Literacy Development of a Preschooler: An Exemplary Case

Hatice Zeynep INAN[•]

Abstract

The importance of older children's literacy development has been recognized and studied for years, the issue of emergent literacy and young children's literacy development has been seriously addressed. Debates have raged over the nature and nurture of young children's literacy learning and development, with considerable research and theory being reported. It is seen that some children and even some college students are experiencing literacy problems. Literacy development of preschoolers has received attention of teachers, administrators, researchers, and decision-makers. They started working on emergent literacy; they have focused on how to assess young children's literacy development, whether it is appropriate to include literacy education in preschool curricula and what can be done for better literacy development of young children. The current study is an inquiry-based case study, which adopted a qualitative interpretivist paradigm to describe the literacy development of an English Second Language preschooler, Mary. The study utilized Clay`s Observation Survey, which included "Concepts about Print," "Writing Vocabulary," "Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words," "Word Reading," and "Letter Identification" and two "Running Records of Text Reading" tasks. The importance of observing sensitively, recording progress, and interacting with a child supportively to achieve forward movement is emphasized. Clay`s Observation Survey showed that although Mary is very young, her behaviors are like those of mature readers and writers.

Key Words: case study, preschool, literacy, observation survey

Introduction

The importance of older children's literacy development has been recognized and studied for years, the issue of emergent literacy and young children's literacy development has been seriously addressed. It is seen that some children and even some college students are experiencing literacy problems. Debates have raged over the nature and nurture of young children's literacy learning and development, with considerable research and theory being reported. Literacy development of preschoolers has received attention of teachers, administrators, researchers, and decision-makers. They started working on emergent literacy; they have focused on how to assess young children's literacy development, whether it is appropriate to include literacy education in preschool curricula and what can be done for better literacy development of young children.

Emergent Literacy

Although the term of 'emergent literacy' was first used by Teale and Sulzby (1986), Marie Clay is known for pioneering the concept of emergent literacy (UKLA, 2007). Davidson (1996) defines emergent literacy as the process of developing an awareness and control of print language, which occurs before young children begin reading conventionally. Such perspective emphasizes that children's knowledge and use of written language emerge over time (Christie, 2003). In the past, "early literacy was viewed as being closely tied to physical and mental maturation," because it was believed that young children need to reach a certain level of intelligence and develop some perceptual-motor skills in order to succeed in literacy (Christie, 2003, p.3). However, according to the new perspective "emergent literacy," literacy development begins much earlier than previously believed.

Emergent literacy development of young children is an important concept in which there is a growing interest among researchers and educators. It is seen that some children and even some college students are experiencing literacy problems. An emergent literacy perspective claims that there is a set of concepts which children need to have to succeed in literacy before they start to go to school. This perspective examines such critical basic concepts about print that children need to have in order to benefit from reading instruction and to avoid the possible reading problems which may arise in the future (Gillet & Temple, 2000). Accordingly, emergent literacy is getting the attention of researchers, educators, and parents.

[•] Assist. Prof. Dr.., Dumlupinar University, Kutahya, Turkey

Emergent literacy represents the children's growing explorations about print: "That writing corresponds to spoken words; that the print, not the pictures, tells the story; that print is composed of a certain set of letters arranged just so on a page; and that those letters stand for spoken words" (Gillet & Temple, 2000, p.10). It applies to preliminary reading and writing, as well as beginning literacy. Children in the stage of emergent literacy are discovering the critical set of concepts about print which will be necessary for being successful in later stages of literacy. Moreover, they learn how pleasurable reading books and being read to is (Gillet & Temple).

Clay (1991) states that it is important to observe sensitively, record progress, and interact with a child supportively to achieve forward movement in emergent literacy development of a child. In this sense, Clay`s Observation Survey, which is an individually administered assessment tool, can be utilized to observe early literacy competency of a child (Clay, 2002). Denton, Ciancio and Fletcher (2006) state that the survey is helpful in measuring some of the key reading domains.

