

From the Reading Rug to the Play Center: Enhancing Vocabulary and Comprehensive Language Skills by Connecting Storybook Reading and Guided Play

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Abstract This article explores the preschool teachers' use of concrete and abstract comments and questions within the classroom contexts of storybook reading and guided play to promote classroom conversations. Early childhood educators promote oral language development by creating a language-rich environment in which children become active participants in classroom dialogue. Teachers must intentionally plan and scaffold this learning through interactive storybook reading and storybook extensions using props through guided play. This article provides examples of the types of comments and questions that can serve to model and facilitate children's vocabulary and comprehensive language development and subsequent literacy skills.

Keywords Preschool · Vocabulary · Oral language · Literacy · Guided play

Early childhood teachers have an important responsibility: to promote oral language development for the students in their classrooms. To meet this challenge, teachers must intentionally create a language-rich environment in which children become active participants in classroom dialogue. Children identified as *early readers* when entering school share facets of developmental history relating to early literacy growth; namely, they were provided a print-rich early childhood environment and educational contexts filled with lively, interactive conversation (Neuman 2004). A lan-

guage-rich classroom is one in which “children are exposed deliberately and recurrently to high-quality verbal input among peers and adults and in which adult-child verbal interactions are characterized by high levels of adult responsiveness” (Justice 2004, p. 3). Children acquire language through social interactions with adults and peers (Chapman 2000) in which meaning is constructed (Halliday 2004; Many 2002); therefore, teachers assume the role of conversational partner and language facilitator in the classroom. One important aspect in creating this language-rich environment involves the use of abstract language (inferencing, reasoning, predicting, explaining) in teacher comments and questions used to support and scaffold children's language development. In relating literacy and language, a child's repertoire of concepts and comprehension can be expanded in guided participation with a skilled language partner, typically the teacher who scaffolds, models, and facilitates sophisticated language (Verhoeven and Snow 2001). Scaffolding is supplied not entirely by the teacher, but also by the contexts and activities supporting the language (Palincsar 1998). Of primary importance in scaffolding sophisticated language is the introduction and integration of “book language” into adult-child conversation. Quality children's literature provides exposure to abstract language and abstract concepts not commonly experienced in typical adult-child conversation (Catts et al. 1999; Cunningham and Stanovich 1998; Isbell et al. 2004; National Early Literacy Panel 2008). This article explores the use of teacher abstract language input in creating cognitively challenging conversation through storybook reading and guided play, two key classroom contexts in which children's language can be developed and expanded. Specific comments and questions useful for designing cognitively challenging conversation during storybook reading and play time are also provided.

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Vocabulary and Comprehensive Language Skills

Oral language competencies developed in the preschool years are related to reading competence when children transition to elementary school. Key components that influence literacy skills are vocabulary knowledge and comprehensive language skills such as grammar, syntax, and semantics (Bowyer-Crane et al. 2008; NICHD 2005). Children learn new words to add to their mental store of known words, their lexicon, through incidental exposure or through elaborated exposure. Incidental exposure occurs when children informally experience unknown words in conversations with others, when listening to a television program, or when listening to a storybook reading (Justice et al. 2005). Elaborated exposure is a more intentional type of word exposure in which children encounter new words through storybook reading or adult conversation accompanied by meaning-focused adult explanations (Justice et al. 2005). In order to truly understand a word's meaning, children need repeated exposure to words and have the opportunity to use the words in their oral language through meaningful contexts (Harris et al. 2011). Research studies indicate that children's vocabulary development is significantly enhanced when teachers' talk involves conversations incorporating elaborated word exposures across such classroom activity settings as mealtimes, storybook reading, and guided play (Han et al. 2005; Wasik 2010; Wasik and Bond 2001; Wasik et al. 2006).

