Shared Reading to Build Vocabulary and Comprehension

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Numerous scholars have discussed the value of shared reading for children's vocabulary acquisition and the link between vocabulary knowledge and overall comprehension (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008; McKeown & Beck, 2006). Fisher et al. (2008) identified four areas of instruction that teachers with expertise in shared reading in grades 3 through 8 demonstrated: comprehension, vocabulary, text structures, and text features.

McKeown and Beck (2006) explained that young children, especially those from nondominant groups, need explicit support with comprehending the decontextualized language in books, which, they contended, "is a major source of learning and thus is at the center of academic achievement" (p. 293). To do this, teachers need to support expansive, thoughtful responses, "aiming to get children to explain, elaborate, and connect their ideas" (p. 293) and produce language.

Coyne et al. (2004) concluded that "explicitly teaching word meanings within the context of shared storybook reading is an effective method for increasing the vocabulary of young children at risk of experiencing reading difficulties" (p. 152). Moreover, this explicit instruction raises these children's levels of word consciousness, which in turn might increase their abilities to notice and learn unknown words more independently and incidentally.

These research findings guided my instructional decisions for shared reading with first through third graders in a high-needs, urban elementary school in a large northeast city. This school has a large population of students from immigrant homes. In addition, 21% of the students received ESL services and 2% were recent immigrants. In this article, I discuss four approaches that I used during shared reading to promote vocabulary knowledge and comprehension for this population: (1) possible sentences, (2) using context clues, (3) repeated readings, and (4) using

our bodies. These approaches often overlapped in any one shared reading session.

Possible Sentences

Possible sentences (Manzo & Manzo, 2008) encourage strategic thinking before, during, and after reading. I decided to use this method in a shared-reading format. Blachowicz and Fisher (2010) stated, "Good instruction emphasizes that talking, thinking, and planning before reading enhance comprehension as they aid readers in developing strategic approaches. Vocabulary stimulates prereading thinking and is an excellent initiator of the prediction process" (p. 49).

I presented the targeted Tier 2 words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) in the same sequence that the words occurred in the text, posted on chart paper, and asked students to generate a possible sentence, either in writing or orally, using two or more of the words that they thought might appear in the actual text. I then recorded a few of these sentences on chart paper and asked students to predict what the text might be about or what we were likely to learn.

During reading, we put a tally next to each word whenever it occurred in context. I prompted students to continue using the textual information to consider the word's meaning. After reading, we revisited the words in context and how often they appeared in the text. The students then refined and generated new possible sentences that we discussed based on new textual information.

In subsequent days, students were encouraged to use the new words in context, as they shared or wrote new information, or retold or summarized, or in their everyday communication. One way we encouraged the active use of these words was to "snap when you hear it" (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2010, p. 26); students simply snapped their fingers whenever they heard the word in use.

During class meetings, after lunch, or before home, the teachers would also point to the words

on the chart and ask who heard or used any of the words in their interactions. Whenever a student was able to give an example, the teachers put a tally mark next to the word. Students loved to see which words were winning, or were in first, second, and third places.

Using Context Clues

In shared reading, I used the cloze procedure to practice contextual clues. Blachowicz and Fisher (2010) explained,

> In a cloze passage, selected words are omitted from the text and replaced with a line or space. Reading a cloze passage requires readers to use their knowledge of context to supply appropriate words and concepts to create a meaningful passage. (p. 37)

Gambrell and Headley (2006) explained the value of using contextual clue activities such as cloze reading: "Strategies that help students connect words with their prior knowledge, emphasize comprehension monitoring, and actively engage students in learning are more likely to result in significant vocabulary growth" (p. 22). In addition, cloze reading exercises develop strategic synthesis of meaning, syntactical, and visual cues for word solving (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

The following example represents my cloze reading work. In a second-grade class, I projected the story "Spring," from *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (Lobel, 1970). I omitted the following six words (out of a total of 130 words) on the first four pages: *knocked, answer, shutters, lying, covers,* and *blinked.* The students generated many possible words and some synonyms as they actively participated in solving the masked words.

Then, as I gradually revealed phonetic cues, the students narrowed their choices and verified their final choice once I unmasked the entire word. The following excerpt demonstrates this generative process: "Frog walked into the house. It was dark. All the _____ were closed."

Ted: Hmm, what could that word be? *All the...*[pointing to the blank] *were closed. All the...*[pointing again to the blank] *were closed.*

Student A: The *doors.* All the *doors* were closed.

Student B: The *windows.*

Student C: *Curtains!* All the *curtains* were closed.

Student D: Oh, oh. [pointing to the shades on the classroom windows] Those, those!

[Other students looked at what she was pointing to.]

Many students at once: *Shades! Blinds!*

Ted: *Blinds?* Like when a person can't see? [I shut my eyes and groped in the air with my arms stretched out.]

Several students: No! For windows!

Ted: Ah! So *blind* can have more than one meaning. A person or an animal who can't see is *blind,* but a window can have *blinds* to keep out the sun and make a room darker. That makes sense; that could be the word. Let's check.

