Improving Reading Comprehension: Making the Oral Reading Connection in the Early Grades

In the past, inferences regarding reading comprehension instruction in the early primary grades (K-2) have been constrained by preschool predictors of literacy success on one side and reading comprehension requirements in the later grades on the other.

The major instructional tension associated with kindergarten and early elementary literacy is less about *what* children should learn than *how* we can help them to learn. The approaches we choose as parents and as teachers should support both developmentally appropriate as well as preparatory literacy goals. In general, students in kindergarten and the earliest school-age grades should:

- become familiar with text formats (books, stories, articles, and other print resources);
- be able to recognize and write the alphabet;
- develop basic phonemic awareness (i.e., understanding of the segments into which spoken words can be broken); and
- develop positive attitudes and motivation to read.

Oral comprehension skills, in working with both vocabulary and text, provide an important support in helping students to transition to the written word. The stage—oral reading comprehension development—can be effective for addressing the primary goals of kindergarten and early elementary literacy. When employed correctly, it can also serve as a useful scaffold—in this case, an intervention that focuses on the transitional needs of students as they move toward full engagement with the written word. The following ideas and tips can help to make this stage more productive for the young learner, and help to establish a firm base for future development of reading comprehension skills.

Three tips for an effective oral reading comprehension transition

Read aloud with shared books. Engage in read-aloud sessions where students take turns reading from a story, book, or other text selections. These sessions also provide an excellent opportunity for a parent or teacher to read aloud to students. Build it into your sessions. Often we hear this referred to as *interactive* reading, and it provides a

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direct avenue for developing students' understanding of the concepts of "word" and "letter" (Holdaway, 1979; Snow & Tabors, 1993), vocabulary (Robbins & Ehri, 1994), and syntax ad style (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi, & Share, 1993), as well as motivation to read.

During read-aloud sessions, encourage students to ask questions, to respond to each other's questions and to teacher-generated questions, and to notice the use of certain print features and conventions (e.g., punctuation, word selection, spelling, etc.). Use "repeated reading" to reinforce these strategies.

Repeated reading—rereading text selections— has been shown to improve students' abilities to acquire vocabulary and to learn from and about storybooks (Martinez, Cheyney, McBroom, Hemmeter, & Teale, 1989; Senechal, 1997). During read-aloud, it is helpful when answering questions about text events or characters, and for reinforcing sight recognition of certain words.

Fiction and nonfiction, including informational texts, storybooks, and picture books, are all effective in a read-aloud format (Mason, Peterman, Powell, & Kerr, 1989). Each provides special opportunities, and these extend from use in kindergarten through third grade. Try several proven read-aloud techniques with each, including:

(Storybooks)

- Before reading, initiate discussions about the author, characters, and/or main story concepts or ideas.
- During reading, clarify vocabulary and ask students to explain certain events and character motives, make predictions where possible, and discuss story "messages" or theme.

(Informational texts)

- Before reading, design brief activities and/or discussions that help students relate the text to everyday experiences.
- During reading, pose frequent questions and probe students' responses with additional questions. Lead students to predict, explain, and deduce/infer cause-and-effect relationships (e.g., an event or action leads to another event, etc.).
- During and after reading, elaborate on concepts associated with context- or content-specific vocabulary, not just definitions.

(Picture books)

- Focus on the pictures and the words themselves on each page, and the relationships between the pictures and the print text.
- Help students use pictures as cues for predicting repeated patterns—especially appropriate and fitting for use with *patterned* or *predictable* books (see below).

When we stop and prompt students to describe, define, or otherwise generate meaning of vocabulary terms during reading, it is often referred to as "passage integration training."

Substituting familiar words for complex terms, a form of "text revision," can also be effective for assisting early readers in transitioning from oral comprehension.

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Use a variety of book types. Keep as many books directly available to students as possible, at all times. Research has indicated that the simple *availability* is a catalyst for developing children's literacy (Gambrell, 1995; Gambrell & Morrow, 1996; Krashen, 1996), but their true impact depends heavily on how parents and teachers use them. Several types of books help support our efforts to help children make the oral reading comprehension connection, and ease our early forays into helping our children learn to read and understand what they read. Several are outlined below.

