

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

We believe strongly that in our society, at this point in history, reading and writing, to be understood and appreciated fully, should be viewed together, learned together, and used together (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, p. 275).

While historical and cross-cultural evidence have suggested that literacy in a society may entail reading and writing as separate entities (Clifford, 1989), Tierney and Shanahan (1991) however, suggest that the skills of reading and writing are not separate and different and they need to be viewed together. From infancy, children are surrounded by texts in various forms as well as varieties of literacy events and practices. In this study of a young learner's literacy development in English, the reading and writing connection is foregrounded. Literacy is seen as a social practice and therefore plays out in particular domains in the lifeworlds of the child's literacy practices.

In this chapter I review the relevant conceptual and research literature that supports my study. This case study of a young learner's literacy development in English through the reading-writing connection hinges upon this discussion. I begin by focusing on the definitions of literacy and how literacy is seen as a social construction. Then I look at literacy development in children and also the historical perspectives of literacy. From there I move on to the reading-writing connection of literacy development in children by looking at previous studies done on the subject. Finally I draw on the sociocultural and social constructivist view of learning which underpins this case study.

2.1 What is Literacy?

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1985), literacy means the ability to read and write. In 1951, UNESCO defined literacy as the ability of a person “who can with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life” (p. 1), and this definition was revised in 1978 as one’s ability to “engage in all . . . activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and community’s development” (ERIC Digests, 2002, p. 1). Literacy here is seen as a social practice where it functions in the lived experiences of the people in the society. This is further played out by the definition provided by the South Australian Council for Adult Literacy (2000):

Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking and incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables the speaker, writer or reader to recognize and use language appropriate to different social situations. Active literacy allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question in order to participate effectively in society (p. 2).

Literacy therefore is seen as a social construction. Literacy consists of people's everyday “ways with words” (Luke & Elkins, 2000, p. 671), their social interactions and practices, habits of minds and dispositions, with texts of all kinds. As communications media, all forms of writing and inscription have the capacity to record, preserve and pass on cultural practices, habits, archives, and traditions, both secular and nonsecular and we participate in communities – real and imagined, virtual and corporeal – in part because of our sharing of knowledge, discourses and textual practices (Luke & Elkins, 2000).

Children learn about reading and writing by observing the literacy practices that occur in their families and community. Hence, children's literacy development occur in the domains of the home and community supported by their social interactions with adults and with each other even before they enter school.

2.2 Children's Literacy Development

According to current research, children's literacy development begins long before children start formal instruction in elementary school (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Clay, 1991; Hall & Moats, 1999; Holdaway, 1979; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This literacy development is nurtured by social interactions with caring adults and exposure to literacy materials, such as children's storybooks (Sulzby, 1991). It proceeds along a continuum, whereby children acquire literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages (Emergent Literacy Project, 2002; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Ramsburg, 1998; Strickland & Morrow, 1988). Children's skills in reading and writing develop at the same time and are interrelated rather than sequential (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Educators can promote children's understanding of reading and writing by helping them develop literacy knowledge and skills through the use of engaged learning activities. Children have been found to learn about written language as they actively engage with adults in reading and writing situations; as they explore print on their own; and as they observe others around them engaged in literacy practices (Idaho Center on Developmental Disabilities, 1996; Teale & Sulzby, 1986, The Emergent Literacy Project, 2002). Children's parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators play an important role in ensuring that children successfully progress in their literacy development.

Children's literacy efforts are best supported by adults' interactions with children through reading aloud and conversation and by children's social interactions with each other (McGee & Richgels, 1996).

Frank Smith (1988) in Hannon (2000), has used the metaphor of "joining the literacy club" (p.46) to characterise the nature of literacy learning. He argues that children develop literacy by joining a community of readers and writers who use literacy to accomplish real purposes. It is imperative that caregivers and educators in all settings are knowledgeable about emergent literacy and make a concerted effort to ensure that children experience literacy-rich environments to support their development into conventional literacy.

2.3 Historical Perspective on Literacy Development

In the following discussion, I provide a historical perspective on the shift in understanding literacy development in young children from the notion of reading readiness to the concept of emergent literacy.

Reading Readiness

Teale and Sulzby (1986) in their review of the literature on literacy development noted that from the late 1800s to the 1920s the research literature on reading and writing focused only on the elementary school years. However in the 1920s, educators began to recognize the early childhood and kindergarten years as a period of preparation for reading and writing. Then, in 1925 the National Committee on Reading published the first explicit reference to the concept of *reading readiness* (Ramsburg, 1998).

The introduction of this term gave rise to two different lines of research on preparing children for reading (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). One school of thought believed that reading readiness was the result of maturation ("nature"), while the other group thought that appropriate experiences could accelerate readiness ("nurture"). These contradictory perspectives emphasize the philosophical differences that have characterized much of the research on children's development through the years (Ramsburg, 1998).

