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SHARED BOOK READING

An informal literacy activity par excellence

Monique Sénéchal

Parents read books to their young children for the enjoyment and quality time it provides. During storybook reading, however, young children can also learn. In this chapter, the research reviewed showed that young children’s oral language is enhanced: (1) when they participate in multiple readings of books rather than a single reading; (2) when they are actively involved rather than listening passively to the book rendition; (3) and that different types of active involvement affect differently how children learn to comprehend, to produce and to describe novel words. In contrast to these positive effects of book reading on young children’s oral language, a synthesis of nine studies showed that shared reading was not a source of early literacy learning (e.g. alphabet knowledge) for young children. Rather than improving early literacy per se, perhaps shared reading increases children’s motivation to read for pleasure. Hints of this were found in two longitudinal studies where parent reports of the frequency of shared reading or the amount of time spent reading during the preschool years predicted four years later the frequency with which their children reported reading for pleasure as well as children’s intrinsic motivation to read.

Shared book reading: an informal literacy activity par excellence

During shared reading, adult and child can enjoy the language, stories and illustrations in children’s books. When asked why they read books to their four- and five-year-old children, parents endorsed most strongly statements that they read for enjoyment and sharing quality time with their child (Audet et al., 2008). During shared reading, however, children can also learn. There are three characteristics of shared book reading that can foster learning about the world and about language (Sénéchal et al., 1996). First, the language used in children’s books is more complex than that typically used during conversation (Hayes and Ahrens, 1988). Also, the language used by mothers is more complex during shared reading than during free play or when remembering events (Crain-Thoreson et al., 2001). As such, children may be exposed to new lexical, grammatical and syntactic forms during shared reading episodes. Second, children, during shared reading, have the undivided attention of an adult who can define, explain and question to facilitate children’s understanding or impart
new knowledge. Third, books can be read repeatedly, thus providing multiple exposures to new knowledge. Because of these features, shared book reading is the single most studied aspect of children’s home literacy environment.

In this chapter, the research reviewed examined the benefits of shared reading in its various forms. Shared reading is a generic term that includes all forms of book reading to a young child, and as such it does not presuppose that the reader will interact with the child during the book rendition. In some studies, it is the frequency of shared reading events that is measured without consideration to the quality of the reading episodes. In other studies, it is the effect of adult–child interactions during the reading episodes that is examined. The chapter consists of three sections: first, a description of the benefits on oral language of shared reading in general, and dialogic reading in particular; second, a consideration of how specific aspects of shared reading enhance vocabulary acquisition; and third, an examination of whether shared reading promotes early literacy. In each section, only studies that included an alternative treatment and/or control conditions were reviewed because such research designs are necessary to evaluate the effects of shared reading.

**How shared reading can enhance child oral language**

Shared reading can be a dialogic environment that contains many opportunities for adults to scaffold learning. Observations of parents reading to 9-, 18- and 27-month-old children show the emergence of that dialogue (Sénéchal et al., 1995). Investigation of the natural reading behaviours of parents with their young children, however, finds that parents do not typically engage in interactive reading with their children (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Parents’ reading style include few dialogic reading behaviours, mainly involving yes/no questions or directives, and most often consists of reading the text directly without engaging the child in the story (Huebner and Meltzoff, 2005).

Recognizing that a more active role in storybook reading may be beneficial to children’s language development, Whitehurst et al. (1988) designed a method, called **dialogic reading**, meant to encourage adults to create dialogues during story time. During dialogic reading, the adult reader encourages children’s oral contributions using open-ended questions, repetition of good responses, expansion of incomplete responses to illustrate the difference between what was said and what could have been said, as well as the use of praise. In a series of studies, Whitehurst and colleagues clearly showed that three- to five-year-old children learned new vocabulary when adults used dialogic reading (e.g. Arnold et al., 1994; Lonigan and Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994). This seminal research led other researchers to assess the benefits of dialogic reading.

