

## 5-3 Language: using letters and words

Recognising letters and learning to read leads children to the world of knowledge. However, a reading skill does not simply lead to acquisition of knowledge if it is not accompanied with understanding what is written, while a writing skill cannot guarantee communication if syntax is incorrect. Adults usually want children to read and write as early as possible. Before that, however, children need to listen to a wide range of stories, so that they can expand vocabulary, understand meanings, and learn to communicate in words that are understandable by others.

### Picture-Book Reading and Picture-Story Shows

Children can start enjoying picture-book reading from about 10 months of age. They explore the world of a picture book by becoming interested in finding something familiar in the book. While enjoying the asking or calling words and rhythmical repetitions of word rhythms, children learn to connect the meaning of words with illustrations. They are ready to develop imaginative skills with which they can portray a fantastic world of the story from what they hear. Children enter into the imaginary world by linking parents' or teachers' reading voices with illustrations. Eventually children will learn letters and become independent readers. Therefore, in line with their language acquisition, development of children's imagination through reading picture books and picture-story shows (a story that consists of over ten sheets of cardboard, with each page showing a sheet-wide drawing) builds a basis for subsequent successful reading experiences and a rich language environment that is full of intellectual stimulation.

#### Educational goals

- **Enjoying word rhythms and sounds and sharpening sensitivity to words through picture-book reading and picture-story shows, further developing reading skills.**
- **With exposure to words in picture books and picture-story shows, practicing expressing things and one's thoughts and increasing vocabulary to facilitate communication.**
- **In the process of understanding the story with pictures as clues, developing an imagination of the world of stories and fantasies that are depicted in words.**
- **Through exposure to a wide range of picture books and picture-story shows, capturing the world around oneself afresh as well as stimulating awareness and interest into the world beyond.**
- **Realizing how people and things affect one's life by having picture books or picture-story shows read by others or reading them by oneself.**
- **Finding ideas for new play in picture books and incorporating it into one's activity.**
- **Familiarizing with words and letters through picture books and picture-story shows and developing motivation to read alone, which is conducive to a smooth transition to elementary school curriculums.**

## Familiarizing with picture-books and picture-story shows



This is, 'Picture Book Corner'.

Except on the bottom shelf, books are lined up with only their spines visible. Books on upper shelves are arranged side by side, displaying their front covers.

Books with their front covers shown attract children.

Children are listening to picture-book reading.

The reader is holding the book by her side, showing its pages to the children.

Two girls are looking at a picture book together.

Though unable to read yet, they imagine the story as they look at the illustrations. Children can memorize the story of a familiar book after listening several times, and sometimes they can turn the page while telling the story as if they were actually reading it.

Two boys are sharing a picture book.

Being curious, another boy came and opened a book.

The circle of friends expanded around the picture book.

A student teacher is doing  
a picture-story show.

Children become glued  
to the story which  
develops at every sliding  
of a sheet.

Sometimes a teacher's  
hand-made show is read to  
children.

A child is trying to create her own story  
by showing a friend her drawing as if it  
came out of a picture-story show.

The experience to see picture books and  
picture-story shows stimulated her  
imagination and creativity which are  
crystallized in her reading play.

Like a teacher, a girl is reading a  
picture book to her friend.  
The show is dramatically  
presented with a blue cloth on  
the desk.

## Keep in mind

- When reading to smaller children, try to present picture-book reading as a fun activity. Share and appreciate the illustrations and words in a book with children.
- Try to read slowly while you are showing the illustrations to children. Sometimes, it may be a good idea to let a child sit on your lap or gather children close around you.
- Try to face children and read as if talking to them, rather than looking at a book all the time. Instead of reading a book as it is written, you may make things exciting by drawing children's attention by asking questions: 'It's beautiful, isn't it?' and 'Do you know why?' Depending on children's maturity, the words and phrases in a book can be rephrased in a different way.
- Read children's favorite books over and over again. By doing so, children can memorize the sentences and recognize a sequence of letters as something meaningful, eventually starting to read while understanding the meaning of what is being read.

## Tips and suggestions

- Good picture books are often elaborately illustrated. The illustrations are full of wonders and have clues guiding children to imagine what is being told. A teacher therefore needs to practice reading a book while paying attention to illustrations and can also try to turn the page at the right timing for each picture.
- When you want to let children imagine what happens next, turn the page slowly while watching their faces. On the other hand, a quick turn of the page can increase the excitement.
- Even if picture books are hard to find in your situation, you can create your own picture-story show by dividing a story into separate scenes and then drawing only a sheet-wide picture on a page per scene. Tell the story according to each drawing.
- In a picture-story show there are instructions in the back of the sheets as to how to make dramatic ups and downs, and some pages even instruct a reader to stop sliding the sheet along the way and hide the part of the picture in order to create excitement. Therefore, a teacher, as a reader, needs to thoroughly understand the picture and words on every page and try to be an exciting and effective reader to attract children.
- Special books describing the seasons and traditional events can be displayed on the bookshelf to

raise children's awareness.

