Can you Read to Me?

Increasing Language and Literacy Skills During Shared Book Reading

by Tiffany P. Hogan

Language development begins in utero and continues to expand across the lifespan. Early childhood in particular is a time of extraordinary gains in language that set the stage for academic achievement. In a recent study, my colleagues and I found that language skills measured at as early as 15 months predicted reading comprehension in fifth grade (Petscher, Justice, & Hogan, 2017). One pillar of most, if not all, preschool curricula is shared book reading, in which children listen to a text read aloud. In this article, I describe work by a federally funded consortium that provides an evidence-base on how best to leverage shared book reading to stimulate early comprehension, which in turn builds a strong foundation for future academic achievement.

What Does the Research Say?

Reading comprehension is comprised of both word reading—turning printed text into spoken words either read aloud or kept in one’s head—and language comprehension—understanding these spoken words as connected language that create a cohesive story, or idea, in the case of expository text (Hogan, Adlof, & Alonzo, 2014). Early elementary school reading curricula focus primarily on teaching word reading. To prepare children for this curricular focus, preschool teachers are spending more time on pre-reading skills such as print awareness, letter recognition, and letter-sound correspondences, thereby leaving less time for activities that increase language skills foundational for comprehension. As a result, some children are becoming good word readers who cannot comprehend the texts they read (Catts, Hogan, & Adlof, 2005).

Noting this trend, the U.S. Department of Education funded the Reading for Understanding initiative in 2010. This was the largest federal research initiative ($120 million) since sending a man to the moon in the 1960s. RFU provided funding to six teams, or consortiums, of researchers to determine the developmental processes underpinning reading comprehension and to create and test evidence-based interventions to improve reading comprehension in children preschool through 12th grade (Douglas & Albro, 2014).

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My lab was one of four that comprised an RFU consortium that included preschool children. Our 14-investigator consortium, the Language and Reading Research Consortium, pulled from decades of research to create and test a new year-long comprehension-focused curriculum for preschool through third grades called *Let’s Know!* Lessons were developed and tested using a nine-phase curriculum research framework (Clements, 2007; LARRC, 2016). In phases one through five, a subset of our investigators and an advisory board of 40 educators completed an extensive survey of the literature, determined the focus, scope, and nature of instruction, and created and refined lesson prototypes with measurable teaching objectives. In phases six through nine, a series of four studies were conducted, utilizing over 100 teachers and students across grades, to test feasibility, fidelity, and efficacy of *Let’s Know!* In phase 10, we conducted a randomized control trial of the effectiveness of *Let’s Know!* to improve language and comprehension during one school year. More than 300 teachers and 1,500 students in preschool through third grade participated in the trial.

LARRC studies show that *Let’s Know!* significantly improves children’s language and comprehension in preschool through third grade (LARRC, Arthur, & Davis, 2016; LARRC, Jiang, & Davis, 2017; LARRC, Johanson, & Arthur, 2015; LARRC, Pratt, & Logan, 2015). *Let’s Know!* lessons and their evidence-base are free online (see example lesson plan on pages 16 and 17).

What Does this Mean for the Classroom?

The *Let’s Know!* curriculum is comprised of 84 30-minute, evidence-based classroom lessons that employ shared book reading with both narrative and expository texts (LARRC, 2016). I highlight three key elements of shared book reading in *Let’s Know!* lessons:

1. **Storybook reading should explicitly target both foundational and higher-level language skills** (Hogan, Bridges, Cain, & Justice, 2011).

Language comprehension involves a complex interplay among multiple foundational and higher-level language skills (Hogan et al., 2011). We coined some language skills as foundational because they develop early and continue to evolve through everyday experiences. These skills include vocabulary knowledge and grammatical understanding and use. Higher-level language skills require explicit instruction for most children. These skills include knowledge of story grammar, comprehension monitoring, and inferencing. *Vocabulary* is most effectively increased by using child-friendly definitions with repeated exposure to new words in varied contexts and in relation to known words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). *Grammar* can be improved through repetition and recasting of a child’s initial phrasing. Recasting is when an adult repeats a child’s utterance but corrects erroneous grammar. For example, a child may say, “him goes,” and the adult would recast the utterance by saying, “yes, he goes.” The teacher’s recast may be repeated multiple times in varied contexts (Fey, Long, & Finestack, 2003). *Story grammar* refers to the consistent structure of a narrative, including reference to a setting, the inclusion of a main character, a problem the character has to solve, an attempt to solve that problem, and a resolution. Some stories use this structure in multiple, slightly different iterations, also called episodes. Preschool children can learn to recognize these elements in stories, thereby improving their comprehension (Dimino, Taylor, & Gersten, 1995). *Comprehension monitoring* is the reader’s ability to notice when comprehension breakdowns occur. Ideally, when a breakdown occurs, “fix-up” strategies will be used to repair comprehension. An example strategy would be to ask a teacher or friend for clarification. Finally, *inferencing* involves using background information to fill in the gaps in a story. A first step to improving inferencing in preschool children is noting that gaps frequently occur in stories.

