



Out and about for words

Making connections in early literacy

Confidence in early reading relies greatly on understanding the link between letters and words, and the role they play in the real world.

Kate Williams brings the process to life with an energetic expedition for words in school, at home and on the street.

'**A** is for apple', we tell our youngsters. 'So what?' they may think, and who could blame them? I mean, exactly how exciting is that piece of news? Does it enthral you? Me neither, nor the kids alas, but oh golly, they have 25 more letters to learn after that one!

Learning to read is one of the most challenging tasks we all face in childhood. The alphabet alone can seem baffling, and just when we're starting to get to grips with their phonics, we're told they do other sounds too – and other shapes! As for identifying whole words and sentences, that's another mountain on top, and despite the best efforts of our brilliant teachers, a small proportion of children still fall through the net. More yet fail to become confident, comfortable readers.

Born to read

According to the National Literacy Trust, 'one person in six in the UK lives with poor literacy', which 'holds them back at every stage of their life.'¹ They are not just referring to newcomers to the country, who often learn quickly. There seems to be a more basic barrier that gets in the way: a lack of connection, a failure to associate with text.

And yet, children are surrounded by letters and words in their everyday lives! They're on the car number plate, the corner shop door, the magazine on the table, the tins and jars in the kitchen, the computer screen, the toy boxes – all over the place. Children have been immersed in written language since birth, so by the time they start school, they will already be familiar with some of their shapes and patterns. What's

more, they'll already have gathered that those signs hold meanings. They'll even have worked out a handful of them too. They'll be familiar with 'Press' on the doctor's door bell, or 'Push' on the shop door, or 'Danger!' by the building site, and they'll have a good idea of the different messages they send out, so you could say they're *already* reading.

Children will pick up information to suit their needs, and that includes word meanings. As a youngster myself, I wasted no time in learning the look of 'Biscuits' on the tin in the cupboard. I could differentiate the pattern of the letters from those on the other jars, knew what that meant would be inside, and that did it for me! In the same way, my own toddlers picked up 'Wait' and 'Walk' at the pelican crossing from the sheer thrill of pressing the button and watching the results.

In my writing workshops, however, there is invariably at least one child who sits frozen, pen poised, despite all our warm-up fun, until I've brought the activity right into their world, one-to-one. For example, if our topic is 'Treasure', I'll need to ask: 'What would *your* treasure be like?... Gold?' The choice is entirely theirs. Together we get its first special letter down, and the link is made – the child is away with the rest.

But a one-to-one prompt is not a solution to the basic problem – that fundamental disconnect with text that holds up so many youngsters. How can we help them make that link? (Or re-make it?)

Making connections

As a teacher, you'll know that a broad, rich

and finely tuned reading programme is applied these days, with fantastic success rates. But still there are always still a few who struggle, for no apparent reason.

So let's get those connections happening! Let's go out into the world and scoop up an armful of real live words to light up the classroom. Everyone will benefit, including your confident readers. As for your foundation phase, don't worry if they haven't met the letters or words involved yet – we're popping out of the curriculum as well as the classroom.

We'll start off with a roam round the school, before the big trip up the high street. Then at the end of the day we'll send the children off to track down more words back home. As for follow-up opportunities, they'll be limitless!

To maximise results, take out small groups at a time, with as many support staff or volunteers as you can muster.

Round the school

If you are working on lower case letters only, you may need to seek out some in advance, as the opportunities will be fewer for these. But some letters are the same or similar in each case, of course. Besides, it's the whole concept of words we're looking at, not just the individual letters.

Guide your group towards any aurally familiar words in large, clear print around the premises – for example, 'push', 'pull', 'toilets', 'press', 'school', 'office', 'staffroom', 'kitchen', 'off', 'on', 'open', 'fire door', 'mind the step', 'private' – helping your group to read, decipher or guess their meanings.



Your aim is to help children feel the realness of the words they find. Okay, so you've arrived at the office, and established that the word on the door says so – everyone knows that's the office! With your foundation phase class, you've made a circle in the air for the 'o' and noted the double 'ff' in the middle of the word. Perhaps you've even pointed out what the word would sound like with only one 'f' – that would be funny. What would Mrs Jones the secretary think of that? But a closed door is a dull sight. Why not look in and say hello to Mrs Jones? Let a child give a knock. Ah, here she is! Let's hear *her* read the word on the door too.

When taking readers of a higher level round the school, you'll want to guide them towards the harder words – for example, 'reception', 'secretary', 'store cupboard', 'stationery', 'computer suite', 'library', 'equipment' or 'percussion box'. Encourage them to check the spellings. Who can read the school motto at the entrance?

On your return, remember to check out your classroom too. Hunt for words on equipment, appliances, clothes labels, activity packs, the interactive whiteboard tabs, the sink taps, the title covers in the reading corner... Draw up a list of findings for later use.