Vocabulary knowledge alone, however, is not sufficient for success in later literacy (Juel et al. 2003). Children proficient in comprehensive language skills have greater literacy success as measured by word recognition and comprehension skills (Dickinson et al. 2003; NICHD 2005). Comprehensive language skills consist of syntax, semantics, and narrative abilities. Syntax refers to the set of rules governing sentence organization and grammar; semantics refers to the set of rules governing the meanings of words and sentences including receptive and expressive vocabulary (Justice and Pence 2005; Storch and Whitehurst 2002). Narrative abilities refer to the coordination of language skills for the purpose of constructing a story or retelling a story previously experienced. Comprehensive language skills combine vocabulary knowledge with expressive language skills. When preschool children engage in multiple experiences to learn and use vocabulary, they are better able to expand the conceptual understandings necessary in comprehending text (Neuman and Dwyer 2009). Early childhood teachers can lend assistance in comprehensive language skill development and conceptual knowledge development through their use of concrete and abstract language in the classroom.

Concrete and Abstract Language: A View from Inside the Classroom

The complexity of the language adults use when interacting with children is a factor in sustaining cognitively challenging conversation. The amount and quality of adult-child conversation is correlated with children's subsequent language and literacy development (National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Strickland and Shanahan 2004). The complexity depends on the level of abstraction used in conversation. Four levels of language have been identified for research measurement purposes and correspond to concrete and abstract dimensions of adult talk (Blank et al. 1978; van Kleeck 2003; van Kleeck et al. 1997). Level I, the most concrete level, involves language focused on labeling, locating, and noticing objects that are present. Imagine Mrs. Kelly reading *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn (1993) aloud to her preschoolers. Comments and questions created at Level I are ones in which Mrs. Kelly draws attention to objects in the illustrations to develop concepts and vocabulary. Comments such as "This is a woodpecker in the tree," and "Notice the books Chester has with him in the tree," help draw children's attention to concrete objects. Level II expands upon the concrete knowledge by further describing characteristics of objects perceptually present and by providing opportunities for immediate recall. Mrs. Kelly comments, "The oak tree has red, yellow and green leaves," and "These animals are called opossums. They are hanging from the tree limb by their tails." These comments further describe characteristics or actions in the illustrations. Levels I and II correspond to concrete language, often termed *contextualized language*, development which enhances vocabulary and concept knowledge.

Levels III and IV correspond to more abstract levels of language and require children to think and reason beyond what is perceptually present. When provided with input at the abstract level, termed *decontextualized language*, children are required to think about past and future events not accessible by the immediate context. Level III comments and questions require children to summarize, infer, and provide judgment. As Mrs. Kelly continues reading, she asks, "What other animals have stripes on their bodies?" and "What does it mean to be lonely?" These questions require the children to draw on their previous knowledge and conceptual understanding to make associations. At the highest level of abstraction, Level IV, children are called upon to reason, predict, problem solve, and explain. After completing the storybook reading, Mrs. Kelly asks, "If Chester gets lonely at school one day, what do you think he'll do?" and "Why do you think this book is called *The Kissing Hand*?" These questions require the

children to think beyond the text and see relationships among the story concepts and character actions.

Students need to build a concrete foundation prior to elaborating with abstract language (Blank et al. 1978; Wilcox-Herzog and Kontos 1998). For example, children need the opportunity to explore an object and learn its name prior to discussion involving the object's attributes, functions, expanded uses, and relationships to other objects (Arnold et al. 1994; Weisberg 2003). As a teacher models and scaffolds language using concrete and abstract language, comments may serve to teach information and to model higher levels of thinking whereas questions may socialize children into verbally displaying knowledge and using vocabulary and sentence knowledge to express language (van Kleeck 2003).

The Reading Rug: Facilitating Language Within the Context of Storybook Reading

Adult-child interactive storybook reading is viewed by experts as an ideal setting in which to provide a meaningful and motivating context for language learning (e.g., Bus 2001; Hogan et al. 2011). As teachers interact with children through the shared context of storybook reading, it is important that they engage in conversations linking the stories to children's experiences, analyzing word meanings, and probing the narrative or expository text elements (Dickinson 2001; Dickinson et al. 2002) which further develop their vocabulary and comprehensive language skills. Reading a storybook aloud without interactive elements of conversation is not sufficient for developing children's language skills necessary for later literacy (Pollard-Durodola et al. 2011; Teale 2003). Reading the text is not accessible for most preschoolers or kindergartners; therefore, the conversations facilitated by the teacher are the primary route by which children have access to the text (De Temple and Snow 2001). Interactive storybook

reading can be accomplished by intentionally using concrete and abstract comments and questions as part of the reading and rereading of quality literature. This combined use of contextualized and decontextualized language provides children the opportunity to become familiar with the type of complex language that will be encountered throughout their school years (McKeown and Beck 2003).

