

# Effective Practices to Balance Literacy Instruction in Early Childhood

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**Abstract:** What constitutes effective emergent literacy practices has been debated for decades between developmentally appropriate play-based instruction and direct instruction. Recently, accountability and more rigorous standards have placed pressure on early childhood educators to shift literacy instruction to direct teaching with less emphasis on developmentally appropriate play-based instruction. However, emergent literacy skills are multi-faceted, requiring flexible instructional practices. This manuscript addresses the benefits of implementing both play-based and direct instructional practices to balance literacy instruction. Educators should implement a balanced approach to literacy instruction to meet the developmental needs of children and the academic demands of the standards.

## Introduction

What constitutes effective emergent literacy practices has been debated for decades. Up until the 1990s, the developmental-constructivist approach dominated early childhood programs supporting child development. In the 1990s, new preschool models and supplemental skills-based approaches began entering the educational community that supported some direct literacy instruction prior to formal education. After No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted in 2002, accountability demands impacted educators' instructional practices. Husband's (2014) preliminary study on teachers' perceptions of how NCLB impacted their teaching practices found that educators perceived that NCLB narrowed the literacy instruction and increased the rigor of literacy curriculum. The change in standards and accountability in education caused early childhood educators to shift their instructional approach to more direct instruction to meet the increasing demands of standardized testing in formal grades. The shift in instructional approaches left literacy instruction unbalanced. The purpose of this manuscript is to address the need for a balanced approach to literacy in early childhood education to holistically support emergent literacy skills. Educators should implement a balanced approach to literacy instruction to meet the developmental needs of children and the academic demands of the standards. Educators must have a deep understanding of the components of emergent literacy and provide high-quality instruction to facilitate the learning of each component to successfully balance literacy instruction.

## Emergent Literacy Components

Marie Clay (1966) introduced the concept of emergent literacy as the skills that refer to the reading and writing behaviors prior to entry into formal instruction at school. Emergent literacy skills begin at birth and are developed throughout early childhood through experiences with adults and their environments. There are four broad components of emergent literacy: language, print awareness, phonological awareness,

and writing. The components of emergent literacy are multi-faceted in the sense that each component has critical subskills to holistically develop reading and writing skills. Rohde (2015) advocates for a comprehensive emergent literacy model where “each EL component has its own developmental sequence and each component supports the development of other components as part of a holistic appreciation” (p. 4). The complex nature of emergent literacy requires flexible instructional practices to balance literacy instruction.

### ***Oral Language***

Oral language development is a critical component of emergent literacy. Oral language is the ability to communicate and express ideas as well as listen and understand language. Oral language is the foundation of developing print awareness, phonological awareness, and writing. Educators have a plethora of strategies to support oral language development. Intentionally creating a literacy-rich environment for children to actively interact with literacy materials, scaffold language through rich conversations, and explicitly support vocabulary through shared reading are a few strategies teachers can implement to balance learning through play and direct instruction. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), “almost all early reading is based on oral language” (p. 4-25). Creating literacy-rich classroom environments and educators intentionally supporting language is critical to young children’s oral language development.

### ***Print Awareness***

Print awareness is evident in children long before they learn how to read. Print awareness consists of understanding the forms of print (alphabet/number knowledge), print conventions (print has an organizational scheme), and book conventions (how books are created, how they function, and are organized (Lovelace and Stewart, 2007). Print awareness can be supported through literacy-rich environments, print referencing, and explicit instruction. Children that enter kindergarten lacking competent alphabet knowledge need explicit instruction to close the achievement gap (Paige et al. 2018). Print awareness should be implemented with a balance of instructional practices to support all subskills.

### ***Phonological Awareness***

The National Reading Panel (2000) states, “phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during their first two years in school” (p.2-1), making phonological awareness a crucial component in the emergent literacy model. According to What Works Clearinghouse (2012), phonological awareness is “the ability to detect or manipulate the sounds in words independent of meaning” (p.1). Phonological tasks develop on a continuum beginning with less complex skills such as listening to rhyme in fingerplays, songs, and books and progressing to more complex tasks such as phoneme manipulation. Phonological awareness tasks are auditory and do not require symbols. According to Terrell and Watson (2018), “teaching strategies for phonological awareness tasks must include explicit descriptions of each task, include modeling,

and provide multiple cues as needed” (p. 156). Educators that implement phonological awareness tasks for five minutes per session can improve children’s phonological awareness skills (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008). Implementing brief phonological awareness tasks into the daily schedule will support children’s literacy development.

