



## Research Unit for Multilingualism & Cross- Cultural Communication

# Raising Children in more than one Language: Reading and Writing

These articles were first published in 2004 and 2005 in [Susanne Döpke's Australian Newsletter for Bilingual Families](#) (see [BilingualOptions.com.au](#)). We thank Susanne for her permission to reprint and make them available on our website.

Contents	Page
Reading to your child, by Susanne Döpke	2
Learning to read in two languages, by Susanne Döpke	4
Learning to read a character-based language, by Kylie Farmer	6
Learning to write the Language Other Than English (LOTE), by Susanne Döpke	7

# Reading to your child

By Susanne Döpke

## Reading to the young child

Reading to your child is probably the single most important activity for the development of the Language Other Than English (LOTE) other than regularly speaking it to her. The fixed and repeatable context helps the acquisition of new words and grammatical structures, it is easy to extend the child's linguistic horizon simply by choosing a book on a new topic. The intervention literature on children with language delay is rapidly accumulating evidence on the effectiveness of book reading for children whose language development needs a bit of a boost. So why not take advantage of this for our normally developing bilingual children?

When you first read picture books to your little toddler talking about the pictures is much more important than reading the text Label and point, e.g. *this is a ball*, and ask him to point, e.g. *where is the dog?* If he doesn't respond yet, you do it for him, e.g. *THERE is the dog!* and point to it. You can also take his hand to point in response to your question. This teaches your child what you are expecting of him.

When you read the same book frequently, you will notice that she anticipates the routines, points before you've asked or says the word she has heard from you before. Now you label in response to her pointing or reaffirm her attempt at labelling, e.g. *yes! that's a dog!* This is also a good time to add just one more sentence to the picture your child is interested in, e.g. *the dog is drinking some water*, pointing to it in order to clarify what you are saying. Make a connection from the book to the real world for him. A number of books have toy representations of the main character. Or you might talk about your own dog, pretend to be dogs and slurp water out of a bowl, or talk about dogs in the street doing similar things to the figures in the book.

As your child becomes more able to participate actively, use the following strategies:

1. Ask "what" questions:  
P[arent]: *what are those?*
2. Slow down and give the child time to respond:  
C[hild]: *shoes*
3. Repeat what your child says:  
P: *yes, shoes*
4. Follow answers with questions:  
P: *what's he doing with his shoes?*
5. Help the child as needed:  
C: [no response].  
P: *he's putting them on*
6. Praise and encourage:  
P: *yes shoes! great!*

## Reading to the older child

The preschool child is linguistically increasingly more able and requires more challenging strategies during book reading. Here are some ideas for reading picture books:

1. Expand what your child says:  
C[hild]: *on the roof.*  
P[arent]: *he's sitting on the roof.*

2. Ask open-ended questions:  
P: *what's happening here/with the puppy/in the garden?*
3. Make your child think up reasons:  
P: *why is he doing this?*
4. Make her predict consequences:  
P: *what is his mum going to say when she sees that?*
5. Make him think about sequences:  
P: *what did the little bird do before he fell out of the nest?*

All of these encourage the child to produce increasingly complex sentences in the LOTE. The cognitive challenges posed by these questions provide a sound preparation for the ways in which language will be used in school later on. That you do it in the LOTE is no problem: these cognitive skills easily transfer to English.

The suggestions made above for bridging the book to the child's life [...] are still valid for the older pre-schooler. Talk about parallels between the book and the child's life, role play the story of the book or set scenes with toys. These present fantastic opportunities for extending the child's ability to talk and think.

At this stage of the child's development, texts become important. For a while you might have been able to translate picture books, transforming them into bilingual books. But eventually you will find that you need books in your LOTE. Try public libraries, fairs held by ethnic clubs and societies, local foreign language book shops, the internet, or exchanges with other families.

Most children are able to move on from picture books before they start school. In the transition to children's novels it is advisable to first choose books which have a picture to every page of text, later the occasional picture will be enough. Books without pictures teach children to process language without visual support. This form of decontextualised language is the main medium of learning in schools. Research suggests that the better children are prepared for decontextualised language before they start school, the better they fare academically.

