Successful Read-Alouds in Today's Classroom

Vickie Johnston

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Successful Read-Alouds in Today's Classroom

by Vickie Johnston

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Abstract
Positively influence comprehension, vocabulary, syntax, and oral language development with read-aloud strategies. The author shares tips for making read-alouds successful.
Key words: *21st-century skills, elementary education, language arts education, reading/emerging literacy*

As states implement English Language Arts (ELA) components of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2010), teachers should remember that best practices and research-based literacy instruction need to continue to be the priority in the area of literacy instruction. The ELA components of the CCSS highlight the need to increase text complexity so that students are prepared for the demands of college and career-level reading by the end of high school;

Vickie Johnston *is an Instructor and Program Coordinator for the Special Education Program in the College of Education at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her areas of interest are literacy, digital literacy, technology, differentiated instruction, and qualitative research methods. Email: vjohnston@ fgcu.edu*

consequently, the standards call for an increase in text complexity and an increase in the use of informational text at each grade level. With the standards outlining a progressive development of text complexity, some educators are worried about their use of narrative text. Before trading in your narrative read-alouds for informational text, look at what research tells us.

What Is a Read-Aloud?

A read-aloud is an instructional practice in which teachers or parents read texts aloud to children, incorporating pitch, tone, pace, volume changes, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and engaging delivery. Researchers have shown that reading aloud promotes comprehension, vocabulary, syntax, and oral language development (Barrentine, 1996; Klesius & Griffith, 1996; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sipe, 2000). Reading aloud to students is supported by the National Education Association (NEA) through its Read Across America program, which has been around for 17 years and promotes read-aloud events across the nation. According to the NEA (2014), "Research has shown that children who are motivated and spend more time reading do better in school" (para. 5).

An effective read-aloud involves more than simply opening up a book and reading to a class of students. Research also has shown that reading aloud positively affects literacy development when delivered interactively. An interactive read-aloud is a systematic approach to reading aloud where the teacher models vocabulary development, reading fluency, and comprehension strategies, and requires the students to interact and become participants in their own learning (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Dickinson and Tabors (2001) supported this idea of interactive read-louds in which children were not just passive listeners, but were actively involved making predictions and asking and answering questions. According to Lane and Wright (2007), the key to an effective read-aloud requires using a systematic approach, which starts by choosing the right text and is structured in its delivery:

> The most positive results of reading aloud have typically been found with researcher-designed methods, as opposed to naturally occurring methods. This suggests that teachers and

parents could be more produc-tive in their read-aloud activities if they employed some of the more systematic methods that researchers use. (p. 669)

Systematic Approach

Himmele and Himmele (2012) found that "in addition to getting kids hooked on books, narrative read-alouds are an effortless way to help students acquire the academic lan-guage they will need to comprehend informational texts" (para. 4). Read-alouds are relatively short activities that, when effectively implemented, provide numerous benefits upon delivery. According to Himmele and Himmele (2012), "A 20-minute effec-tive read-aloud can repeatedly expose children to academic words that will likely show up in content textbooks" (para. 5). Consequently, to conduct an effective read-aloud, teachers should be systematic. The systematic ap-proach described next has been shown to be effective in delivering successful read-alouds to students (Barrentine, 1996; Beck & McKeown, 2001; Dickin-son & Tabors, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Lane & Wright, 2007).

Engagement

The most effective read-alouds engage children in extended conversa-tions through open-ended questions. This goes hand-in-hand with the Com-mon Core ELA emphasis on developing critical and higher-level thinking skills. By transforming a read-aloud into a "think aloud," teachers do not simply encourage children to tell, retell, and describe events, but also give explicit guidance on vocabulary, syntax, and

pronunciation. Teachers scaffold the process involved in metacognition, challenging children to justify their thinking or predictions by referring back to the text, reading for deeper meaning, and setting a purpose for reading—all of which are supported by the ELA component of the CCSS (CCSSI, 2010).

Book Selection

Long before a teacher walks into a class to deliver a read-aloud, he or she must understand the necessary strategies of a research-based read-aloud: book choice, predictions based on the pictures or text, comprehen-sion monitoring, retelling, summariz-ing, making connections, reading with expression, teaching vocabulary in context, rereading for clarity, infer-ring based on the text, and author's purpose (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). To deliver a successful read-aloud, teachers must pore over book lists to pick an appropriate book. Books chosen for read-alouds should be ones that are engaging, well written, and contain appealing plots, and they must expose students to a variety of genres and diversity of characters. Teachers are encouraged to match books to their curriculum goals, inte-grating read-alouds throughout their curriculum.