The current study is an inquiry-based case study, which adopted a qualitative interpretivist paradigm to describe literacy development of an English Second Language [ESL] preschooler, Mary. Clay (1991) states that sensitive and systematic observation of behavior is really needed to monitor gradual shifts across imperfect responding. Accordingly, this study aimed to show an exemplary case of preschool literacy development by utilizing Clay (2002)`s Observation Survey. More specifically, this qualitative single-case study was designed to answer the following questions:

- What does Mary know about reading and writing?

- What confusions exist?

- What instructional goals would be appropriate for this child?

Method

Case Study Method

The current research utilized the "Case Study" method, which is a comprehensive research method with design, data collection, and analysis (Yin, 1993; Yin, 2003) focusing on the *particularity* and *complexity* of a single case (Stake, 1995). The current qualitative research focused on the literacy development of one preschooler, Mary.

Research Tool

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the child, a practice common to case study research (Yin, 2003) utilizing Clay (2002)'s Observation Survey tasks, which included:

1. Concepts about Print,

2. Writing Vocabulary,

3. Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words,

4. Word Reading,

5. Letter Identification

6. and two Running Records of Text Reading tasks.

In this study, confidentiality of the participant was accomplished through concealing the real name by using pseudonyms, and no information that could be used to identify the participant was included.

An Exemplary Case

Mary was a 3½ year-old girl. English is her second language. She was the only child of Chinese, highly-educated, bilingual parents. She attended a full-day preschool, where English is spoken, for four months. She did not have many friends at home, so she usually played with her parents, according to her father. I observed that she did not talk very much, but she appeared to be very smart on the test. She was surrounded with opportunities provided by her parents; for example, her father said that various print materials were hung at home. Her home was in an urban area, in the campus of a big Mid-western research university in USA.

The researcher, in the role of participant observer, was Caucasian, female, and non-American. The researcher identified herself as a participant observer in terms of "moderate participation" (Spradley, 1980), taking part in the research context conducting interviews (Patton, 1990).

Findings

The testing was done in English. During the first day of testing (Concepts about Print), Mary was very shy and did not talk to me, nor did she respond to my questions. In order to be sure that she understood my questions, her father translated some of the questions into her native language, but still she was not verbally responsive to questions. During the next day of testing, she was more relaxed. On the last day of the testing, she was quite comfortable with me, and she even ran happily to me when she saw me. Accordingly, it is essential for me to note that Mary took the "Concepts about Print" task first when she was not familiar with me yet, followed later by the "Writing Vocabulary" task, and then the "Hearing and Recording Sounds in Word," "Word Reading" and "Letter Identification" together, and finally the "Running Records" task when she was very comfortable with me. For the Running Records task, I tried to find books which might be fun for her. The two books I selected were "Disney's Winnie the Pooh's Sing-Along Songs" and "Nursery Rhymes-Mary Had a Little Lamb & Other Rhymes." I wanted her to enjoy the time she spent reading those long texts. I think I was successful because she looked happy and laughed at the story during this task. As indicated by Clay (2002), international children may hesitate to answer the questions stated in the Observation Survey. I kept this in mind and tried to create a comfortable environment where Mary could respond easily. To accomplish this, we stayed in a recreation room where she visited frequently to play on computer/piano, watch TV sitting on a comfortable couch, play with recreational materials (e.g., billiard games) or just watch other children and adults playing. Her father stayed with us during the testing since we wanted him to stay with us.

Summary of "Concepts about Print" Task

The print concepts task evaluates the child's understanding of concepts such as (a) locating the front of the book; (b) knowing that the print, rather than pictures, carry the message; (c) directionality; (d) one-to-one correspondence between the printed and spoken word; and (e) the meaning of punctuation marks and terms such as "first letter," "capital letter," and "last word." (Denton, Ciancio & Fletcher, 2006, p.12)

During this first testing, Mary was very shy to talk, but she showed the right behaviors for "Concepts about Print" task. I read a specially designed book called *Stones* by Marie Clay to Mary and asked specific questions on each page. Her *book handling behaviors* seemed to be completely automatic. She could easily figure out the front of the book, knew that print contains message, detected line reversals, and read the left page before the right one. She had picture orientation; she turned the book to see the picture on page 7 of Stones, and turned the book to page 8 to read the sentence. Mary also had knowledge of *directional behavior*; she had knowledge of where to start, which way to go, and when to return to left. She had the concept of first and last, but did not detect altered line order.