'Chapter books', as they are called in primary school, lend themselves much less to interaction than picture books do. Here the focus is on reading text rather than talking about pictures. However, the following are some strategies you can employ to ensure that your child understood the text and that she will be able to use the new language not just understand it:

- Vary your voice to give the text life, make each character sound distinctive, whisper when it gets scary, improvise some environmental sounds as the text suggests, e.g. knocking on the door, the giant thumping etc.
- Ask what a word means when you think your child might not know. She will probably surprise you- with how well she can deduct the meaning from the text. Alternatively, this provides an opportunity to discuss the text. Don't translate though! Explain.
- Ask the child what happened last time you read before you start the next session. This worked well in our family as I usually read until my eyes fell shut and the last couple of pages were a blur to me. While my kids complained bitterly about how stupid I was, the request was far from artificial and they felt compelled to comply.
- Discuss the content of the book some other time, not during the reading session as this makes the text too disjointed to still be enjoyable. You can ask much the same questions as for the picture books, e.g. *why did he do this?, what do you think will happen next?, was this a good solution?, what would, you have done?, how do you think it will end?* etc.

- Role playing the story will bring the book alive. It will teach about story structure, develop memory capacity because of the visualisation techniques involved, and activate the new words and grammatical structures.

Please don't stop reading to your child as soon as he can read himself. Choose books which are above his reading ability and address his cognitive abilities. A child gains important text skills from being read to, which are so important for competent literacy.

If reading books aloud is a new skill for you and you would like some guidance, you might find the story time at your local library helpful.

HAVE FUN!

## Learning to read in two languages

By Susanne Döpke

Should my child learn to read our home language? When should it happen, and how do I go about this? These are questions parents often raise in workshops or in personal contacts with me.

**Being able to read is a very important factor in the long-term maintenance of the home language.**

As children grow up, they feel best about their language skills when these are age-appropriate. Being able to speak a language but not being able to read it does not do much for the self-esteem of a teenager. What's more, after the preschool years it is reading which promotes further language development the most. Lastly, the personal and national economic value of bilingualism depends on individuals being biliterate. Learning to read is the first step towards this.

Contrary to popular belief, **there is no need to wait with introducing reading the home language until reading in English is established.** English is a particularly difficult language when it comes to reading, because the same sound can be represented in so many different ways. Languages with a clearer relationship between letters and sounds than English, such as Italian, Spanish, Greek or German - to name just a few, are much easier for the beginning reader. In fact, the more phonetic language teaches the child about the concept of letters representing sounds on the page much faster. This concept, in turn, is transferable between languages. Thus learning to read a more phonetic Language Other Than English (LOTE) at the same time as English can support learning to read in English. Even learning a second language at school with as little as an hour of exposure per week has shown to promote children's literacy skills in English in some studies done during the 1980s.

**Different scripts are no problem** in this respect (for tips on learning to read a character-based language see the article by Kylie Farmer on page 6). The child who has always known two words for everything will not be surprised that they are also written differently. A colleague of mine involved with a literacy study in a local Hebrew immersion program in the 1990s found the pre-literacy scripts of kindergarten children distinctly reflecting the differences between the English and Hebrew scripts.

Due to the transferability of many of the literacy concepts from one language to the next,, learning to read one language first and a second one at a later stage is just as unproblematic. Although it might not be automatic, it will happen much faster.

In either case there might be some interference between the strategies for reading from one language to the next. Just as with learning to speak, the novice reader might apply an easy rule to both languages. Far from being a sign of confusion, this shows the child's knowledge of rules, and with support and time she will work out the differences between the systems and prove once again that **interferences are transient**.

