Literacy for All
Young Learners

Mary Renck Jalongo, PhD

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Literacy for All Young Learners

Preface

My first experience with a young English language learner occurred when I was a kindergartner. An Italian boy with olive skin and glossy black curls arrived at our school wearing red leather fisherman sandals. At recess, three boys began to make fun of him, saying, "He's wearing girls' shoes! Girls' shoes! Girls' shoes!" The boys continued to pursue him until the newcomer stood behind the school building, back against the wall, with tears streaming down his flushed face. I told the boys to stop but they ignored me. Finally, I resorted to throwing sand and they ran off, threatening to tell the principal. What happened was much worse: They told Miss Klingensmith. She was the person I pretended to be when I played school; she was the one who would inspire me to pursue a career in early childhood education. Above anyone else at that school, I did not want to disappoint Miss Klingensmith. She listened as I explained what had happened, and to her everlasting credit, my only punishment was to promise never to throw sand again.

Over the years, I have amassed many more experiences with young children who did not speak English and were newcomers to a school: as a Future Teachers of America volunteer; as a new teacher; as a volunteer for the Teacher Corps—a sort of stateside version of the Peace Corps; in a community preschool that included the children of migrant farm workers; and as a doctoral student in a university-based preschool that included the children of international students, many of whom did not speak English. As a college professor, I have had the opportunity to work with college students with dual majors in education and Spanish. They completed their student teaching in an elementary school where English was the language of instruction in the morning and Spanish was the language of instruction in the afternoon. During the summer, I supervised their internship in a public school in Mexico. Thus, young children whose first language is not English—and their teachers—have been a significant part of my professional career. This book has given me the opportunity to synthesize what I've learned from personal experience and from research.

Acknowledgments

Literacy for All Young Learners

Who is the young English language learner? The designation *English language learner* (ELL) is commonly used to refer to children who do not have English as a first language and are working to acquire proficiency in English. What are the realities for the young child who arrives at a school or center with little or no proficiency in English? The first, frequently overwhelming, experience is that the language of communication and instruction will be one that the child does not understand. Unless large numbers of children speak the same first language—such as Spanish-speaking children in Miami or Albuquerque—chances are that the child will be immersed in English from the very first day. While peers or an occasional community volunteer may speak the child's first language, there may not be anyone to interpret or translate. As a result, it will be up to the "regular" teacher—preschool or primary—to offer a curriculum that meets the developmental needs of all learners.

Introduction

Most of the time, the amount and kind of support offered to ELLs are entirely up to the teacher. If teachers make effective use of evidence-based strategies, English language learners will become valued members of the classroom community, will acquire a positive first impression of education, and will make the most of educational opportunities. If, on the other hand, teachers decide that a child with limited English proficiency is an inconvenience and take a sink-or-swim approach, then the child will feel like an outsider, question his competence, and have diminished opportunities to learn.

Misconceptions about Second-Language Learning

Supporting the young ELL relies on a combination of accurate information, pedagogical skills, and a commitment to supporting every child's learning. Often, misconceptions about young English language learners get in the way of making early childhood classrooms effective learning environments for them.

English language learners are not just found in urban settings. ELLs can be found in all types of early childhood settings. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the children enrolled in early childhood programs has increased dramatically. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, between 1997 and 2008 the number of English language learners enrolled in U.S. public schools increased by 51 percent. Today, one in nine students in the United States does not speak English as her first language; by 2025, the Pew Hispanic Center predicts that one in four students will be an English language learner.

Young children do not just pick up language; they need intensive and intentional instruction. Although young children's facility with languages can be impressive, language is first heard as a jumble of sounds. If you doubt this, just turn to a television or radio channel that broadcasts in a language you do not speak. At first, you cannot tell what pieces of that flow of speech represent a word, a phrase, or a sentence. Learners of a new language need *comprehensible input*, or an understanding of what they hear in a meaningful context. The more meaningful input a child is exposed to, the more progress the child can make in a second language.

The child's home language is not an impediment to acquiring English. The first language is a resource for learning the second language. Children are capable of developing emergent literacy skills in two languages simultaneously. And, being bilingual or multilingual offers significant advantages, including enhanced self-esteem, communication with family and friends, and the ability to apply knowledge of the first language to the second language. *Translanguaging*, or sometimes combining both languages into a single sentence, occurs naturally in young children. Consider what you do when someone speaks to you in an unfamiliar language and you want to communicate with that person. Your first instinct is to pay attention to nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and pantomime. You also pay attention to the emotional tone of the message and intonation; for example, the rising pitch at the end of an utterance indicates a question. You latch onto any words that you recognize, such as a person's name, a word borrowed from English, repeated words, and cognates— words that sound similar, such as *accident* in English and *accidente* in Spanish. You consider the context and look for cues from the immediate environment. Just as your knowledge of a language scaffolds your efforts to make sense out of an unfamiliar language, the young child's knowledge of another language is a strength, not a liability.

