to begin formal learning, there are several points parents and teachers should keep in mind. First, reading skills usually develop first and writing follows, so this chapter focuses on reading skills. Writing skills are addressed in [chapter 5](#). It is helpful to tell the child exactly how long the study period will be. When ready, children may be able to sit from 10 to 20 minutes for study sessions, longer when storytelling is incorporated. Even 15-minute daily sessions can yield positive results in the long term (O’Sullivan, 2007). Choosing appropriate materials that your child will enjoy is *essential*. The following information outlines some approaches to teaching reading skills to help parents and teachers.

Phonics & sight words

There are three different classes of word identification in English. These include pronunciation of individual letters, pronunciation of letter clusters, and whole word recognition. In a phonics approach, dealing with the first two of these three strategies, parents or teachers show how written characters correspond with the sounds of the language. But the sound-spelling relationship in English is complex. For example the letters “ho”, read left to right, we might sound out as “hoe”, but in fact the vowel can have eleven different pronunciations depending on the letters that follow: (consider hope, hoot, hour, hook, hot, honest, house, honey, hoist, horse, horizon), suggesting that English readers actually need to read not left to right as we may have been taught in school, but also right to left for comprehension to occur. The complexity of the English is such that the role of phonics instruction is under continuous debate and contention in educational policy. Some education research points towards decentralizing the role of phonics instruction, in favor of reading for meaning and pleasure through comprehensible input, with phonics rules being acquired through the act of reading rather than vice-versa.

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In many languages, there is a direct and reliable correspondence for every character and its sound. Japanese *hiragana* and *katakana* are like this, with the exception of は and へ, which are pronounced more than one way (“ha” or “wa” and “he” or “e”, respectively). Finnish, Welsh, Spanish, Portuguese, and Korean are among the many languages often used as examples, also, of straightforward written-sound systems, while English is joined by Arabic and Hebrew as among the most challenging to sound out correctly (Perfetti & Dunlap, 2008). However, based on our shared experience, we suggest that for bilingual English learners in Japan, phonics programs introduce characters and sounds in a way that usually make it easier for young readers to practice and remember how the characters and sounds work together.

Children can begin to understand and recognize patterns. Most phonics-based programs include various short books, each focusing on one sound and often include word families (e.g. cat, hat, mat, fat). Sound out the words before reading the book: nap = n,n,n / a,a,a / p,p,p; nap.

If the child has learned to read hiragana, this skill will transfer into reading another language. Japanese students (as a language group) have excellent decoding skills that transfer from the relative ease of learning *hiragana* (Linse 2014; Noguchi 1996). However, child can learn to read in two languages simultaneously.

For English, another approach to word identification that is often used in combination with a phonics approach, is whole word or sight word recognition. As the name indicates, students learn words as one unit and memorize them. For some words in English, it is necessary to use a whole word approach because the word does not follow the phonics rules. Words such as “you”, “the” and “here”, which are all high frequency words, need to be memorized and can’t be “sounded out” the way phonetically consistent words can. The best way to help children remember sight words is to make cards and use them in various games, such as the memory game, concentration, or other card games. Using 7 to 10 cards as flashcards to quickly go over the sight words is also helpful. Dr. Seuss books, such as *Green Eggs and Ham*, with 50 different words and *The Cat in the Hat*, with 225 different words, are perfect for reading practice of sight words (and also contain word families and rhymes which help young learners read).

Once a child has mastered basic phonics for reading a language, move on to vocabulary building while organizing words following similar spelling rules together.

Be sure these activities help to build the child's vocabulary by understanding what the words *mean* rather than just memorizing the spelling (Linse, 2014). See more ideas in [chapter 8](#).

Whole Language Approach

Advocates of a Whole Language approach (not to be confused with whole word, sight word, or look-say methods) favor a more holistic reading approach, including extensive, voluntary reading. Whole Language “does not refer only to providing interesting comprehensible texts and helping children understand less comprehensible texts. It involves instilling a love of literature, problem-solving and critical thinking, collaboration, personalized learning and much more” (Krashen, 2002). Under the Whole Language theory, knowledge of phonics is primarily the result of reading rather than its cause. According to this approach, phonic skills are better taught within a meaningful context as the English phonic system and spelling rules are complex with many cumbersome exceptions (Krashen, 2002).

And how do humans make sense of the written word? How do we translate the squiggles on a page into meaningful thought? Though an understanding of phonics (sound-letter correspondence) and spelling conventions certainly plays a role, it turns out that these are not the only things involved. Before you start your journey into phonics lessons with your child, let's look at two other aspects emphasized by Whole Language proponents to understand why *extensive comprehensible input* (shared reading, etc.) is so important.

Prior knowledge

Reading includes the non-visual aspects “of what goes behind the eyes, where prior knowledge, purposes, and questions reside” (Smith, 2006). Readers make extensive use of their *prior knowledge*; the stuff that we already know. This happens at all ages. A pre-verbal toddler looking at “*Goodnight Moon*” and pointing to the cow shouting excitedly “Moo! Moo!” after seeing one in a petting zoo is demonstrating this to her parents. Or, consider a sentence like “they were headed for the bank”; the same

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sentence can have two entirely different meanings depending on what you already know: if you know “they” are robbers wearing ski masks and driving a get-away car, then you will understand this is a sentence about a bank heist. On the other hand if you know that “they” are kayakers, then you will likely understand that this is about an outdoor recreation experience. Neither one of these vastly different interpretations have to do with decoding sounds, and everything to do with the knowledge already in our heads.

Prediction/tunnel vision

Readers also make extensive use of *prediction*, a core part of reading. Many children’s picture books and early readers make use of this predictability with rhythmic, predictable, repetitious text. (E.g. “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?”). For adults as well, prediction is key. For example, in the sentence “the captain ordered the mate to drop the “an~”, probably if readers have any familiarity with shipping schema, they can guess that the word is unlikely to be *anagram* or *answer*, but know without any mention of boats, or even turning the page, that it will be *anchor*. It is this kind of predicting skill based on what we already know (grammar, vocabulary, culture) that enables readers to scan whole phrases, and comprehend chunks of words at a time, rather than having to process them one letter at a time or spend copious amounts of time decoding all the sounds. However when we do encounter less familiar text (a foreign language, or a specialized subject we might not be familiar with such as an engineering or medical journal) our brain gets *tunnel vision* and our reading may slow down to a crawl to decipher the less comprehensible text. Second language learners and children beginning to read are also prone to this kind of tunnel vision due to the extra processing they have to do from lack of vocabulary or cultural knowledge or familiarity with print. Isolated phonics drills without any context to support understanding may increase this kind of tunnel vision for the beginner reader already bogged down with unfamiliar rules. Concentrating on phonics alone in this situation may not bring meaning to the problematic sentence and may even be an intense exercise in frustration. For example, children who are unfamiliar with the sights, sounds, and vocabulary that is associated with, for example, train stations, (conductors, signals, etc.) may be unable to decode a simple story about trains. The same child who has just gone on a kindergarten field trip

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and seen, heard, and touched all of those aspects may well have less trouble comprehending the story and may be very excited to connect with it. In this case it is the field trip may bring more understanding to a story about trains than breaking it apart through step-by-step phonics lessons. The world inside our heads helps brings meaning to print. It will be much more difficult to comprehend or appreciate the beauty of a haiku about the wondrousness of a peony if you do not know what a peony is in the first place.



