

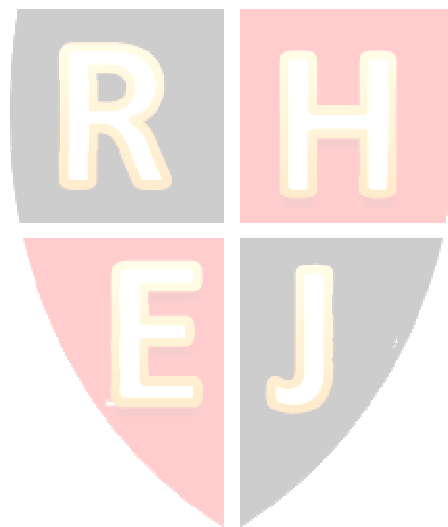
Reading Aloud: Engaging young children during a read aloud experience

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Abstract:

Research documents the benefits of reading aloud to children and suggests that the more children are engaged during the read aloud experience the greater the benefit to their language and reading development. Children's engagement during a read aloud can be increased by creating anticipation regarding the story, making predictions about what will happen in the story, making connections with the characters, and by utilizing dialogic reading strategies. This paper makes specific recommendations on how to engage young children during a read aloud experience.

Key words: read aloud, engaging, young children



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INTRODUCTION

The moments a child spends in a classroom are finite in number, therefore, any activity which would occupy those minutes on a regular basis must be deemed worthwhile academically. Since the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985), reading aloud during class time has harnessed interest as an important academic activity and many recognize it as one of several practices which is a powerful force in creating lifelong readers (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018). Research validates the positive short-term effects of reading aloud to children on the language abilities of young children through the primary grades (Klein & Kogan, 2013) and some positive long-term effects on older children (Kloosterman, Notten, Tolsma & Kraaykamp, 2011). Studies document the instructional benefits of read alouds (ILA, 2018; Lane & Wright, 2007) and suggest that there are certain components of the read aloud process which positively influence children's language and reading skills (Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004; ILA, 2018; Lane & Wright, 2007). The frequency of reading aloud, the dialogue that occurs throughout the reading, and the level of the children's engagement that occurs during the reading experience appear to be factors in positively influencing children's language (Fisher et al., 2004; Keller, 2012; Klein & Kogan, 2013; Kloosterman et al., 2011; Lane & Wright, 2007; Worthy, Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp & Shih, 2012).

How exactly does one engage a young child during the read aloud process? What are best practices that will ensure a greater degree of engagement between the person reading aloud and the children being read to? This paper will present methods of engaging young children to a greater degree during a read aloud. It will describe how creating anticipation, highlighting the topic, making connections, and reading with enthusiasm will engage even the most reluctant, shy child.

CREATING ANTICIPATION

In order to engage children during a read aloud, the reader, the person conducting the read aloud, be it a teacher, parent, or caretaker, should create anticipation. When anticipation is created, the child listens more attentively to see if what they are thinking could happen in the story actually does occur. The cover of the book may be used to create anticipation. On many covers, the characters in the story are depicted. The teacher can generate a series of questions which will encourage the children to read the expressions and actions of the characters on the cover and will guide the children to make predictions regarding the nature of the characters. At this time, the teacher/reader should not be judgmental of any of the children's answers, accepting anything related to what is depicted on the cover. Questions such as: "Why do you think he is on the cover? What is he doing? What do you think this story might be about? Where do you think the story might take place?" would all be appropriate to ask and would generate greater engagement. Through these questions, or those similar to them, even young children can be guided to make predictions regarding the nature of the characters and the storyline. For example, when reading "The Napping House," by Audrey Wood, the reader might ask, "Who is on the cover? Are they happy or angry? What makes you say that? Why would they be smiling?" Before reading "Green Eggs and Ham," the teacher might ask questions such as, "What do you see on the front of the book? Why do you think he's looking at the eggs and ham? What makes you say that?"