### ***Writing***

Implementing writing instruction in early childhood classrooms is an important precursor to formal instruction. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines early writing as, “the familiarity with writing implements, conventions, and emerging skills to communicate attitudes and ideas through written representations, symbols, and letters” (as cited in Hall et al., 2015, p. 115). Early writing not only involves children learning letter formations but also composing messages and spelling. Early writing skills support the development of language, print awareness, and phonological awareness; as children progress through the early writing stages they become more aware that print carries meaning and develops the alphabetic principle. Educators can support early writing development by incorporating student writing into daily schedules, providing writing materials and literacy props in centers, explicitly model writing, and scaffold children’s writing efforts. The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) reported that name writing skills and spelling yield moderate to strong relationships with later reading abilities including decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling. Combining explicit writing instruction with writing experiences in the daily schedule balances teacher-led instruction and learning through play to develop early writing skills.

## **Instructional Practices**

### ***Learning Through Play***

Learning through play is a vital component of child development. Socio-constructivists view learning as a social process. Children actively learn through social interactions. Through social interactions, children activate background knowledge and build connections to re-evaluate their understandings of ideas. Incorporating play into the classroom provides context for learning, has causal relationships to language and narrative development, and positive behaviors related to reading and writing (Cavanaugh et al., 2016). Play-based activities are a crucial component for emergent literacy skills as they provide authentic opportunities for children to develop social and language skills and a positive affect towards learning in formal education. Storytelling/story-acting, dramatic play, and guided play are evidence-based strategies that support play as a mode of learning that are described in more detail below.

### ***Storytelling/Story-Acting***

Storytelling and story-acting is a child-centered, play-based practice that provides opportunities for children to narrate and act out their own stories. As described by Nicolopoulou and colleagues (2015) the process involves a teacher or teacher aid writes down a story as a child dictates. Later that day, as a whole class,

the child/author acts out the story with a group of children as the teacher reads the story aloud. Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) conducted a two-year study that provided evidence that story-telling and story-acting practices foster narrative comprehension (oral language), print and word awareness and pretend abilities (emergent literacy, greater self-inhibition, and reduced play disruption (social competence) skills. The higher frequency of participation of students in story-telling was a significant predictor of higher post-test scores. Heppner (2016) also found promising results that storytelling and story acting fosters emergent literacy skills. She noted, “increased use of expression and more creative vocabulary, as well as more complex syntax and sentence patterns, knowledge of how print functions, and emerging knowledge of phonics and spelling” (Heppner, 2016, pp. 468-471). Storytelling and story-acting implemented as part of the curriculum supports language development and fosters print awareness and phonological awareness skills.

### ***Pretend Play***

Pretend play also provides opportunities for children to expand existing knowledge, skills, and the understanding of the world, through assimilation and accommodation (Park 2019). Engaging in pretend play with props, peers, adults, and literacy-rich environments promote literacy behaviors. Neumann and Roskos (1997) observed children in pretend play scenarios such as a post office or pizza shop, collaborating to solve problems, using domain-specific vocabulary, and reading and writing. More recently, Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk (2018) reaffirmed “reading and writing behaviors were observed with greater frequency in centers that integrated literacy materials, as children used the materials as part of their play” (p. 122). When engaged with literacy materials, children pretended to read menus, fill out order forms, and engaged in conversation with domain-specific vocabulary to the scenario. As evidenced in these studies, engaging in pretend play is an effective, engaging instructional practice for children to develop language, print awareness, and writing skills.

### ***Guided Play***

Another way educators can support language and literacy development is by taking an active role in children’s play, referred to as guided play. Educators can engage in a variety of practices to embed or scaffold academic learning with children’s play such as modeling, providing comments or questions, becoming an active co-player, or leading games and activities. In a study conducted by Cavanaugh and colleagues (2016), guided play was implemented in kindergarten classrooms, where students in the experimental groups participated in teacher-directed activity, then were given the opportunity to use the materials with the freedom to create their own games with the materials; teacher guidance was provided as needed. Children in the experimental group performed better on the DIBELS assessment of early literacy skills than the control group. Additionally, Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels (2018) observed a higher frequency of literacy behaviors during guided play than free play. Literacy-rich guided play with an active teacher presence can support emergent literacy skills by incorporating academic learning in play-based activities.

### ***Direct Instruction***

Some emergent literacy skills are better supported through explicit, direct instruction from the teacher. Phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and vocabulary are components of emergent literacy where students have more positive outcomes with explicit, direct instruction. According to Paige et al. (2018), “research syntheses have found success in letter naming knowledge and phonological awareness requires explicit instruction” (pp. 1-2). With this information, it is clear that educators need to implement effective strategies to support children’s development of foundational aspects in the reading process. Educators can employ developmentally appropriate instructional practices such as small groups and read-alouds to explicitly teach print awareness and phonological awareness skills.