2. **Storybook reading should be interactive** (Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009).

For storybook reading to effectively stimulate language and literacy skills, there must be a reciprocal interaction, a back-and-forth, between the teacher and the students (Whitehurst et al., 1994). This exchange is the crux of the term *shared* in
shared storybook reading. Shared book reading is not a time to ask children to “sit quietly and listen.” One effective way to facilitate language goals is interactive think alouds, in which a teacher stops reading to think out loud about an aspect of the book. For example, the teacher may stop reading to note, “Oh, I now know that this book’s setting is the beach. I know that a setting is the place where a story happens. Now that I know the story happens at a beach, I can think of all of the times I’ve been to the beach, or read stories about the beach. I’m now thinking about all the things I know about the beach, like there is sand that I like to dig and the ocean water is cold on my feet. What do you know about the beach?” Teachers can also use sabotage to simulate comprehension breakdowns and then ask the students how to work through those breakdowns.

3. Storybook reading should include pre- and post-reading activities (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Shared storybook reading goes beyond reading a specific book. It involves pre- and post-reading activities that augment the shared book reading experience. Pre-reading activities activate relevant background knowledge and prepare children for the language skill to be taught. One pre-reading activity is a book walk. During a book walk, the teacher turns the pages of the book and asks children to guess aspects of the story based on the pictures. For example, the teacher may generate a semantic map of animals in a book to determine how they are similar and different. The map would include connections linking similar animals, as well as separate maps for groups of animals that share features. Post-reading activities give children more opportunities to continue to learn or to practice a new skill. For example, the teacher may refine the semantic map generated in a pre-reading activity. Another example is to find other books that include a similar setting. The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) is a well-established technique to structure pre- and post-reading activities. This model uses an “I Do, We Do, You Do” approach. For an “I Do” activity, the teacher models a technique or skill. In the “We Do” activity, children work together to practice the modeled technique or skill. Ultimately, in a “You Do” activity, children practice this technique or skill independently. “I Do” tasks map on well to pre-reading activities, “We Do” onto reading, and “You Do” onto post-reading.

Notably, we found that shared book reading was most effective when we chose books that best matched the language skills we were targeting. As such, when focusing on story grammar, we chose a book that included clear elements of story grammar, such as a straightforward setting, preferably only one; the main character mentioned by name, preferably often; a well-defined problem; etc. We also selected storybooks that represent the diversity of cultures in the United States and we created ¡Vamos a Aprender!, a Spanish-language preschool version of Let’s Know!

Conclusions

Though shared book reading is a staple of early childhood education, what happens before, during, and after shared book reading determines its effectiveness at stimulating language and comprehension skills in preschool children. Implementing evidence-based techniques in everyday shared book reading can significantly strengthen the language foundation upon which preschool children build future academic achievement.

Free Let’s Know! Curriculum Download

https://larrc.ehe.osu.edu/curriculum/

- Includes: lessons, supplemental materials, teaching techniques, and book lists
- 5 grades (Preschool through 3rd grade)
- 4 units: Fiction, Folktales, Animals, and Earth Materials
- 25 weeks: 7 weeks per units 1-3, 4 weeks in unit 4
- 3-4, 30-minute lessons per week for 84 lessons

¡Vamos a Aprender! closely aligns with the preschool version of Let’s Know! and features Spanish and English lessons and materials