Out and about

Now it's time for your real outing – your 'Words in the world' hunt. Get your coats on for a stroll up the nearest high street to spot letters, words and phrases wherever they may be. Look for shop names, billboard announcements, menus, ice cream names (on a van or stall), road names, bus stops, taxis, road and pedestrian signs, door instructions ('push', 'pull', 'open', 'closed' and so on). Also useful are signposts to public places such as parks, libraries, shopping centres, toilets, car parks and information centres. Don't forget to hunt for letters too, and letter clusters, like '-ing', '-ght', or plurals with '-ies'.

For more able readers, you may wish to extend your word search terms. Browse longer texts such as menus (the children will love those!) and public notices – for example, litter warnings, parking restrictions, pay and display instructions, post box collection details, shop window banners and posters about places of interest. More able readers will also enjoy looking for alliteration, which you are bound to find in shop names and adverts. Which pupil can find the most? Check punctuation too. Apostrophes are fun to look for and not always used correctly, even by adults. Challenge your

whizz-kid readers to find an apostrophe that shouldn't be there or not *quite* there. And how about a count-up of exclamation marks?

Remember to keep in tune with the children's experiences along the way. Who heard the clock strike? Was anyone counting the chimes? What kind of dog was that? Wave to Sam's mum across the road! What is that crane lifting? The children will relish your involvement!

Back in the classroom

When you return to the classroom, gather everyone together for a chat about the outing. Talk about the experience first. Did anyone find out what sort of dog it was, or what that crane was lifting? Did everyone wave at Sam's mum? If you have photos, now is the time to look at those.

Next, pool your word and letter finds, making sure every child participates. Discuss it as you



go – what was that word on the cafe door? Did anyone else spot it? With more confident readers, elicit lists of words and phrases. Save or record all for a giant class list.

While memories are fresh, jot down some of the words on the board, large and clear, in assorted colours, and draw the children's attention to the details. For lower reading levels, sound out the letters together and say the words. Which is the shortest word? Which is the longest? For higher levels, invite children to read back the more challenging words and phrases, or offer synonyms.

Round off with a whirl of quick, fun questions, drawing on the day's experiences. What was that word on the road sign with the picture of children? What was the warning you were reading when the cat jumped off the wall? Who noticed how restaurant was spelt? Did anyone notice a neon sign? This recapping will reinforce vital links and relevance.



Round the house

Before they go home, ask the children to look round their house to see what words they can spot and recognise there. They can look at tins, packets, bottles, shopping bags, calendars, clothes labels, greeting cards, the computer keyboard, TV dials, remote controls, DVD sleeves, packaging and instructions for toys and games, newspaper headlines, magazine covers, party invitations, bathroom items (shampoo, soap, toothpaste containers), recipes, pet collars and dishes, and so on. Independent writers could build a written list.

More able pupils could search for and summarise the contents of newspaper or magazine articles, recipes, flyers through the door, game rules and ingredients on food packaging. Alternatively, restrict their search terms to a specific aspect of language, such as adjectives, similes, onomatopoeia, alliterated words or punctuation marks.

Be sure to involve parents and carers! Send out a note explaining your aims and inviting them to join in the hunt. I used to call on one of my children to read out the small print on my jars and cans. It saved me fetching my glasses, and kept him reading through an anti-book phase. He'd happily plough through lists of 'E's and their full chemical names, while refusing to pick up the dreaded book. He's now a journalist, so perhaps those food labels did the trick!

After all the words and phrases the children found at home have been shared and noted, present a few from your own home, preferably on the items themselves, which you can then pass around.

Follow-up activities

Reinforce your real-life reading links through exciting and meaningful follow-up activities. Below is an assortment to start you off, to mix, match, stretch and adapt to your children as necessary.

Be the letters!

In a spacious area, form some of the letter shapes with your bodies, in groups on the floor. Take photos to share later.

Make letter pictures

Using the letters or words on the board as guides, help the children make letter pictures, reproducing them in assorted colours with felt tip pens or paints on coloured card or sugar paper. Older children could make lino cuts, potato prints or tracings for repeats over the paper. While giving a helping hand, don't

worry about accuracy or presentation – keep activities light.

Set your findings to music

Sing and clap selected words to a familiar tune, adding in percussion instruments. You can do the same with single letters, sounding the phonics or saying the names. Here are two rhyme formats to try with foundation groups. Insert letters or words as relevant and set to a simple melody:

We found 'a' in the street.
Clap your hands! Stamp your feet!

'a', 'a', who found 'a'?
I did, you did,
we all found 'a'!

Create artwork

Let children draw pictures of anything they want from the outing. Set the ball rolling with a few suggestions – cars, trees, people, houses, birds, that crane, Sam's mum! Older children could write words on their pictures.

Make links with other words

Here's an interlinking word game, adaptable for all levels. First, take a letter (or letter combination) from your collection, establishing who found it where, and write it on the

board. Now write it again, highlighted, inside its whole word. Say it was 'oo' in 'School'. Who can think of another word with the same letters inside? (For example, 'cool', 'pool' 'tool'). Next time round, let the group volunteer a letter. Advanced readers could draw up lists of answers to compare.

