2-1-1998

Early book sharing: What teachers should know

Sherry Kragler
Ball State University

Linda Martin
Ball State University

Recommended Citation

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Early book sharing:
What teachers should know

Sherry Kragler
Ball State University

Linda Martin
Ball State University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe strategies that care-
givers use while reading books with young children. Research indi-
cates that caregivers: a) use strategies that simplify or extend book
language, b) use prosody, and c) use management strategies so the
book reading event is meaningful for children. Then, how teachers
of preschool children can use these same strategies to plan meaning-
ful book sharing events for children in preschool settings is de-
scribed.

"Read me a story mommy," pleads Brendan as he climbs upon
his mother's lap. Amy gently wraps her little boy in her arms and
opens his favorite storybook. Reading storybooks with a caregiver is
an important event in children's lives, as with Brendan, and profoundly
affects children's early literacy development (Bus and IJzendoorn,
1988; 1995; Bus, IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1995; Durkin, 1966;
Reese, 1995; Snow, 1983; Teale, 1984).
Because these early book sharing events are crucial for literacy
development, preschool teachers should understand and consider the
types of early book sharing experiences children have had at home.
The purposes of this paper are to describe what is known about effec-
tive caregivers' book sharing strategies, and to tell how teachers can
use this information to plan meaningful book sharing events for chil-
dren in preschool settings.

CAREGIVERS DECISION MAKING

Research has indicated the optimum characteristics of effective
and positive home environments supporting literacy development
(McGee and Richgels, 1995). In this research, one dominating
characteristic described how caregivers interacted with their children

in book reading on a daily basis (Cochran-Smith, 1986; Morrow, O'Connor, and Smith, 1990; Sulzby, 1985). During these interactions, caregivers constantly reflected on which decisions to make about how they would proceed through the books with their children (Altwerger, Diehl-Faxon, and Dockstader-Anderson, 1985; Bruner, 1978; Bus and IJzendoorn, 1988; Martin and Reutzel, 1996). From this research, several strategies are detailed below describing how caregivers interact with their children.

(1) Caregivers Discuss
　　Vygotsky (1978) asserted that learning takes place through discussion with more capable language users. While reading with their children, caregivers used dialogue to strategically manipulate language to accommodate conceptual and linguistic development of their individual children (Bruner, 1978; Bus and IJzendoorn, 1988, 1995; Martin, 1998). Bruner (1978) termed this caregiver behavior as "scaffolding." To scaffold, Bruner (1978) stated that a caregiver focuses a child's attention on familiar information ignoring what the child may not understand. Then the caregiver provides a model of the expected dialogue from which a child can extract selectively what is needed for filling a role in discourse. This conversational nature of book reading invites caregivers to scaffold book language for children (Altwerger, et al., 1985; Bus and IJzendoorn, 1988).

(2) Caregivers Simplify Books
　　Caregivers simplify books for children in various ways. DeLoache and DeMendoza (1987) asserted that at times caregivers reduce the complexity of language by conceptually simplifying words. Eliminating words with constant clusters for simpler forms of the same word is another example of simplifying books (Moskowitz, 1985). "Tummy" may replace the word stomach. To accommodate a child's conceptual understanding, a tiger may be called a "kitty." Once children are comfortable with a format, Bruner (1978) stated that this simplified communication level becomes a "launching platform" for teaching children new concepts. If children are given too much information while exposing them to new concepts, the caregivers simplified the process again, thus regaining the children's attention (Bruner, 1978; Martin, 1998).

(3) Caregivers Elaborate and Extend Books
　　As children acquired more sophisticated oral and print language skills, caregivers would not only read the print, but elaborated on concepts introduced during book reading (Altwerger et al., 1985; Bus and IJzendoorn, 1988; Martin, 1998; Moerk, 1972; Snow, 1983). For instance, while reading *The Three Little Pigs,* a caregiver may talk about why the house of bricks didn't come down when the wolf blew. Some of the concepts that caregivers use to extend a book come from

the illustrations. In sharing a book about farm animals, a caregiver can point out a cow's udder and explain the purpose of the udder.

(4) Caregivers Make Connections and Predictions

Parents spend time connecting and relating their children's experiences to related concepts in books (Altwerger et al., 1985; Bus and IJzendoorn, 1988; Martin and Reutzel, 1996). For example, while reading a story about a teddy bear who falls in a well, the caregiver carefully pointed out the well in the illustration and said, "Do you remember when we visited Uncle Dave's farm and you saw the well? Uncle Dave gets water from it. Remember? This is the same type of well."

While making these connections and reading with their children, caregivers frequently asked their children what was going to happen next in the story. Sometimes, the caregivers would even ask their children higher level questions about the story. For example, while reading *One Teddy Bear Is Enough!* which is a story that explores friendships and sharing, a caregiver asked her child if she has ever felt jealous. In addition, while using predictable text, caregivers ask their children to predict the repeated word phrases. While reading *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, caregivers may want their children to predict what phrase they will see next.