References


**Resources**


Find books to target specific language and literacy goals: [https://booksharetime.com/](https://booksharetime.com/)
Example Let’s Know! lesson. See page 14 for details on how to download free Let’s Know! lessons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Let’s Know! Pre-K</th>
<th>Fiction Cycles and Sequences</th>
<th>Read to Me Lesson 2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Show Me What you Know! You’ll be stars of Cycles and Sequences—we’re going to video record our class acting out a story in sequence.</td>
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**Teaching Objectives:**
- Identify when something in the text does not make sense
- Participate in collaborative conversations about the book

**Lesson Materials You Provide:**
- Sticky Notes

**Unit Materials Provided:**
- Comprehension Monitoring Icons
- Fix-Up Strategies Poster

**Teaching Techniques:**
- Comprehension Monitoring
- Rich Discussion

**Lesson Text:**
- *Harry the Dirty Dog* by Gene Zion

**Talk Structure for We Do / You Do:**
- Selected by teacher

**Special Instructions for this Lesson**

**Before the lesson:**
- Cut out and attach the Comprehension Monitoring Icons to craft sticks so students can use them in this lesson and throughout the Let’s Know! units.
- An important purpose of the Read to Me lessons is an opportunity to read the entire book. However, preview the book and prepare the text you will read to keep the lesson at the appropriate length while including all of the story elements.
- Insert sticky notes with prepared questions and comments on the corresponding pages.

**In the I Do portion of the lesson:**
- Introduce the Comprehension Monitoring technique and the Comprehension Monitoring Icons, or Makes Sense/Doesn’t Make Sense signs. Introduce a stumbling block and explain how important it is to “fix it up.” Thumbs up or down or other signals can be taught to indicate when the text makes sense or does not make sense in lieu of the Comprehension Monitoring Icons.

**During the We Do routing:**
- Read the text and occasionally insert a stumbling block. Then do a think aloud, applying a fix-up strategy.

**The goal of the Rich Discussion technique is:**
- To have multiple students participate and take multiple conversational turns. Suggested questions to begin a rich discussion are provided. If a particular question is sparking a good discussion, there is no need to ask all of the questions listed. To help begin the discussion, you may want to model your answer to the question and then ask students to agree, disagree, or add new ideas. Try to facilitate a discussion dominated by student talk.

**Lesson Routine**

**Set**
Engage students’ interest; activate their background knowledge on the skill or concept you will teach by providing an example. State the purpose of the lesson and why it is important for listening or reading comprehension.

You could say: “When you’re watching TV at home, does a grown up ever hit the pause button and rewind the show? They might say they didn’t understand what someone said or what happened. It’s important to do that same kind of thing when you’re reading a book. Today, while I’m reading, I’m going to stop so we can talk about what’s happening in the book. I’m also going to ask if what I’m reading makes sense. Good readers and listeners often stop and talk about what’s happening so they can understand the story and remember what happens in each part of the story. I’m really excited to read our first book for this unit, where we will be studying stories and learning to retell them in the correct sequence or order.”
**Lesson Routine Continued**

