

# REVISITING DIALOGIC READING (DR): STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE YOUNG CHILDREN’S EARLY LITERACY SKILLS

**Rachel J. Boit, Ed.D.**

**University of Akron, College of Education**

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, more than a third of first grade children are not able to read at grade level, and are at a high risk for lagging behind their peers as they go through school [1]. This places them at high risk for overall school failure, truancy, and dropping out, along with other childhood and adolescent problems related to school failure particularly if they do not receive appropriate intervention early in life [2,3]. This is especially true of many children from low-income families, whose parents themselves may have completed fewer years of school and have fewer books in the home. Unfortunately, there is the tendency that children who start off slowly in literacy development rarely catch up with their peers, indicating the considerable difficulty in ameliorating literacy difficulties once they occur [2]. Failure to meet this challenge to improve all children’s readiness and achievement will perpetuate the inequalities of achievement gaps and the low performance of the U.S. student population as a whole, [4].

It is no wonder that studies on early literacy have become one of the most investigated topics by language and literacy researchers in recent years. In the past several decades, for example, increased attention has been paid to the preschool years as a critical time for developing skills that are needed to succeed in school [5]. Moreover, Snow, Burns & Griffin [6] together with Shonkoff & Phillips [7] have documented the significance of

early experiences on later development and the effects that these experiences have on later school achievement.

This article aims to inform early childhood educators of the most effective instructional approaches that will help young children learn to read well. It also attempts to shade light on the power of conversations when reading with young children. It outlines how shared book reading strategies can and have been used to enhance children’s early literacy skills. Most importantly, it attempts to address ways in which educators can use the strategies of Dialogic Reading (a form of shared book reading) to help children become better readers at the preschool level and how to increase meaningful interactions between caregivers and children when they read together so as to promote early literacy and language development. It is important to determine the skills that will directly impact on children’s early literacy development and use this information to provide the best start for young children.

## Beginnings Matter

Research has consistently shown that pre-literacy development has a profound effect on young children's successful transition to school and, in particular, on their success in learning to read [8,5,9]. Children who arrive in first grade with a foundation in pre-literacy skills, interest and motivation to learn are better prepared to engage in the complex task of learning to read compared to children who lack these foundational skills [5].

Most children acquire pre-literacy skills through interactions with adults and peers who use language in ways that are consistent with the majority culture and correspond to the printed word [5]. Unfortunately, many children raised in poverty have limited access to opportunities to develop adequate early literacy skills [6] as quoted by [5]. Dorit & Shira [10] indicate that children from low Socio-economic Status (SES) communities generally attain a lower level of early literacy skills than their peers from middle and higher SES communities. Moreover, [6] reported that children in poverty lack necessary pre-literacy skills at the beginning of kindergarten.

One aspect that is important in literacy development is conversation or dialogue. Most importantly, conversations during storybook reading have been found to play an important role in helping children increase their vocabulary [11], read fluently and comprehend the material they are being exposed to. This is because it is primarily through interactive dialogue that children gain comprehension skills, increase their understanding of literacy conventions, and are encouraged to enjoy reading. Book reading episodes provide an opportunity for adults and children to co-construct knowledge in a social setting and negotiate meanings together [12]. Reading sessions also provide a natural context for adults to assist children in forming concepts about books, print and reading, such as directionality and book handling [13].

The importance of reading to children

Reading books to young children is a very common adult-child early literacy activity [14], and research has shown that it is known to benefit children's literacy development [12]. The Release of the National Research Council Report, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, [6] further confirmed this widespread support. Children's experiences with books play

an important role. Many children from homes with hundreds of picture books enter school with thousands of hours of experience with books. These children see their family members reading for pleasure. Conversely, other children enter school with fewer hours of book reading, [15,11]. This is especially evident among children living in poverty who in most cases have received less than twenty five hours of being read to. In their illustration, [16] reported that by the age of three, children in poverty were already well behind their more affluent peers in their acquisition of vocabulary and oral language skills which could be attributed to the fact that they are exposed to less or no book reading at all in their homes. Picture book reading provides children with many of the skills that are necessary for school readiness: vocabulary, sound structure, the meaning of print, the structure of stories and language, sustained attention, the pleasure of learning etc. Preschoolers need food, shelter, love and they also need the nourishment of books [15].