Oversized books

These are large storybooks featuring both print and illustrations. They make great tools for sharing stories and engaging a number of children at one time in a reading experience. Try using "fingerpointing" as a technique with these books. As you read the book along with the students, fingerpoint at certain words and phrases. As you do so, emphasize such text features as directionality (order of words and left-to-right arrangement), similar sounds or word beginnings, synonyms and antonyms (only, call them something like "opposites," etc.), rhyming texts (for introducing the notion of letter-sound correspondence), and words that repeat often throughout the book or text. Encourage students to hunt down repeated words and help them to establish these as "sight words."

> Sight words/vocabulary are recognized *on sight*, and do not require explicit processing during reading. These words become a tremendous asset to students in the early stages of developing reading comprehension.

Patterned or predictable books

These books contain text that is repetitive or highly predictable. For example, the book may contain a very logical (predictable) next step on each page, such as in the book *The Spooky Old Tree* by Jan and Stan Berenstain. On each successive page, the bear cubs (the Berenstain Bears) make their way through a new part of the tree in order. These books often present a question that is repeated on each page, such as in the book *Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman. In this book, a baby bird that has fallen out of a tree goes in search of its mother, and on each successive page the bird encounters a new animal, and asks the animal if it is its mother. The repetitive questioning, and the predictable answer ("no") helps children to grasp the most basic structure of a story, and to look ahead and predict what is coming next.

Rebus books

These books substitute familiar pictures for unfamiliar words in order to simplify the reading process. They improve fluency by easing the vocabulary requirements necessary for comprehension, and also tap prior knowledge in a substantive way, using the known to promote an understanding of the unknown. Often, rebus books are designed to build sight word recognition of words that are very frequent (e.g., "the," "of," etc.) and gradually more formidable words as students become more comfortable with the written word.

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Teach active listening. Listening has been referred to as the "act of understanding speech" (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Teaching students how to listen is a nice accompaniment to any read-aloud scenario, and use of strategies to promote students' abilities to listen has been shown to be particularly effective for improving reading comprehension (Boodt, 1984; Sippola, 1988). Though they work together well, and both are effective, listening for meaning has actually produced better sentence recall than emphasis on accurate oral reading per se (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). One reason for this is that listening instruction focuses interest on the material being read, and interest has been shown to be more of a factor in sentence recall than readability. During instruction, work with students to take turns describing what they have heard, comparing this with other students, and answering questions about the text. Help pave the way by presenting certain features or aspects of a story that you would like students to listen for in advance of reading the story aloud.

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Bus, A., van Ijzendoorn, M., & Pellegrini, A. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of Educational Research, 65*(1), 1-21.

Feitelson, D., Goldstein, Z., Iraqi, U., & Share, D. (1993). Effects of listening to story reading on aspects of literacy acquisition in a diglossic situation. *Reading Research Quarterly, 28*(1),70-79.

Gambrell, L. (1995). Motivation matters. In W. Linek, E. Sturtevant, & L. Botha (Eds.), *Generations of literacy: The seventeenth yearbook of the College Reading Association* (pp. 2-24). Harrisonburg, VA: College Reading Association.

Gambrell, L., & Morrow, L. (1996). Creating motivating contexts for literacy learning. In L. Baker, P. Afflerbach, & D. Reinking (Eds.), *Developing engaged readers in school and home communities* (pp. 115-136). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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Krashen, S. (1996). *Every person a reader*. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.

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Mason, J., Peterman, C., Powell, B., & Kerr, M. (1989). Reading and writing attempts by kindergarteners after book reading by teachers. In J. Mason (Ed.), *Reading and writing connections* (pp. 105-120). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel - Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* Rockville, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Robbins, C., & Ehri, L. (1994). Reading storybooks to kindergartners helps them learn new vocabulary words. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 86*(1), 54-64.

Sippola, A. (1988). The effects of three reading instruction techniques on the comprehension and word recognition of first graders grouped by ability. *Reading Psychology, 9*(1), 17-32.

Snow, C., & Tabors, P. (1993). Language skills that relate to literacy development. In B. Spodek & O. Saracho (Eds.), *Language and literacy in early childhood education* (pp. 1-20). New York: Teachers College Press.

Senechal, M. (1997). The differential effect of storybook reading on preschoolers' acquisition of expressive and receptive vocabulary. *Journal of Child Language, 24*(1), 123-138.

You may also be interested in:

The Cornerstones of Reading Comprehension: Teaching for Vocabulary and Text Understanding (all grades, primarily 2-8)
(http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/reading-vocabulary-text.html)

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