

## 9. Dialogic Story-reading: A Vehicle to Develop Children's Oral Language

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*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world* (Wittgenstein, 1915).

### Introduction

One of the most recommended activities for supporting children's language and literacy development is reading stories aloud to them (Beck and McKeown, 2001). When children listen to stories they hear new words and deduce meaning from context; the flow and grammar of language becomes more familiar and children develop a sense of the structure, rhythm and pattern of story (Fox, 2013). They begin to anticipate words, phrases, sentences and the denouement of the story. The following anecdote from a parent who reads regularly to her children illustrates the point:

I find it interesting that even at an early age children recognise the pattern of a problem with resolution at the end. I brought home *Where is the green sheep?* one day and announced to my boys that I had purchased a new book called *Where is the green sheep?* My four year old said "Probably on the last page, but I want you to read it to us anyway. (Fox, 2013, p. 4)

A particular interactive type of story-reading called dialogic story-reading has been found to be the most effective type of story-reading in developing children's oral vocabulary. Research studies indicate that a dialogical approach to reading, when the child has an active part in the reading experience, talks about the story and asks and answers questions about the story, is more effective in developing oral language than when adults just read the book to the child with no interaction (e.g. Trivette and Dunst, 2007; Hargrave and Senechal, 2000).

### What is Dialogic Reading?

A dialogic story reading approach involves a child and an adult sharing a picture book, focusing jointly on the picture book and focusing on the story

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through talk (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998). Dialogic reading differs from traditional story-reading in that the child ultimately becomes the teller of the story. The adult becomes the listener, the questioner and the audience for the child (Whitehurst, 1992).

The American National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) defines dialogic reading as follows:

Dialogic reading is a form of interactive shared reading in which an adult reader asks the child or children questions about the story or the pictures in the book and provides feedback in the form of repetitions, expansions, and modelling of answers. In dialogic reading, the adult tries to facilitate the child's active role in telling the story rather than fostering passive listening (NELP, 2008, p. 158).

Research shows that dialogic story-reading develops vocabulary but also more complex language skills such as grammar, listening comprehension, the ability to form an argument, to elaborate (NELP, 2008). These complex language skills are what make a difference to reading skill around in the middle grades.

Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2011) found that dialogic reading causes children to

- Use more words
- Speak in longer sentences
- Score higher on vocabulary tests
- Demonstrate overall improvement in expressive language skills

### **The Practice of Dialogic Story-Reading**

Whitehurst (1992) proposes a reading technique called the **PEER** sequence which is a way of interacting between the adult and the child. The **PEER** sequence is an acronym for the adult to:

- **P**rompt the child to say something about the book,
- **E**valuate the child's response,
- **E**xpand the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it, and
- **R**epeat the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion.

An example of an interaction between an adult (usually a parent) and a two year old child might go something like this:

The adult points to a cat and says “What is this?” (visual prompt). The child answers “A cat”. The adult says, “That’s right, (the evaluation); a black cat (expansion). What is it again? It’s a \_\_\_\_\_ (repetition). (Whitehurst,1992).

The adult might go on to inquire “Who do we know that has a cat?” The child might respond by talking about a relative or neighbour. This important strategy supports the child in relating the story to his/her life experience. Whitehurst calls it a distancing prompt. He describes five prompts or comments to encourage the child to say something. Whitehurst uses another acronym, **CROWD**, to describe these encouraging comments:

1. **Completion prompts.** Allow the child to finish your sentence. The child understands what to do by the upward inflection of your voice towards the end of the sentence and the blank left by you. For example, “Molly knew Patch was happy because he wagged and wagged his \_\_\_\_\_”.
2. **Recall prompts.** These prompts happen when you want to re-read a book that you have already read with the child. You might ask the child “Can you help me remember where Molly brought Patch for a walk?” It encourages children to respond and makes the relationship more egalitarian if you are recalling together and mulling over matters together, rather than putting the child on the spot by asking a direct question.
3. **Open-ended prompts.** Whitehurst says that these prompts tend to focus on the pictures in books and they work best if the pictures are rich in detail. The idea behind open-ended prompts is to encourage a narrative flow from the child. Just like with the recall prompt above, it is better to speculate with the child rather than to ask a direct question (Powell and Snow, 2007). So, instead of saying “What do you see here...” it might be more beneficial to say something like “Mm, I wonder what is going on here...” Then leave a pause and hopefully your child will fill the gap.
4. **Wh – prompts.** These are what, where, when and why questions. These are not open-ended questions but they serve a good purpose in that they support the child in deepening his/her focus.

5. **Distancing prompts.** These require children to make a link between the book and the real world. For example, when Hansel and Gretel get lost in the woods, the adult might recall with the child a time he/she got lost in a department store. Story helps to build identity. By empathising with characters and comparing their dilemmas with the child's life experience, it helps to make the story meaningful for the child and to find resonance for his/her life.

