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Storybook reading: Improving vocabulary and comprehension for English-language learners

Teachers can use this strategy to systematically build the vocabulary and comprehension skills of primary-grade English-language learners through daily read-alouds.

In the last five years, considerable emphasis has been placed on improving instruction and educational outcomes for struggling readers. Several reports have synthesized extant research findings in the area of early literacy and provided guidelines for researchers and practitioners with regard to essential elements of effective programs for comprehensive literacy skill development (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Snow, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

However, very little discussion in these reports has addressed how to use teacher read-alouds as an effective practice for enhancing two of the critical components of reading instruction: vocabulary and comprehension. Furthermore, practices associated with improving reading outcomes for English-language learners (ELLs) have not been addressed within these reports.

English-language learners are one of the largest groups of students who struggle with literacy in general and vocabulary and comprehension in particular. Often, the language experience and skills of ELLs are heterogeneous. The prior knowledge, home literacy practices, language skill,

language flexibility, and language proficiency of each learner varies considerably (Au, 1993; Grabe, 1991) and influences learning and instruction. Thus, teachers are faced with the challenging demands of planning instruction geared toward this highly diverse group of language learners.

Vocabulary, comprehension, and ELLs

Researchers in the field of second-language acquisition have repeatedly stressed the need for instruction that addresses not only the social language needs of these students but also the academic, cognitive, and language development that is critical to success in schools, especially in light of current accountability standards and standardized assessments (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummins, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995). Of particular importance for the academic success of English-language learners are what Cummins described as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills, or CALPS. These include skills associated with comprehending and using academic language in its various forms, for a variety of purposes, while incorporating multiple and varied language structures. Central to academic language development are the related elements of vocabulary and comprehension.

A student's level of vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be an important predictor of reading ability (fluency) and reading comprehension

for English-language learners (Grabe, 1991; McLaughlin, 1987). Other specific areas of language and literacy competency critical to English-language learners' development of language and comprehension skills include, but are not limited to, the development of increased flexibility of English-language use; learning words (vocabulary) in context; determination of importance and unimportance of text events and details; opportunities to respond orally to texts in more skillful ways; and encouraging student conversations related to text (Anderson & Roit, 1998; Au, 1993). Arguing that these competencies are critical but often neglected in language and literacy instruction for ELLs, Anderson and Roit contended that the development of these competencies will lead not only to increased skill in areas of comprehension but also to more highly developed oral language proficiency.

Given these critical areas of need, teachers of English-language learners can provide students with ongoing and consistent support required for language development related to literacy and oral language growth, particularly in the area of vocabulary and comprehension. Practices highlighted in the literature for supporting development in these areas for ELLs include the following:

- Activating and drawing upon students' background knowledge in relation to story content to support comprehension and vocabulary retention (Schifini, 1994; Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999).
- Integrating the teaching of word meanings with the content area and context in which they will be used, rather than as a separate list of words and definitions (Au, 1993). Particularly important are relating vocabulary to the content area topic and showing connections between words through such activities as semantic mapping and word family associations (Au, 1993; Nagy, 1988).
- Addressing basic vocabulary that is difficult to visualize (abstract words and modifiers; Anderson & Roit, 1998) as well as vocabulary that is rich and evocative, thereby increasing student challenge and engagement with words (Gersten & Baker, 2000).
- Providing guided discussions with students and encouraging higher level, elaborated

responses with regard to vocabulary, structure, and use (Anderson & Roit, 1998; Au, 1993).

- Using culturally relevant texts as well as those that incorporate aspects of students' life experiences to draw upon prior knowledge to promote comprehension and retention of text concepts and new vocabulary (Barrera, 1992; De León & Medina, 1998; Trueba, 1988).

