

# Introduction

PAULA M. RHYNER

A child's success in school is strongly influenced by the knowledge and skills that he or she has acquired before entering school (Duncan et al., 2007). Thus, a child's experiences as an infant, toddler, and preschooler are critical to the acquisition of a set of "tools" (or knowledge and skills) that the child can draw on to facilitate academic success. Literacy is one area examined extensively for connections between knowledge and skills before and after entering school (Fritjers, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; Hammill, 2004; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Interest in children's acquisition of the knowledge and skills that pertain to literacy has increased over the last two decades within disciplines such as general education, special education, early childhood education, psychology, and speech–language pathology. Following Marie Clay's suggestion in 1966 that children demonstrate literacy-related behaviors even when they are not able to read and write, investigators in these disciplines turned their attention to defining "emergent literacy" (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Their goals were to delineate the knowledge and skills that characterized the emergent literacy stage and describe the process of emergent literacy development. As research findings revealed that children's literacy development began even before they were exposed to formal reading instruction in school (Clay, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Teale & Sulzby, 1986), interest increased in young children's

emergent literacy development and in the relationship between emergent and later literacy development. Consequently, there has been a surge of information from various disciplines on these two goals. Further, there has been growing recognition of the relationship between the acquisition of early oral language and emergent literacy knowledge and skills (Snow et al., 1998). In fact, the available longitudinal research has shown that children who were identified as having oral language impairments during the preschool years were at greater risk for oral and written language impairments as they progressed through school, even if their language impairments appeared to have been remediated by the time they began kindergarten (Aram, Ekelman, & Nation, 1984; Aram & Nation, 1980; Bishop & Adams, 1990; Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999).

From a professional perspective, it has been the responsibility of speech–language pathologists to engage in the prevention of communication disorders (American Speech–Language–Hearing Association, 1988). Recently, professional responsibility has been expanded with respect to reading and writing development (American Speech–Language–Hearing Association, 2001). As a result, it is important for speech–language pathologists and other early childhood specialists (e.g., teachers, psychologists, and day care providers) to have an understanding of the emergent literacy stage and of the relationship between emergent literacy and early language acquisition. Such understanding will increase the effectiveness of these specialists in their collaborative efforts with parents to foster the emergent literacy and early oral language development of young children. Thus, the major purpose of this book is to provide a framework for understanding the emergent literacy stage and the linkages between emergent literacy and early language acquisition.

The focus of this book is on building a bridge to connect our knowledge on emergent literacy learning and early oral language learning with instruction so that greater effectiveness can be achieved by specialists within early childhood educational settings. The construction of this bridge draws on the expertise of this book's contributing authors, which include clinical researchers who are engaged in the study of emergent literacy and early oral language acquisition. Thus, the content of each chapter reflects the expertise and specialty areas that the authors emphasize in their research.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of emergent literacy for early childhood specialists. The chapter begins with a definition of “emergent

literacy” and a discussion of the notion that the emergent literacy stage is the beginning of a continuum of literacy development. The chapter progresses with descriptions and comparative analyses of three main perspectives on, and their corresponding frameworks for, understanding the emergent literacy stage, followed by the implications of the perspectives for fostering children’s emergent literacy development. Chapter 2 addresses the importance of book sharing for the development of meaning for both children’s emergent literacy and early oral language acquisition. In Chapter 3, the development of children’s phonological awareness and its relationship to development in other areas of language and emergent literacy are examined. The focus of Chapter 4 is on children’s early writing and spelling development and their bidirectional influence on early oral language acquisition. The interrelationship of children’s early language learning and their early story and expository discourse is considered in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, the connection between emergent literacy and cultural and linguistic diversity is discussed with regard to assessment and intervention with young children.

Throughout this book, the “supports” for our bridge are provided in each chapter by the relevant and current evidence on young children’s emergent literacy and early oral language development. These supports are critical to maintaining and guiding the construction of the “substructure” of our bridge, which is the assessment of young children’s emergent literacy and early oral language acquisition. The assessment substructure then serves as a basis for the intervention “roadbed” for the bridge that in turn links emergent literacy and early oral language acquisition. The “superstructure” of the bridge is then created through each chapter with examples and case studies specific to early childhood settings. Building sturdy bridges between emergent literacy and early oral language acquisition is critical to children’s development. This bridge building requires that early childhood specialists collaborate with parents to support children’s journey along the continuum of literacy and language learning with the mutual goal of ensuring their success in school.

## References

- American Speech–Language–Hearing Association. (1988). Position statement on the prevention of communication disorders. *ASHA*, 30(3), 90.

- American Speech–Language–Hearing Association. (2001). Position statement of the roles and responsibilities of speech–language pathologists with respect to reading and writing in children and adolescents (position statement, executive summary of guidelines, technical report). *ASHA Supplement*, 21, 17–27.
- Aram, D., Ekelman, B. L., & Nation, J. (1984). Preschoolers with language disorders: 10 years later. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 27, 232–244.
- Aram, D., & Nation, J. (1980). Preschool language disorders and subsequent language and academic difficulties. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 13, 159–170.
- Bishop, D. V. M., & Adams, C. (1990). A prospective study of the relationship between specific language impairment, phonological disorders, and reading retardation. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 31, 1027–1050.
- Catts, H. W., Fey, M. E., Zhang, X., & Tomblin, B. (1999). Language basis of reading and reading disabilities: Evidence from a longitudinal investigation. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 3(4), 331–362.
- Clay, M. M. (1966). *Emergent reading behaviour*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- Clay, M. M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Duncan, G. J., Dowsett, C. J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A. C., Klebanov, P., et al. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(6), 1428–1446.
- Fritjers, J. C., Barron, R. W., & Brunello, M. (2000). Direct and mediated influences of home literacy and literacy interest on prereaders' oral vocabulary and early written language skill. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 466–477.
- Hammill, D. D. (2004). What we know about correlates of reading. *Exceptional Children*, 70, 453–468.
- Scarborough, H. S., & Dobrich, W. (1994). On the efficacy of reading to preschoolers. *Developmental Review*, 14, 245–302.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Storch, S. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2002). Oral language and code-related precursors to reading: Evidence from a longitudinal structural model. *Developmental Psychology*, 38, 934–947.
- Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (1986). Emergent literacy as a perspective for examining how young children become writers and readers. In W. H. Teale & E. Sulzby (Eds.), *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading* (pp. vii–xxv). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.