Photo courtesy of Hanka Kawakami

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Stages of development

Pre-reading skills might start with a child pretending to read a book. The child may use the pictures in the book, may retell the story without reading at all or may retell a familiar story loosely related to the book they are holding. This is an important step for soon-to-be readers and these efforts should be praised (e.g. “You’re making such a good *effort* to read!”). It is also a good indicator that your child is ready to start learning to read. Good reading programs, such as Reading A to Z, have books with pictures, which give readers clues to help them read. Most phonics-based pre-reading programs start by teaching some initial sounds first. “B” is for bear, etc. The initial letter/sound is the biggest clue for a child to guess/read a word (Noguchi, 1996). The Reading A to Z program starts with higher frequency initial and final consonant sounds in words (n, p, t, s, etc.) and short vowels; followed by blends (bl, br, st, cr, cl, fl, pl, sl); long vowels with magic/silent “e”, then more challenging sounds: (th, wh); and finally the more challenging digraphs: oo (book), oo (pool), ar (shark) air (hair), ee (meet), ea (beach), igh (night), ai (train), ow (snow) and (how), oy (toy), oi (soil), ur (turn), er (her), ir (girl), ay (day).

At first the parent-teacher can read to the child. Point to each word as you read. After this first reading-listening, ask the child to point to each word as you read. Next, assign one (or two) words for the child to read every time the word appears. In other words, the parent or teacher reads the story, but stops each time the word “cat” appears so that the child can read (or guess) it. The next step is alternating words or pages to read. The same book should be read many times until the child feels comfortable reading it.

Once your child or student is sounding out words, if a child makes the wrong guess based on the picture, take a moment to sound out the word together. Avoid pointing out mistakes with comments like “You made a mistake. That’s wrong!” Guessing at words should be encouraged. Praise your child for the effort. Remember too that constant correction is not necessary. Sometimes enjoy having your child rely on the pictures to “read” to you without interruption or corrections.

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Many reading programs include worksheets. While it is great to encourage children to do the worksheets, if they are too difficult or the child feels frustrated doing them, do not force them to do them. Let her choose which ones she wants to do. Writing can be taxing for young children who are still building their fine motor skills (Johnson, 2014). Parents can write answers while children dictate their answers. Letting the child draw pictures or color will help develop their muscles and motor skills to prepare them for writing. Writing usually lags behind reading, so in the early stages, focus on reading. (See more about writing in chapter 5.)

Emergent readers

Now your child is sounding out words and reading, perhaps not so fluently yet. This is the stage where parents need extra patience. The goal now is to help the emerging reader become comfortable. Sitting together and reading, refrain from correcting every mistake. Instead, and only if the meaning has changed because of a mistake, have the child reread sentences or gently repeat for confirmation. Skilled adult readers unconsciously change words to other words with the same meanings; do not be concerned about this natural, positive skill surfacing! Also during this period, a child might “forget” sound combinations they had seemingly mastered earlier.

Let the child work it out or ask if s/he wants help. A great way to practice and build fluency is to read a favorite (easy) story over and over. Also, some fun ways to repeat reading is for the parent to read, then the child, or to read it together in unison. Ask the child to point to the words as you or s/he reads.

Choosing reading material that is understandable, that the reader can relate to, and can emotionally connect with is very important. Some books or activities that can make the connections between the different cultures may make a big difference. Even if commercially prepared materials in your home language are available, you can still



Photo courtesy of Federica Armstrong

build these cultural bridges. You and your child can write your own "books": for example, take some Japanese folk tales re-write them in your home language. Or write about your family life or your child's school adventures to make a family album or to share with extended family and friends abroad. For children learning to read English in Japan there are a number of famous authors whose books have been translated into both languages. Having a bilingual book, or both language versions of the same book can be a good way to make that connection. For example, nearly every Japanese elementary school child will be familiar with the Japanese version of Leo Lionni's *Swimmy* from *Kokugo* (Japanese language arts) texts. Eric Carle's *Hungry Caterpillar* (*Hara Peko No Aomushi*) is another. Eric Carle and Kazuo Iwamura have co-authored a lovely bilingual children's book, *Where Are You Going? To See My Friend!* The story can start either in English on one side of the book or in Japanese on the other side of the book and the characters meet in the middle, very naturally introducing the concept of directionality of the text while simultaneously reaffirming bicultural identity.

As the new reader develops confidence, to continue improving fluency use a short, *easy* passage for timed reading. Have the child read the passage several times, using a timer. Encourage the child to go faster.

Recent research has found that to build reading skills in any language, being able to separate the stream of speech to catch words and the parts of words is a necessary foundation for learning to read (Koda, 2008). For learning to read a minority language (such as English in a majority Japanese environment), researchers have begun suggesting that large increases in listening to the target language, particularly listening to read-aloud versions of the book that one is or will be reading, will help increase reading proficiency (Isozaki, 2014a, 2014b; Stephens, 2011a, 2011b, Walter, 2008; Waring, 2003). Well-designed experiments are now yielding clear evidence that combining reading and listening to the same books is extremely helpful for vocabulary building, listening fluency and comprehension, and reading speeds and comprehension (Chang 2011; Chang & Millett, 2014; Chang & Millett, 2015). In the case of English, in which so much of the meaning is conveyed by rhythm, stress and tone (yet almost none of that visible in print!) sophisticated studies have recently also been showing that fluent readers are *mentally* "hearing" the appropriate stresses and rhythm ("prosody") while reading silently to themselves, resulting in better comprehension (Ashby, 2006; Whalley & Hansen, 2006). For halting, less-skilled readers, reading and

listening at the same time can scaffold building this strong “sound sense” of the language; for better comprehension, and to help them speed up, too (Chang & Millett, 2015). These paired activities should not be forced together, though. If the child’s reading speed and the speed of the audio are different, the experience may become tiring or frustrating. Separating the listening sessions from the reading sessions may increase the pleasure of both activities. Parents reading aloud, or listening to an audiobook with their children, build a store of shared stories, which has practical benefits as well; for the beginning independent reader, picking up the same book later, much of the story and its vocabulary will be known. Thanks to having heard the story together, however, when the reading child does find a question, it is easier to explain quickly and help them keep their “flow”. Anecdotal experience suggests listening to long books when ears are free but hands are busy (with building blocks, drawing, etc.) can help build a strong base for reading. A beginning reader may then carry the book around to read in quiet moments at school or before bed, gradually gaining both confidence and comfort reading independently (Isozaki, 2014a, 2014b).

Confident readers

In mid to later elementary grades, children will begin to build confidence and fluency when reading. However, most children are still learning to read. More writing exercises and worksheets can be assigned to students, but most will need help with the instructions on the worksheets. As a child becomes more confident reading, start to introduce more “chapter books” in audio and in print. These are longer books with fewer pictures and usually come in series. Some classics include “Amelia Bedelia”, “The Magic Tree House”, “Horrid Henry” and “Amber Brown”. (See a full list of [chapter books](#) and recommended age-levels of [Newbery Award winners](#).)

Newbery Award winners span in age appropriateness from mid to late elementary (for example, “The Higher Power of Lucky”) through young adult, but are high quality and are a good place to start finding favorite authors. Most Newbery winners have audiobook versions available, and thanks to the growing understanding of listening’s role in literacy-building and the growth of interest and availability, the readings are often by the authors or by well-known professional actors, such as Christopher Paul

Curtis's *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*, read by *Reading Rainbow*'s LeVar Burton.