Prediction is a comprehension strategy which will help children apply what they know, a valuable skill which can be taught orally through reading aloud to young children before they are fluent readers (DeBruin-Parecki & Squibb, 2011). Often, a scene from the story is displayed on the cover. In that case, the teacher might ask the children, “What do you think is happening here? What do you think will happen next?” guiding the children to wonder and ponder about what might be occurring in the story. Before reading “Horton Hatches the Egg,” by Dr. Seuss, some focused questions might be: “Where is the elephant? Do we usually see elephants sitting? What is he sitting on? Why do you think he is doing that?” Before reading “Click, Clack, Moo Cows that Type,” the reader might point to the cover and ask, “What are these animals doing? Is that what cows usually do? Why do you think they’re doing that? Who do you think they’re writing to?” If children can begin to think about the story even before the teacher begins reading it, they may remain sufficiently engaged in finding out if what they thought (predicted) actually happens. Later on in the reading the teacher can comment when something a child predicted might happen actually does occur in the story, perhaps saying, “Oh, this is exactly what Madeline said might happen in the story. Good thinking!” This will encourage children to make more predictions in the future.

Anticipation can also be generated by highlighting the topic of the read aloud book. Take advantage of holidays and cultural events to accumulate stories that are interesting and entertaining and have a common theme. At Thanksgiving time, after reading one or two non-fiction books about the meaning of the holiday, the teacher might read a Thanksgiving-themed story, such as “There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Turkey,” or “Bear Says Thanks,” or “Llama Llama Gives Thanks.” Before starting to read “There was an Old Lady who Swallowed a Turkey,” the teacher might begin with a narrative in which he or she highlights the theme, the topic of the story, saying, “Yesterday, in our story we read about some of the things that were eaten during the first Thanksgiving. Today we have a silly story about a lady who ate some of the things we talked about yesterday and a few things we never mentioned.” During the reading of the story, or once finished, the teacher could ask the children what characters or features of the story were similar and which were different from the ones in the stories read previously. For instance, the children might be asked, “Was there a turkey in the story we read yesterday? What about in today’s story? What else was in the story? Was there a football? What else was not in the other story? What types of things are at your house on Thanksgiving?” It is advisable to have the books that were read previously available, perhaps on a ledge close to the area where everyone is sitting during the read aloud, providing visual cues for the children.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Another way to engage children is to help them make connections with the characters and the plot or storyline in the books. Connections can be made between stories, between the story and personal experiences, and between the story and things happening in the world. These connections can be highlighted before the reading, during the reading, or when the reading of the story is finished. Questions such as, “Does this remind you of another story we may have read?” or “Has anything like this ever happened to you or to someone you know?” might lead to lively discussions and engage the students with the read aloud. For example, in order to make connections with other books, during the reading of “Somebody and the Three Blairs,” the teacher might say to the class, “This story reminds me of another story we read in which one person visited the house of three animals. What might that story be?” When reading “The Three

Little Javelinas,” she might ask, “Oh, they’re building houses. In what other story were three animals building houses? Do you think what happened to them will happen to the javelinas?”

To make connections with the children’s personal experiences, during the reading of “Too Many Tamales,” the teacher might ask the children, “Have you ever lost something your mother or father gave you to hold? What did you do when you couldn’t find it?” When reading “Julius, the Baby of the World,” by Kevin Henkes, one might ask, “Do any of you have a baby brother or sister? How did you feel when they arrived? Did you feel anything like Lilly did in this story?” Helping the children make connections between stories, between the characters or occurrences in the story and their own lives captures their interest and engages them in the read aloud process.

READING WITH ENTHUSIASM

Another way to engage children in a read aloud is by reading with enthusiasm. The first requirement for reading a story aloud with enthusiasm is to read a story which the reader himself has enjoyed. Recall the titles of books that were read aloud by parents and teachers. Search for the stories which were captivating, enthralling, and/or enchanting when they were read aloud. Find the stories which, when read aloud to sons and daughters, or nieces and nephews, are requested over and over again. If remembered fondly, then these characters in the story or the storylines (or both) were engaging. These stories captured the interest, the imagination, the sense of adventure of the listeners. If children ask that a story be read again and again, it’s because they have been engaged by some portion of it, and it is likely that other children will be engaged by it and enjoy it also.