Language learning is not limited to one area of the brain nor does it follow a steady, incremental path. Language learning involves many areas of the brain and tends to occur in spurts as new neural pathways are established. If your metaphor for language learning suggests evenly spaced steps, it is time to rethink. Research suggests that language development progresses unevenly, sometimes surging forward and at other times lingering at a plateau.

The seemingly simple act of looking at a picture book engages all areas of the brain, as the child uses motor skills to pick up a book and turn the pages, vision to look at the words and pictures, reasoning to interpret the meanings of the words, gestures or speech to respond to the pictures, and emotions to respond to the book's art and meaning.

Understanding Second-Language Learners

Stages in Learning English

Researcher Patton Tabors notes that young children must work through a series of revelations as they begin to learn a new language:

- Not everyone understands or speaks their language.
- The people who do not understand and speak their language speak a different language.
- If they want to communicate with these people, they need to learn this new and different language.
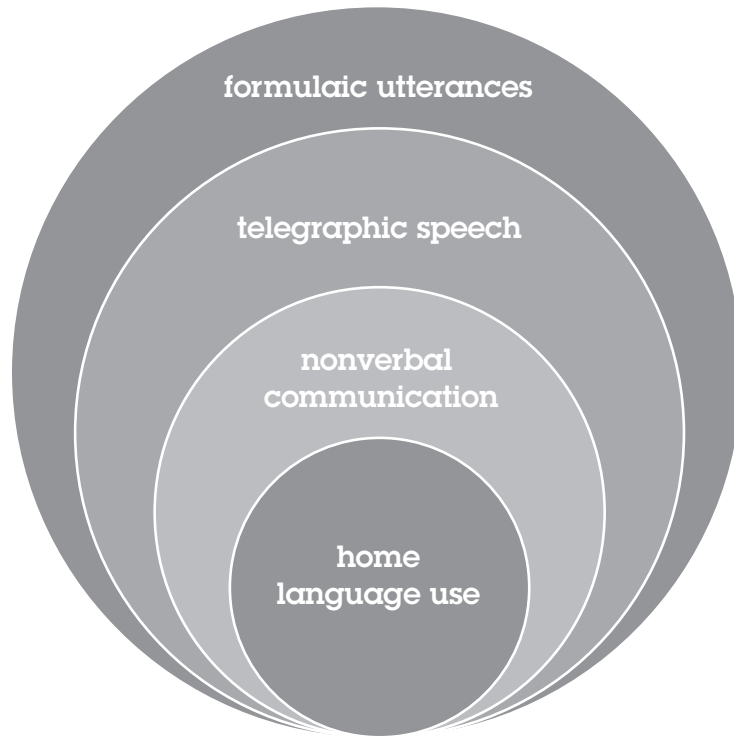
- **Home language use:** Although not all children do this, they may speak in their home language for a while before realizing they are not communicating. They may go through a period of speaking to others in their first language, even though everyone is responding in English. Even after they have begun speaking English, children may continue to use their first language with grandparents or other family members or may mix the two languages.

- **Reliance on nonverbal communication:** At this stage, children realize that they are not being understood and may use little or no language, relying instead on gestures and nonverbal utterances. For example, a child who needs assistance might whine or whimper. However, even if they are not producing English, this does not mean they are not receiving English. It is common to see these children standing on the sidelines as spectators, watching and listening to their peers. Other children may treat them like babies, speak to them as they would a much younger child, or simply ignore them. Some children go through a stage in which they attempt to sound like they are speaking English before they have acquired a vocabulary in English. This behavior parallels the stream of nonwords often produced by babies near the end of their first year—a flow of gibberish with the intonation of speech but with no (or few) recognizable words. Second language learners may repeat this stage much later. If adults cannot understand the child's first language, this important milestone may be overlooked because the adults assume the talk is in the first language. However, it is an important part of development because it shows that the child is trying on the sounds and intonation patterns of English.