Now that reading is underway, video and movies at home can take on a newly helpful role. For building faster reading skills and even more connections to grasp between written and spoken language, try setting the language of a movie and the subtitles to match each other, for a fun and natural speed reading and listening reinforcement-verification challenge. Researchers Mitterer and McQueen (2009) found that film-viewing with subtitles in the same language as the language spoken in the movie is useful, but when the movie is one language and the subtitles in another, the language gain potential is lost, and as many biliterate viewers point out, it can also backfire, especially with subtitled mistranslations and lost jokes being remembered better than the words actually spoken in the film (Isozaki 2014b; Mitterer & McQueen 2009).

Moving or changing schools

International families need to be proactive and flexible about their goals and future plans. When these plans include a move overseas or changing to a school that is based in a different language, a child may need support if they are not up to grade level in the language of instruction. This is particularly crucial in grades 4 and 5 when students are making the transitions from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Rosenberg, 2012). When a child is removed from one language environment, especially in a divorce for example, it is important for both emotional and cognitive reasons to provide opportunities for the child to continue using all the languages they have acquired (Rosenberg, 2012). Reading can be at least one pillar of support.

From adolescence through the teen years

By the teen years the demands and schedules of the surrounding environment (schools, clubs, extracurricular activities, entrance exams, *juku*, etc.) may be time-consuming or rigid, and there may be more limits to what can be done in the

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minority language at home. With the infamous teenage rebellious stages at hand, parents may find that this is the time where battles need to be chosen carefully and bilingualism may not actually be something one chooses to fight over since adding trauma to the teenage angst and pressures about the future could be self-defeating. Hopefully, the groundwork of earlier years will carry through and at this point the efforts and choices of the teens themselves become more important. Parents can encourage and support but ultimately it may be the goals of the teen that guides and drives the process at this point.

Instead of pressuring the teen perhaps this is the time to think about the environment. For example, some teens may be thrilled by the competition and recognition that come from trying formal testing ([Eiken](#), TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS), which can also have the added benefit of being useful for the future. Are there weekend, online, or summer classes that can be taken? Independent projects, learning activities, or volunteer activities? Perhaps a teen can earn some extra pocket money by tutoring younger siblings or children of friends. Is there anything more that can be done within the context of the school?

Sometimes majority language schools and teachers in monolingual countries can be ignorant or unsupportive of minority language student's needs, but with a bit of advocacy and imagination sometimes accommodations can be made. For example, some Japanese teachers of English in Japanese public schools have been willing to let English speakers do independent work during English classes. Some Japanese elementary school principals are fine with having them take the month of September off to try out going to school in the minority language country, and have even counted their attendance there towards school in Japan. There have been cases also of negotiating a partial homeschooling/early release to allow for more to be done with the minority language at home. Though as parents we sometimes throw up our hands and assume nothing can be done with apparently inflexible school standards, actually it is not always so. With a bit of research, persistence, and creativity there are various things that can be done.

Hopefully by age 12 or 13, children have developed a love for reading. However, even confident readers may find the transition from children's books and chapter books into "teen" reading difficult (Brummitt-Yale, 2008). Two obstacles that adolescent readers may encounter that parents and teachers need to be aware of are cultural

differences and idioms. Despite trips home and the Internet, if a child has not had daily exposure to the minority language culture, s/he may have difficulty relating to the stories in 'tween and teen books. Many topics (love relationships and social problems) in teen books will be somewhat foreign or too mature for adolescents and teens in Japan. Finding a wider variety of reading and listening material may help: magazines or newspapers and more recent young adult-oriented books and audiobooks may help understanding and flexibility grow along with literacy.

Reluctant readers

Some children do not enjoy reading and try to avoid it. Many adolescent boys in particular will go through a stage where they lose enthusiasm for reading (Brummitt-Yale, 2008). When a child or student does not want to read, parents and educators need to find out the reason why. Once the cause is clear, the proper strategy can be used to help remedy the situation. Some common causes for not wanting to read are difficulty deciphering the sounds of the words, difficulty decoding (understanding the meaning of) the text; or a lack of interest in the content (Brummitt-Yale, 2008). When a learning disability is suspected, it is important to seek professional help as early as possible. Some learning differences can be detected at young ages, however, reading problems may not emerge until after age 7 or older.

Of the above issues, finding reading material that interests the child is the easiest to resolve. First, let the child choose the books, manga, magazines or newspapers that they want to read. Explore various genres: Does the child enjoy nonfiction, fantasy, adventure, mysteries? Find books related to the child's interests and hobbies. If they have a favorite TV or movie character or sports figure, finding books related to them might help. Many people enjoy watching a movie after they have read the book, but for reluctant readers, reading a book from a movie they have seen and love may increase motivation to read. Even though the child will be familiar with the story, the book will offer much more detail than the movie. Have the child report the differences and similarities of the book and movie. Another way to find interesting material is to ask other parents what authors or book series children of certain ages enjoyed.

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While trying to tap into your child's interests to find interesting reading material, do not limit yourselves to books. Book-loving parents may be despairing at this stage thinking their child is not "reading" if it isn't a novel. But remember *any* type of reading can be good input and a way to absorb more of the conventions of the written language, get information, and expand vocabulary. Tap into their passions. The teen who is obsessed with fashion might be more interested in fashion magazines. The vocabulary – along with the contextualizing photos and pictures – may help the words "stick" more than they would plowing through textbooks and drills. Or the one with a passion for basketball might be more interested in reading compelling Internet based news about basketball. If their world is immersed in the majority language they may not have an awareness or knowledge of how to seek out things that are interesting to them in the minority language. As a parent you can look for those things and introduce them whenever an occasion pops up. Instead of battling with them on the teen things that seem to be wasting time why not use it as a hook into literacy?

For those who may be despairing at this age that your teen is not reading at the level or quantity you had hoped for, try not to despair over the mechanics of "little picture" literacy issues (spelling, punctuation, etc.). Keep your eyes on the capital "L" (Big Picture) Literacy as much as possible. Rich, meaningful experiences, travel, and engaging discussions build Literacy too, and in the long run are more important and ultimately may provide the tools that enable your child to pursue their own language goals when they are ready.

Is the child having difficulty reading in both languages? If you are concerned that this may indicate a learning challenge, seek professional help for an evaluation, preferably in both languages. With proper help developing the skills and strategies, reading challenges can be overcome.

More books are being published to cater to learning differences. Books with off-white backgrounds and larger text, but more sophisticated content, will help children with dyslexia, for example. "High interest texts" are written especially to engage children who are used to the fast paced world of video games and TV and find typical reading material boring (Brummitt-Yale, 2008). The "Percy Jackson" series by Rick Riordan is a good example, in which the main character has dyslexia and it is dealt with in a positive, affirming way.

5

Writing

Writing is undeniably an important skill for life and academic success. Writing helps to develop higher-thinking skills such as critical thinking and is important for academic success in whatever language the student is studying in (Nobuoka 2006). Writing can also be a fun, creative outlet.

Some parents worry about poor writing skills, bad spelling or sloppy penmanship. One important point to remember is that typically writing proficiency lags behind reading, so it's important to not be overly critical of a child's writing.

Pre-writing

In the early years, once a toddler is able to hold a writing instrument, children will be experimenting with these new gadgets and paper. It's fine to let children punch holes or rip paper. The marks they make on paper may be nothing more than blobs of color. These fun, and perhaps destructive, activities help children develop their fine motor skills. As children gain more control of their motor skills, they will begin to draw spirals and circles. Next, young children will "scribble and write mock letters or real letters that do not [necessarily] correspond to sounds" (Rubin & Carlan, 2005). At this stage, refrain from correcting anything your child creates, but remember to praise them for their efforts.

To encourage your child, provide a wide variety of "writing" tools: In addition to crayons, pens and pencils, have markers, paints and a variety of textures (sand, whipped cream) and colors of paper. Creating art alongside you child is fun for everyone.

