

The Language/Literacy Hierarchy

“The best way to demonstrate the importance of oral language to reading and writing, and ultimately all school subjects, is to demonstrate it using the Language/Literacy Hierarchy.

** At the base of this pyramid is receptive oral language, LISTENING. This is the foundation of all learning, it is the first area to develop, and it is the largest area of development. Think about how babies learn to talk. They can understand what you tell them long before they can say the words. For instance, A 10-month old baby turns to look for Daddy when someone says “Daddy.” Adults also have a much larger listening vocabulary (that is, words they can understand) than their speaking vocabulary. For example, you could probably understand parts of a lecture on brain surgery, but you probably aren’t ready to go and GIVE a lecture on the same topic!

** The next level is expressive oral language, or, TALKING. This area is slightly smaller than the receptive language since you understand many more words than you actually use in your spoken vocabulary. Obviously, you don’t use words in oral communication that are not within your scope of comprehension (part of your receptive vocabulary), although there are people I know whom I suspect of doing this! But for most of us, the size of our expressive language vocabulary is directly dependent on the size of our receptive vocabulary. The same is true for children.

** The next level is your receptive written language, or READING. Now, you might be able to sound out a word like this - (WRITE ON flipboard or create a slide) *Spasmophonia* (or any word you wish that is easy to decode but not well known by most people). How do you pronounce this word? What does it mean? (Audience member generally says they don’t know what it means). Then, would you say that you READ the word? What if a child had no idea what an owl was. Even if he or she could sound out the word O-W-L, would that be reading? No, of course not. In order to truly read a word (not just sound out a bunch of letters) you must be able to comprehend its meaning. So, your reading vocabulary is directly dependent on the size of your oral language base. (In case you were wondering, spasmophonia means inability to speak due to a spasm of the larynx.)

** The fourth level, receptive written language, which is, of course, WRITING is directly dependent on the size of your reading vocabulary. In the same way as with oral language, you do not write words you cannot read. Consequently, your writing abilities are limited by your reading abilities.

** On the very top are all the other academic areas that require oral and written skills in order to be proficient. These include math, social studies, english, science, and even physical education!

Now, as interesting as this all is, it is not the most impressive thing about this slide! Let's say that a child enters school with a slightly smaller than average receptive vocabulary. This could be for any reason. Maybe he or she has not had a chance to visit a farm or a zoo or a grocery store. Maybe there is an underlying problem with language development. Maybe he or she was not read to. Whatever the reason, this would mean that the child's receptive oral language base is going to be reduced. * That means that that child's expressive oral language is also going to be somewhat smaller– which means his or her reading potential is also decreased. This decreases the size of the writing base * and when you see what has happened to the size of the top tier * you no longer wonder why so many children are having trouble in math and science!



Hopefully, this demonstration gives you a graphic understanding of the importance of helping children build language base that is as broad as possible. The strategies and techniques that you will be learning during these workshops will help you do exactly that!”