- **Telegraphic speech:** Telegraphic speech, observed commonly in toddlers and young preschoolers, strips language down to the very essence (as adults once did when they sent telegrams and had to pay for each word). Second-language learners typically go through a similar phase. Telegraphic speech relies primarily on nouns, verbs, and words for social interaction. Articles, pronouns, word endings, and other grammatical pieces are left out. For example, a child may say "More juice" instead of "I want some more juice." At this point, children use the few words or phrases that they know.

- **Formulaic utterances:** If you have studied another language, you probably memorized common scripts along the lines of "Hello, my name is _____. What is your name? I am glad to meet you." Such scripts make communicating easier; young second-language learners use a version of this approach as well. Some of the more common expressions used by young children are "What's that?" "Lookit," or "How does it . . . ?"

Obstacles that Second Language Learners and Their Families Face

For many young children and their families, the transition to an English-language early childhood program represents challenges in a number of areas.

- **Reduced circumstances:** A family's social status can be diminished as they attempt to reestablish their credentials in a new environment. Young ELLs' parents frequently are underemployed; for example, a medical doctor from Russia may not have a U.S. medical license and may be working two jobs to support her family. Reduced circumstances can affect children as well; for example, a gifted child may be treated by his preschool classmates as if he were a toddler because he does not speak English. Family socioeconomic status (SES) is a combination of family income, parents' education level, and job status. In the United States, higher income levels can mean access to more language-learning resources such as books, technology, cultural events, tutors, and enrichment programs. Thus, it is particularly important that teachers inform families about of all of the free and inexpensive resources available to them in the school and larger community.

- **Limited exposure to English:** Many families of English language learners are living in linguistically isolated households; no one in the household knows English well enough to accomplish routine tasks. This leads to a double bind in that they cannot acquire English unless they have social interaction with English-speaking individuals, yet these interactions do not occur until *after* they have acquired some English. The family will often continue to speak only the home language. As the children grow older, they often will serve as translators for their family members.

- **Changes in the physical environment and expectations for in-school routines:** Many young children who previously spent much of their time outdoors become nature deprived when they are kept indoors much of the time. Overcrowding, violence, and the absence of green spaces in the neighborhood can cause dramatic changes in the physical environment. A child may be accustomed to social expectations that differ significantly from those in her new country. When she behaves according to the old expectations, she may be embarrassed or even ridiculed by her new peers. Teachers can help by learning about the child's culture and working with the family to teach all of the children in the class about their new friend's background and country. They can also pay special attention to helping the young ELL learn the expectations of her new environment.

- **Rejection of the home language in an effort to fit in:** In the United States as well as some other countries, English not only dominates but also is associated with status, education, wealth, and power. One common yet disappointing outcome

for many families is that children's proficiency in the ethnic language often declines. This can lead to disillusionment with the "American dream" as parents and families see their young children drifting away from their traditions, values, and language. In an English-dominant context, children often need more support to preserve and enhance their knowledge of their first language.

- **Lack of cultural information:** Educators can be uninformed or misinformed about the many different cultures, traditions, or religious observances among their students, and achieving understanding can be a challenge. For example, I know of some teachers who carefully planned a pizza party for the class families and were offended because the Muslim mothers would not eat. The teachers knew that Muslims do not eat pork, and they had been careful to order a vegetarian pizza. However, because the teachers used the same knife to cut both the sausage-and-pepperoni pizzas and the vegetarian pizza, religious observances prohibited the Muslim mothers from eating. Until the teachers understood this, they were inclined to think that they had "already done everything" to make the gathering a success.

Specific Activities Lead to Success in Literacy

In 2009, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) analyzed 299 predictive studies to arrive at a list of the early childhood activities that are associated with success in literacy. On that list were the activities that serve as the research base for this book, including:

- Oral language
- Concepts about print
- Name writing and other activities related to children's names
- Environmental print
- Alphabet knowledge
- Phonological processing
- Visual-perceptual skills
- Rapid Automatic Naming (instantly and correctly identifying letters, numbers, and words)
- Emergent (pretend) reading
- Emergent (pretend) writing
- Dialogic reading (interactive reading and discussion of books)
- Parent programs
- Vocabulary instruction
- Play-based literacy

Throughout this book, readers will find all of these principles and more put into practice.
In my early days of teaching, I remember being boggled by the concept of individualizing when there were twenty-eight first graders in my classroom. I naïvely assumed that it meant planning a different activity for each child simultaneously. Later, I realized that the activities themselves were too prescriptive and limiting.