Teacher read-alouds are perhaps the most consistent activity used by classroom teachers that provides frequent, if not daily, opportunities to enhance the literacy of ELLs by integrating effective vocabulary development practices. Yet, despite the prevalence of this practice and its importance for enhancing vocabulary and comprehension (Coyne, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2004; McKeown & Beck, 2004), there are few specific guidelines for how teacher read-alouds might be used with ELLs, including those with reading difficulties. Typically lasting from 20 to 30 minutes a day, this time spent reading aloud to students, when structured to focus specifically on vocabulary and comprehension, can have a powerful impact on students' skill development in these areas (Coyne et al.). This impact only increases in magnitude when considered in light of the cumulative time students will spend over the course of the school year learning new vocabulary and engaging in discussions of text as they relate not only to the text itself but also to their own experiences.

The purpose of this article is to describe a teacher read-aloud practice designed specifically to address and promote vocabulary and comprehension skill development for first-grade English-language learners with reading difficulties. The books chosen for read-alouds, the materials used, and the language of discussion correspond to the language used in the students' core reading instruction: English for those ELLs learning to read in English as part of their core instruction, and Spanish for ELLs learning to read in Spanish.

Overview of storybook reading

The instructional objective of the daily story and passage read-aloud sessions conducted with students is to assist students in building and

extending vocabulary and content knowledge, as well as expanding their skills in listening comprehension and oral expression. Both narrative and informational trade books can be used for read-alouds, chosen at a reading level that is one to two grade levels above the students' grade placement. Stories and informational texts can be chosen on the basis of students' interests and, when grouped by three or four according to a specific theme, provide many opportunities to encounter and generalize vocabulary across texts. (See Table 1 for a sample list of English and Spanish books, themes, and sample words.) The thematic selection of texts provides students with many opportunities to use and extend new vocabulary and comprehension skills, as well as gain more depth of content knowledge, as each successive book in the theme is read. Each book is separated into passages of 200–250 words, breaking with the natural flow of the story. Teachers read the complete book over the course of three to five days, with a complete reading of the entire story and a review of particularly important or challenging vocabulary on the day after the last passage is read and discussed. The duration of each read-aloud session is approximately 30 minutes. Table 2 provides an example of how vocabulary and stories or texts can be presented, read, and reviewed over five days (for a text or story of about 900–1,000 words).

By dividing texts into smaller units, or passages, the teacher is able to focus on a smaller number of new vocabulary words and to adequately explore their meaning(s) in the context of how and where they were used in the story. Limiting the read-aloud to short, consecutive passages also exposes students to a complete story or informational text over three to five days, which requires that they maintain story and content comprehension and vocabulary knowledge in relation to that text over a longer period of time. Limiting the text also allows for adequate time and opportunities for vocabulary and comprehension skill development in relation to the text. A final, complete reading of the story and review of four to five specific, challenging vocabulary words from the text on the last day allow the students to hear the entire story and vocabulary words at one sitting and participate in activities that reinforce word meanings (for sample activities for the final day, see Table 2, Day 5).

Selection of vocabulary words

With so many words to choose from, how do teachers begin to establish parameters for word selection? Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) suggested focusing on words of high utility that can be used across contexts. Identified as Tier 2 words, these words go beyond familiar or basic (Tier 1) vocabulary that might not require explicit instruction in a school setting. Yet they are not so abstract and technical that their use is limited (Tier 3) and therefore requires explicit instruction within a specified body of content area knowledge (e.g., science, social studies). In contrast, Tier 2 words can be defined and associated with words already familiar to the students. (See Table 1 for sample words and definitions.)

Using terms with which the student is already acquainted to give meaning to new words enables students to associate the new vocabulary with their daily experiences, generalizing it across contexts. In this way, students gain greater sophistication and depth in their ability to describe familiar situations and use language in meaningful and important ways (Beck et al., 2002). Tier 2 words are often those that are highly descriptive and imaginative and of high utility, corresponding with Gersten and Baker's (2000) assertion that these are the types of words that are critical to the language development of ELLs. Furthermore, these are often the types of words students encounter in academic and higher level texts, including assessments; introduction to these words through read-alouds and context-specific discussions provides opportunities for students to interact with them so that comprehension is possible when students encounter these words in other academic settings with other texts.