Recent meta-analytic reviews continue to show that dialogic reading has a positive effect on young children’s vocabulary (Marulis and Neuman, 2010; Mol et al., 2009; Mol et al., 2008; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; van Steensel et al., 2011). Considering only the 13 non-overlapping studies across these meta-analyses showed that dialogic reading has a moderate positive effect on children’s vocabulary ($ES = .42$ on standardized tests). These meta-analyses also included 39 studies on other forms of interactive reading, studies that included specific types of interactions such as asking questions or giving explanations of novel words. This set of studies also had a moderate positive effect on children’s vocabulary ($ES = .80$, experimenter designed tests). Taken together, the combined findings of five meta-analyses show clearly that dialogic reading and other forms of interactive reading can be beneficial to young children’s vocabulary. In the studies included in the meta-analyses, readers could be parents, educators or experimenters. In most of these studies, however,
children were typically developing. A detailed description of a study on reading to children with language delays is presented next.

Early differences in vocabulary knowledge have long-term effects: children with stronger vocabularies in kindergarten have stronger phonemic awareness one year later as well as better reading comprehension skills four years later (Sénéchal et al., 2006). Moreover, four-year-old children with larger vocabularies learn novel words more easily during shared reading than do children with smaller vocabularies (Sénéchal et al., 1995). Given these findings, it is important to intervene early in the lives of young children whose vocabulary development shows signs of delay.

Hargrave and Sénéchal (2000) conducted a dialogic-reading intervention study with four-year-old children (N = 36), who had poor expressive (spoken) vocabulary. The children were at risk for long-term deficits in language development because the children’s expressive vocabularies were, on average, 13 months behind on a standardized expressive vocabulary test and their parents had an education level below the national average. The children attended one of two day-care centres associated with high-school programmes for adults. Both day-care centres had circle times in which book reading occurred occasionally. As part of the intervention, the educators were asked to read every day during circle times. They were to read a set of books at least twice during a four-week period. Educators at one centre were asked to read in their customary or regular fashion and educators at the other centre were trained to read in a dialogic manner.

Observations of educators reading at the beginning of the intervention showed no difference across conditions – in fact, educators asked few questions, seldom expanded or praised the children, and did not model or repeat child utterances. During the intervention, however, educators trained in dialogic reading asked 13 times more wh-questions, repeated, modelled and expanded the children’s utterances, and gave more praise than did the untrained educators. At the end of four weeks, children who experienced dialogic reading made expressive vocabulary gains that were equivalent to those that would normally occur over four months. In contrast, the children who experienced regular reading did not make significant gains on the standardized expressive vocabulary test. Thus, increasing the active participation of children during reading may be a useful way to facilitate the vocabulary development of children at risk for delays.

Hargrave and Sénéchal were also interested in the vocabulary development occurring in the centre where educators read in their regular fashion. Hence, they included a test of expressive vocabulary that measured how many novel words children learned from the set of storybooks read to them. The use of this sensitive measure revealed that children at the regular-reading centre also made statistically significant expressive vocabulary gains, albeit more modest than did the children in the dialogic-reading centre. Thus, although the impact of reading varies considerably depending upon the level of interaction between the adult and the children, any reading is presumably better than none.

Hargrave and Sénéchal provided another important extension to the literature on reading interventions. In contrast to some other studies, dialogic reading was incorporated into the existing structure of the day-cares. One consequence of this procedure was that each educator at both centres was responsible for eight children during circle time whereas the ratio used by Whitehurst and colleagues typically did not exceed five children per educator. Therefore, Hargrave and Sénéchal’s findings indicate that dialogic reading is effective with the larger groups of children that are typical of many day-care centres. This result suggests that the effectiveness of active reading is not limited by factors that might lead busy educators to dispense with it. The research reviewed so far has been limited to vocabulary
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acquisition. The study presented next extends the research on dialogic reading to children’s narrative skills.

A young child’s language development includes the ability to tell stories. Constructing oral stories allows young children to verbalize real or imagined events in ways that not only communicate social messages to others but that help them derive meaning from experiences (Nelson, 2007). To be understood by naïve conversational partners, however, children’s stories should be structured chronologically, include causal links to the goals and motivations of characters, and provide sufficient background information (Peterson, 1994). This story-construction knowledge is assumed to develop through parent–child routines such as shared reading. The limited correlational evidence on the frequency of shared reading, however, has not supported the idea that children gain knowledge about narratives from the context of storybooks alone (e.g. Sénéchal et al., 2008). Rather than the frequency of shared reading, perhaps it is the case that shared reading enhances children’s narrative skills only when adults adopt a dialogic interaction style.