The leading theory from the 1920s into the 1950s was that reading readiness was the result of biological maturation. Reading readiness from the "nature" perspective believed that the mental processes necessary for reading would unfold automatically at a certain period of time in development (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The argument put forth by researchers was that good practice would provide an environment that did not interfere with the predetermined process of development in the child. In consequence, educators and parents were advised to postpone the teaching of reading until children reached a certain age.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, the dominant theory shifted from reading readiness as maturation towards readiness as the product of experience. Advocates of this "nurture" perspective argued that if children had the appropriate experiences, their reading readiness could be accelerated. As a response to this shift in thinking, educators and parents were encouraged to use more direct instruction and structured curriculum in early childhood and kindergarten programmes in order to prepare children for reading. In reading readiness programmes children were considered ready to read when they had met certain social, physical, and cognitive competencies (Morrow, 1997).

The Shift to an Emergent Literacy Perspective

Beginning in the 1970s, researchers began to challenge traditional reading readiness attitudes and practices. One of the pioneers in examining young children's reading and writing was Marie Clay (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Clay (1966) first introduced the term *emergent literacy* to describe the behaviors seen in young children when they use books and writing materials to imitate reading and writing activities, even though the children cannot actually read and write in the conventional sense (Ramsburg, 1998). While the concept of reading readiness suggested that there was a point in time when children were ready to learn to read and write, emergent literacy suggested that there were continuities in children's literacy development between early literacy behaviors and those displayed once children could read independently (Idaho Center on Developmental Disabilities, 1996). Clay (1975) also stresses the importance of the relationship between writing and reading in early literacy development where previously, it was believed that children must learn to read before they could learn to write. Their continuing literacy development, their understanding of literacy concepts, and the efforts of parents, caregivers, and teachers to promote literacy influence children's growth from emergent to conventional literacy.

2.4 The Reading-Writing Connection

Reading builds knowledge of various kinds to use in writing and writing consolidates knowledge in a way that builds schemata to read with (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Sternglass, 1988). Language development in the early stages depends a lot on vocabulary knowledge. The more words children know, the better they will learn to speak and the better their chances of doing well in school. Therefore, reading is an

excellent source of help in the acquisition of vocabulary. Of utmost importance is reading aloud to children and providing opportunities for them to discuss the stories that they hear (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999).

Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) state, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. This is especially so during the preschool years" (p. 23). Reading aloud to children helps them develop in four areas that are important to formal reading instruction: oral language, cognitive skills, concepts of print, and phonemic awareness. Development of these skills provides a strong foundation to support literacy development during the early school years (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Hall & Moats, 1999; Holdaway, 1979). Children who are read to develop background knowledge about a range of topics and build a large vocabulary, which assists in later reading comprehension and development of reading strategies. They become familiar with rich language patterns and gain an understanding of what written language sounds like.

Reading aloud to children helps them associate reading with pleasure and encourages them to seek out opportunities to read on their own. Children also become familiar with the reading process by watching how others read, and they develop an understanding of story structure. Repeated readings of favourite stories allow children an informal opportunity to gradually develop a more elaborate understanding of these concepts. By revisiting stories many times, children focus on unique features of a story or text and reinforce previous understandings. In addition, rereadings enable children to read emergently (Sulzby, 1985b; Sulzby, Buhle, & Kaiser, 1999).

Children benefit from having access to a wide range of literacy materials, such as books, magazines, newspapers, and a variety of writing materials. Literacy rich

environments, both at home and at school, are important in promoting literacy and preventing reading difficulties. In literacy-rich home environments, parents and caregivers provide children with occasions for daily reading, extended discourse (extensive talking or writing), language play, experimentation with literacy materials, book talk (discussion of characters, action, and plot), and dramatic play (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

In literacy-rich classrooms, teachers incorporate the characteristics of literacy-rich home environments, but they also use grouping for learning, developmentally appropriate practices, and literacy routines; in addition, they have classroom designs that continue to encourage reading and writing (McGee & Richgels, 1996) through learning centers and engaged learning activities. In their joint position statement, “Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children”, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) confirm that the first eight years of a child's life are the most important years for literacy development and that developmentally appropriate practices at home and at school are crucial for ensuring that children become successful readers.

In a study of Latino households in California, Gallimore and Goldenberg (1993) identified meaningful settings, which provide literacy activities, such as letter writing, for novice learners of reading and writing. They focused on cultural experiences in everyday life and on the active participation of young learners in literacy events (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). In an ethnographic study in the United States of two neighbouring communities, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) shows that what children learn at home about literacy can vary enormously according to culture and values of their communities. In a

British study, Elaine Millard (1997) shows how boys' and girls' use of written language differ in terms of their choice of reading, their leisure activities and their preference for alternative forms of 'narrative distraction' such as television programmes, video recordings and computer games (Hannon, 2000). David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998) used the idea of different literacies in their detailed ethnographic study of literacy practices in a town in England.

