

Chapter 4

Using the Early Literacy Continuum



This chapter introduces a continuum that supports the development of the emergent reader and writer in developmentally appropriate ways. This continuum, when used properly, helps match up assessment with classroom practice. Because of this alignment between assessment and classroom practice, teaching becomes more focused.

GUIDING QUESTION

- How can I monitor and assess my students' oral language development and attention to detail?

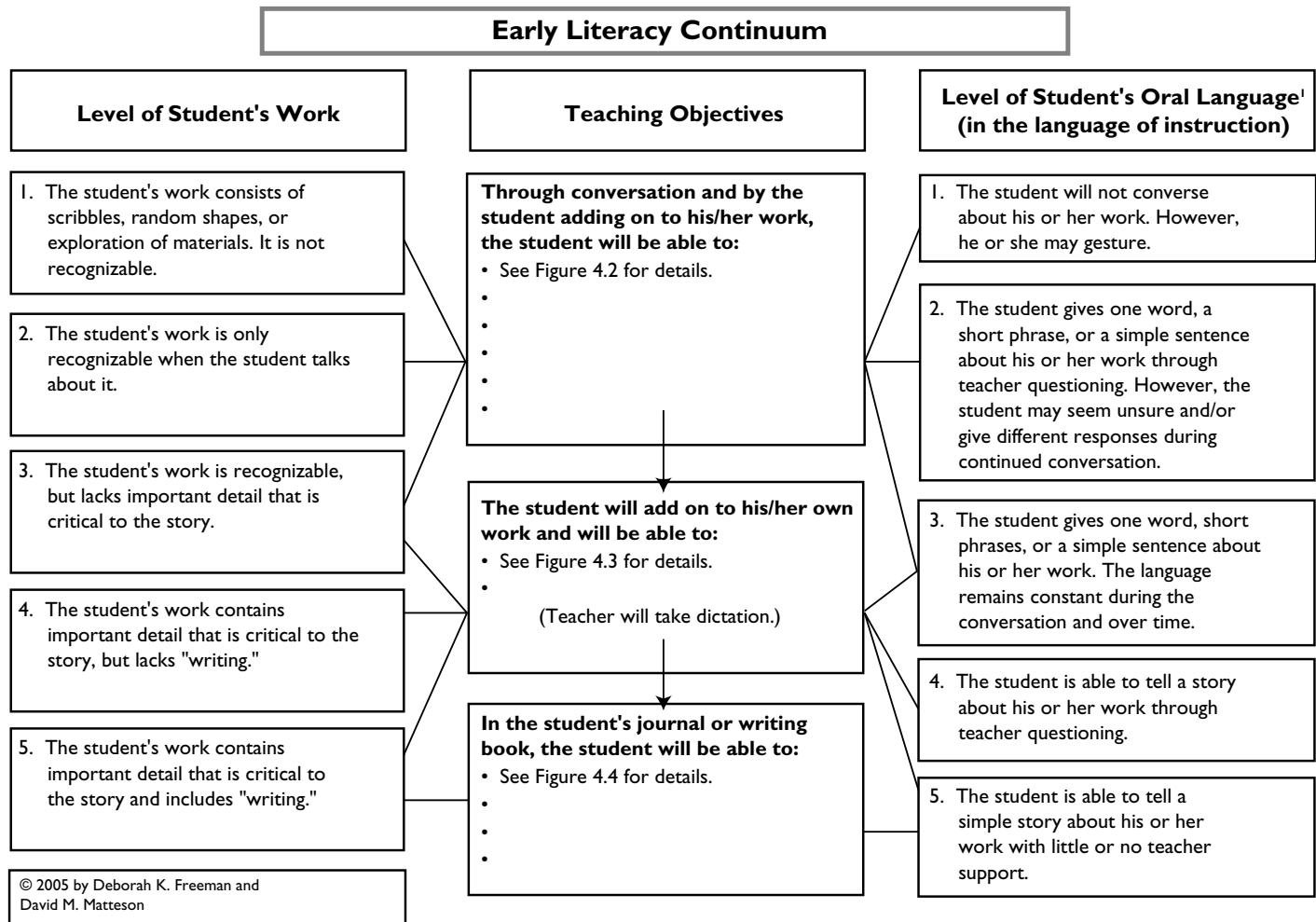
Oral language and attention to picture detail are critical for literacy development in young children. Assessment of these precursors to reading and writing is fundamental to literacy development. Teachers need to understand where their students are in relation to oral language development and attention to picture detail, and teachers need to know how to monitor for growth in these areas. The **Early Literacy Continuum** is a tool that can help teachers do that. This tool helps teachers use observation of daily classroom activities in a systematic and ongoing way.

UNDERSTANDING THE EARLY LITERACY CONTINUUM

The **Early Literacy Continuum**, displayed in Figure 4.1, consists of three distinct sections. The two outer sections of the continuum focus on oral language development and student work.

