The Power of Interactive Read Alouds

Gwen Marra, Ed.D.

Dordt University

Gwen.Marra@dordt.edu

2016

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Today's classrooms are bombarded with demands of all kinds. Teachers work to find balance to provide time to play and time to assess, time to rest and time to run, time for technology and time to teach about health and wellness. In the midst of this balancing act, teachers seek time to interact with children in meaningful ways. Positive interactions between caregivers and children are important for language development (Boschee & Jacobs, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). These interactions provide opportunities to use words and engage in conversations. Children are given multiple opportunities to develop their speaking and listening skills through stories and discussions with peers and teachers. This builds school readiness and lays the foundation for later learning (Cazden, 2005; Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; Morrow, 2005; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008). Interactions at school are an important part of language development because language in the classroom is different than language at home. Classroom language is not as familiar and is often focused on learning content, including new concepts and vocabulary. Using language in these more abstract and academic ways encourages children to interact with their teachers and classmates. They have multiple opportunities to use new words and engage in conversation.

The size of a child's vocabulary is important, but children need more than word knowledge (Hirsch, 2003). Background knowledge gives children context for the new words they are learning and allows them to connect new learning to what they already know, making inferences and supplying missing knowledge to construct meaning (Hirsch, 2003). In order to be successful readers, children need to have strong vocabulary knowledge and strong world knowledge (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). When word knowledge and world knowledge are linked, children develop learning-to-read and reading-to-learn skills. These lay a firm foundation for future learning (Walsh, 2003).

Expanding vocabulary knowledge and world knowledge can happen naturally in the classroom. For example, teachers can use texts from different genres and formats on the same topic (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, short stories, poems, historical narratives) and discuss the texts in depth (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, Palmer & Stewart, 2005; Pappas, 1991). This offers children the opportunity to develop the receptive and expressive use of new vocabulary in a

meaningful way. Reading these texts aloud provides the perfect opportunity to help children build word power and world knowledge. The use of children's literature offers developmentally appropriate scaffolding in that new words are introduced and explained in the supportive context of the story (Silverman & Crandell, 2010). The use of discussions during read alouds promotes the meaningful use of new vocabulary by the children, and it leads them to make connections between new information and previous knowledge. This, in turn, increases comprehension (Curtis, 1987).

Fiction texts and nonfictions texts provide different and equally important opportunities for authentic and meaningful discussions (Cazden, 2005; Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Morrow, 2005; Pappas, 1991). Fiction texts help children develop an understanding of literary elements including character, point of view, and plot (Lever & Senchal, 2011). Nonfiction encourages the use of academic vocabulary, integrates information from illustrations, and inspires children to ask questions as well as make connections and observations (Bosse, Jacobs, & Anderson-Topete, 2013; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). Incorporating interaction into your read aloud time is a good way to make this happen.

The use of dialogic discussions encourages children to make connections between the new content and their own lives. Dialogic discussions involve a teacher stopping periodically while reading literature to ask children a series of open-ended questions that monitor their comprehension and expand on children's understanding of vocabulary (Cavanaugh, 2012; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Children are encouraged to be active participants in the book reading, and teachers are able to provide timely feedback to guide students' learning (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000). The interactions around the text being read aloud promote listening comprehension and oral language skills.

Research findings suggest children's expressive and receptive vocabularies improve as they participate in dialogic discussions (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Swanson et al., 2011; Cavanaugh, 2012; NELP, 2008). In fact, preschool children with limited vocabularies have been found to increase their expressive vocabularies after four weeks of participating in dialogic discussions (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000). It is helpful for classroom teachers to plan ahead for the dialogic discussion. A sample planning sheet is shown below, and a template is available in PDF format.

Dialogic Reading Planning Form

Literature: Seed, Sprout, Pumpkin, Pie by: Jill Esbaum

Target Vocab: (Choose 2-5 key words that you will explain as the book is read.)

cycle, decompose, sprout, vine, pumpkin patch

Ways to extend/promote conversation as the book is read (PEER):

Prompt (Plan for discussion opportunities): *Why do you think a seed sprouts?*

Evaluate (Evaluate the response, is the conclusion accurate or not? Comment accordingly.) *Is the seed a pumpkin yet? So is the pumpkin growing bigger when the seed sprouts? What has to happen for the pumpkin to start growing?*

Expand (The teacher expands on the child's response. The teacher models proper use of target vocabulary words): *When the seed sprouts, the vines start to grow.*

Repeat (Repeat the child's response so everyone can hear. You want to ensure that children hear the key concepts / target vocabulary as many times as possible.) *The pumpkins will grow on the vines.*

Before the book is read, the teacher may also plan questions or prompts to promote discussion, following the CROWD format. These could be put on sticky notes and stuck to appropriate pages of the book being read.

- **C**ompletion Prompts
- **R**ecall Questions
- **O**pen-Ended Questions
- **W**h-Questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why?)
- **D**istancing Questions (making connections)

Explicit teaching of target vocabulary is an important component of oral language learning and later, reading development. Dialogic discussion provides a natural, authentic context for children to use the vocabulary they are learning as they take an active role in teacher-led fiction and nonfiction book reading.

Dialogic Reading Planning Form

Text: _____

Date: _____

Target vocab:

Ways to extend/promote conversation while reading:

Prompt

Evaluate

Expand

Repeat

Questions and prompts that promote discussion:

Completion prompts

Recall questions

Open-Ended Questions

Wh- Questions

Distancing Questions (making connections)

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