Optimize your ability to reach and teach a diverse group of children by planning open-ended activities that allow every child to participate at some level. For example, suppose that you

are sharing a predictable big book with a group of preschoolers, one that is an action song with accompanying gestures. Some students will watch, listen, and rely mainly on the actions combined with oral language to understand the book. Others will study the illustrations to figure out what comes next in the song. Still others will rely on repetition, rhyme, and recall; they may begin by joining in on a few words or a refrain and eventually memorize the entire text. Just a few will actually decode the words and read them in the conventional sense. Thus, because the activity is not narrowly defined, everyone gets a chance to participate and experience success with literacy at some level.

Organization of This Book

This book is organized along a developmental continuum to make the activities more accessible to learners at different stages and to support teachers in differentiating instruction. It is based on Jerome Bruner's conceptualization of stages in learning.

- **Level I—Enactive: links oral language with physical activity**
  Using physical activity helps make oral language understandable. Use the enactive mode with young children who are new to English, particularly if their first language is not strong. Level I strategies are designated with the symbol to the right.

- **Level II—Iconic: links ideas with pictures**
  Initially, children need photographs or realistic drawings to make the connection with ideas, because it is difficult for them to fill in the blanks of more abstract symbols. As they progress through this stage, they learn to understand less realistic images that are still pictorial. Level II strategies are designated with the symbol to the right.

- **Level III—Symbolic: uses abstract symbols, such as letters, words, numerals, logos**
  It is not until children are interpreting symbols that they can become literate with print. Level III strategies are designated with the symbol to the right.

- **Extensions**
  Each of the sixty-five evidence- and standards-based activities in the book has an extension that is suitable for young children who are gifted and talented with language or for older students, such as second or third graders. The extensions are indicated by an icon that suggests a high level of proficiency with reading and writing.

Effectively Teaching ELLs

To effectively teach English language learners, consider the following approaches:

1. **Build on familiarity.** Imagine what it must be like to be a child from rural China and arrive at a well-equipped U.S. preschool. Surely, some of the materials found there must be mystifying. In my experience, breakthroughs in communication frequently happen when children interact with materials and do activities with which they are already familiar, such as water, sand, clay, and music and movement. For example, the three-year-old son of a Chinese graduate-student couple first attempted to speak English with peers while they played at the water table. The relaxed atmosphere, smaller group, and familiar materials

encouraged him to begin with an enthusiastic "Hi!" each time a child joined the group and "Bye-bye!" as the children exited. Next, he progressed to saying, "Look!" at whatever he was doing with the toys and water.

2. **Use a variety of approaches.** Multimodal approaches promote student engagement. If you combine gestures, objects, pictures, sounds, oral language, demonstrations of how things are done, and references to printed texts, you offer the largest number of children the greatest opportunity to learn. For example, introduce snack with pictures and the actual food containers; a demonstration of how to set the table; pantomimed actions of eating and drinking; and words that are commonly used in that context, such as *more* and *thank you*.

3. **Consider the children's emotions.** Young children often fear making a mistake and, at least initially, may remain silent as they listen and observe—even when they understand some of what is being said. Positive recognition from peers can fuel a child's motivation to speak out. The son of a graduate student from Saudi Arabia, for example, moved beyond one-word utterances for the first time when the class was singing. I had noticed him clapping and mouthing some of the words, and his mother shared that she had overheard him practicing at home. He surprised all of us one sunny afternoon when he enthusiastically joined in the song and the accompanying actions. The other children began to applaud spontaneously, and from that point forward, his English grew by leaps and bounds.

4. **Use repetition and intentional vocabulary instruction.** Researchers have found that, beginning at about age three, young children learn an estimated six to ten new words per day. However, they need about eight to ten meaningful repetitions of a word to make it part of their active vocabulary, so ordinary talk is often inadequate for developing vocabulary. When children are thrust into an environment where their language is not the language of instruction, it restarts this process. To bridge this vocabulary gap, young ELLs need teachers who provide context-rich encounters with a word, introduce key words in books before sharing them, use multimodal approaches, and supply child-friendly definitions of words.

5. **Get in touch with the beginner's mind.** As a beginning first- and second-grade teacher, I used to be puzzled when a not-yet-reader would volunteer to read aloud. Then, I realized that these children thought that knowing how to read would magically "just happen" to them someday. It is easy to see how this assumption could occur. Prior to attending school, we tell them that they will learn to read and that it will be fun, but we never say how long it might take or the huge investment of time, effort, and practice required. Adopting the child's point of view is essential to understanding how to support literacy all day and every day. It takes a beginner's mind.