In examining texts not only for culturally relevant and meaningful content but also for interesting and challenging Tier 2 vocabulary, teachers can ask themselves the following questions, the answers to which will determine if the text is appropriate for the purpose of developing vocabulary and comprehension skills: Will learning the words make students better able to describe their own familiar life experiences because the words or knowledge can be linked to other words or concepts? Or, in a similar way, will learning the words facilitate a deeper understanding of a specific context within a story that can also be linked to the students' own

TABLE 1
Sample texts, vocabulary words, and definitions in English and Spanish

Title of book (English)	Theme	Author	Sample vocabulary words and definitions
<i>Julius, the Baby of the World</i>	Family	Kevin Henkes	insulting (<i>adj</i>), mean or rude admire (<i>v</i>), to think something is special, good, or beautiful disgusting (<i>adj</i>), awful, horrible
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Family	Kevin Henkes	privacy (<i>n</i>), space to be alone or by oneself artistic (<i>adj</i>), like an artist, creative or colorful semicircle (<i>n</i>), half of a circle
<i>Chrysanthemum</i>	Family	Kevin Henkes	scarcely (<i>adv</i>), hardly, barely wilted (<i>v</i>), became sad and lifeless, without life informed (<i>v</i>), told
<i>Bugs Are Insects</i>	Creepy crawlies	Anne Rockwell	pierce (<i>v</i>), stab communities (<i>n</i>), groups that work together creeping (<i>v</i>), moving slowly and low to the ground
<i>Ant Cities</i>	Creepy crawlies	Arthur Dorros	devour (<i>v</i>), eat up quickly and completely hollowed-out [hollow] (<i>adj</i>), open on the inside pavement (<i>n</i>), sidewalk or roadway
<i>Spiders</i>	Creepy crawlies	Gail Gibbons	unusual (<i>adj</i>), very different, strange scurries (<i>v</i>), runs quickly snatches (<i>v</i>), grabs something quickly
Title of book (Spanish)	Theme	Author	Sample vocabulary words and definitions
<i>El sancocho del sábado</i>	Tradiciones de familia	Leyla Torres	trueque (<i>n</i>), un cambio de una cosa por otra entre dos personas convencer (<i>v</i>), persuadir, hacer creer a uno escuálidas (<i>adj</i>), chicas y malas
<i>El pollo de los domingos</i>	Tradiciones de familia	Patricia Polacco	intenso (<i>adj</i>), fuerte esparciendo (esparcir) (<i>v</i>), moviendo y poniendo por todas partes, derramando intentarlo (intentar) (<i>v</i>), tratar de hacerlo
<i>Un sillón para mi mamá</i>	Tradiciones de familia	Vera B. Williams	mullido (<i>adj</i>), muy suave y cómodo tapizado (<i>adj</i>), cubierto incendio (<i>n</i>), un fuego muy grande
<i>Delfines</i>	Mamíferos marinos	Rourke	recompensan (recompensar) (<i>v</i>), dar en cambio por hacer algo ágilmente (<i>adv</i>), muy fácilmente veloces (<i>adj</i>), rápidos
<i>Leones marinos</i>	Mamíferos marinos	Rourke	externas (<i>adj</i>), en la parte que se ve, en la parte de afuera sostienen (sostener) (<i>v</i>), levantan palmeadas (<i>adj</i>), que tienen dedos juntadas (unidas) con piel que les hacen más fácil nadar
<i>Nutrias de mar</i>	Mamíferos marinos	Rourke	criaturas (<i>n</i>), seres, animales promedio (<i>n</i>), tamaño flojamente (<i>adv</i>), muy relajada, fácilmente