[I showed the first two letters, *sh.*]

Several students: *Shades!* It's *shades!*

Ted: Let's look at the entire word.

[I now showed the whole word. "It's *shades!*" students called out, but others hesitated.]

Ted: Hmm, does it look right?

Many students: No.

Ted: Would *shades* end in *e-r-s*?

Several students:	No. It's *shutters*.
Ted:	Ah, so maybe *shutters* means something similar to *shades* and *blinds*. What do you think?
Students:	Yeah.
Ted:	Let's reread to see if *shutters* makes sense.

In this one cloze segment, the students generated the words *doors*, *windows*, *curtains*, *shades*, and *blinds*, recognized that *shades* and *blinds* were synonyms, and recognized that some words, such as *blind*, have more than one meaning (i.e., polysemy). Students also learned that the word *shutters* has a similar meaning to *shades* and *blinds*: window coverings that keep out sunlight. Thus, across six cloze segments, the students generated an impressive amount of vocabulary activity while developing their strategic reading skills.

Repeated Readings

I also wanted to use shared reading to develop the students' fluency. Extensive research exists on the value of repeated readings of short passages (Dowhower, 1987). Two benefits are quick and accurate processing of text, which leads to more reading over time, and more meaningful phrasing (Rasinski, 2003). Samuels (1997) stated, "As less attention is required for decoding, more attention becomes available for comprehension. Thus rereading both builds fluency and enhances comprehension" (p. 378).

On a subsequent day with the same second-grade class, I returned to the Frog and Toad "Spring" story. This time, I provided the following excerpt from the shared reading that featured lots of dialogue between Frog and Toad:

"Toad, Toad," shouted Frog,
"wake up. It is spring!"
"Blah," said a voice
from inside the house.
"Toad! Toad!" cried Frog.
"The sun is shining!
The snow is melting. Wake up!"
"I am not here," said a voice.

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During the shared reading, I clarified who the "voice from inside the house" was. I also imitated the excited, enthusiastic voice of Frog, and the grumpy, grouchy voice of Toad. The students discussed what clues the text gave to make my voice sound that way. They repeated the passage, getting their voices to match. "Right," I explained, "Frog is *enthusiastic*, he is *eager* to enjoy the nice spring weather with Toad." I made an expression and gesture of enthusiasm.

"On the other hand, Toad is sleepy, kinda *grumpy* and *grouchy*." I made a grouchy, sleepy face. "Like Oscar the Grouch!" one student called out. "That's right. I never made that connection before," I responded. "I suppose Toad is a little bit like Oscar the Grouch. How many of you feel grumpy and grouchy when you first wake up, like you don't want to get out of your nice, warm bed, especially if it's still dark?" Students concurred.

I wrote *Frog* and *Toad* on chart paper. Under "Frog," I wrote the paired words *enthusiastic* and *eager*, and under "Toad," I wrote *grumpy* and *grouchy*. Using a pointer, I touched and read each word, then asked the students to read the words as I touched them. I made either an enthusiastic, eager face and gesture (e.g., arms open, facing forward), or a grumpy, grouchy face and gesture (e.g., arms folded across my chest) a few times, as students called out "Frog" or "Toad."

Then, I asked the students if they wanted to try. Whenever I touched the Frog descriptors, the students made enthusiastic faces and gestures, and whenever I touched the Toad descriptors, the students made grouchy faces and gestures. I paired the students and gave a copy of the short passage to each pair with the instruction, "One of you will be Frog and the other one will be Toad. Practice until you feel ready to perform it for the class. Then, if you have time, switch parts." The students had a few minutes to practice and then I chose a few pairs to perform the passage, as the others read along silently.

This 15-minute sequence introduced the students to important descriptors and their synonyms. The students showed their understanding of these terms in their embodiments of the characters and in their read-aloud voices. Concurrently, they had repeated readings of a short passage to develop their fluency and comprehension (Samuels, 1997).

Using Our Bodies

Numerous researchers discuss the value of using multiple modes to develop understanding of academic language, especially with English-language learners. Tactile and kinesthetic activity provides other modes besides language for expressing understanding. Freeman and Freeman (1994) stated the following:

> If second language students have to wait until their oral English is well developed before beginning to read and write, they fall behind their native English-speaking classmates in academic content areas. For this reason, explorer teachers who focus on the learner provide choice and make learning meaningful by encouraging students to use a variety of ways to learn and express their understandings of both language and content. (p. 158)

The section on repeated readings of the Frog and Toad passage showed some examples of the use of gestures to express understanding. The following example, however, shows how I combined the use of gestures during reading with other instructional approaches to help students understand challenging academic vocabulary.

In the same second-grade class, I gathered the students for a shared reading of a passage about sea turtles called "On Land and Sea" from a text called *Sea Turtles* (Lepthien, 1996). The primary purpose was to teach the students the compare and contrast structure. The passage contained challenging content-specific words, such as *paddle-shaped*, *flippers*, *hind*, *rudders*, *clumsy*, *drag*, *energy*, *ashore*, *exhausted*, and *effort*.