Although the dialogic reading literature focuses on improving vocabulary skills, the types of *wh*-questions used to create dialogues during shared reading could also be beneficial to children’s narrative skills. A search of the published literature yielded only two studies that assessed the impact of dialogic reading on narrative knowledge. Zevenbergen et al. (2003) determined that a dialogic reading intervention enhanced children’s inclusion of some important aspects of narratives within their stories, such as more detail about characters’ mental states and motivation, as well as the use of dialogue. Children in this study retold a story they had just heard. In contrast, Lever and Sénéchal (2011) showed that dialogic reading could enhance a wider range of narrative components in children’s telling and retelling of stories. In their study, five-year-old children listened, over eight weeks, to biweekly dialogic readings conducted in small groups. During the readings, the dialogic-reading questions focused on the story plot. In this study, the control-group children participated in an alternative activity. The findings supported the notion that some, but not all dimensions of narrative skills are sensitive to dialogic discourse during shared reading. After the intervention, children in the dialogic-reading group told stories that were better structured and more easily understood than did children who were in the alternative-treatment group. Also, the dialogic-reading children’s retelling of a story included more references to characters’ mental states and emotions than the retelling of the alternative-treatment children. Contrary to expectation, however, dialogic reading did not affect the complexity of the language children used in their stories or their inclusion of cohesive ties (e.g. words like *because*, *so*, *since*). Finally, and replicating well-established findings, expressive vocabulary gains were found for the dialogic-reading children as compared to the alternative-treatment children.

In sum, there is considerable evidence supporting the notion that dialogic reading can enhance children’s receptive and expressive vocabulary. There is more limited evidence that it can also improve specific aspects of children’s narrative abilities. The body of research reviewed provides sound evidence for parents and educators to read to young children in a dialogic manner. Because dialogic reading is so multi-faceted, one cannot ascertain whether all facets are necessary for improvements to occur. In the second section of this chapter, experimental studies that tested the effects of specific aspects of shared reading are reviewed.

How specific aspects of shared reading enhance child vocabulary

In a series of older studies, Sénéchal and colleagues examined factors that might influence how much new vocabulary children learn from shared reading. In this section, the Sénéchal
studies are revisited, followed by more recent research. As will be seen, researchers continue to examine how three- to five-year-old children might learn from shared reading.

In the experimental work on shared reading conducted in Sénéchal’s lab, the studies use a common method that consisted of reading to children unfamiliar books containing novel words. The novel words were unfamiliar to young children, but were synonyms of concepts that were presumably familiar. For example, young children may not know the words *infant, angling* and *elderly* but they are likely to be familiar with the words *baby, fishing* and *old*. The novel words were introduced in the text and illustrated in the book. Children’s knowledge of the novel words was tested before and after reading the books to assess learning. Two types of word knowledge were of interest, namely children’s comprehension of novel words or receptive vocabulary and their production of novel words or expressive vocabulary. Children’s comprehension was measured by testing whether the children could select an unfamiliar illustration of the novel words from an array of four pictures. In contrast, children’s production was measured by children’s capacity to recall novel words using the book pictures as retrieval cues.

Sénéchal and Cornell (1993) found that four- and five-year-old children could comprehend novel words after a single exposure to a book and tended to remember the novel words one week after the reading episodes. Children, on average, learned two novel words from a single storybook session. It is important to put this number in context: researchers have estimated that young children learn approximately five novel words a day (Read, 1980; Templin, 1957). The results of Sénéchal and Cornell showed that some novel word learning can come from listening to adults reading storybooks.

Sénéchal and Cornell, however, did not find differences in how much children learned when they were actively responding to questions during book reading versus passively listening. It is possible that a single reading of the book was not sufficient to allow the emergence of potential differences in vocabulary acquisition as a function of child active involvement. To address the issue of whether the number of reading episodes would interact with the activities occurring during reading, Sénéchal et al. (1995) examined whether the differences between active and passive reading would appear when the books were read twice. They found that after two readings, four-year-old children who actively participated during book reading both comprehended and produced more novel words than children who passively listened to the story. Active participation could take two forms: pointing to the illustrations or labelling the novel words. Although both forms of participation helped children to recognize novel words, answering labelling questions helped children to produce more novel words than did pointing. Furthermore, children who had larger vocabularies, as measured with a standardized receptive vocabulary test, learned more words than did children who had smaller vocabularies. This finding indicated that children who initially had greater knowledge or abilities benefited more from shared reading.