Most people cannot simply open a book for the first time and read it aloud with enthusiasm and inflection and emphasis. Therefore, one must practice reading the book aloud before any attempt to read it to an audience of children. This allows the reader the opportunity to discover the rhythm of the word flow, will help him work through the pronunciation of interesting or unfamiliar words, and will highlight the prosody and cadence necessary to convey the actual meaning of the words in the narrative. Fluent readers realize the difference between these three sentences: “Yes.” “Yes?” and “Yes!” However, it requires practice to be able to convey these differences simply by reading them aloud.

In order to make the read aloud more interesting and engage an audience of young children, it is important to provide different voices for different characters in the story. The Papa Bear in “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” should speak in a deeper voice than does Baby Bear, and Goldilocks needs a completely different intonation or inflection than Mama Bear does. Using different voices injects drama into the read aloud experience and helps the children visualize the characters, helps them become part of the story itself. The grandmother in “Babushka’s Doll” has a Russian accent. Perhaps the teacher is unsure of what a Russian accent might be – then create one! The children will accept the teacher’s version of the accent as long as he is consistent in using it each time the story is read.

DIALOGIC READING

An excellent way to involve children in a read aloud is to engage in conversation with them throughout the reading. Known as dialogic reading, these conversations are a completely different scenario from the “I read, you listen quietly until I’m done” experiences that some

readers used to engage in. During dialogic reading, the teacher asks the children questions about the story, beginning with simple, factual questions regarding the characters and/or events, and then gradually introducing more complex questions where the children might have to make inferences or predictions about the characters and what they are doing.. During the reading of “Too Many Frogs,” one might ask, “What did Froggie ask the Rabbit for the first night? What did he ask him for this night? Did you notice Rabbit’s face when Froggy shows up with his friends? How do you think he’s feeling?” While reading “Tikki Tikki Tembo,” the teacher might ask, “What do you think will happen while they are playing near the well and then on the well? How would you get the big brother out of the well?”

Another aspect of dialogic reading is the completion of repetitive phrases within a story in which the teacher would read the phrases the first few times they appear, and then hesitate whenever they appear again, hoping that the children will chime in and complete the repetitive phrase. In “My Little Sister Ate One Hare,” the teacher would read the refrain “We thought she’d throw up then and there. . .but she didn’t” the first two or three times it appears in the book. Then, the next time this passage appears, the teacher would begin reading this repetitive phrase, but would hesitate before finishing reading it aloud, allowing the children to participate in the reading by “filling in the blank.” Therefore, the teacher would say “We thought she’d throw up then and there. . .” and then pause. Teachers will find that the children will jump in and finish the phrase with “but she didn’t” with enthusiasm. When reading “And to Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street,” the repetitive phrase is “And that is a story that no can beat, when I say that I saw it on Mulberry Street.” After establishing the phrase by reading it a few times, the teacher could pause after “when I say” and allow the children to finish the phrase. In this way, the children are actively participating, contributing to the reading, engaged in the read aloud experience.

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of reading aloud can be increased if we create situations in which children are engaged in and can participate in the read aloud experience. The teacher can engage the students before beginning the reading of the book by creating anticipation about the book by using the book cover, commenting on and asking questions about the characters shown or any scenarios that might be depicted there. Children can be engaged by asking them to make predictions about what will happen in the story and then verifying their predictions during the reading. Discussion regarding the theme of the book, connections to other books or to incidents in the children’s own lives will create interest and engagement. The reading of stories with enthusiasm, with inflection, proper cadence, and differing voices for different characters all draw children into the story. Carrying on a dialogue with the children regarding what is happening in the story makes them a part of the story, engaging them in the experience and enhancing the learning that can occur during the read aloud.

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