Before reading, I first wrote *Sea Turtles* inside a circle in the middle of the chart paper and asked students to generate words that they associate with sea turtles. The students gave words such as *shell*, *eggs*, *ocean*, *sea*, *sand*, *beach*, *head*, *flippers*, *legs*, *tail*, *eyes*, *nose*, *mouth*, and *fish* that I connected in a concept web (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2010). For example, I grouped *shell*, *flippers*, *legs*, *tail*, *eyes*, *nose*, and *mouth* on the web because these all referred to the sea turtle's body parts. The concept web helped me to figure out which key terms I needed to introduce and which terms I could explain by making connections to

Take ACTION!

Here are some pointers for getting started with these four approaches to shared reading.

Possible Sentences

1. Choose 8 to 10 Tier 2 words from the passage. Tier 2 words are academic words that are likely to be unfamiliar to most students and are not content specific (Beck et al., 2002).

2. List the words on chart paper in the same sequence as in the passage.

3. Touch and pronounce each word. Use ideas from the six-step sequence (Beck et al., 2002; Graves & Fitzgerald, 2006) to introduce each word.

4. Invite students to predict what the passage might be about.

5. Tell pairs of students to compose a possible sentence using two or more of the words, either orally or in writing.

6. Record possible sentences for review after reading.

7. Tally each word as it appears in the passage during reading.

8. Revise and elaborate possible sentences based on passage information after reading.

Using Context Clues

The value of cloze passages is the contextual meaning and syntax cues that support the graphophonic decoding of the word. Therefore, choose the right balance of masked words: enough to challenge readers, but not too many as to interrupt the flow of the passage.

Repeated Readings

Samuels (1997) recommended using short passages of 50 to 200 words (depending on readers' skills). I tend to choose engaging passages that require inferring or have challenges for fluency practice. Passages with dialogue or special print or interesting use of punctuation or syntax work well.

Using Our Bodies

Descriptive or procedural action passages work well for this approach, especially when they contain challenging vocabulary (Tier 2 or Tier 3 words).

terms the students already provided. For example, to introduce *ashore*, I connected *beach* to *shore*, which helped students to learn the term *ashore*.

To introduce each word, I used ideas from the six-step sequences suggested by Beck et al. (2002) and by Frayer, Frederick, and Klausmeier (1969; as cited in Graves & Fitzgerald, 2006). This included writing the words on chart paper in the order they occurred in the text; having students say each word; defining each word in context; using pictures, drawings, and connecting the word to what students already know to develop their understanding; providing examples in other contexts; asking students to distinguish examples from nonexamples; asking students to provide examples and nonexamples while offering constructive feedback. After introducing the words, I asked students to generate possible sentences and recorded them on chart paper.

During the shared reading, I further developed students' understanding by demonstrating and encouraging kinesthetic activity to envision the text. For example, the students read aloud the following passage: "To swim, sea turtles move both of their front flippers forward at the same time—like a bird flapping its wings. They use their hind flippers as rudders" (Lepthien, 1996, p. 18). I demonstrated what that might look like, by flapping my arms and moving my feet out and in to steer, and invited the students to try. Soon the whole class was pretending to swim like sea turtles.

On the following spread, the passage read, "When females come ashore to lay their eggs, they pull themselves along by using their front flippers one after the other. They drag their bodies along the ground, leaving huge tracks in the sand," (Lepthien, 1996, p. 21). Again, all of the students tried moving like sea turtles on sand, delighting in their efforts. These kinesthetic experiences prepared the students for the after-reading work of processing the information by revisiting our possible sentences and using the challenging vocabulary in the compare and contrast structure that the author used in this passage.

Explicit Support for All Students

Our shared-reading work expressed sociocultural and cognitive constructivist principles of learning, consistent with the research. The activities were motivating, multimodal, open ended, and required few resources. Teachers found them easy to adapt for students of varied English-language competence. Students were engaged in their own learning and gave thoughtful, expansive responses. In each shared-reading session, students actively collaborated and had meaningful social interactions that expanded their vocabulary and deepened their reading comprehension. In sum, these shared-reading activities provided explicit support with comprehending decontextualized language that all students need for academic success.

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ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- "Shared Poetry Reading: Teaching Print Concepts, Rhyme, and Vocabulary" by Bethany L.W. Hankinson

IRA Books

- *Essential Readings on Comprehension* edited by Diane Lapp and Douglas Fisher
- *In a Reading State of Mind: Brain Research, Teacher Modeling, and Comprehension Instruction* by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp
- *Teaching Individual Words: One Size Does Not Fit All* by Michael F. Graves
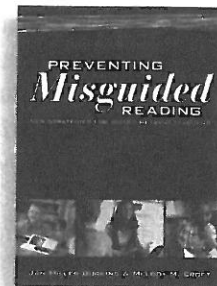
IRA Journal Articles

- "Building Word Consciousness" by Jeff Barger, *The Reading Teacher*, November 2006
- "What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension" by Laura S. Pardo, *The Reading Teacher*, November 2004