Creating cognitively challenging conversations during storybook reading can be accomplished by using concrete and abstract comments and questions based on the four levels of abstraction. To do this, the teacher must first choose the vocabulary and concepts deemed necessary and appropriate to teach. Using the vocabulary and concepts as a guide, the teacher intersperses comments and questions while reading aloud to initiate conversation. As the teacher facilitates conversation, he or she should be responsive to the children's comments and questions in order to expand upon their language by reframing children's words into semantically and grammatically advanced utterances or extending their comments based on previous experiences (Girolametto and Weitzman 2002). Table 1 provides specific examples of comments and questions teachers can use as a guideline to facilitate conversation for a targeted storybook, *Diary of a Worm* (Cronin 2003). When reading the book aloud, teachers ideally provide follow-up comments and questions in response to the children's level of understanding.

The Play Center: Extending Language Through Guided Play

A teacher's participation in guided play is pivotal in helping children incorporate literacy materials into their imaginative play (Snow et al. 1998; Tsao 2008). According to Vygotsky (1978), children develop an understanding of the world through the medium of play. Play provides a learning context for literacy and vocabulary development (Han et al. 2010). The extension of the storybook reading

Table 1 Comments and questions used during storybook reading categorized by the four levels of abstraction using *Diary of a Worm* by Cronin (2003)

Level of abstraction	Diary reference date	Comments	Questions
Level I	April 4	Look at the bucket that says <i>bait</i> . The fishermen will put the worms in here	Where are the worms in the picture? (<i>They are in a hole under the ground</i>)
Level II	June 15	The worm's sister is looking into the puddle of water to see her reflection	What is the mother worm doing in the picture? (<i>Mother is yelling at her son</i>)
Level III	April 20	The girls screamed because they are afraid of worms	Why does the worm love it when the girls run off screaming?
Level IV	July 29	The worm never gets in trouble for tracking mud in the house because he lives in the mud	Why do you think the worm never has to take a bath?

into guided play provides children an opportunity to have continued exposure and practice with vocabulary and comprehensive language through teacher scaffolding and adult-child interaction.

When children engage in play, they use both non-pretend talk and pretend talk (Katz 2001). Non-pretend talk is concrete in nature and incorporates naming, counting, and labeling. Conversations consisting of non-pretend talk include literal discussions about the toys and perceptually available objects. Pretend talk, by contrast, is more abstract in nature and includes “making one object represent another; attributing actions, thoughts, or feelings to inanimate objects; assuming or assigning a role or a persona; enacting typical scripts or routines of everyday events; and creating a narrative about a person or an object” (Katz 2001, p. 65). Pretend talk goes beyond what is perceptually available in the play environment. Both non-pretend talk and pretend talk are necessary components of literacy related play. “Play helps young children learn about their intellectual, social, symbols and language world” (Saracho and Spodek 2006, p. 715).

Guided play is a type of play that is structured to directly teach academic skills and concepts to further children’s language and early literacy abilities (Roskos et al. 2004). The teacher’s role is to guide the children’s attention and learning through modeling and interaction using props and instructional tools (Christensen and Kelly 2003; Saracho 2004). The use of props provides children the opportunity to link real objects to the text (Justice and Pence 2005), to provide motivation to label and learn the props’ names and uses (Wasik and Bond 2001), to provide concrete tools for story retelling and linking to world experiences (Rowe 1998), and to encourage children’s language and vocabulary development (Bond and Wasik 2009).

Returning to Mrs. Kelly’s fictitious classroom, following the initial reading of *The Kissing Hand* (Penn 1993), Mrs. Kelly introduces several props associated with the book: mother raccoon puppet (Chester’s mother), baby raccoon puppet (Chester), stuffed animals depicting animal characters in the book (opossum, woodpecker, owl), sand box pail, small artificial tree, hand shaped cut outs, and heart stickers. Mrs. Kelly’s instructional goal is to introduce the props using the four levels of abstract language previously presented in order to encourage the preschool students to expand and extend the story during guided play. She then will place a tub with the book and props in a book-related play center and purposely interact with students during guided play. Students may reenact the story, portray characters in the story, or dialogue about the story within the context of pretend play (Welsch 2008). As Mrs. Kelly interacts with a small group of children in the play center, she will model comments and questions related to the levels of abstract language while encouraging children to engage in