## Practical issues

To be successful with teaching your child formal skills at home, for most children **the learning experiences have to be fun and functional**. To keep them fun, teaching sessions have to be short, successful for the child, and playful. None of the following strategies will be instantly successful. Be prepared to demonstrate the skill time and again. **Praise your child for being interested**, and pretend he did it, just like you used to pretend he said the whole word when he was only just trying! Especially when you try to teach your child to read before he commences school, you might find that it takes him some time to understand the concept.

The following strategies and activities build on each other and therefore need to be presented much in the order given here:

- Together with your child identify the first sound in a word and match it with an oversized cardboard or magnetic letter. **It is important to pair letters with the sounds they make, not their names** since you want to path the way for your child to put them together into words. Make a scrapbook of cut-outs all starting with the same sound, teach your child songs and rhymes that start with the same sound. Casually but frequently talk about the sounds which words and names start with and identify letters in the environment which correspond to sounds.
- Do the same with final sounds of words and eventually with sounds in the middle of words. Continue this until your child knows most. of the letters of the alphabet in your LOTE.
- Demonstrate the sounding out of words by first saying the individual sounds of a word slowly and then increasingly faster until your child can guess the word.
- Encourage your child to do the same for short words of two or three letters/sounds.
- Write silly sentences for your child and sound the words out together with her. This way she easily learns the remaining letters. as well. Being silly makes it fun!
- Read easy picture books together with your child either demonstrating the sounding out or simply reading the more difficult words and your child reading the easy words.
- Explain when two letters team up to make one sound, possibly underlining or highlighting them in a different colour to indicate that they belong together.
- Talk about the differences between sound representation in English and your LOTE, e.g. [sh] in English and [sch] in German.
- Integrate the reading of words into the play, e.g. labels when playing shop, destinations when playing trains, lists of treats to find around the house, etc.

- Do all written communication with your child in your LOTE possibly with a drawing added; put notes in the lunch box, write her an email to the school address send her a letter in the mail.
- When you read to your child, let her read the chapter headings, the captions under pictures, or any words that are inside pictures.
- Talk her into taking turns reading a paragraph to you or negotiate that he reads the first paragraph and then you continue.

I hope you don't feel overwhelmed by now. There is actually no need to put terribly much effort into doing these activities. You just need to lay the foundations for your child being able to read in your language. The ongoing literacy work at school will transfer nicely and you'll be surprised about the progress your child has made every time you try again.

## Learning to read a character-based language

By Kylie Farmer

[At the time of writing in 2004, Kylie Farmer was Coordinator of the Japanese Bilingual Program at Huntingdale Primary School in Melbourne.]

Susanne Döpke's article, reprinted above, provides a number of strategies and suggestions for how parents can help their child to read their home language. In this article we will consider how parents can help their child learn to read character-based languages.

Much of the information from the previous article is equally applicable to character-based languages. For example, the skills used in reading one language (including character-based languages) are transferable and can be used to develop reading skills in another language.

In developing reading skills in character-based languages it is particularly important to provide regularity and variety. Regularity, in terms of providing regular exposure to the characters, and variety in terms of using a range of techniques and text types to give children many opportunities to become familiar with the characters and to add them to their memory.

Games are an ideal way to reinforce character recognition and to aid memory. Communication games, such as *Simon says* using flashcards to encourage reading, card games such as *Concentration*, *Snap* or *Fish* using character cards are also enjoyable and effective. Computer software and Internet-based games are another ideal resource for developing quick recognition skills and providing sequential challenging tasks for children in a medium they tend to enjoy! There are also many online stories which children can listen to and read along with. Recorded stories are particularly good for character-based languages as children can look at the characters as they read along and enjoy the reading experience!

Labels around the home are another way for children to see characters regularly and to begin to identify characters in words. They also begin to make connections and assumptions about characters. A character chart at home makes it easy to refer to characters frequently and allows children to see patterns and follow rules for identifying characters.