TABLE 2
Format for story reading and vocabulary instruction, 1,000-word text

Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce story (~2 minutes). • Introduce three new vocabulary words from this day's 200-250-word passage (~3 minutes). • Read approximately 200-250 words of the story or text (~5 minutes). • Check for comprehension (two probes for explicit text information, one probe for students to make inferences or predictions) (~10 minutes). • Review new vocabulary words (~2 minutes). • Reread story or text passage, stopping at each vocabulary word to review, clarify, and check understanding of meaning (~10 minutes).
Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review content and vocabulary words from previous day's reading. • Introduce today's reading. • Introduce three new words from this day's 200-250-word passage. • Read approximately 200-250 words of the story or text. • Check for comprehension (two probes for explicit text information, one probe for students to make inferences or predictions). • Review new vocabulary words. • Reread story or text passage, stopping at each vocabulary word to review, clarify, and check understanding of meaning.
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue steps from Day 2, with a new 200-250-word passage from the text.
Day 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue steps from Day 3, with a new 200-250-word passage from the text. For a book of 900-1,000 words, depending on the flow of the text, this may be the last day of reading and discussing separate text sections.
Day 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose four to five vocabulary words from the previous days' lessons to review with the students (ones that may have been particularly challenging or difficult to remember). • Review the words. • Read the entire story to the students. • Have students respond to comprehension questions using the vocabulary words chosen for review. • Have students participate in an activity designed to reinforce the meaning of the vocabulary words chosen for review. Examples include, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using all the words to create a new story with student input (e.g., each student is given the word on a card and must provide a sentence with that word in the context of making a new story with the sentences). Using objects to demonstrate the words; for example, having the students demonstrate what <i>many</i> looks like with objects. Asking students to determine which vocabulary word out of a list fits best in a given sentence. Playing "charades" or acting out the meaning of the words. Asking students to orally match a word the teacher says with one of the vocabulary words (an oral version of semantic mapping); for example, the teacher says a word (e.g., <i>big</i>) and the students must say the matching, related vocabulary word (e.g., <i>gigantic</i>) from the group of words. Provide students with examples and nonexamples of word use (e.g., "Can a bear be <i>terrified</i>? Can a tree?").

knowledge or life experiences? For example, in the story *Julius, the Baby of the World* (Henkes, 1995), the adjective *clever* would be appropriate for many English-language learners because the general meaning of the word is familiar to many students, and in the context in which it is used in the story students will be able to relate the events in the story in which cleverness is described to events or moments in their own lives when they or others they knew did something that was “clever.”

After selecting three or four words that meet Tier 2 criteria in a story, the teacher focuses on developing short explanations of the meanings of the words, using familiar language that students can easily understand. To do this, teachers rely on their knowledge of their students’ individual levels of first- or second-language development and skill to ensure that meanings are accurate and at the same time will be comprehensible to the students they are teaching. Although dictionaries created for young children often provide simpler meanings for words, teachers will need to rely on their knowledge of their particular students’ language proficiency to discern appropriate meanings for the chosen words. In the case of words with multiple meanings, depending on students’ level of proficiency, teachers can focus initially on the meaning of the words as they appear within the context of the story and provide alternate meanings as students’ oral language proficiency increases.

Beck et al. (2002) also suggested creating meanings for words that focus on the essence of the whole definition of the word rather than on specific parts or words in the definition that may be misleading. In their book *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, Beck et al. contrast two definitions for the word *meticulous*. When the word is initially defined as “extremely careful about small details,” students can very easily focus on the word *careful*, often used in the sense of watching out for danger, and use *meticulous* in the wrong context. However, rephrasing the definition as “being careful and neat about small details” provides a more robust understanding of what the word really means. In another context, the teacher might explain that *amble* means to walk slowly and easily as opposed to walking slowly and leisurely, as the word *easily* is more apt to be understood by young children than is the word *leisurely*.

Elements of story read-alouds

The success of this story read-aloud practice for the increased comprehension and oral language development of English-language learners is dependent not only on the teacher’s selection of texts and vocabulary words but also on the implementation of the lesson design. The basic elements of this story read-aloud practice include the following steps:

1. Introducing (previewing) the story and three new vocabulary words.
2. Reading a passage from a narrative or informational text out loud, focusing on literal and inferential comprehension.
3. Rereading the passage, drawing attention to the three vocabulary words.
4. Extending comprehension, focusing on deep processing of vocabulary knowledge.
5. Summarizing what was read and any content knowledge that was learned.

The following is a brief description of each element referred to along with suggestions for how the activities can be implemented with ELLs receiving literacy instruction in English or Spanish. Ideas for how to select appropriate vocabulary words are also presented.