Sénéchal (1997) replicated and extended these findings by showing that three- and four-year-olds could comprehend and produce more novel words when they labelled the novel words during book reading than when they listened passively to the story. In this study, the books were read three times. The requirement for children to label the pictures had a powerful effect on children’s production of novel words. Children who listened to one reading of the book could not produce any novel words and children who listened passively to three readings of the book could produce one novel word. In contrast, children who were asked for labels of novel words during the three book readings were able to produce three novel words. Sénéchal argued that label requests are effective because they provide children with practice at retrieving the novel words.
Sénéchal’s work on shared reading has shown that features of shared reading as well as child factors affect vocabulary learning. Whether the effects of these features and factors have been replicated is examined next in a series of studies conducted with three- to five-year-old children. The first finding is that books need to be read more than once in order to produce differential effects of adult–child interactions. In recent research, repeating the reading of the same books is an integral part of studies on shared reading (e.g. Kucirkova et al., 2014; Loftus et al., 2010; Reese and Cox, 1999; Walsh and Blewitt, 2006; Walsh and Rose, 2013).

The second finding is that child active participation produces greater learning than simply listening to the book rendition. To date, most of the research on shared reading investigated some form of child active participation (e.g. Blewitt et al., 2009; Coyne et al., 2009). Moreover, the type of active participation seems to differentially affect learning. For example, Blewitt et al. (2009; Study 2) found that pairing where- and why-questions during shared reading was just as effective for receptive vocabulary growth than asking the questions separately. However, children learned more expressive knowledge about the words when the questions were paired.

The third finding is that the amount of learning varies as a function of children’s known vocabulary. Young children with larger vocabularies learned more words than do children with smaller vocabularies. This latter finding was also found in Robbins and Ehri (1994) and has been replicated in a number of shared reading studies (e.g. Blewitt et al., 2009; Coyne et al., 2004; Silverman et al., 2013).

Recent research on interactive shared reading has also advanced our understanding of other dimensions of child vocabulary learning. Recall that most often, children are introduced to novel (rare) synonyms for known concepts. Recent research has extended the research to learning novel concepts. For instance, Horst et al. (2011) showed that children who were read the same book three times gained more robust knowledge about novel words for novel concepts than children who were exposed to the same novel words in three different books. In addition, Ard and Beverly (2004) showed that actively involving children during shared reading is also beneficial to learning novel concepts.

The research reviewed so far focused on vocabulary breadth, that is, the number of words learned. There is a limited set of studies, however, that focused on children’s ability to define each novel word, that is the depth of their learning (e.g. Blewitt et al., 2009; Justice et al., 2005). Coyne et al. (2009) showed that during readings of the book: (1) providing additional information and interactions about the novel words facilitated learning more than incidental exposure in the book context alone; (2) providing additional questions and interactions after the book reading enhanced learning more than limiting the interactions to before and during the reading; and (3) after eight weeks, children’s performance on receptive vocabulary had not changed, whereas there was evidence of forgetting on the measure of children’s definitions.

In sum, certain factors influence young children’s learning during shared reading, these are: (1) multiple readings of books; (2) children’s active involvement; (3) different types of interactions affect differently how children learn to comprehend, to produce and to describe novel words; and (4) more opportunities to learn vocabulary might be required for children with more limited vocabularies. The studies described so far in this chapter focused on child oral language. In the next section, the issue of whether shared reading can enhance children’s literacy is examined.

**Does shared reading promote early literacy?**

During shared reading, parents and children could also discuss the printed text. Observations of parent–child interactions, however, revealed that parents seldom comment on print during
these interactions. For example, in a study by Hindman et al. (2008), the majority of remarks (85 per cent) made by American parents during shared reading with their four-year-olds were meaning-related (e.g. labelling, summarizing, discussing novel words), whereas only 15 per cent were code-related (e.g. teaching names or sounds of letters, decoding words). In addition, Hindman et al. (2013) showed that only 1 per cent of mothers pointed out letters or sounds during shared reading. Similar findings had been reported in other observational research (Audet et al., 2008; Deckner et al., 2006; Stadler and McEvoy, 2003).