There is considerable evidence to support the supposition that book reading is a context that facilitates growth of literacy skills, [17,18]. Vocabulary growth and story comprehension for example, are fostered by interactional routines during book reading experiences [19,20,21, 22]. Furthermore, book handling and knowledge about print [13], an understanding of fictional worlds represented symbolically in pictures and text [23], exposure to story structures, schemes and literacy conventions which are prerequisites for understanding texts [24], as well as positive attitudes about book reading [25], are other attributes developed in the reading process. Klass et al. [1] further point to the fact that reading with children will help them grow up with literacy skills which make it more likely that they will succeed in learning to read early and acquire strong positive associations with books and

reading. This has a positive impact in their lifelong development.

Reading with Children: An opportunity for oral language.

Oral language is the foundation of learning to read and write and develops skills necessary for future reading and writing achievement; children who do not develop strong oral language skills in the preschool years find it difficult to keep up with their peers in later years. Oral language development includes critical skills that allow children to communicate (listen and respond when other people are talking), understand the meaning of words, obtain new information about things, and express their own ideas and thoughts [26]. Research tells us that young children's ability to use language and listen to and understand the meaning of spoken and written words is related to their later literacy achievement in reading, writing and spelling [20,18]. Therefore, adults must intentionally plan to engage children in oral language experiences.

These language interactions are the basis for building children's understanding of the meaning of a large number of words which is a crucial ingredient in their later ability to comprehend what they read. It allows for social interaction between an adult and a child in which both participants actively construct meaning. One way to do that is through interactions with children around books in the process of shared book reading.

#### Shared Book Reading

Shared book reading is one of the best opportunities for adults and children to have conversations that build oral language, especially when they are engaged in discussion around the book. Shared storybook reading is one strategy that has been used to facilitate children's early literacy skills especially in the development of oral language. Shared storybook reading expands simply reading a story to a child into a more

interactive reading approach where the adult and the child are engaged in a dialogue. According to [28,27] shared storybook reading approaches enhances a child's language development, increases a child's participation and target abstract language. Bus et al. [20] stated that shared storybook reading in the first 6 years of life is "related to outcome measures like language growth, early literacy, and reading achievement" (p. 1).

There are many reasons to incorporate shared storybook reading into language intervention. Morgan and Goldstein [28] listed several benefits of shared reading including that it is a widely accepted way of teaching, it contains repetitive modeling for the child, it targets multiple skills, treatment outcomes are easy to monitor and it facilitates positive interaction patterns for adult and child.

Additionally, shared storybook reading has been used to facilitate multiple domains of oral language. Morgan and Goldstein [28] summarized the aspects of early literacy that have been targeted to include vocabulary skills [29], increased participation in the book reading activity, and additional skills such as print awareness[30,31,32]. The idea that story book reading promotes language development is further supported by correlational, experimental and intervention studies, [33]. Senechal, LeFevre, Hudson & Lawson [34] reported that storybook reading accounted for unique variance in preschool children's expressive and receptive vocabulary after controlling for parent's education and levels of literacy.

Experimental research further showed that shared book reading between adults and children provides children with the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary. Senechal and Cornell [21] found that young children acquire receptive vocabulary when books are read to them. Similarly, Robins

and Ehri [35] found that children who were non-readers acquire new vocabulary from listening to stories read to them repeatedly. Additional studies have shown that instructive behaviors by the adult reader can further enhance children's language abilities, [33]. Elley [36] as quoted by [33], demonstrated that children who received explanations of word meaning during the book reading made greater gains in vocabulary than children who simply listened to the story. Senechal [37] found that children who answered questions about target words during shared reading comprehended and produced more of those words.

These studies suggest that children's participation in shared book reading promotes vocabulary development. Several experiments indicate that eliciting children's active responses to literature enables them to integrate information and to relate various parts of the story and even a teachers reading style can affect how well children comprehend stories read to them, [38]. There are different approaches to shared book reading that have been proposed by researchers in early literacy. Dialogic reading, a specific technique used in shared reading, is an approach that promotes oral language between the child and the adult.

#### Dialogic Reading

Dialogic Reading (DR) is a method of shared book reading in which the adult reads picture books with children and provides multiple opportunities to talk and engage in conversations. In DR, the child becomes the story teller while the adult becomes an active listener, asks questions, adds information and promotes the child's use of descriptive language. It is one context that has shown promise in providing children with the necessary skills that allow them to become successful readers throughout their education and throughout life.

The DR approach was developed by Whitehurst, G. J., Falco, F. L., Lonigan, C. J., Fischel, J. E., DeBaryshe, B. D., Valdev-Menchaca, M. C., & Caulfield, M. [39] as an intervention program designed to involve children actively during shared reading and to provide a rich avenue for language development. Whitehurst [15] noted that when most adults share a book with a preschooler, they read and the child listens. Dialogic Reading encourages the child to become the story teller (aided by an adult) and is therefore a powerful strategy for building oral language since the adult becomes the listener, the questioner and the audience for the child. According to [40,11,27] DR provides a systematic approach for parents or teachers to interact with the child through discussion while reading the text.