Preview story and vocabulary. In this initial step, the goal is twofold: (a) to preview the story or text and (b) to introduce new vocabulary within the context of the story to be read. To preview the book, teachers can show and read the front and back covers of the story, asking the students about their life experiences and knowledge in relation to the content of the book. This preview and activation of students’ prior knowledge and experiences is vital to English-language learners’ comprehension of the text and vocabulary (Barrera, 1992; De León & Medina, 1998; Trueba, 1988). Teachers can also have students predict what they think the story might be about and briefly discuss concepts related to the story topic.

After the text preview, teachers briefly introduce three or four new vocabulary words that students will hear and be listening for in the story: Each word is spoken by the teacher and repeated by the students, then a definition of each word is

provided. Definitions that use everyday language; relate to concepts, words, or phrases with which the students are already somewhat familiar; and emphasize critical attributes or connotations of the word are the most effective (Beck et al., 2002). Last, teachers display the word in written form on an index card and continue with the next word.

Read-aloud/guided comprehension discussion.

After previewing the text and orally introducing the new vocabulary words, the teacher sets the instructional goal by telling students to listen carefully while the story is being read, as questions will follow that will require each student to tell what the story was about. Students are also asked to listen for the vocabulary words in the story as it is read aloud, although comprehension of the read-aloud is the goal during this element of the activity.

Next, the teacher reads the passage aloud, without stopping, and emphasizes concepts by using appropriate prosody (e.g., intonation and enunciation). After reading, the teacher then guides students in a discussion about the content of the passage, encouraging students to use the three new vocabulary words in their retelling of the story. If the read-aloud session is conducted with a small group (three to five students), then each student may have an opportunity to share what he or she has learned from the passage read. The attention of all students in the group can be secured by asking all of them to make sure that other students are providing correct information. If the read-aloud takes place with a larger group, all students may not have an opportunity to share. However, they can all participate by listening to their peers' responses and by confirming the accuracy of their statements (thumbs-up signs are particularly helpful in managing the responses of agreement of the other students in a large or small group).

During the discussion of the story content, the teacher acts as the facilitator of students' oral expression; in retelling the story or content from the text, students are not only demonstrating their skill in comprehension, but they are also using oral language to express and elaborate upon their ideas and thoughts. This is a skill that is important to the language development of ELLs (Anderson & Roit, 1998; Au, 1993). The teacher guides students in determining both the explicit and the implicit, or literal and inferential, information presented in the

text, encouraging them to use the new vocabulary in their responses when appropriate. Initially, the instructional goal is for students to comprehend the main events or information presented in the text (one to three events or concepts), taken directly from the passage. Retelling of sequential events should be emphasized only if it is evident from the story that there is a clear beginning, middle, and end.

First, the teacher asks one student to recount explicitly what happened in the story, focusing on who, what, when, and where types of questions. Next, the teacher uses open-ended questions to prompt another student to extend or tell more about the first student's response or asks a second literal comprehension question directly related to what was explicitly read in the text. For example, the teacher might say to the second student, "Adriana told us that in the beginning of the story *Julius, the Baby of the World* (Henkes, 1995), Lilly's mother gave birth to a new baby boy. Jaime, what did we learn about the new baby?" or "What happened after Lilly's mother brought her baby brother home?"

Last, the teacher asks a third student an inferential question that focuses the students' attention on synthesizing information that is not directly present in the story. During this questioning, students are given opportunities to draw conclusions and inferences and make predictions based on the story details and on their own experiences. The teacher, in this step, guides students to explain their thinking, offering additional opportunities for students to use higher level language skills involved in elaborating upon their ideas and thoughts. For example, the teacher could ask, "How do you think Lilly feels about her new baby brother?" With this question, students are asked to make an inference or to draw a conclusion. After a student responds, the teacher can follow up by asking, "Why do you think she felt that way?" In doing so, the student is asked to explain or elaborate upon his or her thinking and justify his or her response to the group. In this step, teachers also have additional opportunities to gauge students' comprehension based on the nature of their responses.