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¹In ELL/ESL and bilingual classrooms, dictation is taken in the language of instruction. For example, in a Spanish bilingual classroom, the language of instruction is Spanish. In any ELL/ESL classroom, the language of instruction is English.

Figure 4.1: Early Literacy Continuum

The Student's Oral Language section deals with a student's ability to tell a story as it relates to his or her own work. This section consists of five boxes that represent five different developmental levels of a student's current ability to tell a story.

The Student Work section focuses on the student's attention to detail in his or her work. This section consists of five boxes that represent five developmental levels of a student's current ability to add detail to his or her work.

The third section, Teaching Objectives, consists of three separate boxes in the middle of the continuum where any state or district goals can be placed in order to plan for teaching that responds to each child's developmental level in the Student Oral Language section and Student Work section of the continuum. Also, using the Characteristics of Emergent Readers and Writers (Chapter 3) as a guide can enhance the Teaching Objectives section. Depending upon the thoroughness and appropriateness of individual state or district goals, the behavior portion of the emergent characteristics of readers and writers could be utilized as objectives. There is a *strong* connection between the Student's Oral Language, Student's Work, and Teaching Objectives sections of the continuum. The lines that connect the boxes within the continuum represent these connections.

USING THE THREE TEACHING OBJECTIVE BOXES

In the Teaching Objectives section, the uppermost box represents teaching to develop a child's oral language and improve the student work through conversation between the teacher and the student. The example in Figure 4.2, excerpted from Figure 4.1, shows where objectives that are taught through conversation should be placed.

- How can I monitor and assess my students' oral language development and attention to detail?

Through conversation and by the student adding on to his/her work, the student will be able to:

- stay on topic
- identify character(s) and/or event(s) of a story
- retell some sequence of events
- make connections to self, others, and/or environment
- use both real and make-believe situations
- answer questions
- ask questions and make comments on work
- apply knowledge/experiences to new areas (drawing, painting, blocks, housekeeping, etc.).

Figure 4.2: Objectives Taught Through Conversation

The second box in this section, shown in Figure 4.3, represents teaching through the taking of dictation. Through this approach of taking dictation, the teacher records all or part of the student's story that most clearly connects to the picture. The teacher chooses to take dictation based upon one of the objectives listed in either of the first two boxes of the Teaching Objectives section of the continuum.

The student will add on to his/her own work and will be able to:

- tell a simple story, focusing on favorite or most important part. (Teacher will take dictation.)

Figure 4.3: Taking Dictation Based on Objectives

The last box in the Teaching Objectives section represents teaching through students' writing. The state or district's goals are organized according to where they would most likely fit within this developmental flow. The arrows that connect the boxes in this section represent this flow (see Figure 4.4).

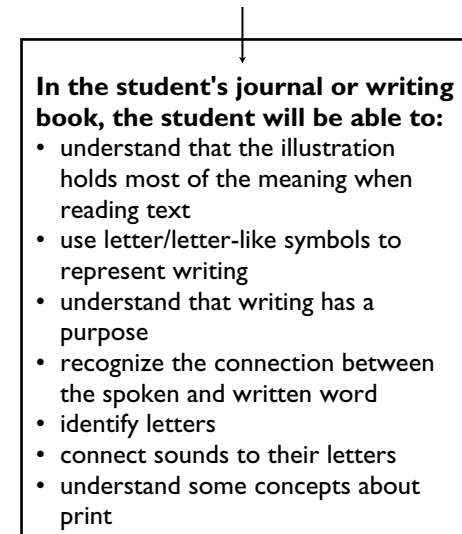


Figure 4.4: Teaching Writing Based on Objectives

Arrows connect the three boxes of this section. These arrows represent the flexibility of utilizing objectives among the approaches of conversation, dictation, or student's journal writing. The approach would change depending on the student's developmental level. However, a teacher who is taking dictation from a student may use one of the objectives from the second box but may also have the option to use objectives from the first box if appropriate to the teaching.

- How can I monitor and assess my students' oral language development and attention to detail?

GENERAL DIRECTIONS FOR ASSESSING

The Early Literacy Continuum is used for both assessment and teaching. Because we believe that assessment precedes teaching, a discussion of the continuum as an assessment tool comes before the discussion of its implications for teaching. We recommend collecting assessment data every four to six weeks, but certainly no less than three to four times a year. The more current the assessment, the more focused and intentional the instruction can be.

When teachers use the continuum for assessing, they should ensure that students do not borrow or share ideas from one another. In order to get a more accurate snapshot of what the student knows, the teacher wants to be sure that it is the child's own work and story that are being assessed and evaluated. When we assess, we work right in the classroom. The assessment we have developed very closely resembles the everyday work in which our students are involved. During an assessment the student is given a blank piece of drawing paper and crayons then asked to draw a picture. The amount of time needed for the child to complete the drawing will depend on the developmental level of the student. For example, a child who is on level one and is scribbling may only spend a minute or two on the drawing. A child who is on level four and uses more detail might spend five or more minutes on the drawing. Once the student has completed the picture, the teacher says, "Tell me about your picture." It usually takes no more than three to five minutes to hear about the picture or for the student to tell the story. The teacher makes some observation notes by jotting down a brief written description of the picture as well as a short note about the oral interaction. These notes will help later when evaluating the assessment sample. The more complete the notes, the faster the evaluation will go.