A series of studies using the Dialogic Reading (DR) program [39,41,42,15,43,21,44,31,45,5,29,40,33,46] demonstrated that children exposed to DR experimental programs outperformed their peers in measures of oral language and phonological processes as well as other early literacy skills.

According to Whitehurst et al. [39], the fundamental reading technique in DR is the PEER sequence. This is a short interaction between a child and the adult. The adult:

- Prompts the child to say something about the book (i.e. "what can you see here?")
- Evaluates the child's responses ("yes, it's a cow")
- Expands the child's responses by rephrasing and adding information to it ("it's a big black cow")
- Child Repeats the expanded response.

Except on the first reading, PEER sequences should be used often when sharing books with young children. Here's an example of what this might look like: The following are some examples; "What did Max do?" (P), "Yes, he poured the milk" (E), "He poured all the milk on the floor"

(E), and children Repeat, “He poured all the milk on the floor” (R).

The second set of techniques has been given the acronym CROWD which refers to the five types of questions asked by adults when engaging in dialogic reading with young children. These questions include:

(1) Completion prompts: These are fill-in the blank questions (e.g., “when we went into the car, we all put on our \_\_\_\_\_.”)

(2) Recall prompts: These are questions that require the child to remember aspects of the book (e.g., “can you remember some of the things that the elephants did?”)

(3) Open-ended prompts: These are statements that encourage the child to respond to the book in his or her own words (e.g., “Tell me about this page”)

(4) Wh-prompts: These are what, where and why questions (e.g., what is this called? where did Peter go?)

(5) Distancing prompts: These are questions that require the child to relate the content of the book to aspects of life outside of the book (e.g., did you ever go to the zoo like Jenna did?).

The purpose of using CROWD is to provide opportunities for young children to practice new oral language skills, build short-term memory, and maximize their oral language experience. CROWD gives the adult the opportunity to consider expected responses from the child in order to elaborate on them, give vocabulary support, be prepared to scaffold, and provide rich language models. The following are the examples; “And all the children shouted \_\_\_\_\_”(C), “Can you tell me what happened to the dog?” (R), “Can you tell me something about this picture” (O), “What is going on here?” (Wh), “Why is it dangerous for you to jump on the bed?” (D).

• Ask the “wh” questions: Use feedback to provide instructive information. Feedback can come in a variety of forms such as recasting what the child

has said (example: “Yes, you told a story yesterday”), expanding by adding more information (example: “you told a story about your visit to the dentist”) and praising or correcting errors (example: “Dentists take good care of our teeth”).

• Reading style of the adult should mature as the child does. For example, a child who is so adept in naming pictures should be encouraged to talk about other features in the book and not simply to label colors.

Guideline for Using PEER and CROWD.

The following is a brief guideline for teachers, adults and all who work with young children. On how to use the PEER and CROWD sequence in DR:

• Preview the book and determine opportunities for engaging children through the use of PEER and CROWD prompts.

• Create sticky notes with questions that utilize PEER and CROWD prompts and apply them to the selected book.

• Preview the book with the PEER and CROWD prompts so that you will know when to pose questions to your students while the book is being read

Virtually any book is appropriate for dialogic reading. So choose your favorite and plan your steps for a successful interactive session. If need be, books can be chosen using the following criteria : (a) The books should contain colorful illustrations to provide the opportunity to narrate the story without complete reliance on the text; (b) they should potentially have new vocabulary depicted by the illustrations and in the text thus allowing children to be exposed to the new words either through being read to in a dialogic manner or through conventional reading; (c) texts should be short so as to increase the likelihood of teacher-child interaction and (d) the books should be

appropriate for the entire age range of children in the class.

### CONCLUSION

Young children who are exposed to book experiences in interactive literacy settings develop a complex range of attitudes, concepts and skills that form the foundation of school-based literacy [47]. From these experiences, especially those with story books, children gain an interest in books, the capacity to understand and talk about stories and the ability to connect the information in the stories to their background knowledge. These children also learn that it is print that is read in stories [6]. As they hear stories read to them, they acquire knowledge about book concepts, story structures, literacy language and specialized vocabulary and are able to identify many of the alphabet letters. Research shows that children who have been exposed to dialogic reading show gains on language tests over children who have been read to without this interaction. In sum, dialogic storybook reading works and provides children with opportunities to express themselves, to build upon existing language with the aid of appropriately structured questions, and to witness language-rich models.

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