Reread passage: Focus on vocabulary. During this step, the teacher has the opportunity to review, reteach, and extend vocabulary knowledge within the context of the story. The teacher briefly reviews

the words and meanings with the students. Then the teacher tells students that she or he will reread the story, and that each time they hear one of the vocabulary words they can show a “thumbs up” gesture. As the teacher reads the vocabulary words at their appropriate place in the story, she or he looks to see if the students have heard them and put their thumbs up. If not, the teacher can stop briefly and explain that one of the vocabulary words was just read and that she or he will reread the section again to see if they can show their thumbs up when they hear it. After students are able to indicate that they have heard the word read in the story, the teacher asks the students to repeat the word and to explain in their own words what the word means. The teacher confirms or modifies the meanings offered by the students and then rereads the word in the text.

Next, the teacher guides students in creating their own original sentences using the vocabulary word just encountered in the story. If needed, scaffolds can be used to generate ideas. One type of scaffold to facilitate sentence building is to provide a model sentence stem or pattern that students can complete with their own thoughts. For example, if the word the students are learning and heard in the passage is *extraordinary*, the teacher can provide a sentence using the model: “I think _____ is/are *extraordinary* because _____,” then ask students to insert their own ideas into the scaffold. The teacher then continues reading the story passage until the students have correctly identified the remaining two words, discussed their meaning, and created their own sentences using the words.

Extend comprehension. This step is critical in providing opportunities for English-language learners to engage in meaningful dialogue about a topic related to the story or text (Barrera, 1992; De León & Medina, 1998; Trueba, 1988). This step not only allows students to discuss the story in relation to their own experiences, thereby enhancing their comprehension of the story, but also allows further opportunities for students to generalize use of the new vocabulary words in relation to their own ideas and experiences. It is important in this step that the students are communicating their thoughts and ideas to one another, relating what was read to life and their own experiences. The

teacher’s role is to serve only as a facilitator of the conversation.

Summarize. The teacher summarizes what was learned by briefly reviewing the name and author of the story passage, the main events and ideas from the particular passage read for that day, and the new vocabulary words. The teacher can leave students with a challenge to listen for and use the new vocabulary words they have learned throughout the day.

When continuing with the story the following day, the teacher begins the lesson by activating students’ prior knowledge of the story, reviewing what was read and learned the day before, and then previewing this day’s text. For example, the teacher can show the students the first page of the story, activating their prior knowledge by emphasizing key words and asking them to summarize a few main events from the prior day’s reading. The teacher also reviews the vocabulary words from the previous day, asking students to briefly tell what each word means while the teacher scaffolds and modifies as appropriate. For the last step of the review process, the teacher asks students if they have encountered the words in conversations with others (e.g., with parents, teachers) and encourages them to keep listening for and using the words whenever possible.

The teacher continues by previewing what might happen in the text (e.g., “Today, we are going to learn what things Lilly’s new brother likes to do”). Students might be asked to predict what will happen or to share knowledge or life experiences related to the content of the next story passage. The teacher then introduces the three new vocabulary words by using the same procedure as the first day.

On the day following the last day of reading sections from the text, the format of the lesson changes slightly. On this day, the teacher rereads or retells the entire book with the students and conducts an activity designed to review four or five particularly challenging or difficult vocabulary words from the previous days’ lessons. The goal of the activities for this final day is for students to understand the meanings and use of vocabulary words that may need extended teaching for adequate comprehension. The teacher, after reading the entire text, reviews the challenging words with students and then asks them to participate in

activities such as acting out the meaning of the words through a game of charades, using props as appropriate, or creating a short story of their own, as a group, using all of the target words. Another type of scaffold particularly relevant to language development for English-language learners is to have students orally “match” a word or phrase the teacher says with one of the vocabulary words (e.g., the teacher says “*big*,” the students say, “*enormous*”). This is a form of semantic mapping (Au, 1993; Nagy, 1988).