The prompts described here are likely break up the flow of the story so it is not advisable to use them during the first reading of the story to the child. Biemiller and Boote (2006) claim for example, that children dislike interruptions for word explanations when the story is being read for the first time but do not mind interruptions during subsequent readings. After several readings and explorations of the book together over three to five days, the child should begin to take over the story and the adult reader is often told – “I’ll say it” or “I’ll do the story”. The repetition of the story is important for younger children (2-6 year olds) because it builds their vocabulary. In fact research by Childers and Tomasello (2002) tells us that a children needs to hear a word twenty times before it becomes part of his expressive vocabulary. However, Biemiller and Boote (2006) warn that repeated readings, though beneficial for younger children, bring about a fourteen per cent decrease in vocabulary for older children (7-8 year olds).

### *Style matters*

...the best way to ‘use’ books is to read them over and over and over again, especially on the day they’re first introduced. Read with vitality and wild enthusiasm and giggles and laughter and craziness and quietness and zest (Fox, 2013, p. 8).

Research confirms that a focus on the performance element of reading aloud brings about higher vocabulary scores for children when they commence primary school (McKeown and Beck, 2006). A study by Dickinson and Smith (1994) examined pre-school teachers’ styles of reading aloud and identified three particular styles: co-constructive, didactic-interactional and performance. They found that children whose teachers were identified as using a performance style had the best vocabulary outcomes a year later when they were in primary school (McKeown and Beck, 2006).

The challenge for the practitioner of dialogic story-reading is to maintain the vitality and wild enthusiasm described by Fox (2013), while practising the strategies outlined. If there is no interest in the joint enterprise, it is unlikely that dialogic story-reading (or indeed any learning activity) will achieve the outcomes attributed to it by the literature (Schiefele, 1990).

### *Follow the Child's Lead*

Once joint attention has been achieved, it is good practice to allow the child to dictate the focus of interest. Research says that a child's vocabulary is particularly advanced when parents talk about the focus of the child's attention. A corollary finding is that children learn fewer words when their parents try to re-direct their attention to objects and matters not of interest to them (Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).

### **Parental Involvement**

Debaryshe (1993) found that the age that home reading routines begin is the most important predictor of children's oral language skills. Babies whose parents/carers read to them are likely to feel positive about books and will associate books with warm relationships and bonding experiences. In addition to this, they will pick up important information about books, for example, how to turn pages, look at pictures and point at them. Research indicates that children who were read aloud to before they started school scored higher on national literacy tests than children who had not been read to (Mullan and Darragnova, 2012). It makes sense, therefore, to encourage parents to read stories to their children from an early age.

### **Training in Dialogic Story-Reading Strategies Works**

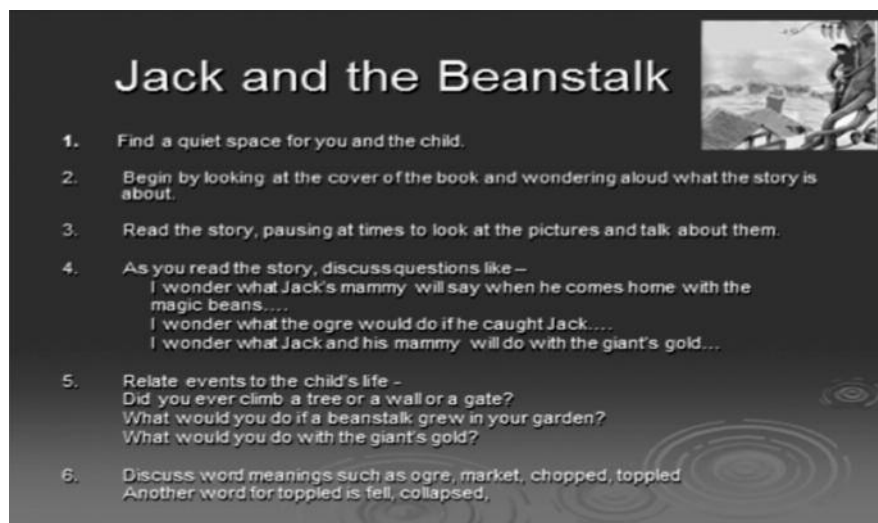
Research tells us that if parents are given training/coaching in dialogic reading strategies, they tend to continue to use those strategies. Huebner and Payne (2010) provided the first evidence that brief instruction in interactive reading has an enduring effect on parents' reading style. Parents taught to use dialogic reading behaviours when their children were ages 2 or 3 years continued to use this reading style more than 2 years later. The frequency of dialogic behaviours among those with prior instruction was nearly double that of parents with no prior instruction.

Furthermore, research tells us that giving parents *specific* literacy coaching

advice in relation to how to work with their children works better than giving parents general literacy advice (Sénéchal and Young, 2008). Dialogic story-reading strategies are quite specific.