Early childhood educators play an essential role in fostering and furthering language growth. The experiences that they provide are formative, irreplaceable, and set essential language-learning processes in motion. Giving young children a good start as learners is what early childhood education is all about.

What Is It?

Word walls are collections of developmentally appropriate words that are posted so that children can see them in print. Many classrooms have word walls with different purposes—for example, Words We Know: *yes, no, stop, I, Mom, love, cat, dog*; or Words for Pets: *dog, cat, hamster, fish*. Generally, a word wall is matched to instructional purposes; is cumulative so that, as new words are introduced, the familiar words remain; and serves as a support for students as they study, think about, read, and attempt to write words. An e-sort is an electronic, individualized word wall that the child can access digitally. Children can also use digital desktop publishing to create electronic word lists and share them with others. Older children can refer to word walls when they are writing in their journals as well.

Why Is It Important?

To become fluent readers and writers, children need to recognize many common words on sight. Not all words are spelled the way that they sound, and it is too time consuming to sound out every word. Hearing and understanding language or speaking words aloud and then seeing them in print support children's language growth.

How Does It Work?

Experts recommend building word walls with children over time, referring to them often as an instructional resource, and practicing reading the words in an interactive way with the children. To get more tips on using a word wall effectively, see Reading Rockets http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/word_walls.

Connections with the Common Core Standards		
Age	**Category**	**Standard**
Kindergarten	Conventions of Standard English	L.K.1. Use frequently occurring nouns and verbs.
First Grade	Vocabulary Acquisition and Use	L.2.4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade one reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.
Second Grade	Phonics and Word Recognition	RF.2.3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word-analysis skills in decoding words.
Third Grade	Phonics and Word Recognition	RF.3.3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word-analysis skills in decoding words.

Leveled Adaptations

Level I: Relying on Actions and Oral Language

1. Create a word wall that has several of the most essential words for social interaction, such as *yes, no, please*, and *thank you*. Write these words in English as well as other languages spoken by the children.

2. Set up a game with a toy. The first child asks, "Would you like to play?" and the English language learner answers, "Yes, please." The first child hands over the toy, and the second child says, "Thank you." Use a pointer or small LED flashlight for children to highlight each word as it is said.

Level II: Relying on Visual Images

1. To make the connection between actions and oral language, take digital photographs of children doing helpful classroom tasks. Laminate the images and affix magnets or Velcro to the back of each.

2. Make a helper board listing the names of the children in the class and −ing verbs. You could add tasks such as watering the plants, feeding the fish, or setting the table.

3. Let the children place the photos to link the verbs for the tasks to children's names. Model the practice of referring to the board when determining who is responsible for a task.

4. For a bilingual word wall, share the bilingual book, *Bebé Goes Shopping* by Susan Middleton Elya. In this story, a child keeps grabbing strange items to put in the cart until he gets a box of animal crackers. Make silhouettes of the animals to represent the crackers that Bebé eats, such as a giraffe, a camel, and a bear. Make a matching set of the Spanish words: *jirafa, camello*, and *oso*. If there are children who speak other languages, these words can be posted as well.

Level III: Beginning to Use Symbols

1. Young children are learning names of all kinds of things, so create word walls of nouns. Next, develop a word wall of action words.

2. After you have developed these two word walls, try combining the words into simple sentences, such as: "Once there was a _____ , and he wanted to _____." Some of these sentences will be humorous. You can get more ideas for noun-verb combinations that begin with the same letter of the alphabet at http://www.toytheater.com/action-alphabet.php

3. As children gain experience with word walls, they can use them to produce their own original books. For example, a word wall with days of the week in multiple languages could be used with the children's book *Cookie's Week* by Cindy Ward. In this story, a kitten gets into all kinds of mischief, Monday through Saturday, and finally takes a rest on Sunday. Children can invent their own day-by-day account of a pet—real or hoped for—and what it might do.

Extensions

1. To challenge students with gifts and talents in working with words, consider having them learn about silent letters. Share the book *Silent Letters Loud and Clear* by Robin Pulver as a way to introduce this concept.

2. Have the children create their own e-sorts of words with silent letters using a program such as VoiceThread. Or, have them create word walls of specialized academic vocabulary related to a subject area, such as the names of dinosaurs.

Picture Book Recommendations

Daywalt, Drew. 2013. *The Day the Crayons Quit.* New York: Philomel. **(P, K, 1st, 2nd)**
   This entertaining story stimulates children's imaginations by describing the antics of personified crayons. This book would lend itself to a word wall of the names of colors.