(5) Caregivers Use Prosody Effectively

Caregivers also use the prosodic features of the voice, the melodies, and rhythm of language to draw attention to the drama of the story (Altwerger et al., 1985). For example, while reading *The Three Little Pigs*, caregivers may use a low pitch to characterize the wolf, "Little PIG, little PIG let me IN!" They may use a high pitch to characterize the pigs answer, "Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!"

These prosodic features of the caregivers' voices are often the first linguistic variations to be learned by children during oral language acquisition (Buss, 1984; Fernald, 1984). Buss (1984) also contended that the prosodic features of the voice may also be the first linguistic variations to be acquired as children learn about book language (p. 297). Prosodic language cues may be a precursor to literacy development (Schreiber, 1980, 1987; Snow, Coots, and Smith, 1982).

(6) Caregivers Manage

Caregivers used various management techniques to maintain their children's engagement during book sharing (Murphy, 1978; Ninio and Bruner, 1978, Ninio, 1980; Martin and Reutzel, 1996; Martin, 1998). For instance, they pointed to words or illustrated concepts and asked questions. Caregivers would also help their children point to objects in the pictures or to point to words. They shared control of the book sharing event by allowing their children to hold

the book and turn pages. Additionally, caregivers maintained physical contact with their children without restricting the children's movements. Most caregivers knew to end the book reading when their children lost interest in the book.

Because these early book reading strategies are important in homes where sharing books with children is common, teachers of preschool children should also consider using these same strategies as tools to guide and continue children's development of book language concepts in classrooms. The following is a preschool classroom scenario describing a teacher's use of these early book reading strategies while reading with his students.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Mr. Smith's class of four-year-olds starts each day in a similar fashion. As they enter the room, there is a personal welcome to each child. The day starts with play time for the children. Mr. Smith's class has a variety of centers: blocks, art, books with related book props and puppets, writing center, drama, and housekeeping. Each of these centers includes literacy materials. For example, in the housekeeping center, there are magazines, newspapers, pads of paper for grocery lists, pens, and other materials one would find in a house. Mr. Smith also has a center whose content changes depending on the children's interests or the seasons of the year. At this time, the rotating center is the post office.

There is also a place in the room for Mr. Smith to share books with children. During the day, Mr. Smith gathers small groups of children (3-5) to read at different times. He realizes his children get more involved with books if they are in small groups. They have more opportunities to talk about the books than when he shared books with the whole class (Dickinson, DeTemple, Hirschler, and Smith, 1992; Morrow and Smith, 1990). Mr. Smith lets the children point to pictures and turn the pages. He wants to share control of the book reading with the children.

Getting Ready to Read
On this particular day, Mr. Smith has decided to introduce the story, *The Snowy Day,* by Ezra Jack Keats to the children. Since Mr. Smith is teaching in a preschool located in the south, he needs to spend time thinking about how to connect the topic of the book to his children's experiences. Mr. Smith has decided to do several things to introduce the children to the concepts of snow and cold as a whole class activity. He will share the following items he has brought to school:

- pictures of snow and other winter-related pictures;
- other winter items; such as, heavy coats, hats, mittens, boots, and a snowsuit;

- shaved ice for the children to experience the feel of cold and to see what happens to the ice in the warm room; and a
- short video on snow and winter for the children to see and hear the sounds of winter.

Since Mr. Smith knows the children have all walked and made tracks in sand, he will use this experience to help his children understand what it is like to walk and make tracks in snow. At this time, Mr. Smith will share the book with a small group of children while the others are at the various centers.

Engaging the Children in the Snowy Day

Mr. Smith will have the children do a picture-walk to make predictions and connections with their previous experiences.

Mr. Smith is ready to read the story to the children. He realizes that he doesn't need to simplify the text for the children since he has already made the earlier connections for them. While reading the story, Mr. Smith has noted several places to extend the children's knowledge of concepts in the book. He is choosing just a few to elaborate. For example, he realizes his children may not understand the concept of a snowball fight even though they all know what it means to fight. Another concept he has chosen to clarify for the children is making a snow angel. This is a special problem because not all children may know about angels. In this situation, Mr. Smith has decided to describe snow angels as a play activity children do with snow. It is a large print in the snow similar to their tracks in the sand. In addition, he will clarify that snow is slick and that snow melts. Finally, the children will check on the ice in the room to see what has happened to it. In this last case, Mr. Smith will extend the idea that snow and ice change.

Mr. Smith did not choose to use prosody while reading *The Snowy Day* since it does not have dialogue. However in other books, this may be a strategy that he will use because of the dialogue.

Mr. Smith will need to use several management strategies while reading *The Snowy Day*. He plans to continually monitor the book reading activity by asking questions and listening to the children's responses. He will also maintain student involvement by sharing control of the book reading. This will be done by allowing the children to join in reading, making comments, or asking questions. Finally, Mr. Smith will point to various objects in the pictures to draw the children's attention to particular aspects in the illustrations.

Mr. Smith is looking forward to sharing the book, *The Snowy Day* with the children. He has carefully thought through the process to create a meaningful book sharing based on his knowledge of his children's experiences and their literacy development. He is aware that this book sharing strategies will change depending on the concepts in the book and his children's literacy development.