According to Nobuoka (2006), "interest in putting a 'pen to paper' will vary widely among children in these early years. If your child doesn't seem interested in making 'art', take a break and offer the opportunity a few months later." One story shared by Nobuoka (2006) was of a parent who was at first disappointed when her toddler showed little interest in drawing or painting, instead focused on his trains.

However, when the child turned four, “he had a sudden and very keen interest in scribbling and painting and would spend hours going through stacks of paper”. Rather than pushing your children to write, let the child develop at their own pace in these early years (Johnson, 2014). While coloring pages are a great way to help your child develop control, be sure to provide opportunities to do free art, drawing and other fun, age-appropriate projects.

The emergence of letter forms

As a child develops his motor skills, the next phase, especially if a child is learning to read, is the semi-phonetic stage. Here a young writer is beginning to understand that letters represent sounds though many errors may occur in the attempt to write words or sentences (Rubin & Carlan, 2005). In other words, children will attempt to write actual words, but will probably not be using correct spelling. Often the phonetic spelling will be accurate. Example: “kat” instead of “cat”. Nobuoka (2006) states that if children have “been exposed to enough print, parents will begin to see print characters (roman letters or perhaps hiragana or kanji) in children's art and scribbles”. At this stage, again, praise the child’s efforts and give them plenty of opportunities to work out their muscles and build up hand-eye coordination. More free drawing and coloring pages will help. The Internet has endless free coloring pages. Use the search terms “coloring pages” plus the topic or theme you or your child is interested in focusing on. One way to encourage vocabulary building is to choose themes related to the holidays or seasons. This way, children can draw or write about vocabulary that is part of conversations they are hearing every day.

The first stage of writing

Around ages 4 to 6 years old, children will have developed control over their writing instruments. There are several worksheet creators online, such as the [Amazing Handwriting Worksheet Maker](#) website. These can be used to create worksheets for penmanship practice. Start with the child’s name in block letters. Next, alphabet letters

and words can be used. Create worksheets that correspond with the letters and vocabulary or word families (cat, hat, sat, etc.) of phonics books or other books a child is reading.

Starting from the kindergarten years, encourage children to make up and write stories. The child may want to draw a picture before or after creating their story. Copying text or tracing over a parent's handwriting is also good practice if the parent's handwriting is neat.

Children can begin learning cursive writing in earnest around ages 8 or 9, though some children might enjoy practicing cursive by tracing at earlier ages (Johnson, 2014). Cursive writing worksheets are also available online. Sometimes students with messy handwriting can improve their control by trying to master cursive writing.

Spelling

Some research shows “that *direct instruction* in spelling has limited effects” (Krashen, 2014) and that it is reading itself that builds spelling proficiency. However, there are exercises teachers can do to help students gain a better grasp of spelling. Steck-Vaughn's Spelling books teach spelling patterns in units that are well-planned. The teacher's edition is excellent and provides interesting, fun ways to teach spelling. Two important keys to remembering how a word is spelled is knowing how it is pronounced and understanding its meaning(s) (Kimura & Ssali, 2009). Two activities that will help children improve both spelling and grammar is journal writing and timed writing – with no error correction by parent or teachers (Nation, 2013). Some children in Japan enjoy the “koukan nikki” or diary-exchange type journals. Two or more beginning writers take turns writing to and for each other in a shared journal, which is a great activity in English as well.

Some languages are easier to spell than others, and English spelling seems to be almost as difficult as kanji for some students. Two more ways to improve spelling are timed-writing (Nation, 2013) and reading a lot (Krashen 2014).

Increasing writing fluency

Once the child can write in sentences (with errors) on their own, try some timed writing (also known as free writing or speed writing) exercises. Using a timer, have the child write as much as they can in an allotted time. Begin with 2 minutes for early elementary school students. As the child gets faster and gains confidence, slowly increase the length of time. It is very important that *no* corrections are made during this timed fluency practice. The child should not use an eraser and should not cross out mistakes and the parent should not point out mistakes. After the allotted time, count the number of words the child has written and calculate the words per minute “score”:

$$\text{Total words/minutes} = \text{words per minute (wpm)}$$

Post the score on a [timed writing chart](#). Over time, the child will become motivated to do more as she sees her score going up on the chart. Some children enjoy doing this exercise because they know there is a short time limit to it.

Journaling

Another way to develop a child’s writing fluency is to have them keep a journal. As with timed writing, the journal should not be scrutinized for mistakes. Parents or teachers should make encouraging comments about content: what was interesting or what might be used to develop into a longer piece of writing, for example. Parent and child (or siblings) can use double-entry journals that have space for a reader to give feedback on the writer’s ideas. In the classroom, students can have two journals: one that they have at home and one that the teacher is checking. When they meet, the two exchange the journals so that the student always has a journal to write in outside of instruction time.

From Paragraphs to essays

As students become more confident readers and writers, paragraph structure can be taught. A common approach to explain how to write a good paragraph is the “sandwich” method. The bread on the top and bottom are the topic sentence and concluding sentence. These two sentences can be similar content, using different wording. The sandwich filling includes the descriptions and details.

Once a child has mastered paragraphs, they can begin longer writing projects such as essays and reports. The format for an essay is similar to an expanded paragraph: The topic sentence becomes a thesis statement, each paragraph gives information to support the thesis statement and the conclusion repeats or highlights the most important points. Encourage writers to start their essays or reports with attention-getting devices such as famous quotes, questions, surprising or shocking information, or a story related to their topic. There are many websites that give examples on paragraph and essay writing as well as tips and instruction. For extra practice, students can try [book reports](#) and creative stories. Let your child choose a topic that interests them to research and report in writing.

See appendices for a timed-writing [chart](#) and [book report](#) forms.

6

Practical tips and ideas

Realistic expectations & “grade-level”

With an enthusiastically motivated learner, it may be possible to keep a child at grade level in two languages, in other words, the child can read and write at the same proficiency as her monolingual peers. Many parents will find that the time and energy required to do so make it difficult. Still other parents have unrealistic expectations of where their child should be. If the child’s school and social life are all in the community language, then the time available for the minority language input is limited. Keep in mind that it is unlikely that your child will have the same linguistic input as a native speaker would in your home country. In many cases the reading, writing or speaking levels will simply not realistically look the same. This does not mean your child is “behind,” after all, there are two languages being acquired. It does mean that the pace may be different from what may be defined as “grade level expectations”. To keep reading enjoyable, worry less about reading level and just be sure to make time to read and encourage your child to read often enough. If a child is keeping up in school, they can always catch up at a later time in the minority language. Online benchmarks from your respective country or state will help gauge your child’s proficiency.

When an English-speaking teen enters a Japanese junior high school, he might be surprised at how challenging the curriculum is. Even if the curriculum seems easy, encourage your child to pay attention to the details of spelling and punctuation. This can also be a great time to improve handwriting. Currently, the English curriculum is transitioning to a more communicative approach, but many textbooks used in the Japanese junior high and high schools include higher level linguistic-focused information in Japanese, such as word stress, using the international phonic symbols or explanations in Japanese of how one’s mouth and face is positioned to produce certain sounds in English. Make sure your child studies these points as well as they are often included on major tests.

Dictionaries

Dictionary skills are important. If you purchase one, be sure it is appropriate for the child's age and proficiency. Because children outgrow dictionaries in a few years, online dictionaries may be a better option. There are many specifically for children, and most online or electronic dictionaries have helpful recordings of pronunciations.