Mary showed an interesting behavior in *visual scanning and following*. When there was one change in word order or line order, she read the sentence quickly without making any corrections. However, when there was one change in letter order, she claimed that she did not know the word, and asked me what it was. Clearly, she paid attention to the actual text and tried to read what exactly she saw. She did not correct a

sentence that was grammatically incorrect. Mary was not able to identify that there was something wrong in word order or letter order. Mary hesitated to read those wrong words, except in one case: She read "yelolw" by correcting it to "yellow." This might have happened simply because she was reading the text very fast, and so did not notice the change in the word. Without any hesitation, she succeeded in the last item related to visual scanning and following behaviors: "Reversible items: was, no."

Moreover, Mary knew some of the *specific concepts about printed language.* She knew the concept of letter matches (capital and lower case – Tt and Bb). Also, she was able to identify the capital letter. Since she did not respond verbally any questions, it was difficult to access her knowledge of "question mark, period, comma, quotation marks," but she showed the correct behavior (stopping behavior after period) when she saw a period. Lastly, she already had a grasp of *hierarchical concepts – letters, letters within words, words within sentences*. She showed behaviors of "word by word matching," understood the concepts of letters and words and could easily figure out the first and last letter of a word.

Summary of "Writing Vocabulary" Task

In this task, students are asked to write all the words that they can within a 10-minute period. The student is given a blank piece of paper and a pencil, and the administrator says, "I want to see how many words you can write." … Suggestions for prompts are offered as examples only, and include other children's names, things people do, things at home, things people ride, things people eat, and high-frequency words such as *I, a, see, to, at, and me*. The task is scored by assigning one point for every word that is correctly spelled. (Denton, Ciancio & Fletcher, 2006, p.12-13)

First I asked Mary to write what she knew, but she did not make any attempt. I asked her to write some specific words, as advised in Observation Survey by Clay (2002). Mary wrote most of those words. She knew her name and some other words, such as "look" and "go." She only had difficulty with the word "green." She wrote "G" for green. I asked her "What is this?" She said "G." Then she wrote the letters "GN," which are the first and last letters of the word "green." Then I asked her to read what she wrote, but she did not read it, and she erased it. Clearly, she knew that letters stand for words and these two letters were not enough to demonstrate the word "green." It is important to note that she was aware of whether what she wrote was right or wrong, exemplified by her attempt to correct it and her choice not to read it as though it were correct.

I think that Mary had reached a stage where she did not need to pay a conscious attention to directional behavior. These behaviors had become automatic for her, such as reading/writing from left to right and after finishing a line moving to the next one. Moreover, she knew to sweep the lines. She also distinguished space between words and has knowledge of hierarchical concepts; for example, when I asked her to write a word she did not attempt to write anything else besides that word, such as a letter, but wrote exactly that word.

Although Mary was very young to use a pencil, she grasped the pencil properly and wrote with a very good handwriting. While she was writing, she frequently looked at and examined the pencil. Her father explained that she always wrote on a board using dry erase markers, and she was not used to using pencil and paper. It was amazing that she showed good pencil holding behaviors in spite of her inexperience; her handwriting was quiet nice, clear, and readable.

Summary of "Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words" Task

For this task, which we will call Dictation, the examiner reads a sentence to the student and then repeats each word in the sentence once at a time, instructing the student to say the words slowly and write them. The administrator may prompt the student if needed, asking, "How would you start to write it? What can you heat? What else can you hear?" (Clay, 2002, p. 113). … Four forms of this task are provided. (Denton, Ciancio & Fletcher, 2006, p. 13)

I read to Mary "I have a big dog at home. Today I am going to take him to school." She wrote "I h a big dog hore today I am to him too." I asked her to read "hore" to let her hear what she wrote. She erased "re" and wrote "hom." This was important because this showed that although she had difficulty spelling some words, she was able to figure out that there was something wrong. Another issue was that instead of writing

the word "to," she wrote "too." In fact, this was not a real mistake, because both of them had the same pronunciation.

