

Revitalising Read Alouds

Interactive Talk About Books with
Young Children, Pre-F–2

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Foreword by Sharon Walpole

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- Awareness of text structures such as story schema (van den Broek, 2001)
- Sensitivity to the linguistic and organisational structures of books (Duke & Kays, 1998)
- Print awareness (Pullen & Justice, 2003)
- Word recognition skills (Stahl, 2003)
- Monitoring comprehension and making corrections while reading (Smolkin & Donovan, 2001)
- Understanding how voice or intonation can change meaning (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984)

Given such research findings, it is hard not to believe that reading aloud is a pivotal instructional activity. However, despite the fact that read alouds have merit, there is also evidence that when read alouds limit the time students actually practise reading with an adult or reading on their own, students' reading achievement can suffer (Meyer, Stahl, Wardrop & Linn, 1994). Therefore, reading aloud should not supplant reading instruction or students' opportunities to engage in guided or independent reading.

How can we reconcile the research that shows important benefits of reading aloud in the classroom with the research that cautions us not to let reading aloud overtake actual reading instruction? With new standards and curriculum documents entering the scene, with their much higher expectations for student achievement, does reading aloud still warrant a place in the instructional scene for young students in preschool through to year two? The answer to that question is a resounding *yes*, and here are three reasons why.

Reading Aloud Provides Exposure to Complex Texts Before Students Are Capable of Reading Those Texts Independently

In the early year levels, when students are still learning how to read, they will need texts that include features such as decodable words and predictable language. Yet students eventually need to be able to read and comprehend texts that are much more complex. This has always been true; however, newer standards up the ante by requiring texts that are more complex than previous educational standards and stipulating that teachers begin to incorporate complex texts earlier. Students need such early exposure to complex texts in order to develop the language and cognitive skills needed for independent text comprehension when they are in fact readers. To accomplish this, students need thoughtful instruction early on that lays a foundation for comprehension of those complex texts.

Reading aloud is an important instructional activity for achieving this goal because teachers can model the kinds of comprehension strategies students will need to use later when they read independently. However, simply reading

complex texts aloud and making a few comments will not be sufficient. In this book, we describe methods for reading aloud that help teachers use and teach comprehension strategies so that students can comprehend complex texts before they are capable of reading them independently.

Reading Aloud Provides Opportunities for Active Participation and Collaboration with Peers

Oral language abilities provide a foundation for academic success. Oral language includes both the expressive domain (speaking) and receptive domain (listening). We expect students in foundation year to year two to speak in well-formulated sentences that are relevant to the content and social nature of the conversation. In terms of receptive language, students need to demonstrate listening skills by asking and answering questions that are relevant to a text or topic of discussion. They must understand what others have said about the topic so that their own verbal contributions build on previous ideas. In order to achieve these receptive and expressive language skills, teachers can help students collaborate verbally within discussions about a text. Discussions must go beyond simply eliciting a few answers to questions during or after reading aloud. Rather, they need to involve multiple students and multiple turns on topic, with students building on what others have said already. Further, the content of the talk needs to show students' ability to use an academic language register, including use of diverse and sophisticated vocabulary, complex and more formal grammar, and explanation of abstract concepts.

Although speaking and listening can and should be addressed all day long in the classroom, the activity of reading books aloud is particularly well suited for focusing on language. For one, the grammar and vocabulary contained in books are more sophisticated than that typically found in conversational language. Thus, the text itself already provides a model of academic language. In addition, the activity can involve much more than a teacher reading the text aloud. Teachers ask questions that stimulate discussion, and they follow up on students' questions and comments in responsive ways that help to expand students' language skills and use of an academic register. In this book, we describe methods teachers can use to help students actively participate, collaborate with peers and make connections across curricular topics while discussing the content presented in a book.

Reading Aloud Provides Opportunities to Think and Speak at High Levels of Cognitive Thinking

Clearly, students with solid basic language skills are in a better position to do well academically. However, beyond basic language skills, they need to learn to use language to engage in higher levels of cognitive thinking. This type of

conclusion?” Questions also could be closed-ended to elicit specific information. Such Low Support questions help the students verbalise information or ideas that they can then use to create a more elaborate response to our original question. After the student provides clarification, we often repeat our original question to give them another chance to answer.

In summary, when we provide Low-Support Strategies, a student has an opportunity to revise and add to the original response. If the student’s new contribution makes sense, we can accept it and move on, or we might choose to raise the bar to push the student even further. Alternatively, if the student’s second or third attempt continues to show errors in content or language, we can switch to High-Support Strategies.

RAISE-THE-BAR STRATEGIES

The purpose of Raise-the-Bar Strategies is to help students achieve higher levels of cognitive thinking, more complex language expression and a deeper understanding of the text. Raise-the-Bar Strategies are useful when students are already familiar with the topic, concepts and vocabulary in the text or have had previous exposure to it (e.g. on a second or third repeated reading of the text). When a student contribution contains accurate content with good language formulation (i.e. no errors or only minor grammatical errors), we can help the student and the class by taking the discussion to a greater depth of understanding. Raising the Bar is one way to differentiate instruction for students who are ready for this challenge.

Teachers might be worried that Raise-the-Bar Strategies would be too challenging for some students in the class. That may be true. However, all students in the group do *not* have to be at this higher level in order for teachers to engage some students at a higher level of cognitive thinking. It is important to challenge the students who are ready for that, not to hold them back because others in the class might not understand the discussion. And students benefit from hearing those discussions even when they cannot fully participate in them yet. Consequently, it is important to *plan* ahead for ways to raise the bar during a read aloud. In the planning for a read aloud, teachers can consider the genre of text and choose several ways to raise the bar that match the learning objectives for the read aloud. Figure 3.2 includes specific ways to raise the bar that are appropriate for the genre of text. These methods of raising the bar will be defined and discussed in the chapters that follow on each genre of text.