Children vary in their preferred learning styles. Recent brain research has identified that people learn in various ways. Some children learn visually, some prefer hands on, tactile learning and others may be active, logical-mathematical, or musical learners. Some children learn best through interaction with others and some are more independent learners. By tapping into a child's own learning style, their ability to learn to read can be enhanced. For example, one child may enjoy learning to read by listening to a tape of the story, one may use plasticine to make the characters and another may sing a song to help remember characters. By recognising your child's preferred learning style and creating activities based on this, learning to read can happen regularly, be effective and enjoyable.

Characters are generally quite complex, requiring considerable memory as there is relatively little generality. However, this can be used to appeal to a child's intrinsic sense of intrigue. By talking about the characters with children and having them make up their own stories about what can be seen in the pictures or ways they can use to help them remember them gives children a sense of ownership of their learning.

While learning characters can be a challenge, by making a fuss of children, saying they are *so clever being able to remember such difficult characters*, taps into a child's sense of achievement and can spur them on to learn more and more.

## Learning to write the LOTE

By Susanne Döpke

During seminars I am often asked how to teach children to write the Language Other Than English (LOTE). My main answer to that is: **Reading relates to writing like understanding relates to speaking**. Thus, reading precedes writing in many ways. As parents we also need to watch that we continue to be parents, have fun with our children and give them lots of love, and not waste valuable time on being teachers instead. The third part of my hesitation argument is that writing the LOTE may be learned with relative ease once children are in high school because of the knowledge of writing they already have, their much improved motor skills and their more advanced cognition. This said, there is also an argument that the active process of putting words together actually aids the process of learning to read for children who are experiencing difficulties with reading, suggesting a two-way process.

In this article I am going to suggest some strategies for introducing writing the LOTE to your 4- to 8-year old. For older children, the process will be much simpler, if not an incidental outcome of their ability to read.

- **Model writing:** together with your child, put names on pictures, letters, cards, write shopping lists, notes to family members, reminder notes to yourself, etc. Let your child tell you a story and write it down as "his" text.
- **Introduce your child to short phonetic words that are meaningful to them:** write the word slowly with your child watching, and say every sound (not the name of the letter, but the *sound* of the letter!!), then say them again more quickly, repeating it up to three times with increasing speed and the last one fast enough for it to be clearly recognised as the target word. This teaches correspondence between sounds and letters and blending them into words as well.
- **Use movable letters** for your child to be able to put words together without having the burden of handwriting (unless this is what you want to practice, but for most languages it is the same as in English and you might just as well leave it to the school). Big cardboard or magnetic letters are ideal. I would steer away from coloured ones unless you can keep the letters all to one colour. Educational toy shops sell magnetic wooden Letters (much more expensive) or make your own from cardboard and magnetic tape (available in art shops).
- **Play a game of changing one sound and reading the new word:** if *you* make the changes, you teach reading; if *your child* makes the changes, you teach writing. Guide your child as to which changes are pronounceable, which are not, and which actually make words, but don't discourage nonsense words. It's all part of the fun.
- **Demonstrate writing short phonetic words** (three to four letters) in a range of play activities: this integrates writing into life. Don't abandon life in order to have a writing lesson. When you integrate it, it is much more meaningful to your child.
- **Allow your child to play at writing.** This might take an extended time of several months, up to a year, depending on the maturity of your child and how much s/he already knows about literacy. If s/he started school and has developed literacy skills in English already, this step might be very short, or can possibly be skipped altogether. When your child tells you what s/he has 'written', right it again in your adult conventional way.
- **Play lots of sound games:** Identify the first sound, last sound, middle sound in words or syllables (a great game for the car!); exchange sounds to make a new word (if your language allows you to do this, or do it with English words, or have the person who usually speaks English with your child step in for that.)
- **Match letter chains** to pre-written words.
- **Assemble letters to label a picture.** Cut out a picture or use clipart and give your child the individual letters that make the corresponding word; then let her assemble them.
- **Use any commercial spelling game** for more ideas and produce corresponding material for your LOTE.
- **Design games** which involve your child writing notes to you or to others.

These ideas for teaching writing can be used for any linear script, may that script be Latin as for English and many other languages, or may that be Russian, Greek, Hebrew or Arabic.