In this dictation task, Mary did not leave an overly big space between words. That was one of mature reading/writing behaviors. Mary tried to write the words together, unlike in the Writing Vocabulary task. This might show that she knew that these words belong together in a sentence, whereas the Writing Vocabulary task required her to write separate, unrelated words. During the dictation task, she was given a long sentence to write, and as usual she tried to write it very quickly. Moreover, she showed the behavior of placing the next word on the next line if there was no space any longer on the line she had been using.

Summary of "Word Reading" Task

Clay (2002) provided three versions of the OS Word Reading task: (a) the Ready to Read word list, widely used in New Zealand; (b) the Duncan Word Test; and (c) the Ohio Word Test, which was constructed from the Dolch word list and is typically used in the United States. Each version is composed of two to three parallel lists of high-frequency words. The New Zealand version has 15 words in each list, the Duncan has 23, and the Ohio version has 20. After reading a "practice word" the student is instructed to read the word list. Each version of the Word Reading task has three forms that can be administered at different times of the school year. (Denton, Ciancio & Fletcher, 2006, p.12)

I used Ohio version of this test. Mary read all words in List A correctly. She took a breath and read one-third of the whole list. She seemed proud of herself because she could read fast. Before she read what I asked her, she scanned the whole page quickly and then read it. She showed similar behavior in the "Concepts about Print" task; after scanning the page and looking at the pictures, she read the text on the page.

While she was reading, as required by the test procedure, I was putting check marks for each item she read. While she was reading the words, she was also trying to look at my paper and see what I was doing. This let me conclude that she had a good, visual scanning and following behavior, because she could easily keep track of what she read, even while frequently checking my own paper to see what I was doing. In order to satisfy her query about what I was doing, I told her "This is my own paper, and it has the same words as your paper."

Summary of "Letter Identification" Task

In the Letter Identification task, children are asked to identify all uppercase and lowercase letters, plus the "printer's" g and a (the form of these letters typically found in print). The directions for standard administration of this test indicate that students may identify a letter in any one of three ways: by name, sound, or keyword. When the test is scored, credit is given for each letter that the child identifies in any of the three ways. In other words, the child would receive credit for saying the name of the letter C without saying the sound of the letter, or for saying that the letter Q is the first letter in the word queen without saying the name or sound of the letter. Testers may decide to prompt children to provide letter names, sounds, or keywords in any order or combination. The 2002 edition of the OS manual includes optional administration procedures for the Letter Identification task in which the teacher asks the student only for the sound of each letter. (Denton, Ciancio & Fletcher, 2006, p.12)

On "Letter Identification" task, Mary read all of them without any hesitation. She even read various forms of same word as a "capital letter" and as a "small letter." Moreover, she easily identified cursive form of G, which was supposed to be very difficult for children to differentiate from other forms. As in the "Word Reading," task she read these letters very quickly. Being very fast at reading them might mean that identifying letters had become very automatic for her and did not require any conscious attention any more.

Mary did not need any clues to identify the letters; she named all of them correctly. She gave an "Alphabet response" for all letters, and did not need to use any clues, such as "letter-sound relation" or "a word which begins with this letter" to figure them out. There was no confusion and no letter unknown by Mary. Letter identification was one of her most impressive strengths I observed. She was self-confident while

reading, and she seemed to be proud of herself. After she read she would look at my face happily, as though to say "I did it."

Summary of Two Analyzed Running Records

A running record is a method of recording oral reading of connected text. The student is presented with a sample of text, and the administrator applies conventions to record (a) correctly read words, (b) miscues, (c) repetitions, (d) self-corrections, (e) appeals from the child for help, and (f) words told by the tester. These records can be analyzed to identify patterns in the student's reading behaviors that provide clues to the teacher regarding the kinds of reading skills and strategies the student applies when reading connected text. The test is scored according to the percentage of words read accurately. The percentage of errors the student self-corrects is also recorded. Thus, the test is primarily an untimed assessment of oral reading accuracy with the potential of additional qualitative analyses. (Denton, Ciancio & Fletcher, 2006, p.11)