The book must be one with which the reader would be able to carry on a dialogue or could demonstrate his or her thinking while reading. This dialogue or dialogic reading (White-hurst et al., 1994) runs parallel to the process used in think-alouds (Fisher & Frey, 2014). In other words, the teach-er must be a metacognitive reader or must think out loud about his or her

own thinking while reading the book aloud. As Harvey and Goudvis (2007) stated,

Our definition of thinking aloud means that we peel back the layers of our thinking, show kids how we approach text, and make visible how understanding happens in a variety of reading contexts. To demystify the com-prehension process, we share the thoughts we have as we read, surfacing our own inner conver-sation with the text so kids can do so independently. (p.45)

Planning

Prior to the delivery of a read-aloud, a teacher must write out a detailed lesson plan. This lesson plan should incorporate "before read-ing" strategies that will encourage students to predict what will happen in the read-aloud with the emphasis on helping children confirm or refute their predictions using the text. A teacher must understand the value of encouraging listeners to use their background knowledge to aid in com-prehending the text and also must encourage his or her students to refer back to the text to substantiate their predictions.

The specific questions to be asked "during" a read-aloud also must be included in a successful read-aloud plan. This type of planning requires teachers to go deeper with their ques-tioning in order to encourage their students to think critically. Although the lesson plan may seem scripted, teachers are encouraged to engage children in both immediate and sub-sequent talk. According to Dickinson and Tabors (2001),

Immediate talk focuses on answering literal questions and labeling pictures. Nonimmediate talk extends beyond the text. It includes discussions of word meanings, making predictions and inferences, and relating the text-to-personal experiences. It is important that individual children have multiple opportunities to engage in nonimmediate talk during read-alouds. (p. 669)

Questions such as "what, when, where, why" may monitor comprehension, summarize what has happened, and clarify understanding. However, open-ended questions monitor comprehension, allow students to infer based on the text, and provide opportunities for critical thinking. The questions should be incorporated into a think-aloud or dialogic process in which the read-aloud is interactive, and the reader and listeners share their thinking as they make sense of the text.

A successful read-aloud lesson plan should also include specific vocabulary to be taught or discussed. "Text talk" (Beck & McKeown, 2001) is a way to engage children in meaningful discussions about new vocabulary and provides the teacher with a context for teaching new words. As the teacher plans to target several specific words from the story, he or she may choose to discuss these words in more depth, depending on the student responses.

Although a successful read-aloud usually lasts approximately 20 minutes, research has shown that extension activities that include writing have great benefits. The Common Core ELA Standards emphasize writing and learning to support one's opinion. Consequently, a successful read-aloud plan should include "after reading" activities that will allow students to respond to the text that was read. Best practices in literacy instruction support the integration of literature-based reading and writing so that students can put language into context (Cunningham & Allington, 2007). According to Harvey and Goudvis (2007), "Whereas talk is most likely the most immediate way to respond to reading, writing allows readers to really work out their thinking in relation to the text" (p. 56).

Delivery

Successful read-alouds are delivered using varying voices, meaningful gestures, and facial expressions to engage children. They provide the teacher with opportunities to model fluent reading and enhance their students' understanding of the text as well. Read-alouds must be read by referencing the print, referring to verbal and nonverbal cues (such as pointing to the print and pictures), or tracking the print as it is read (Ezell & Justice, 2000). It is important for teachers to remember to show their listeners all of the important aspects of the book, including the text, forms, features, and functions.

Closing Thoughts

Although this may seem like a great deal of planning for a 20-minute read-aloud, incorporating research-based practices will help teachers get the most out of a read-aloud activity. In the most successful classrooms, teachers appeal to their students on a personal and emotional level, and they create engagement in reading and foster an environment that instills ownership of learning. Read-alouds provide a wonderful opportunity for engagement, and delivering them effectively builds on and increases knowledge, vocabulary, advanced language development, and higher-level thinking—all of which are supported by the Common Core ELA Standards.

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