Table 2 Props to accompany *Diary of a Worm* by Cronin (2003)

Newspapers	Toy shovel
Plastic worms	Variety of shoes
Dirt	Toy spiders
Leaves	Toy birds
Bottle caps	Toy ants
Buckets	Paper and pencil for children’s diaries
Tea bag box	Dry macaroni

purposeful dialogue (Bond and Wasik 2009). For example, while interacting with the students, Mrs. Kelly may say, “Here we have Chester the raccoon and several of his school friends to help us talk about the story. We have the woodpecker, opossum, and owl. Which ones will you use to talk about the story?” Mrs. Kelly may also say, “What color is the raccoon puppet? The raccoon puppet’s face looks like he is wearing a mask. This tree can become the animals’ school. Which animals are coming to school today?” These comments and questions correspond to Levels I and II, the concrete levels of abstraction. As Mrs. Kelly plans comments and questions at Levels III and IV, the abstract levels, she may say, “How can Chester’s mother use the heart stickers? Pretend you are the mother raccoon. What can you say to Chester?” While interacting with the students during guided play, Mrs. Kelly will model and scaffold (Pentimonti and Justice 2010) the children’s language skills and assist in their conversations related to the characters and story plot using concrete and abstract language.

Table 2 provides a list of props suitable for use with a worm theme accompanying the target book, *Diary of a Worm* (Cronin 2003). Table 3 provides specific examples of comments and questions teachers can use to enhance conversation when introducing the props and directing the re-enactments of the storybook. In designing guided play to address concrete and abstract language, early childhood teachers create an environment in which children can practice oral language skills through the medium of play.

Conclusion

As early childhood educators plan and implement effective classroom instruction, it is becoming clear that the quantity and quality of adult language input has an impact on children’s oral language development and subsequent literacy skills (Hart and Risley 1995; Stahl and Yaden 2004; Weizman and Snow 2001). Adults who create an environment in which cognitively challenging conversation occurs across the various contexts of learning are helping children understand the language in which they’ll eventually be reading and creating a foundation for future text comprehension (Pollard-Durodola et al. 2011).

Table 3 Comments and questions for guided play categorized by the four levels of abstraction using *Diary of a Worm* by Cronin (2003)

Level of abstraction	Comments	Questions
Level I	Here are items you may use in the play center today: worms, a bucket, dirt, and a shovel	What items do we have for guided play today?
Level II	You may put some leaves in the teabag box to make worm's bed	What color are the leaves we'll play with today?
Level III	Worm built a tunnel under the ground to get away from the fishermen	Why was worm afraid of the fishermen?
Level IV	Your worm can make tunnels in the dirt. When worms build tunnels, it helps the soil get the air and water it needs	If worm doesn't have legs or arms, how will your worm be able to dig tunnels and get around? How is the digging helping the soil?

This experience with words assists children in developing a concrete understanding of their world and then applying that knowledge to more abstract concepts as their world knowledge expands.

Connecting storybook reading and guided play provides an avenue in which early childhood educators can enhance their students' vocabulary and comprehensive language skills. The relationships between early literacy and play are becoming more defined and the cognitive impact on emergent learners continues to be examined (Roskos and Christie 2011; Wohlwend 2011). Preschool teachers scaffold these early literacy skills by focusing on the comments and questions addressed to children during storybook reading. By providing language input at various levels of abstract language, teachers model vocabulary usage and higher level thinking skills, thus building a foundation for children's later reading comprehension (Rowe 2007; van Kleeck 2008). Targeted questioning allows children to engage in the storybook reading experience by interacting and conversing with the adult teacher and classroom peers.

To further enhance the vocabulary and comprehensive language skills, preschool educators can continue literate conversations with the students by coupling the storybook experience with opportunities to expand the learning through play. By providing props related to the storybook and then interacting with students in play centers, teachers continue to scaffold language and literacy skills through targeted comments and questions related to the book theme. Purposeful planning of storybook reading, guided play, and targeted conversational input by preschool educators are key components in effective preschool classrooms.

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