Check the dictionary

With harder words, ask children to check the spelling and meaning in their dictionaries, or on the Oxford online dictionary.

Make a poem of found words

Check if any of your words rhyme or share a rhythm. You have wonderful material here for a nonsense rhyme, and perhaps for a more thoughtful one too – about your locality or your outing. See what poetic wonders the children can come up with! Make a book of the poems for display in the school foyer.

Make a word necklace

Help children make word or letter necklaces, using pieces of coloured card, each displaying a word, letter or phonic from your collection, hole-punched and threaded together with raffia. Challenge your independent writers to produce domino-style letter-linked necklaces, with adjoining words sharing a last and first letter (as in 'sto[p]ost'). These could double as a riddles!





Word collage

Using coloured pens and paper, write out – or let the children write – specific letter(s) from your collection, to be arranged in patterns on coloured card with other materials for a chunky-funky poster.

Letter box (foundation level)

Make a letter box and post the letters the children found while out and about. Envelopes would add to the fun – the children could draw stamps and write their names. Each day, a different child can collect and open a letter to share with the class. Could it be the letter of the day?

Words out of a word (advanced)

Select a long word from your collection, write it out across the board with gaps between letters, and tell the children to copy it down the same way, allowing space for word lists below each letter. Who can make the most words out of that long one? The best method is to try starting with each letter in turn. Count and compare!

Incorporate words into stories

Next time you set a piece of creative writing,

ask the children to include one or more of their collected words.

Computer hunt

Help the children find words from your collection in an online dictionary. Able readers could check out their meanings and search for synonyms.

Type up your words

Let every child type a letter, word or phrase from the collection, with some accompanying decoration. Display on your class blog or print off for the classroom wall.

Tell the story

Your class will be proud to give an account of their 'Words in the world' hunt in a whole school assembly! They could include some of their follow-up work too, embellishing their account with artwork, poetry, percussion, songs, letter shapes and acting out. And those necklaces will be just the ticket!

Keeping the links alive

The activities above will draw your children into the reading process with zest. But don't leave it there! Keep up the links, jogging memories

and making connections at every opportunity. Here are some to look out for:

- **School trips** – these will open up a whole new realm of letters and words to spot. Depending on your destination, there may be a chart or map to browse, signposts, information plaques, logos, titles, labels, tags, tickets, programmes, warnings and more! Take time to guide your class towards as many of these as you can, encouraging independent discoveries too. Take a photo or two for future reminders.
- **School events** – check the diary for opportunities on site such as sports days, science challenges, the Christmas play, 'Book Week', parents' coffee morning and more. Then keep an eye out in school for posters and notices about them and bring the class to read them with you. Preparations will be going on, and your children may be involved in the events themselves, so they should be familiar with the words. Even a beginner reader may note the 'p' for 'performance', or the 'oo' and 'ee' in Book Week. Make a class poster to add to the others, with a letter or word from every child, and display it up there with the rest – big and grand for everyone to admire!

A is for... anything you can imagine!

So, what did we say at the start? 'A is for apple'. True, but 'A' is for a whole lot of other things too: that lorry's number plate, for instance, and 'Avenue' on the road we crossed, and 'Apple pie' on the cafe menu, remember? Now 'A' is for 'Ah-ha, I know that word! I've seen it somewhere!'

'A' is also for 'abracadabra'. How about rounding off your follow-up fun with a magic sprinkle of words to decorate your book corner? Bring the books alive too. Let's open one while we're about it... but wait – what's this? The very same word we found on our walk!

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Further reading and resources

- World Book Day's website offers support for teachers at worldbookday.com. See what other schools are doing on their 'Ideas' page: worldbookday.com/ideas/showcase
- The National Literacy Trust at literacytrust.org.uk. See their 'Schools and teaching' section for resources, events and more: www.literacytrust.org.uk/schools_teaching
- The National Education Trust's website offers resources, information and other support, including a video of 'good practice' literacy teaching at www.nationaleducationtrust.net.
- Authors Abroad (part of Caboodle Books Ltd) offers Able Writers' and Reluctant Writers' workshops with visiting authors, under a scheme whereby selected children from several schools meet for the day. The host school pays nothing; the others pay per child. See cpd.authorsabroad.com for more information.
- Forest Schools Education offers schools a range of innovative events and resources for outdoor teaching, bringing meaning and relevance to classroom learning. See www.forestschools.com.

References

1. National Literacy Trust (n.d.) About our work. [online] Available at: www.literacytrust.org.uk/about [Accessed 1 February 2016].

Knowledge trails

1. **"We're going on a print hunt!"** – Inspiring young children to take an interest in literacy, Sue Lyle leads a class of four-year-olds on a hunt for signs, symbols and writing in the classroom, on the street and in the shops. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/we-re-going-on-a-print-hunt
2. **The storytelling curriculum** – Sue Lyle reports on an innovative and provocative approach to literacy that involves no formal teaching of reading and writing, simply complete immersion in stories and imagination. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/ctthestorytellingcurriculum