## **Familiarizing with letters**

Children are surrounded by many letters and symbols. Younger children's encounters with letters are triggered by their developing intellectual maturity to have interest in letters and symbols presented in their everyday life. Therefore, what matters is how adults organize an environment that stimulates children's curiosity in letters and symbols.

Upon entering kindergarten, children are welcomed with language environment that directly affects their lives at school. A child's name is displayed in many places, for example on a shoe box, a towel hook, a locker, a shelf, and a drawer. Then the child will recognize a sequence of letters as a particular symbol that represents his or her name. However, language acquisition is one of the significant developmental tasks greatly affected by individual difference. Therefore, since there are children who are not ready for learning letters, a teacher may need to present letters accompanied by figurative marks of familiar animals and flowers.

### ..... Educational goals .....

- **Through exposure to various letters in one's surroundings, developing interest and curiosity in letters and symbols.**
- **Developing word recognition skills in language through an environment full of letters, marks and pictures.**
- **Triggered by the sequence of letters that represents one's own name, becoming interested in letters in general.**
- **A teacher can enhance children's linguistic interest by giving them a hand-made birthday card and writing a message to them.**
- **By watching a teacher write a child's name or comments on his/her art work, feeling motivated to learn language.**
- **Through traditional games such as Japanese picture card game, cultivating interest and curiosity in letters.**
- **With the lists of Japanese and English phonetic alphabets posted close enough to look at and touch, becoming aware of the world of letters.**

## Language environment at kindergarten



How to organize one's shelf with a play-dough board, sketchbook, play dough, glue, and crayons is illustrated on a signboard.

To help children sort out sandbox toys into designated baskets, a card shows both the name and the picture of a toy.



A child's name is displayed on a shoe box. A familiar picture such as an animal or a fruit is attached beside the child's name. Each child is given a unique mark, which is used elsewhere in kindergarten.

The boxes to stack either newspaper or fliers are clearly indicated in large letters.

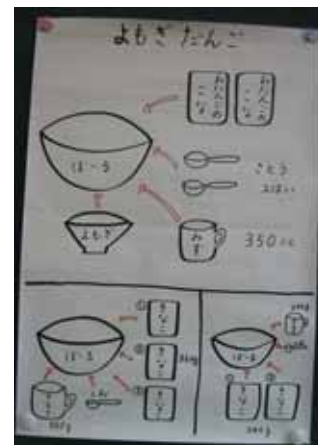


A classroom and washroom are indicated with both the letters and drawings.



A teacher writes a message on the paper and lets the class know by posting it on the board decorated by children.

The recipe for dumplings is presented in words and drawings.



A teacher is neatly writing children's names on their art work.  
A child is carefully watching the teacher writing their own names.  
By observing adults write letters, children are motivated to write on their own.

## **Keep in mind**

- It is important to encourage children to learn letters voluntarily from their surrounding environment through play, rather than forcing them to learn.
- Because letters are presented to children as a part of the school environment, try to write precisely and neatly.
- When selecting supplementary marks and pictures accompanying children's names, ensure that they are appropriate to the educational environment.
- Children will find it hard to recognize the language environment if it is presented in a disorganized setting. Keep the classroom tidy to make letters and characters easily recognizable.
- Exposure to an excessive amount of letters can be problematic. Be sensitive to children's language development and adjust the environment accordingly.
- Cherish close communication with each child when writing his or her name and your comments on their art work. Such an intimate experience with a teacher will reinforce a child's trust in you and he or she can feel 'positively regarded,' which will motivate the child to communicate more themselves.
- Adjust the language environment to the individual child's level of development so that a child who is not ready for reading does not have low self-esteem.

