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PACKED WITH **POTENTIAL**

Content-rich classroom conversations in the early grades

By **Sonia Q. Cabell & Jennifer Passalacqua**

*d*eveloping strong oral language skills during the preschool and primary grades is essential for comprehension. These skills not only include understanding the meanings of words and how those words make up sentences (vocabulary and grammar) but also the ability to make inferences, or fill in the gaps, when listening to or reading texts. In combination with their language skills, children use their prior knowledge about the topic of the text to help make necessary inferences and to create a mental representation of that text, both to understand and learn from it.

Because both language and knowledge are important for comprehension, content-rich English language arts (ELA) instruction has been gaining popularity over the past decade. This type of instruction infuses science and social studies learning into ELA. Research demonstrates that integrating content knowledge and literacy instruction may be more powerful than traditional instruction,

taught within the siloes of subject areas with little attention to meaningful connections across subjects. For example, texts read aloud during ELA instruction may have nothing to do with science or social studies topics under study during the content time.

In the early grades (preschool–grade 2), a common approach to content-rich ELA instruction is using interactive read-alouds to simultaneously build oral language skills and content knowledge through conversations that take place before, during, and after reading. Here, we focus on conversations that happen in the “after reading” portion of the interactive read-aloud.

The importance of conversations

From their earliest years, the back-and-forth conversational interactions that children have with adults around them help their oral language skills grow. As they enter school, conversational interactions with teachers continue to be important to language learning. Ideally, these conversations invite children to actively participate (*elicit*) and are responsive to and build upon what children are saying (*extend*). Multiple turns between teachers and children, and among children, allow for the opportunity to practice important oral language skills and are linked to children’s language development.

Elicit children’s participation.

Asking open-ended questions is a fantastic way to encourage children’s active participation. Open-ended questions often have multiple correct answers and typically cannot be answered by a single-word response. They may also be inferential questions about a text that is read aloud to enable children to “read between the lines.” For example, in a read-aloud about plants, a teacher could ask an open-ended question such as, “What does a stem do?” or an open-ended inferential question such as, “Why would a plant need a stem?”

Extend on children’s turns.

After a child answers an open-ended question, it is up to the teacher to keep the conversation going. Instead of replying with an acknowledgement such as “That’s right” or “Good job”—which

typically ends conversations—a teacher can build on the child’s comment by making their statement more complete and providing more information. For example, when asked, “Why would a plant need a stem?”, a child may answer, “To eat.” The teacher might extend the child’s comment by saying, “The stem helps the plant to ‘eat’ by supplying the leaves with water and nutrients that it needs to survive.” The teacher can also offer another elicitation by asking open-ended “why” or “how” questions, which can invite other children into the discussion as well.

The benefits of content-rich interactive read-alouds

Through content-rich interactive read-alouds, teachers can have topic-focused conversations that can build both language and knowledge through eliciting and extending children’s participation. Specifically, teachers can engage children in conversations about science and social studies topics under study, explicitly introducing vocabulary words that enable children to better understand the text and the topic. While these conversations can occur before, during, or after the read-aloud, the majority of back-and-forth discussion takes place after the read-aloud to promote understanding of concepts.

The texts used in read-alouds can work together to build knowledge on a particular topic. Using *coherent text sets* for read-alouds can repeatedly expose children to related words and ideas in different ways across different texts. Knowledge can be systematically built across texts to promote deeper learning of the topic. These texts are generally more syntactically complex than what children are able to read on their own. They can represent both narrative and informational genres, but it is important to note that research demonstrates that teachers are more likely to use inferential language while reading aloud informational text.

Read-alouds are a common classroom practice filled with possibilities.

In addition to building knowledge and vocabulary, dedicating time to content-rich read-alouds can help support other ELA goals. Standards such as determining central ideas or themes of text can be accomplished not only with fictional narrative texts but also with content-rich informational texts. Specifically, a teacher could focus on summarizing the main idea and supporting details with a content-rich text, which would align with required ELA standards and support the uptake of content knowledge. This type of intentional planning provides an additional opportunity to model or practice ELA- and content-specific concepts within a daily schedule.

An example

Ms. Forsyth has just finished her second read-aloud on plants with her kindergarten class. In the previous plant read-aloud, the conversations focused on living versus nonliving things and the basic needs of plants. Today, they read about plant parts. The words that Ms. Forsyth chose to explicitly teach were the names of the plant parts (leaves, roots, seeds, and stems) and survival. After the read-aloud was over, Ms. Forsyth chose to *elicit* student talk by asking an open-ended and inferential question: “How do the different parts of the plant help the plant survive?”

Student 1: “The leaves!”

Ms. Forsyth: “Yes, the leaves are an important part of the plant. What do leaves do?” (*extend, elicit*)

Student 1: “The leaves make the food.”

Ms. Forsyth: (pointing to a picture of a leaf from the read-aloud) “Yes, the leaves make food for the plant! Why is this part of the plant important for survival?” (*extend, elicit*)

Student 2: “Because they need food.”

Ms. Forsyth: “Because the plant needs food for survival.” (*extend*)

Student 2: “The plant needs food for survival.”

In this exchange, Ms. Forsyth has elicited students to participate in a conversation around the content and vocabulary learned. She then extended the first student's answer before returning to the original inferential question ("How do the different parts of the plant help the plant survive?"). The inferential question required the student to use their knowledge of plant parts and connect it to previous knowledge of the basic needs of plants. To offer more opportunities for oral language practice, Ms. Forsyth could have the students turn and talk with a partner to answer the stem, "Plants need _____ for survival because _____."

An essential practice

Read-alouds are a common classroom practice filled with possibilities. The book that is chosen, the words that are highlighted, the questions that are asked—these factors all have tremendous potential. The use of content-rich interactive read-alouds is a strategic decision to align multiple

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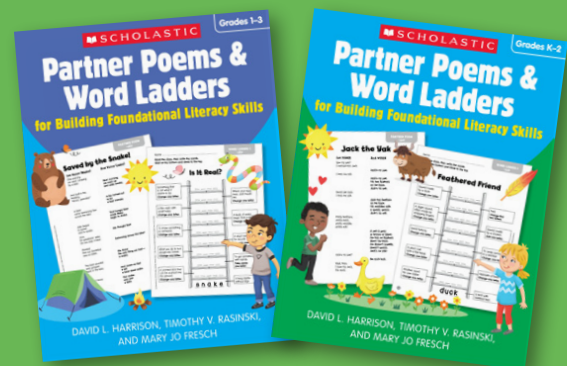
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instructional goals with the intent to deepen content knowledge, provide opportunities to elicit and extend oral language, and build vocabulary in a meaningful and engaging context.

Importantly, the conversations that take place in the read-aloud session can help to develop the essential oral language skills children need for literacy success. ■



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