Dewdney, Anna. 2012. *Llama, Llama Hoppity-Hop.* New York: Penguin. **(T, P)**
   In this rhyming board book, part of a series about Llama Llama, the activities are clapping, jumping, stretching, and moving. Make a picture word wall of the actions.

Elya, Susan. 2006. *Bebé Goes Shopping.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Children's. **(P, K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd)**
   Bebé is not at all helpful during a trip to the grocery store until Mama gives him a box of animal cookies to keep him occupied. Spanish words are interspersed throughout the book.

Fogliano, Julie. 2012. *And Then It's Spring.* New York: Roaring Book Press. **(P, K, 1st)**
   After sharing this book, make a word wall of the seasons and descriptive words associated with each time of the year. Children can then refer to the word wall to construct books or create a picture of an activity that they enjoy during each season.

Fox, Mem. 2010. *Where Is the Green Sheep? Donde Esta la Oveja Verde?* Chicago, IL: Harcourt. **(T, P, K, 1st)**
   Basic vocabulary is repeated and rhymed in this bilingual story about various kinds of sheep—and a particularly hard-to-find green one.

Janovitz, Marilyn. 2012. *Play Baby Play!* Naperville, IL: Source-books. **(T)**
   Babies in a playgroup enjoy participating in all of the activities that include rolling around, ringing bells, and listening to stories.

Pulver, Robin. 2010. *Silent Letters Loud and Clear.* New York: Holiday House. **(1st, 2nd)**
   The book follows a class who wants to ban silent letters because they make spelling too difficult. Including these silent-letter words in a word wall will help the readers to visualize their tricky spellings.

Sierra, Judy. 2012. *Suppose You Meet a Dinosaur: A First Book of Manners.* New York: Knopf. **(P, K, 1st)**
   A little girl goes grocery shopping with her friendly dinosaur companion. In the process, they learn to use polite words, including *please, thank you*, and *excuse me*. Use this book to generate a word wall of polite words in multiple languages.

Teckentrup, Britta. 2012. *Animal Spots and Stripes.* San Francisco, CA: Chronicle. **(P, K)**
   This is a brightly colored board book that teaches patterns. Use it to inspire a wall of words that describe patterns.

T = Toddlers (ages 1–2)
P = Preschool (ages 3–5)
K = Kindergarten (ages 5–6)
1st = First grade (ages 6–7)
2nd = Second grade (ages 7–8)
3rd = Third grade (ages 8–9)

Ward, Cindy. 1997. *Cookie's Week.* New York: Puffin. **(T, P, K, 1st)**

> A mischievous cat does something disruptive to the household every day—except Sunday, when she takes a rest. Use a word wall of days of the week before and after sharing the story. The children can create their own books with pages for each of the days.

Wild, Margaret. 2003. *Kiss Kiss!* New York: Simon and Schuster. **(T, P)**

> A baby hippo rushes outside to play and forgets to kiss his mom. All of the other jungle animals he meets along the way remind him of his omission. Have children retell the story with clip art images, stuffed toy animals, or puppets.

Online, we offer recommendations for apps that can help support children's literacy learning. Many apps are offered for free or at a low cost and are available on iTunes or Google Play. See www.gryphonhouse.com

Discover
new ideas and **fresh** approaches
for teaching
English language learners.

Early childhood classrooms are becoming more and more diverse. One in nine students in the United States currently does not speak English as his first language. Soon, one in four students will be an English language learner (ELL). Dual languages and a wide range of reading abilities require that teachers have the resources to reach all learners in their classrooms.

In **Literacy for All Young Learners**, Mary Jalongo, PhD, offers 65 strategies to support literacy learning with children from preschool through the third grade. With specific suggestions for ELL students, Jalongo includes recommendations for hundreds of great children's books, websites, and apps to make teaching easier. Each strategy is designed to be simple to use with all of the children in your classroom—from the not-yet-readers to the fluent readers—and each strategy is tied to the Common Core State Standards for kindergarten through third grade.

Support literacy learning across a range of abilities in all areas:

- alphabet learning and letter-sound correspondence,
- sight words,
- reading comprehension,
- sequence and story line,
- listening skills,
- oral language skills,
- writing skills, and so much more!

Downloadable digital content includes sample parent letters in English and Spanish, extra book-based activities, and technology supports.

Mary Renck Jalongo, PhD, is an internationally respected educator, author, presenter, editor, and consultant. She is a professor of education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she coordinates the doctoral program in curriculum and instruction. She is the author of more than 25 books and is the editor-in-chief of *Early Childhood Education Journal.*

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