Some parts of the dictionary you can bring to your child's attention are: its alphabetical arrangement; the pronunciation(s); the definition(s) and example sentences and/or pictures. For elementary-school age and older, point out how to identify the parts of speech and encourage students to check how a word changes depending on what part of speech it is. One example is analyze, which becomes analyzed, analyzer, analyses, analyzing, analyst, analytic, analytical, analytically, etc. These are also called "word families".

Bilingual dictionaries can also be an important tool. Children growing up with two languages benefit from ways to forge connections between their languages. It is sometimes difficult to switch gears, for example, to explain an experience that happened in one language to someone in else in the other language. A bilingual dictionary can help strengthen both languages.

It's important to know when to use a dictionary. Students should be checking words from reading; however, when writing, they should keep their use of the dictionary (or thesaurus) to a minimum. Encourage them to use the language they know when they are writing, using a dictionary mostly to check spelling.

Vocabulary cards

Vocabulary cards are the fastest way to remember new words (Nation, 2013). Once a student is reading with confidence, it may be time to begin using vocabulary cards. Vocabulary cards are 2cm x 3cm, smaller than flash cards and easy to hold and carry around.

When a student encounters a new word while reading or in conversation or looks up a new word in the dictionary, the



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student should include this new word in the vocabulary card set. Depending on the student's proficiency, the cards can be made bilingually (Japanese on one side and the minority language on the other) or in only one language (the new word on one side with its definition in the same language on the other). These cards are great for remembering Japanese kanji and their readings (*yomikata*).

If you would like to test your child's vocabulary, check out [Lextutor](#) online. Once your student has a large grasp of the first 2,000 to 3,000 high-frequency words, start working on the [academic word list](#). After that, students can build their vocabulary by focusing on root words, suffixes and prefixes.

Screen vs. paper

Digital devices, such as computers, iPhones, and tablet readers are ubiquitous. There are many games and apps promoting literacy skills, reading and spelling. Research is just beginning to focus on the how these devices affect reading compared to the traditional paperbound book.

In research comparing paper and screen reading, “[s]ubjects who read the texts on paper performed significantly better than subjects who read the texts on the computer screen” (Mangen, et. Al, 2012). One reason for this seems to be the physicality of paper books: Readers have access to the entire text rather than just one page, digitally, and the mind maps out and remembers information based on where it is on a page. Reading from a screen rather than from paper slightly slows reading speed, decreases comprehension, and also causes more stress and tiredness (Mangen, et. al, 2012). Hyperlinks in text, as many websites include, especially tax a reader's cognitive load and reading comprehension suffers (Mangen, et. al, 2012). This doesn't mean that reading should never be done on digital devices, but parents and educators should be aware of the differences between these formats and provide children with plenty of print material.



Photo courtesy of Mary Nobuoka

Starting a learning circle

One of the best ways to keep children motivated to learn to read and write is to have them study with a group of their peers. Often known as “Saturday schools” or “cooperative learning circles”, these learning environments help develop reading and writing skills in a child’s minority language even when there is pressure to assimilate into the larger community’s culture (Fishman, 1964, 1985). In Japan, many international and returnee families get together to create learning circles or Saturday schools. Learning circles differ from playgroups in that the focus is on formal – though hopefully fun – teaching and learning rather than the playing, singing and dancing done at the preschool level. There are many ways to form and run a learning circle. Two of the biggest challenges in operating a learning circle are finding a suitable location and a good teacher.

Many communities have public spaces that can be rented for a low fee or maybe even for free. Check with your local city or ward office for information about these places. Some families may be able to host a group in their home. With either choice, storage of teaching materials may be difficult.

The group should decide whether they want to hire a teacher or rotate the responsibility of lesson planning and teaching among the parents. There are pros and cons for both having parents teach and hiring a teacher.

Parents can offer their services for free, thereby keeping the cost of the lessons very low, and this option gives students more exposure to a variety of language use and accents when parents rotate teaching duties. However, sometimes, a child might “act up” or “show off” when his or her parent is leading an activity. It’s also difficult to keep the workload equal among the parents – especially if they don’t have confidence teaching. Quality might vary. A group could always start with parents doing the teaching and then hire a teacher later if people get burned out.

Hiring a teacher may cost more, but it takes a lot of pressure off the parents. Children are sometimes more motivated having a teacher, rather than a parent telling them to do homework. Ask carefully about experience and observe sample lessons by

prospective teachers to assess if the teacher has enough experience teaching literacy skills to bilingual children. Teachers with experience in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan, for example, may not know how to teach children literacy skills. It can be difficult to find a qualified teacher, but check local international schools or place an ad on job websites.

Parents should decide exactly what type of group they want and what their goals are. Decide who will manage the group, the scheduling, the money, etc. To be realistic, parents should understand that one class a week is not enough to teach children to read; support is needed at home. Make sure parents are on board with this, otherwise you may have some children who start falling behind.

For younger children, choosing a seasonal or timely theme or a children's picture book and building a lesson around it is an easy approach to creating a lesson plan. For very young children, one letter or word can be the lesson theme. For elementary school students, themes should be chosen from a variety of subjects (science, social studies, music, art, etc.) in order to develop a wider range of vocabulary for students. Activities in class can include songs, games, book-reading, discussion and writing practice.

Start as you mean to go: It is best to limit language use to the target language at the time and place of the lesson. If children start using Japanese, when left unchecked, it can be very difficult to bring them back into the target language.

How to get minority language books and reading materials

One of the factors for literacy success is having a library in the home. We are fortunate to have access to both new and used books from a variety of websites that deliver books to our door. Used books work just as well as new ones. Book Off and other used bookstores, depending on the location, sometimes have children's books written in various foreign languages for sale. Check rummage sales, bookstores and library sales during home visits. In Japan, international schools may have flea markets where international families sell books.

If you have a community of learners using the same target language, organize book exchanges, book swaps or book clubs. With book exchanges, a group can lend books which are circulated to each family in the group for a predetermined length of

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time. Some groups put 5 to 7 books into a protective plastic bag with a list of the book titles and authors. The bags can be numbered for easy reference and then exchanged regularly until all the families have had a chance to read the books from each bag. At the end of the circulation period, the books are returned to their original owners. Often when children get their books back, it feels like getting new books since they haven't seen them in a while.

Book swaps involve families collecting books (and magazines or games) that they have read, used or outgrown and do not need anymore. All the books can be placed on a table and the children and parents each get a turn to choose a book (usually the same number that they brought). The order of who chooses a book can be determined by lottery or some other fun, interactive game. In book swaps, the books and other materials are not returned to their previous owners.

There are several publishers' book clubs available for groups, such as learning circles or for families that want to participate together. [Scholastic](#) has a long-running book program that is usually done in schools, but may be implemented by individual families or by smaller groups, for example for homeschooling groups or for informal weekend schools. Some have been able to sign up as a home-school (and what family of a minority language child promoting biliteracy isn't a home-school?) through their website. Scholastic books are cheap. Some are of low quality and easily fall apart, while many others are the same hardcover editions of commercially available books, but available at much deeper discounts than generally offered at any store. The cheaper quality ones are still good for children who go through books quickly or are not particular about keeping the books in a permanent home library, and the prices mean you and your child can also sample quantities and varieties of books and genres without the huge expenditures you would otherwise need. Among the monthly offerings of classic literature, picture books, chapter books, novels, reference books, non-fiction, kid's magazines, games, puzzles, popular fashions and much more there is usually something of interest for even the most reluctant reader. Not sure what to order? You also can try a potluck assortment in their bundled books that are shockingly cheap but still often good quality and a great way to jump-start your library. A percentage of your family or group's orders will be available to you in a point-type system for future orders, to help build your library. Scholastic books are mostly American English and some center around American culture and holidays, but they do also include an array of

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multicultural offerings and world famous literature (for example J.K Rowling and Roald Dahl).