## **Tips and suggestions**

- The front cover of a picture book posted on the wall is, among other language presentations, an effective way to send a message: 'We have such a wonderful book. Please try to read this.'
- If children are mature enough, write lyrics of a song in a large paper and post it in their classroom. Through memorizing the words, children will learn the letters without realizing what they are doing.
- For a group project involving many children, a large instruction chart that shows materials to prepare and steps to follow can effectively make the whole group understand the flow of the project.
- The name labels on trees in the yard and plants on the flower bed can prompt children to become aware of the nature in the kindergarten.
- A Japanese picture-card game is designed to play with a small number of people, and yet, with the help of picture clues, even those who cannot read can enjoy the game. Those whose linguistic curiosity was stimulated by the game will start actively learning more and more letters. When a large number of children are participating, divide them into smaller groups and give each group the same set of picture-cards. The game will then become fun for all.



## Writing Letters

Children see letters, symbols and signs during everyday life, at home and outside. By watching adults reading them, or by reading and talking about signs with adults, children gradually become interested in words and letters. And, by seeing adults reading a newspaper or writing a letter, they instinctively understand the meaning and purpose of words and are inspired to use letters and symbols like adults do. Children's writing attempts may often look like scribbles, but remember that some start writing shapes that are like letters from a fairly early age. As they mature, many children start to ask a teacher or friends how to read letters. In daily activities, Japanese kindergartens emphasize the function of letters as a means of communication and try to let children know it is fun to use letters and to communicate with others.

### Educational goals

- **Recognizing the functions and meanings of letters as symbols, through exposure to various letters, symbols, and signs at home and in the community.**
- **Enjoying expressing oneself in words by trying to write and read letters, through a growing interest in letters in the course of everyday life and play.**
- **Enjoying communication with others, by means of letters in everyday life and play.**
- **Understanding what is represented by words and letters, through word games and playing with letters, which helps a child realize and enjoy different styles of expression and shows that it is fun to use letters.**
- **Being able to construct a short sentence to convey what one feels, thinks or wants to communicate.**

## Writing activities at kindergarten

Three-year olds wrote a letter in scribbles. They are enjoying “writing” and trying to convey a message in something that looks like letters.

A teacher needs to fully respect children's motivation to write and their enthusiasm to communicate.

Boys playing trains are writing a logo of a train company.

The sign on the hat says 'JR,' or Japan Railways.

Through their course of everyday life the 'JR' logo has become familiar to them and was therefore adopted in their play.



The train shows its destination, 'Tokyo,' in Chinese characters, just like a real train. Even though this is fairly difficult for younger children to write, Chinese characters are still used in their play.

A pretend pastry shop has opened. In an attempt to let everyone know, they made a signboard. Then they taped the signboard on a building block.



For easier reference by children, a list of the Japanese alphabet is posted on the wall.

Five-year old children created cards for a Japanese picture-card game.

The Japanese card game is played by matching a word card read out by an adult with its corresponding picture card, the top right corner of which shows the first letter of the sentence on the word card. Around New Year's Day children and adults enjoy playing the game together.



They are playing with their hand-made cards.

The reader is reading letters on the word cards.

While children compete for the picture cards, they can learn letters and have fun.

This is a list of all the children's names in the group.

A teacher tries to find an opportunity to write children's names as often as possible in daily activities at kindergarten and teaches them the functions and the importance of written words.

A teacher has flipped a card and announced to the class, 'Tomorrow's leader is Yuri.'

The card shows the child's name.

## **Keep in mind**

- Children's early writing attempts may often look like scribbles or mirror-letters that are written in reverse. This is the important step toward using letters as a means of self-expression and communication. Instead of correcting their "writing" right away, praise their achievement and encourage them to write.
- By introducing letters through writing a sign or a letter to someone in the course of play, try to help children feel interested in writing. Even though at first a teacher has to write for them, children will gradually start writing by themselves.
- When a child comes to you for help by asking, 'Please write it for me,' 'How do you write this?' or 'Tell me about this,' teach them with patience and show them the correct way to write.
- Supply an adequate range of writing materials, including paper of various kinds and sizes, pencils, as well as markers and crayons that are easily used by children who cannot grip small pencils tightly enough.
- Creating a quiet place with desks and chairs to help children concentrate on writing.
- Respect children's enthusiasm to write by praising and appreciating however nice or poor their handwriting may look.

## **Tips and suggestions**

- With sheets of drawing paper ready, you can let children draw some pictures on the paper and create a story which will then be written by adults, resulting in children's own picture book or picture-story show.
- Introduce something that involves writing in a play, such as a menu at a restaurant, or an inventory or price list for a shop, in order to provide children with an opportunity to write letters.
- Always have pieces of paper handy. Children can keep record of activities such as who plays a particular character in a drama and how many times one person jumped over a rope.
- It is nice to let children write invitation cards to a birthday party or a performance and give them to their family or neighbors.
- For those who can write their own names, encourage them to write their names on their art work.