Observational research has also shown that four- and five-year-olds tend to look at the illustrations, not the written words, during shared reading (Evans and Saint-Aubin, 2005), unless their attention is drawn to the print (Justice et al., 2008). Moreover, intervention research in which parents are asked to focus on letters during shared reading did not yield statistically significant improvements in letter knowledge in samples of young children (Justice and Ezell, 2000; Justice et al., 2011). A recent study conducted with at-risk children also did not show a statistically significant effect size (ES = .21) in print knowledge for children whose parents had been trained in shared reading versus children in the control group (Anthony et al., 2014). If shared reading is not used frequently to stimulate early literacy, if young children do not look at print readily, and if young children do not learn more when parents highlight letters during shared reading, then how do parents stimulate their child’s early literacy knowledge? A recent study by Martini and Sénéchal (2012) might help answer this question.

Martini and Sénéchal (2012) documented the activities and contexts that parents used to help their child learn about literacy. Examples of learning contexts include using familiar household items, street signs, games, the mail, newspapers, as well as children’s books. They found that parents generally reported using a wide variety of learning contexts: of the 18 presented, parents selected on average 14 different contexts that they used at least some of the time. Moreover, Martini and Sénéchal found that parents who reported teaching about literacy more frequently tended to use a greater number of learning contexts. Martini and Sénéchal concluded that parents focus on naturally occurring activities to impart knowledge about the alphabet, printing and reading words. The reported frequency of teaching along with the numerous contexts used might also suggest that these teaching moments are not very long in duration. Importantly, frequent teaching moments that are varied and short in duration might indicate parents’ sensitivity to the attention span and interest of their young child as well as the difficulty of the task at hand. Learning the alphabet, for example, requires learning to discriminate the different forms of letters, learning that letters are symbols that represent individual speech sounds and learning that letters have names and sounds that may or may not be the same (for an excellent description of the complexity of learning to write words, see Treiman and Kessler, 2014). Additional support for the view that parents stimulate literacy knowledge in a variety of contexts comes from analyses of everyday parent–child conversations demonstrating that parents sometimes talked to their children about letters, asking questions about letter shapes and letter–word associations (e.g. Robins et al., 2013).

In their synthesis of shared-reading intervention studies, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) found that shared reading enhanced children’s conceptual knowledge about print (ES = .51, 4 studies), but not alphabet knowledge (ES = -.06, 2 studies) or phoneme awareness (ES = .11, 2 studies). Second, the powerful role of parent tutoring was evident when focussing on early literacy. Sénéchal (2014) updated a synthesis of intervention studies on early literacy (Sénéchal and Young, 2008) and found that parent tutoring (ES = .94, 4 studies, 282 families) enhanced early literacy (e.g. alphabet knowledge, reading readiness, beginning reading or invented spelling) and reading skills. A smaller, but still statistically significant effect was found when parents were trained to tutor their children during specific
literacy activities as well as trained in shared reading ($ES = .33$, 6 studies, 551 families). In contrast, shared reading alone did not produce statistically significant effects on these early literacy outcomes ($ES = .09$, 9 studies, 509 families). Thus, the benefits of shared reading are limited to children’s oral language development, which will eventually be important for reading comprehension.

**Conclusion**

The findings on shared reading discussed in the first two sections of this chapter provide some valuable information for parents and educators. Adults can enhance children’s learning during storybook reading by actively encouraging them to participate. For example, encouraging children to label the pictures can enhance their ability to use these words at some other time. Children at risk for language delays are likely to greatly benefit from active reading, however, any reading is better than none. Furthermore, reading a book two or more times increases the likelihood that children learn novel words. These evidence-based practices are in accord with the view that young children’s vocabulary development can be enhanced by their participation in shared storybook reading.

In contrast to these positive effects of shared reading on oral language, the third section showed that shared reading was not a source of early literacy learning for children. Hence, it seems that parents of young children got it right in limiting the number of print-focused interactions during shared reading. This is food for thought for researchers and educators who might be tempted to transform shared reading into a source of early literacy learning. Numerous questions still need to be addressed about shared reading. For example, rather than improving early literacy per se, perhaps shared reading increases children’s motivation to read for pleasure. Hints of this were found in two longitudinal studies where parent reports of the frequency of shared reading or amount of time spent reading during the preschool years predicted four years later the frequency with which their children reported reading for pleasure (Sénéchal, 2006) as well as children’s intrinsic motivation to read (Gottfried et al., 2015).

**References**


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