Most of the time reading was easy for her, so I tried to find more challenging books that matched her reading level. The first book I selected was "Disney's Winnie the Pooh's Sing-Along Songs," and the second was "Nursery Rhymes-Mary Had a Little Lamb & Other Rhymes." Mary would read whatever I asked her to read. Then I asked Mary to read whichever songs and rhymes she wanted. I gave her the chance of choosing what she wanted to read. I tried to make this reading event fun for her. The first book was a book of songs with a microphone so she could sing into the microphone and also play the music for the songs she wanted. An interesting thing took my attention: At first I did not realize that each song matches with a specific music button, but Mary showed this to me. She was very observant, visually scanning not just reading materials but also other things on the book, such as pictures and music buttons. Mary read three songs without any mistake. She showed again that she knew concepts about print, such as directional behavior. She used visual scanning strategies. She did one to one match. Moreover, letting her to choose what she wanted to read showed me that she chose both long and short texts; she was confident in reading hard and long texts. Mary had very mature literacy knowledge for her age.

The second book she read was called "Nursery Rhythms." She enjoyed this book because it included pop-up pictures. After scanning the pictures and everything on the pages, she read the texts. She read four nursery rhymes. She was quite good at reading those long rhymes in a complex format, which required sweeping to the bottom of the left paragraph, then to the top of the right paragraph. This was the hardest text I could find, and I was impressed that she could solve even this very complex problem at her age.

Except one case Mary read everything without any mistake. This one error was probably due to reading so fast. Mary saw the first letter of the word "**n**aughty" and found another adjective which began with "n," "**n**ice." It is important to point out that both words were of the same part of speech, thus she used structural cues to choose a logical word beginning with "n." One time she stopped reading and scanned the word "killed," and then read it correctly. When she could not read a word, she could easily find out how to read it using grapho-phonemic cues.

During the next rhymes, she did not make any mistakes but read everything very clearly and quickly. While reading the third rhyme, she hesitated before the word "upon." First she said "s," and then she stopped and said "upon" correctly. She worked on the other word a little bit longer. In order to read the word "wherever," first she read the second part of the word "ever", and then on the second attempt she read the whole word correctly. I think here she used her background knowledge of "ever" to read the "wherever," which might have been new to her. She used partial articulation. While thinking she would examine and scan the word, and always on the second attempt she would read the words correctly. Lastly, she read the "one, two…" rhyme very fluently, except one case in which she stopped. After sweeping to the next part of the rhyme, she stopped and looked at my face. I asked her whether she had finished reading. She said "no," and then quickly returned to the book and finished it. I didn't know why she stopped there; it might be because we were selecting just some of the rhymes among many of them; she might have wondered whether she was supposed to read this too, and looked at my face to understand whether I also expected her to read this part.

Conclusion

Mary was only 3½, but she practiced many behaviors that mature readers and writers do. For example, Mary left appropriate, rather than too much, space between words and scans the text before reading it (Clay, 1991). Moreover, we may consider Mary as a mature reader because, as a dual-process model of mature reading theory indicates, she focused on letter-sound associations whereas expert readers use Lexical cues more frequently than the phonological cues (Clay, 1991). Even though she was an ESL child, she was fully aware of what she was doing. In most of the tasks, she showed her complete competence in reading and writing in English. When she hesitated, she usually used a method to identify words. For example, she used the partial articulation method to figure out how to read a word.

During the visual scanning task, Mary was not able to identify that there was something wrong in word order or letter order. However, I didn't think that these were real mistakes; even adults with English as a second language had the same difficulty. For example, when I see a misspelled word, I am likely to think that it might be a new word that I have not learned yet. Usually though, I figure out that this word is already in my word bank, it's just written wrongly. During the Writing Vocabulary task, Mary wrote the letters "GN," which are the first and last letters of the word "green." As stated by Clay (1991), it is a typical behavior of young children to write the first and last letters of a word.

As a suggestion for the future, Mary may work on specific concepts, such as question marks, comma, and quotation marks. Moreover, she may practice on writing more. Mary`s unique case illustrated why teachers should observe each child sensitively, record his/her progress, and interact with him/her supportively to achieve forward movement (Clay, 1991).

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