

Analysing the impact of environmental print on children's written acquisition

In the following activities, you will learn how to analyse the impact of **environmental print** - the printed language of everyday life which children see around them - on children's language development.

Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky researched the impact of environmental print on children's literacy (1982), by studying the literacy knowledge of Argentinian children aged 4 - 6 years old, throughout their first school year.

They found that the children had developed knowledge about written language before they started to be taught about it formally in school. This knowledge came from their day-to-day experiences of printed language that they saw in the world around them, at home, in school, in shops and in their local community. The printed language of everyday life is called environmental print.

'It is absurd to imagine that four- or five-year-old children growing up in an urban environment that displays print everywhere (on toys, on billboards and road signs, on their clothes, on TV) do not develop any ideas about this cultural object until they find themselves sitting before a teacher.'

Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy before Schooling* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, p.12

1. How does the study by Ferreiro and Teberosky challenge traditional ideas about literacy teaching for children?

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2. How could a child be helpful to learn language from environmental print?

For example, a child could cut out letters from print on cereal boxes, and sort them into upper case and lower case, or could try to recognise the letters of his/her name in the registration numbers of cars. Can you come up with at least three more suggestions?

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Now study the following handwritten text, created by Agnes, aged 3 years 10 months. Then read the information in the box, provided by Agnes' mother.



'We had been to another child's birthday party where Agnes had seen a banner which said "Happy Birthday Freddie" so I think she set out to recreate that. She did it by herself at home without help, then showed me. She told me that the writing says "Happy Birthday Agnes". She also told me how she wanted her own birthday party to be and specified that this drawing had to be on the wall at the birthday party. The people in the picture are Agnes and one of her friends, and they are wearing birthday hats.'

3. How has environmental print assisted Agnes' language development? Apply Ferreiro and Teberosky's study, and any other relevant research, as well as your own ideas.

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Teaching notes

1. How does the study by Ferreiro and Teberosky challenge traditional assumptions about teaching children literacy?

The study by Ferreiro and Teberosky shows that children are not passive learners of language but actively responding to the language of their environment.

A traditional approach would be that children do not know about language before it is taught. Traditionally, a formal classroom setting in which children are instructed by their teacher to do tasks like reading books and completing writing tasks is considered to be the 'best' way for children to learn language. However, this traditional approach fails to take into account all the ways that children engage with language in the world around them.

Ferreiro and Teberosky showed that children's knowledge of environmental print (the printed language of everyday life which children see around them) should be taken into account by schools to help develop children's literacy.

2. How could a child learn language from environmental print?

- A child could make a shopping list for when s/he is taken shopping by a family member, and try to match the words on the list to the labels of food products in the shops.
- A child could count how many times s/he sees a particular sign, such as a shop's 'open/closed' sign, when out on a walk.
- A child could use words and pictures cut out from magazines and newspapers to make their own 'book'.
- A child could try to spot a particular house number in the street where s/he lives, or try to recognise any familiar letters in house names.

3. How has environmental print assisted Agnes' language development? Try to apply your knowledge of Ferreiro and Teberosky's study, and any other relevant research.

The 'Happy Birthday Freddie' banner is an example of environmental print that inspired Agnes to try to create her own banner. Agnes is actively responding to the language of everyday life. To stretch students, you could encourage them to apply other relevant theories/concepts to the text.

This text seems to lend support to Ferreiro and Teberosky's finding that a formal school environment is not essential to a child's linguistic development. Agnes has developed her ideas further, through a combination of text and image. The representations of herself and her friend in party hats show her awareness of birthday party conventions. Although she did not know how to write 'Happy Birthday', she has written some of the letters of her name (usually the most familiar letters for a young child), showing her understanding that she should change the name on the banner from 'Freddie' to her own name, for her own birthday party.