Another great book club is [Baker's Books](#) from the UK. This book club offers higher quality reading books, sticker books, cookbooks, study workbooks and reference books (such as dictionaries and atlases). It has a program that helps groups, or club managers, build up a library of free books (usually the value of 20% or the total books order). The book packs from Baker's offer good discounts on sets of books related to one theme or group (e.g. "reluctant readers", "adventure stories for boys", "Roald Dahl book set"). Baker's offers many hardbacks of excellent quality that will last a long time in a school or home library. Some of the books for sale appeal to parents. The prices may seem cheap or expensive depending on the yen-pound exchange rate.

International Children's [Bunko Association](#) (ICBA) is a wonderful resource that lends out hundreds of books to registered groups. The groups operate like learning circles, mentioned above, but are usually run by parents. ICBA does have some requirements about the programs they lend their books to, one being that the program is not too instruction-oriented. In other words, the program needs to have a relaxed, hands-on, fun approach rather than a school-like setting.

Of course, don't forget your local public library. Become a frequent visitor to your library. If the public library does not have a large selection (or even if it does), you can ask your library to order books you are interested in reading. Libraries in Japan have budgets for ordering books requested by the public. If you get a chance to do *satogairi* (a visit back to the home country), check out the library there. Most libraries in the U.S. for example now offer rentals for ebooks that can be accessed even in Japan on kindle-type devices or tablets.

See [Resources](#) for great websites with free books.



Photo from Mary Nobuoka

Volunteer reading at the library

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More Fun & Games

The following are just a few ideas of games and activities that can be used at home or in the classroom. After the name of the activity, an age and/or proficiency level is given as a general guide.

Rhyming Nonsense (young beginning readers – ages 4 – 7)

This is a rhyming competition for two or more people. Create funny nonsense rhyming words. Select a certain number of words that rhyme, like 3 words: *yat, jat, lat*. The next person creates 5 words using the same rhyming sound: *zat, shat, dat*. The aim is to not say any “real” words. If one person says a “real” word, this rhyme is stopped. Then you begin with another rhyme. However, please keep in mind that if a young child says a “real” word that she doesn’t know, like *vat*, it shouldn’t count and would be best to ignore the fact that it is a “real” word. After all, the purpose of the game is for the child to practice rhyming. The competition element is there to make the game more exciting. Adjust the number of words to the child’s comfort level and be sure the child is winning the game most of the time. For older children, use more difficult combinations: *zipple, fripple, shipple, flipple, plipple, shriple, gipple, bripple, lipple, thipple*. Suggestions: This can be played at bath time, snack time, mealtimes, or when waiting for the school bus.

Out of the Box (young beginning readers – ages 4 – 7)

Use a box or a tin, a size that is easy to hold in your hands. Fill it with word cards. These words can be written on any type of paper or you can even use recycled food boxes. Be sure the words are large enough for your child to read easily. Write words your child is interested in on the cards, for example: her name, favorite animal, favorite color, a funny word, people who are important to her like family members, easy or fun words she hears in favorite books, songs, and so forth. Put the words in the box and take them out in turns.

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Have fun reading the words! This is the key. Say, “Wow, I got hippo!” “I got grandpa.” “Mine’s piano!” Naturally, the child cannot read the words from the start. So, when she pulls them out, read it for her. Then let her say the word. When the word begins with a letter that follows a simple phonics rule, such as “B” is for Bear, teach the sound for the initial letter. In this case “B”. However, do not have her sound out the entire word! Then, it is no longer a game and loses its fun element. Say “Bear starts with B. The letter “B” sounds like /b/ (B sound).” Then move on to another word. If your child has difficulty understanding that the letter “b” sounds like /b/, put easier words that start with the letter “B” in the box.

Variation 1: For the above game to have a winner, you can write words in different color letters, for example blue and black. When a person gets a word with blue letters, she can then choose an extra word. At the end of the game, the person with the most words wins.

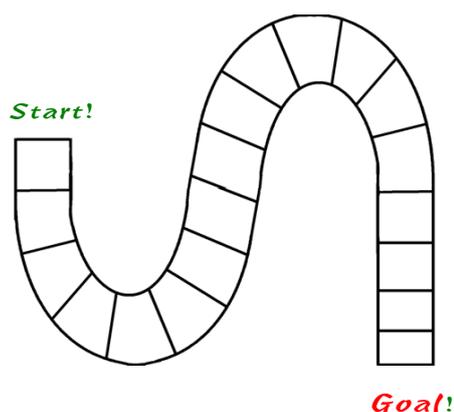
Variation 2: Make the letter “o” into a smiley face. When a person gets a word with a smiley face, she can take 2 extra words.

Variation 3: Choose a category. If you get a word in that category, say “food” or “animals” and you get to take 2 extra cards.

Variation 4: Put in 2, 3 or even 4 of the same word cards. If someone gets 2 of the same card, she can take 2 extra turns, if she gets 3 she takes 3 extra turns and so forth. This can help kids who need to review certain words and can help motivate them to play and win the game.

Personalized Game Board (ages 4 and up, older children can make their own board)

Create a Personalized Game Board. Choose a theme your child is highly interested in for your game board, such as trains, dinosaurs, dolphins, teddy bears, etc. Use cardboard or poster board, cut to any size you prefer for the board. Make the board design as elaborate or simple as you like. Of course, your child can participate in making the board design. One simple way to design a board is to use cut out pictures or photos and use stickers to make a



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path. However, you could also include paper art or original crafts on the board. Whatever you choose, make it fun and personalized!

For markers, small toy figures or toy cars, and so forth can be used. Players can use dice, a spinner or make cards to decide how many moves to make.

Make a path on the board that includes a *Start* and a *Finish*. A simple way to make a path is to use large circle stickers. Between the *Start* and the *Finish* include places for the players on the path to stop with various “tasks” or cards to be read. The cards can be as simple as letters of the alphabet, decodable words, sight words or fun questions.

The player who reaches the *Finish* first is the winner. This will enable the child to win by the luck of the dice or spinner, rather than by reading skill. Consequently, the learner is free to make plenty of reading errors, yet can still win the game, encouraging her to challenge herself and not be fearful of mistakes.

Labeling (ages 4 and up)

Mary Noguchi (1996) shares a fun labeling activity that a mother in her survey used: While your child is at school, create a label or two for objects around the house. When the child comes home, tell them that “Labelman” visited. The child then searches around the house looking for the labels. When she finds it, she reads it. After several items have been labeled during the week, the labels can be gathered and used as flashcards to check whether the child can actually read the words and as a review. Of course, children can be encouraged to create their own labels for items in their bedrooms or around the house, too.

Concentration or Memory Game (ages 4 and up, children can make cards)

This is a classic that most parents and teachers will be familiar with. Make 2 cards for each word (using any category of words: letters of the alphabet, decodable words, sight words, animals, colors, numbers, or words your child would like to read such as *princess*, *sing*, *dinosaur*, *teddy bear*, etc. Some people prefer to write a word on one card and match it with its picture on the other. Adjust the number of words to the child’s ability. You might start with about 6 words (12 cards). Later you can add more words or make a new set, including more words. Use a dark felt marker and write neatly, so it is easy to read.

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Variations: For children who are already comfortable reading simple words you can make this game more challenging.

