

6

Essential  
Literacy Skills

The

Right

to Be

Literate

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# Introduction

## Receptive and Expressive Language

**The** right to be literate, the unequivocal *what* of this book, comprises six comprehensive skill areas: reading widely, in all the many formats; writing to communicate clearly; listening to garner other perspectives; speaking with confidence and presence; viewing intently in the digital age of computer screens of all sizes and shapes; and representing ideas graphically through the powerful medium of visual literacy.

The big-picture vision of language is, above all else, about communication. It's about the back and forth of receptive and expressive language. Receptive language consists of three critical skill areas—(1) reading, (2) listening, and (3) viewing. Expressive language includes the three complementary skill sets—(1) writing, (2) speaking, and (3) representing—as shown in table I.1. Receptive skills are ways learners gather information, discover ideas, and take in the thoughts of others. Expressive skills, on the other hand, are the exact opposite. They are modes used to communicate the learners' own ideas to others, and they encompass the sense of audience that permeates discussions of student work.

**Table I.1: Receptive and Expressive Language**

Input: Receptive Language	Output: Expressive Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reading/Deciphering</li><li>• Listening/Hearing</li><li>• Viewing/Visualizing</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Writing/Composing</li><li>• Speaking/Articulating</li><li>• Representing/Symbolizing</li></ul>

While each of these areas is fully discussed in dedicated chapters, a quick glance here sets the stage for deeper analysis.

Moving along the developmental spectrum of language skills, when learners are reading-ready, they begin experiencing *reading input* from many realms: from stories read to them, from pointing to words they recognize and can say, from consolidating the listening, and from speaking about these earliest reading episodes. Likewise, the skills of *writing output* emerge over time, beginning with scribbles, drawings, and some indecipherable pictures. Then, as more formal exercises are introduced, students begin to actually write, moving from words and sentences to phrases and paragraphs.

*Listening input* is a modality developed at birth as infants respond to the sounds of language. Soon, their speaking skill kicks in, and they begin babbling and yammering, which eventually transforms into a distinguishable *speaking output*, consisting of words, phrases, and sentences. Thus, the yin and yang of listening and speaking begin to connect.

*Viewing input* begins early as well, similar to listening input. As soon as infants' eyes can focus, they are privy to the colors, shapes, shadows, and images around them, both in the real world and in the virtual world of our screen age. *Representing output* grows from this stage. Consider a toddler pushing objects into abstract arrangements and naming her creation, saying "hat" as she points to it with gleeful squeals.

Thus, our vision is to provide all teachers with explicit research-based evidence and with active, engaging learning strategies focused on these inputs and outputs of literacy instruction. The strategies included in this book are also aligned to all standards and help students think with logic and reason.

## Logic and Reasoning

The brain/mind connection, that inextricable link between literacy learning and thinking, is a critical part of a student's right to be literate. The basis of all literacy skills is knowing the how, the what, and the why, and fortunately, such thinking is what the brain is wired to do (Sylwester, 1995). In fact, the brain/mind connection is what allows humans to think broadly, deeply, and divergently, as well as think in more convergent ways for focused, targeted thinking.

Students may not all read confidently or write swiftly at grade level, but they have a range of abilities to think, reason, problem solve, draw conclusions, and make sense of things at their developmental level for the various stages of schooling. If you doubt this, consider the following story:

A fifth grader noticed that all of his teachers were giving skill-and-drill test prep worksheets. He asked, "When are we gonna meet this teacher?"

When asked what he was talking about, the student reasoned that it seemed like all the teachers were working together on these sheets, and that one of them was doing most of the work.

As he pointed to the corner of one sheet, he explained, "Look here, his name is on most of the sheets: Ed Leader. I'd like to meet him."

It would be easy to simply correct this misconception, but better still, giving coaching feedback to this fifth grader about the logic and reasoning exhibited by his observation and conclusion would strengthen his confidence as a good thinker. In fact, upon closer analysis, there is clearly abundant evidence of thinking and reasoning on his part. He does all of the following:

- **Determine:** A pattern of all teachers and test prep skill-and-drill sheets
- **Associate:** Source and author in many instances is Ed Leader
- **Hypothesize:** Teachers must be working together
- **Infer:** One (Ed Leader) is doing most of the work
- **Justify:** He sees the name on many sheets
- **Inquire:** Student-initiated question

To become close observers of rigor and thinking in the classroom, this is the kind of analysis that allows teachers to give students valid coaching and feedback about their reasoning skills and their ability to think well, which is the exact message from the Common Core State Standards and Partnership for 21st Century Skills (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d.).

If the consensus across sets of standards is that higher-order thinking is critical to student success, it makes sense to explicitly teach students how to think. Even though many states are designing their own standards, most are still more than 85 percent Common Core. Thus, the research on thinking skills that dominates the Common Core is still as valid and as applicable. To further this conversation, we've included a list of thinking skills in the back of the book. These thinking skills align to each standards-based strategy as noted at the end of the chapter. This is not to say that each strategy only addresses these individual thinking skills. Rich, multifaceted instructional strategies can be customized to address a variety of thinking skills.

All standards guide learning, and all thinking skills foster rigor in thinking. Using these tools, teachers can pave the way for all students to be literate, mindful, and contributing members of society.