SUMMARY

Children come to preschool with some knowledge about books. Preschool teachers can build on and continue this development with appropriate activities in their classrooms (Weinbarger, 1996). In fact, McGee and Purcell-Gates (1997) state that "children learn to read and write successfully if their teachers accommodate their instruction to the children, and they struggle if they do not" (p. 312). Book sharing is one example of a wonderful opportunity teachers have to develop and build children's literacy awareness and language. By using similar strategies caregivers have used, teachers can ease children's transition to school learning as well as continue to support their literacy development.

REFERENCES

Altwerger, B., Diehl-Faxon, J., & Dockstader-Anderson, K. (1985). Reading-aloud events as meaning construction. *Language Arts, 62*, 476-484.

Bruner, J. (1978). The role of dialogue in language acquisition. In A. Sinclair, R. Jarvelle & W. Levelt (Eds.), *The child's conception of language* (pp. 241-255). NY: Springer-Verlag.

Bus, A., & IJzendoorn, M. (1988). Mother-child interactions, attachment, and emergent literacy: A cross-sectional study. *Child Development, 59*, 1262-1272.

Bus, A., & IJzendoorn, M. (1995). Mothers reading to their 3-year-olds: The role of mother-child attachment security in becoming literate. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*, 998-1015.

Bus, A., IJzendoorn, M., & Pellegrini, A. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of Educational Research, 65*, 1-21.

Buss, K. (1984). Melody: Importance in learning oral and book language. *Reading Psychology, 5*, 297-301.

Cochran-Smith, M. (1986). Reading to children: A model for understanding texts. In B. Schieffelin & P. Gilmore (Eds.), *The acquisition of literacy: Ethnographic perspectives* (pp. 35-54). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing.

Deloache, J., & DeMendoza, O. (1987). Joint picture book interactions of mothers and one-year-old children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 5*, 111-123.

Dickinson, D., DeTemple, J., Hirschler, J., & Smith, M. (1992). Book reading with preschoolers: Construction of text at home and at school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 7*, 323-346.

Durkin, D. (1966). *Children who read early.* NY: Teachers College Press.

Fernald, A. (1984). The perceptual and affective salience of mothers' speech to infants. In L. Feagans, C. Garvey, & R. Golinkoff (Eds.), *The origins and growth of communication* (pp. 5-29). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing.

Martin, L. (1998). Early book reading: How mothers deviate from printed text for young children. *Reading Research and Instruction, 37*, 135-160.

Martin, L., & Reutzel, D. (1996). Scaffolding books for children: Mothers' metacognitive decisions. *Reading Psychology, 17,* 159-180.

McGee, L., & Richgels, D. (1995). *Literacy's beginnings: Supporting young readers and writers.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

McGee, L., & Purcell-Gates, V. (1997). So what's going on in research on emergent literacy? *Reading Research Quarterly, 32,* 310-318.

Moerk, E. (1972). Principles of interaction in language learning. *Merill-Palmer Quarterly, 18,* 229-257.

Morrow, L., & Smith, J. (1990). The effects of group setting on interactive storybook reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 25,* 213-231.

Morrow, L., O'Conner, E., & Smith, J. (1990). Effects of a story reading program on the literacy development of at-risk kindergarten children. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 22,* 255-275.

Moskowitz, B. (1985). The acquisition of language. In V.P. Clark, P.A. Escholz, & A.F. Rosa (Eds.), *Language: Introductory readings* (pp. 45-73). NY: St. Martin's Press.

Murphy, C. (1978). Pointing in the context of a shared activity. *Child Development, 49,* 371-380.

Ninio, A. (1980). Picture-book reading in mother-infant dyads belonging to two subgroups in Israel. *Child Development, 51,* 587-590.

Ninio, A., & Bruner, J. (1978). The achievement and antecedents of labeling. *Journal of Child Development, 5,* 1-15.

Reese, E. (1995). Predicting children's literacy from mother-child conversations. *Cognitive Development, 10,* 381-405.

Schreiber, P. (1980). On the acquisition of reading fluency. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 12,* 177-186.

Schreiber, P. (1987). Prosody and structure in children's syntactic processing. In R. Horowitz & S. Samuels (Eds.), *Comprehending oral and written language* (pp. 243-270). NY: Academic Press.

Snow, C. (1983). Literacy and language: Relationships during the preschool year. *Harvard Educational Review, 53,* 165-189.

Snow, C., Coots, J., & Smith, K. (1982). *Speech prosody and children's perception of sentence organization* (Technical notes 2-82/34). Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 222 890)

Sulzby, E. (1985). Children's emergent reading of favorite storybooks: A developmental study. *Reading Research Quarterly, 20,* 458-479.

Teale, W. (1984). Reading to young children: It's significance for literacy development. In H. Goelman, A. Oberg, & F. Smith (Eds.), *Awakening to literacy* (pp. 110-121). NH: Heinemann.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Weinbarger, J. (1996). *Literacy goes to school.* London: Paul Chapman.

Sherry Kragler and Linda E. Martin are faculty members in the Department of Elementary Education at Ball State University, in Muncie Indiana.