Synonym Concentration: Make the words synonym pairs: quiet/silent, big/large, small/little...

Antonym Concentration: Make the words antonym pairs: big/small, quiet/noisy, long/short...

*One step further – When you read her a book with words she has learned, ask her if she can find a certain word and point to it.

BINGO! (ages 4 and up)

This classic game is a big hit in Japan. Instead of using numbers, use letters (for younger children) or words/phrases. For younger children, use the [Bingo card](#) with only 9 squares, older, more confident readers can manage 25 squares. First, write the target words on the whiteboard (or a piece of paper). The words can be decodable or sight words, target words from a recent reading exercise or holiday-related words (ex. Valentine's Day: *chocolate, candy, cupid, heart, card, love, like, February, red*). The students should copy the words (or letters) *randomly*, one word in each square.

When everyone is ready, the teacher can say the words (or use the word in a sentence). The student will mark each word as they are said. For younger children, point to the word on the whiteboard, if needed. Older students should be able to listen to the word and find it on their card. Of course prizes of stickers or Hershey Kisses can be awarded to students who get Bingo. The game can continue until all the students have gotten Bingo.

There are also [Bingo card makers online](#). Teachers can select words from lessons or based on themes to create multiple cards.

Go Fish (ages 5 and up, older children can make their cards)

Go Fish is a popular card game in the U.S. Players are dealt a hand of 7 cards each. The remainder of the cards are put into a pile face down. The aim is for each player to get as many pairs of cards as possible. On each turn, one player asks another player "Do you have any...?" The player answers yes or no. If the answer is "yes", the second player must hand over the card – or cards if they have more than one – to the

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first player. If the answer is “no”, the second player replies, “Go fish.” Then the first player takes a card from the pile.

Rather than using regular playing cards, you make word cards or reuse the cards from the concentration game. Choose a word family* or a phoneme you want to teach, like oo as in book for the cards. If there are 2 players, aim to make at least 24 cards (12 words) to make it fun.

Word suggestions: Use oo as in pool (tool, school, moon, soon spoon, cool, poop, loop snoop, room, zoom, broom), or word families: (fat, cat, sat, bat, that, and so forth).

Tic Tac Toe (ages 5 and up)

Make Tic Tac Toe grids with word families written in the grids. I recommend making several grids, so you can alternate them. On each grid write words from *one* word family. Remember you will need at least 9 words from the same family for each grid. Words with long vowels and silent “e” at the end work well. In addition, words with “ai”, “oa”, “ow”, “ee”, “ea” also work well. Use words that are familiar to your child, for example: *cake, bake, make, rake, fake, snake, lake, brake, take* could be written on one grid. Then, make markers for Tic Tac Toe. You can cut out 5 “X’s” and 5 “O’s” from some cardboard.

Crazy Eights (ages 5 and up, older children can make their cards)

Crazy Eights is also used to teach word families. Make the word cards in 4 different colors. What words should I write on the cards? From the following choose what would best stimulate your child to enjoy reading: 1) Words your child would like to read like princess, sing, dinosaur, teddy bear, etc. 2) Short, easy high frequency words, words you read often in books: the, and, a, of, is, in, up, on, my, go, see, etc. For example, write her name, a pet’s name, favorite color, favorite animal, a person or place she likes, and so forth. Next, you can also include short high frequency words, which you find in your child’s easy to read books. Start by choosing the high frequency words, for example: and, he, she, go, to, the, of, on, up, by, it, my, car, tree, come, go, play, etc. from a single easy book your child has heard many times.

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Charades (ages 5 and up, but some children may need help reading the cards)

Charades is a classic total physical response (TPR) activity which can be made for various proficiencies. Students can also help to make the cards. For early learners, use simple actions (verbs) such as “go”, “jump”, “run”, “eat”, etc.

Running dictation (ages 5 and up)

This activity can be adapted for any proficiency. The teacher should write two sentences (or even single words for very beginners) on two different pieces of paper. Tape the papers onto the wall at the back of the room or some place that is not near where the students are sitting (the back of a free-standing white board can also be used). Divide the students into pairs. Student A sits at the table/desk with a pencil and paper, while student B runs to the prepared paper and reads it, tries to remember it and then runs back to dictate the message to student A. Student A writes down what student B reports. Student A may not leave their seat. Student B may not shout or carry paper or pencils. The partners both check for correct spelling. Once the team completes one set, the partners can switch so that student B writes and student A runs. Make sure that there are no obstacles in the students' path and caution the students to be careful when running so that they avoid running into each other or tripping. Again, no running with pencils in hand!

Continuing story (ages 5 and up)

This is a simple activity in which two or more people create a story by adding a new sentence. For older students, grammar can be included into the rules (e.g. past, present or future tense). To help the students begin, choose the main characters name and where they are. The teacher can start off the first sentence: Once upon a time, there was a boy named Sam who lived in a dog house in New York... The sillier, the better!

A variation of this game is using conditionals: “If...” (Student 1: If it rains tomorrow, we won't go on a picnic. Student 2: If we don't go on a picnic, we can watch a movie. Student 3: If we watch a movie, we'll need to buy popcorn, etc.)

Spelling bee (ages 6 and up)

Both formal and informal spelling bees can be done in class with teams or as an individual competition, or even with one child. Students can be given a list of

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vocabulary to study. In addition to spelling the word, ask students to use the word in a sentence.

Another variation for vocabulary building is: The teacher gives hints until one of the teams guesses the words. Then the team that guesses the target word (from the homework list) must spell it correctly (either orally or written on the whiteboard). Points can be given for both guessing the word and spelling it correctly. If the target word is spelled incorrectly, the other team gets a chance to spell it.

To make the game a little less competitive, alternate between each team. Also, for younger learners, the entire team can write the word together on the whiteboard so that weaker players can be supported by stronger players.

This game also can be adjusted for classes that have varied proficiencies. By using the less competitive version mentioned above, the teacher can select target words based on each team's grade or reading level even though two teams differ in proficiency.

Reverse crossword puzzle (ages 6 and up)

With a huge piece of paper, and based on the vocab notebooks the learners have developed from what they are reading, making a crossword puzzle “backwards.” First a member or the teacher writes a word (as long a word as possible) in the center of the paper. Then, in demonstrating the process and point system.

Write the word: one point. Say what it means: 2 points. Use it in a sentence: 5 points! Then the next member tries to fit a word across what is already on the paper. This works with different levels of students because everyone can get some points, even for just writing a word.

Word scavenger hunt (ages 4 and up)

This is a great party game but can be done with one or more students. Using any children's book, select some key words (or phrases) and write them on small pieces of paper. Each child gets one or two pieces of paper. Go over the words to make sure the children can read and understand their word(s). Then as you read the story, the children must listen for their word. When they hear it, they should say the word. Small prizes can be given out when the child catches their word.

Shiritori/ghost (ages 5 and up)

This classic Japanese word game can be played in English. First, choose a theme. You use the last letter of the previous person's word to form a new word. Example (for the theme "animals": cat – tiger – raccoon – newt – turtle – elephant – turkey – yak – etc. In the English version, the person who cannot think of another word in the category gets a letter (first out, "g", second time "h", etc. First person to spell *ghost* is out.

Mad Libs (ages 6 and up)

Mad Libs are fill-in-the-blank story templates, where students make a list of required words by parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, numbers, exclamations, etc.). The students (or teacher) then read the story using the words the students listed. The final result is usually a silly story that will make everyone laugh. They are a great way to practice the parts of speech and spelling. They can be found [online](#), or children can write their own to share with each other.