Looking at different literacy events it is clear that literacy is not the same in all contexts; rather, there are different literacies . . . within a given culture, there are different literacies associated with different domains of life. Contemporary life can be analysed in a simple way into domains of activity, such as home, school, work-place (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 9).

Research has consistently demonstrated that literacy development occur in different domains of the lifeworlds of children. Parents, caregivers and teachers need to ensure that children are exposed to literacy rich environments and receive developmentally appropriate literacy instruction.

2.5 Theoretical Perspectives of Language Learning

In this study, the view of literacy as social practice is put forth and hence the need to discover how children come to understand and participate in the literacy practices of their immediate and surrounding domains. The theoretical perspective that supports the development of literacy in this study is a sociocultural and social-constructivist view of learning, which posits that cognitive development follows immersion in language and experiences in which members can construct knowledge together (Wells & Chang-Wells,

1992). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that cognitive development depends much more on the people in the child's world where his or her knowledge, ideas, attitudes and values develop through interactions with others.

Scaffolding

Vygotsky believed that language plays an important role in cognitive development. Cognitive development occurs through the child's interaction with members of the society such as adults or more able peers. These people serve as guides and teachers, providing the information and support necessary for the child to grow intellectually and this assistance is termed '*scaffolding*' (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976 cited in Woolfolk, 1993, p.48). Vygotsky's theory suggests that adults need to guide children with explanations and demonstrations and children should be encouraged to use language to organize their thinking and to talk about what they are trying to accomplish (Woolfolk, 1993).

Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The zone of proximal development is the area where the child cannot solve a problem alone but can be successful under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more advanced peer (Wertsch, 1985 cited in Woolfolk, 1993).

Learning and teaching in the ZPD is dependent on social interaction and Vygotsky's concern about children's development is that they have the opportunity for "good learning" and "good instruction". He gives a clear indication of this in his discussion of the Montessori approach to early stages of literacy learning:

Teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something. If they are used only to write official greetings to the staff or whatever the teacher thinks up (and clearly suggests to them), then the exercise will be purely mechanical and may soon bore the child; his activity will not be manifest his writing and his budding personality will not grow. Reading and writing must be something the child needs . . . writing must be "relevant to life" – in the same way that we require a "relevant" arithmetic writing should be meaningful for children, that an intrinsic need should be aroused in them, and that writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Wells, 1999, p. 4).

Vygotsky also made clear that there are other sources from which children receive assistance in the ZPD. In addition to the instruction or the assistance of others who are physically present with the child, learning is also facilitated by semiotic mediation or codes. For those who are able to read them, such texts can provide a powerful means of self-instruction, as the reader appropriates the thoughts of others and makes them his or her own (Wells, 1999).

Constructivist Learning Theory

The term constructivism refers to the notion that learners construct knowledge for themselves whereby each learner individually and socially constructs meaning as he or she learns (Constructivist Learning Theory, 2001). Constructivists believe that learning does not happen in a vacuum and that learners must want to learn and share information in a learning environment. This learning environment should promote meaningful and authentic activities that help learners develop skills in language learning.

Learning involves language and the language we use influences learning. It also involves the learner engaging with the world and constructing systems of meaning. Conversation, interaction with others and the application of knowledge are the basic elements of learning. We need knowledge to learn. It is not possible to assimilate new knowledge without having some structure developed from previous knowledge to build on (Constructivist Learning Theory, 2001). Therefore, any effort to teach must be connected to the state of the learner and must provide a path into subject for the learner based on that learner's previous knowledge.

The New Literacy

New Literacy (Willinsky, 1990) encourages development of an authentic reason to read text, that is, to answer a question or solve a problem and imposes a need for effective ways to read. In essence, the New Literacy is a school of thought in which students are seen as authors and meaning makers. That is, reading and writing become a realization and connection of self (Willinsky, 1990). Willinsky (1990) defined the New Literacy as consisting of "those strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the students; literacy is

promoted in such programs as a social process with language that can from the very beginning extend the students' range of meaning and connection" (p.8). Willinsky's New Literacy is supported by the models presented by other theorists who share his premise that reading must be meaningful and useful to students. Freire and Macedo (1987) explained that students' literacy competencies (their ability to read the word) are built on their ability to read the world around them. Rosenblatt (1994) characterized the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text, strengthening the importance of the reader's prior knowledge and goals.

2.6 Conclusion

Parents, caregivers, and teachers need to ensure that young children are exposed to literacy rich environments and receive developmentally appropriate literacy instruction. Such environments and experiences have a profound effect on children's literacy development by providing opportunities and encouragement for children to become successful readers and writers. The literacy development of young learners therefore needs to be understood in terms of the practices engaged in different domains in the lifeworlds of the learner.

In this chapter, I have drawn extensively on the relevant literature to help situate this study within a socially-oriented theoretical framework of literacy. In the next chapter, I will discuss the research methodology of this study.