After the student has talked about his or her picture or the story, the teacher asks, “Is your picture finished?” A caution is to remain a neutral observer and not interfere with the student’s work at this time. The Assessment Guide in Figure 4.5 was designed to help bring consistency to the assessment procedure when using the **Early Literacy Continuum**.

The Early Literacy Continuum Assessment Guide

1. Ask students to make a picture with materials that they are already familiar with using. For example: If the student has not used watercolors in the past, do *not* give him/her watercolors for the first time when you ask him/her to draw this picture.
2. Do *not* prompt the student about the work that is being completed. Questions are likely to be interpreted as instructional prompts. For example, do *not* ask: “Where is your mommy in the picture?” or “What about your hair?”
3. When the student has completed the drawing ask, “Tell me about your picture.”
4. Write down the student’s response to your request.
5. Read the student’s response back and ask: “Is there anything else that you want to add to your picture?”
6. If the student responds yes, allow the student to include more details and add the student’s additional words to what you previously wrote. Sometimes after hearing their own words read back to them, students will decide that they wish to add more details to the picture and/or the explanation. *Never* push the student to do so, simply ask the question as given in #5.
7. The actual Early Literacy Continuum Individual Student Recording Sheet that you complete will be placed in each student’s file with the student work sample the assessment is based upon.
8. The student’s scores will be recorded on The Early Literacy Continuum Classroom Summary Sheet. It is this sheet that will be turned in to the district.

Adapted from Cartwright Preschool

Figure 4.5: Directions for Administering the Early Literacy Assessment

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GENERAL DIRECTIONS FOR EVALUATING STUDENT WORK

When using the **Early Literacy Continuum** to evaluate a piece of student work, teachers should be conservative in how they rate the student's work or oral language on the continuum. When it is difficult to decide which level to assign the student's work or the student's oral language, it is prudent to rate the student at the lower level since expectations at the higher level may later cause frustration for the teacher and the child during the daily teaching. A student's best learning likely occurs when the teacher is in the student's **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**, which is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, 86). In other words, the ZPD is what children can *almost* do by themselves but still need some instructional assistance from the teacher or other peers in order to be successful. For that reason, it is crucial that teachers use caution when rating a student's work. The teacher's aim should always be to stay within the student's ZPD. The scoring considerations in Figure 4.6 offer some guidelines to use when assessing students.

This chapter looked at using the **Early Literacy Continuum** to administer a formal assessment several times during the school year. The goal at these times is only to gather information; teaching occurs later. These assessments help determine a student's skill level at a point in time, and to show student growth over time.

The Early Literacy Continuum Scoring Considerations

Student's Work:

1. Be objective when scoring the work sample. The score given *will not* be used to determine the effectiveness or the abilities of the teacher. The score is used *only* to measure children's progress over time.
2. Sometimes you may find that you have difficulty choosing between one score and the next higher number. When this occurs, *always* choose the lower number.
3. Even when the student draws shapes that are recognizable, if you are unable to figure out the purpose for the objects without an explanation, then the score is a 1.
4. Sometimes it really helps to confer with a colleague, especially one who has knowledge of the student. Often through discussion you will be able to form conclusions that you might not come to on your own.

Oral Language:

1. The assessment is designed to measure oral language development in English. If the student describes his or her drawing in Spanish, those words are recorded in Spanish. The student is then asked to describe his or her drawing in English. Those words are recorded as well. The teacher will plan for individualized instruction based upon the student's response or responses.
2. It is best practice to write an observation recording the student's words that were given in Spanish because although you won't use the Spanish words in this assessment, you certainly will use the student's details in your planning for individualization.
3. As in the case of the work sample, when in doubt between two scores, always choose the lower score.
4. As in the case of the work sample, do not prompt the student or press for more details. Simply offer the opportunity to add details. If the student declines, end the activity and score based upon what has been provided.

Adapted from Cartwright Preschool

Figure 4.6: Directions for Scoring the Early Literacy Assessment

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Another aspect of using this continuum is to aid a teacher in selecting appropriate teaching objectives. Assessment for the purpose of selecting teaching objectives involves a more in-depth evaluation. This in-depth evaluation is made after the teacher has already obtained an **Oral Language** level and a **Student Work** level. It is at this point that we need to choose one of the objectives contained within the **Teaching Objectives** section of the continuum. When the teacher has an idea of a student's developmental levels, the teacher can begin to select objectives that support a child's needs based on the child's work. The chosen objective will guide and focus the conversation between the teacher and the student. To illustrate the look and sound of student work and oral language that is ranked at the different levels of the continuum, see the vignettes in Chapters 5 and 6. For more on teaching objectives, see Chapter 7.