Dictation (ages 6 and up)

Most children love to speak into a recording device and hear their own words. Another fun activity is to let children dictate words or a story either to an adult or to a computer or smart phone with dictation software. The child can try to read back what they have said or transcribe the story onto paper for writing practice. An adult should help identify possible errors in software dictation. For writing practice, too, have younger student dictate their stories to an adult or older learner. The student can then trace over or copy the text that they dictated.

The Dictionary Game (ages 9 and up)

This is a game of the imagination for groups of three or more students. It is similar to "Balderdash" or "Fictionary". The teacher (or students in turn) chooses a low-frequency word that students are unlikely to know. A great place to find these words is an online dictionary's "[word of the day](#)" archive page. Write the word and its part of speech on the board and pronounce the word for the students. Students (individually, in pairs or small groups – depending on the size of the class) write a fake definition on small pieces of paper, while the teacher writes the real definition of the word. Be sure to remind the students that they do *not* need to know the real meaning of

the word and that they should be as creative as possible. The teacher collects all the pieces of paper and randomly numbers them. Next, the teacher reads each “definition” aloud. Each team chooses the number of the definition they think is correct. If they choose the correct definition they get 2 points. If a team chooses a fake definition, the team who wrote it gets 1 point. The purpose of this game is to get students thinking about words, using the language and writing in the target language. It is not so important for students to remember low frequency words, but teachers can use the game words in example sentences to show how the word is used. Using target words from spelling lists that are age appropriate is not recommended, as some students may already know the word, and the game may not be as fun.

Texting and emailing

Parents can use frequent text messages or emails to their children to give reminders, share stories or news from the Internet that will be of interest to their child or just to let the child know the parent is thinking about them. This is a great way to keep communication going into and through the teen years.

Koukan Nikki/Journal exchange

Have a shared journal/diary and take turns writing to and for each other. Or have the Journal exchange among a group of friends.

Tests

Have children/students create their own tests or test questions. This helps students review material while they are practicing their reading and writing skills. It can be done individually or in pairs or small groups.

Collaboration

Get students working together. Highly successful students study and work together (Stauss 2013). In his research, Sugata Mitra (2013) observed that students in groups were able to master even very difficult concepts without the help of a teacher. Mitra created an online community, called “[School in the Clouds](#)” where students can work on inquiry projects together.

9

Conclusion

When is literacy achieved? There is no one answer to this question. It depends on what your goals are and what your child's goals are. Some parents might be satisfied to see their child reading novels for pleasure or writing short notes to grandparents. Others might want to send their children to university or graduate school overseas. Think of literacy as a spectrum: There is no point at which there is some finish line. It starts in infancy when babies start recognizing symbols and continues throughout adulthood with continual expansion of vocabulary and concepts. Some parents might be satisfied to see their child reading novels for pleasure. Others might want to send their children to university or graduate school overseas, which would require much more demanding reading and writing proficiencies.

There is no finish line for anyone and it isn't a race, and those without the resources to make it to some test score level should still be proud of whatever input and progress they have made. Whether a child can read Jane Austen or newspapers, or song lyrics or street signs, it is ALL literacy.

In some situations, single parenting, limited budgets or life with in-laws, for example, can restrict the amount of input, but there is always an opportunity to catch up. Parents who have done well with oral bilingualism may have given their children the background to enable their kids to push forward on their own power with literacy when they hit Jr. High School English classes, and that is okay too.

Remember: Be a reading model – Children love to imitate their parents and caregivers, so it's important to model reading and writing. Plan for reading to be a fun activity either as a shared experience of loving good stories, or just like a sort of game. As the parent or facilitator *you* create the shared fun atmosphere, forever engraving this enjoyable reading experience in your child's mind. Invite your child to a family reading time or to help write Christmas and New Year's cards. Keep in mind, a young child may not realize an electronic device is similar as a traditional book and could

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mistakenly think a parent is merely playing a game rather than reading; therefore, be sure your child sees you reading paper books, too.

It is often said that bilingualism is a wonderful gift. Bilingualism expands future opportunities and skills socially, economically and cognitively. By teaching your child to read in a second language, you are not only supporting your child's future academic success, but also building loving bonds, empowering communication and self-directed learning, and creating wonderful memories together. Have fun! Enjoy reading and writing.

Appendices

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Book Report (easier)

Name: _____

What is the name of the book? _____

Who wrote the book? _____

Who is in the book? What are they like?

Where does the story take place?

What is the book about?

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What did you think of the book?

Draw your favorite scene from the book.

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Give your opinion of the book.

Can you identify any themes in this book? What are they?

Was there a moral or message the author wanted to teach? Explain:

What new words did you learn in this book?

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Name: _____

B	I	N	G	O
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Starting Your Bilingual Child on the Path to Biliteracy

Name: _____

B	I	N	G	O

Resources

Free books and other reading materials

[Bibliomania](#) (fiction, short stories, poetry and more)

[Bingo card makers online](#)

[Bygosh.com](#) (children's classics, short stories, novels, poems and more)

International Children's [Bunko Association](#)

International Children's [Digital Library](#) (English, French, Spanish and more)

[Literature.org](#) (unabridged classic literature)

[MIT Open Courseware](#) (free study materials)

[Page by Page Books](#)

[ProPlay](#) (children's plays, musicals, etc.)

[Project Gutenberg](#) (27,000 free e-books)

[Starfall.com](#) (from ABC recognition to phonics books to games and activities)

[Trilingual Mama](#) (a list of book resources for various languages)

More resources

[Amazing Handwriting Worksheet Maker](#) (create personalized handwriting worksheets in print, D'Nealian or cursive style)

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[Baker's Books](#) (a UK-based book club)

[Bilingual Monkeys](#) (an inspirational blog from Adam Beck with lots of great resources)

[Bilingualism SIG](#) (JALT Special Interest Group focusing on research and raising children in two or more languages/cultures)

David Paul's [flip cards](#)/flip boards!

[Discovery puzzle maker](#) (Create your own crosswords, word searches and more!)

[Education in Japan](#) (a blog about education in Japan and related topics)

[Eiken](#) (The Eiken or STEP Test can be an excellent motivation for your child to build their reading skills and develop their vocabulary. Check the Eiken website for [downloadable materials](#)/past tests. Face-to-face interviews start from grade 3 and upwards.) Always start with a test that you *know* your child will pass easily!

[Highlights Magazine](#) (a subscription magazine for ages 0 to 12)

Kindergarten readiness [checklist](#)

[Lextutor](#) (an online vocabulary test)

[Mindset](#) (research/worksheet lesson)

Recommended books for higher elementary through early teens -- almost any [Newbery Award](#) winning book, and almost all of these have high quality audiobooks available on CD or in downloads for reasonable prices

[Reading A to Z](#) (a reasonably-priced reading program and includes excellent lesson-plan suggestions, worksheets and books – thousands of books)

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[Reading eggs](#) (a paid subscription reading program for either British or American English)

[Speed Reading course](#) (from E. Quinn, Paul Nation and Sonia Millett)

[Spelling & Vocabulary City](#) (a great site to practice spelling and vocab)

[Scholastic books](#) (a U.S.-based book club)

Scholastic [100 words children need to know](#) series of workbooks

[School in the clouds](#) (a website that supports group learning through inquiry-based projects)

[TELL](#) (Tokyo English Life Line provides support, counseling, testing and resources for international families in Japan)

[Time4Writing.com](#) (short courses via the Internet, from sentence through essays. The teachers – based in the U.S. – are responsive and helpful)

[Quizlet](#) (a website for making online flashcards and quizzes)

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