### ***Small groups***

Small group instruction allows educators to differentiate instruction to meet children’s individual needs in a setting that offers opportunities for higher-quality interactions. While children are playing in interest areas or centers, educators can pull small groups not exceeding five children, to work explicitly on certain skills. When implementing small groups, educators can utilize explicit instruction for print knowledge or phonological awareness tasks, such as rhymes or alphabet knowledge. These tasks can be modeled through co-teaching and coaching and supported with embedded practice during read-alouds and play, and literacy games throughout the day (Terrell and Watson, 2018; Cavanaugh et al., 2016). Explicit, direct instruction is effective in small groups due to the modeling cues and feedback teachers can provide that are in response to and specific to children’s needs. In a study conducted by Hilbert and Eis (2015), small groups were implemented using the Read It Again Pre-K program to increase narrative, vocabulary, print knowledge and phonological awareness. Children participating in the experimental group exhibited a statistically significant increase in picture naming, vocabulary, and print knowledge. Small groups provided more opportunities for children to share their ideas and interact with their peers and teacher. Educators can differentiate instruction and design meaningful, developmentally appropriate activities based on children’s needs on the continuum of phonological awareness and print awareness development.

### ***Read-Alouds***

Studies have shown that reading aloud to children promote emergent literacy skills. However, not all read-alouds are created equally. Educators need to intentionally plan for literacy experiences before, during, and after reading to unlock the full potential of reading aloud. Planning for a read-aloud experience should include a focus on language and print actively involving students in the experience. Lefebvre et al. (2011) found that using explicit facilitation strategies during shared reading improved scores for vocabulary and print awareness as well as phonological awareness. Vocabulary instruction can be supported in shared reading by intentionally and explicitly teaching target words before, during, and extension activities after reading. Loftus-Rattan et al. (2016) found that “children obtained higher scores on

words that received extended instruction over embedded instruction or incidental exposure” (p. 403).

## Balancing Practices

Recent research has argued for play-based learning after NCLB shifted practices to more direct instruction. Through the medium of play, children develop cognitive, social, and self-regulation skills, as well as stimulate literacy development (Guirguis, 2018). However, the term play is difficult to define; it is abstract and has different meanings within different groups. Guirguis (2018) claims that play-based learning supports emergent literacy skills through scaffolding. Still, educators perceive play as difficult to plan, less structured, and are often confused about their role in facilitating play (Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels, 2018). Yet, clearly there is a role for teachers if play is going to support emergent literacy skills, given, that “students primary focus during free play is not the development of their own literacy skills and of itself is not sufficient for the development of literacy skills” (Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels, 2018, p. 229). Play-based learning alone is not sufficient to support emergent literacy skills.

Given the evidence of the benefits of play and direct instruction, educators should incorporate both practices to support emergent literacy skills. Chambers et al. (2016) found positive effects of comprehensive programs on language and literacy outcomes indicating that it is beneficial to provide some direct instruction in language and literacy skills along with child-initiated activities. Additionally, Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels (2018) advocate for a balanced approach including free play, direct instruction, and guided play. They found that “free play provided the opportunity for some literacy development and direct instruction provided the opportunity for children to develop core literacy skills” (Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels, 2018, p. 229). Educators can balance literacy instruction by implementing flexible instructional practices from play-based to direct instruction. These instructional practices provide developmentally appropriate activities, while simultaneously developing the complex components of emergent literacy.

By creating a literacy-rich environment and developing a daily schedule, educators can balance literacy instruction. Intentionally designing a literacy-rich environment by labeling objects, offering books and writing tools throughout the classroom, offering puppets and flannel boards and designing engaging learning experiences that support extended teacher-child and child-child interactions provides opportunities for educators to support the development of literacy. (Byington and Kim, 2017). To support literacy behaviors, educators should purposefully plan the materials they are exposing the children to and actively engage with the children during play scaffolding their knowledge and making connections to academic learning. Adding small group work to the daily routine provides children with the explicit instruction needed to meet children’s individual needs. Educators can plan “instructional games to intentionally support the development of targeted literacy skills” (Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk, 2018, p. 122). Furthermore, educators can intentionally plan to embed literacy skills throughout their daily schedule during table time and music and movement to extend literacy instruction in meaningful, authentic activities. Literacy instruction can be balanced when teachers plan a daily

schedule that provides opportunities for play and teach-directed activities. A sample daily schedule can be found in the Appendix.

## Conclusion

Balancing literacy instruction to have both open-ended play-based and more targeted explicit learning opportunities supports children's development of the multiple complex components of emergent literacy. Educators must have a deep understanding of the components of emergent literacy and how to effectively facilitate learning of each component. Employing a variety of play-based and direct instruction strategies supports developmentally appropriate practices while meeting the increasing academic demands placed on early childhood programs from NCLB. A balanced approach to literacy instruction holistically supports emergent literacy employing developmentally appropriate practices and evidence-based strategies.

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