The storybook reading practice is appropriate for both ELLs receiving literacy instruction initially in their primary language and for those receiving initial literacy instruction in a secondary language. Explicit vocabulary instruction for both types of students might include ways to integrate new words with those formerly taught, providing frequent encounters with a word over time, and creating opportunities to deeply process concepts taught (Decarrico, 2001). One way to assist students in making the transition from learning to read in their primary language to reading in a second language might be to focus on text that includes cognates. English-language learners in general may also benefit from brief discussions on idiomatic expressions that appear in storybooks (Schifini, 1994). Vocabulary introduced through the storybook practice may later lead to more specific instruction in word families or simple discussions on word associations by focusing on meanings associated with certain words (e.g., *pen* is associated with *paper*) so that students can see broader relationships between words.

When teaching English-language learners, one becomes aware that students might not always be familiar with knowledge or concepts necessary to understand new vocabulary words or comprehend topics within the storybook. This scenario is even more challenging when instructing students in a secondary language who lack certain concepts or knowledge in their primary language. This situation might be remedied through careful scaffolding, which may focus on using pictures in the storybook to facilitate discussion of vocabulary words or other concepts central to the story, or may include briefly demonstrating concepts with simple objects or providing nonexamples (e.g., “this is not used for cooking but for eating”).

Having observed teachers implementing the storybook practice, I am aware of some pitfalls to avoid. With the instructional goal of developing oral language proficiency via dialogues in which students retell events from a story and make simple inferences about what was read, there is a natural tendency for teachers to take the lead and do most of the talking. This may occur more often when reluctant students or those with the most limited oral language proficiency are called upon to lead the discussion. It is important that teachers preview the text prior to teaching and carefully note those words or concepts that might require more skilled explanations or scaffolding. One scaffold that may assist students in expressing their thoughts is to use a sentence stem to facilitate retelling (e.g., “Lilly shows that she dislikes her baby brother by...”). Another scaffold might be to use words depicting sequential order to prompt retelling (e.g., “How did Lilly feel *before* her baby brother was born? How did she feel *after* he was born?”) or to assist students in making an inference (e.g., “How might you feel before having a new baby brother?”). The goal is to scaffold quickly and efficiently so that the dialogue is robust and moves along at a lively pace, with students leading the conversation.

There is also the tendency to teach too much—to capitalize on every opportunity to introduce related concepts or vocabulary associated with the topic in the story. It might be more effective to teach a few concepts well than to overwhelm English-language learners with too much information. Separating the storybook text into shorter daily passages provides more opportunity to introduce related concepts and vocabulary as appropriate, with careful scaffolding.

Keys to effective vocabulary instruction

Students who are ELLs will require effective and ongoing instruction in vocabulary and comprehension to improve their oral language skills and to increase the likelihood that they will read with meaning and learn from text. Teachers have many opportunities throughout the day to provide structured instruction in vocabulary and comprehension

to these students. One of the most available and valuable times is during storybook reading.

Keys to effective vocabulary instruction are keeping the process simple and feasible yet making the instruction powerful by explicitly relating words to familiar concepts, integrating new words with context-specific concepts by building on prior knowledge, providing frequent encounters with the words, and providing opportunities for students to process the words deeply by using new vocabulary to describe experienced reality (Nagy, 1988). Furthermore, by relying on engaging text, the storybook read-aloud practice incorporates each of these important elements of effective vocabulary instruction, promoting both oral language development and listening comprehension.

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Brain scans shed light on dyslexia

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) can be used to discover what parts of the brain are active when various tasks are performed. Researchers from the Center for the Study of Learning, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., used MRIs to watch brain function in a group of people (age 6 to 22) while they read. The Georgetown researchers found that young readers, while using areas on both sides of the brain, differ from older readers in their use of an area in the right hemisphere associated with visual images. To help researchers distinguish between how the brain reacts to seeing something and to reading something, the children in this study were told to look for tall letters in real words and in “false font” nonsense symbols.

The nonsense symbols were unreadable, but the researchers found that the children, without instruction, read the real words automatically. By comparing MRIs, researchers could isolate the extra regions of the brain associated with reading. This research can now be compared with brain scans of dyslexic children to see where the differences lie.

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