Here is an example of a tip sheet designed for parents to assist them in reading the story of Jack and the Beanstalk to their child. It is not intended to be prescriptive because the advice is to follow the child's interest in the story. The use of open-ended questions on the sheet is deliberate because research says open-ended questions develop the ability to use language to describe and explain (Cole, Maddox and Lim, 2006; Debaryshe, 1993).

*(Adapted by Kiely, 2011 from Kelleher, 2005).*



## Jack and the Beanstalk

1. Find a quiet space for you and the child.
2. Begin by looking at the cover of the book and wondering aloud what the story is about.
3. Read the story, pausing at times to look at the pictures and talk about them.
4. As you read the story, discuss questions like –  
I wonder what Jack's mammy will say when he comes home with the magic beans....  
I wonder what the ogre would do if he caught Jack....  
I wonder what Jack and his mammy will do with the giant's gold...
5. Relate events to the child's life –  
Did you ever climb a tree or a wall or a gate?  
What would you do if a beanstalk grew in your garden?  
What would you do with the giant's gold?
6. Discuss word meanings such as ogre, market, chopped, toppled  
Another word for toppled is fell, collapsed.

## Oral Language and Socio-Economic Status (SES)

Not all children are in a position to benefit from rich early language experiences. By the time that they enter school, children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are behind their more advantaged peers in verbal and other cognitive abilities (Ramey and Ramey, 2004). In fact, Fernald, Marchman and Weisleder (2012) found that significant disparities in vocabulary and language processing efficiency were already evident at 18 months between infants from higher- and lower-SES families. By 24 months, there was a 6-month gap between SES groups in processing skills critical to language development.

Cunningham and Zibulski (2011) claim that the gap in skill set between low and middle SES families at school entry lays the foundation for the differences in achievement that we witness throughout children's school lives. If this discrepancy can be addressed before children come to school, it might support those children who would otherwise lag behind their peers at school entry.

Morgan and Goldstein (2004) found that children from low SES families demonstrate poor language usage in the following areas:

- Explanations
- Formal definitions
- Retelling stories
- Relating personal narratives

It is clear, therefore, that parents and other adults in children's lives need to support their child's language development as early as possible in children's lives. It would also seem sensible to suggest that a story-reading programme, involving a degree of interactivity including modelling of explanations, introduction to new words and the opportunity to retell stories and relate personal narratives would improve oral language outcomes for children. *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020* highlights the role of parents and the community in supporting the development of children's literacy and numeracy. It specifically mentions shared reading (p. 24) as a strategy that can be used to develop oral language. Dialogic story-reading is a form of shared reading.

### **Decontextualised Language**

Decontextualised language merits attention because it is a form of language that is important for children's academic development and it is enhanced by the practice of dialogic story-reading (e.g. Wasik and Bond, 2001; Dickinson and Snow, 1987). Decontextualised language is described as language that is not focused on the here and now or on the immediate physical environment; it is abstract and is found in extended discourse such as explanations, narratives and pretend play (Demir, Meadow, Levine and Rowe, 2010). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998, p. 851) describe decontextualised language as follows:

Decontextualised language refers to language, such as that used in story

narratives and other written forms of communication that is used to convey novel information to audiences who may share only limited background knowledge with the speaker or who may be physically removed from the things or events described. In contrast, contextualised uses of language rely on shared physical contact, knowledge and immediate feedback. Children's decontextualised language skills are related to conventional literacy skills such as decoding, understanding story narratives, and print production (e.g., Dickinson and Snow, 1987).

Research shows that care-givers from socio-economically disadvantaged environments tend to focus on labelling and describing during story-reading and less on decontextualised language (Mogan and Goldstein, 2004). It is important, therefore, that the dialogic story-reading strategies are used because they will facilitate the use of decontextualised language.

The use of story facilitates the development of decontextualised language because story is life experience in an abstract form. "Narrative fiction offers models or simulations of the social world via abstraction, simplification and compression" (Mar and Oatley, 2008, p. 173).

## Conclusion

Research indicates that dialogic story-reading is an effective way to develop children's oral language, particularly decontextualised language. Fidelity to the strategies outlined is important because these strategies are what makes story-reading dialogic and are what facilitate the development of children's oral language. *Deliberate* strategies need to be employed in order to enhance the learning experience. Philips and Norris (2008) claim, for example, that children's awareness or understanding of print does not improve unless the parent/teacher consciously brings the child's attention to print. However, in our efforts to 'do it properly', it must be borne in mind that unless the child is enjoying the story and the experience of interacting around the story, it will be difficult to realise positive learning outcomes in relation to the development of oral language. It is of paramount importance that story-reading is an enjoyable experience for the child. It is hoped that enjoyment of reading will kindle a desire for further engagement with books and that the child will develop life-long habits of reading which will advantage him/her as a learner and bring added joy and richness to life.

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