| I Do | Teach main concept or skill using clear explanations and/or steps. Model two examples for the skill or concept students will practice in You Do. Show a completed sample if appropriate.  
You could say: “Today we get to read our first book in this unit, *Harry the Dirty Dog*! Before we begin I want to teach you something important to do while you are listening to a story. Sometimes when you are listening to a book, there might be words or ideas in the story you don’t understand. When you listen to a story it’s important to stop and ask yourself, ‘Hmm.... Does this make sense? Do I understand what is happening?’ If the answer is yes, you keep listening because you understand what you’re hearing; it makes sense. *(hold up Makes Sense side of the Comprehension Monitoring Icon.)* If the answer is no, then something doesn’t make sense. *(hold up Doesn’t Make Sense Icon.)* Some ideas or some words in the story are confusing. You need to stop when you don’t understand and fix what doesn’t make sense.”  
Demonstrate holding up the Makes Sense/Doesn’t Make Sense sign while students listen to part of the text and think about whether they comprehend it. You could say: *(10th page; begins “He slid down a coal chute...”)* “Let’s see... I’m going to stop where it says, ‘Harry slid down a coal chute and got the dirtiest of all.’ I don’t know what a coal chute is. *(Hold up icon.)* In the picture I see a pile of something black that looks like it came from the truck. The story says Harry got the dirtiest of all. The black rocks are probably the coal; they are black and would make you very dirty. Harry is going down something that looks like a slide. It looks like the black coal slid off the truck on that slide. From the illustration, I think the slide is the chute, and it’s for the black coal. It makes sense that a coal chute is a slide for coal and that Harry got dirty sliding down it.” *(Flip icon.)*  
*(18th page; says “He danced and he sang.”)* “I’m going to stop here where it says, ‘He danced and sang.’ Does that make sense? *(Display the Fix-Up Strategies Poster.)* When we read, we’ll practice stopping and checking if something doesn’t make sense. It’s important that the story and words make sense.” |
| We Do | Provide guided practice, feedback, and support, ensuring active participation of all students. Check for understanding, ensuring that students are ready for independent practice before moving to You Do.  
To demonstrate comprehension monitoring, you could say: *(10th page; begins “He slid down a coal chute...”)* “Let’s see... I’m going to stop where it says, ‘Harry slid down a coal chute and got the dirtiest of all.’ I don’t know what a coal chute is. *(Hold up icon.)* In the picture I see a pile of something black that looks like it came from the truck. The story says Harry got the dirtiest of all. The black rocks are probably the coal; they are black and would make you very dirty. Harry is going down something that looks like a slide. It looks like the black coal slid off the truck on that slide. From the illustration, I think the slide is the chute, and it’s for the black coal. It makes sense that a coal chute is a slide for coal and that Harry got dirty sliding down it.” *(Flip icon.)*  
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| You Do | Provide at least two opportunities for each student to complete independent practice of the skill or application of the concept. Provide individualized feedback. At the end of You Do bring students back together and focus their attention on you before beginning the Close.  
Rich discussion should be teacher-led but student-dominated conversation. Prompt students to take multiple turns and use higher-level language. You could say: “I really enjoyed that story. Harry made it back home, and finally his family realized it was their dog, Harry. I wonder... *(ask one of the following questions):”*  
■ “What might have happened if the dirt didn’t wash off of Harry?”  
■ “What would your family do if you couldn’t find your dog or cat?”  
■ “At the end of the story Harry was sleeping peacefully. What do you think Harry might do next?” |
| Close | Help students briefly review the key skills or concepts they learned, suggest how they could apply them in other activities or contexts, and bring the lesson to an orderly close.  
You could say: “You did a great job listening to our first book, *Harry the Dirty Dog*, and answering questions. Today we learned it’s important to stop when you are reading and make sure that what you read makes sense. If something doesn’t make sense, what should you do? Show me the sign we use when something does make sense. Next time someone reads to you maybe you can teach them how to stop when something doesn’t make sense and talk about the book while you are reading together.” |
The impact of effective early literacy practices on the future school success of children is well established. In 2010 the massive Reading for Understanding project focused on a key element in the process of learning to read that was underrepresented both in terms of research and in curricular goals: language comprehension. Researchers, including Tiffany Hogan, undertook an intensive, multi-tiered, longitudinal research program that explored ways that children learn to comprehend and make meaning from listening experiences. The investigators then created and tested an innovative curriculum, Let’s Know!, an accessible, free resource of effective instructional practices aimed at increasing language comprehension in young children that focused on an everyday occurrence in thousands of early learning programs—sharing a storybook together.

Three key findings became the basis of an evidence-based curriculum. With her summary, examples, and links to the Let’s Know! curriculum, Hogan provides clear and useful ways to apply this research directly to the classroom. By taking cues from the research project itself, however, we can find additional insights into how to enhance our own professional growth and improve learning outcomes for young children. Three ideas include: (1) examining current knowledge and practices; (2) reviewing and using curricula; (3) fostering collaborative learning.

Examining Current Knowledge and Practices

Shared-book reading is a part of virtually every preschool teacher’s daily routines, whether the books are part of program-wide book choices with pre-planned accompanying activities or chosen by individual teachers to coincide with children’s interests, community events, or classroom learning themes. Hogan’s research took a deeper look at this commonplace experience as an opportunity for inserting effective teaching strategies. Early learning professionals can benefit from this research’s design by looking at their current strategies and accepted routines with fresh eyes. Are children gaining needed skills, for example, from the current way that they experience shared-book reading? What are teachers’ own understandings of important pre-reading skills, and how can they nurture them while still preserving the pleasurable overall experience of sharing stories? Questions like these can be used to closely look at what happens daily in early childhood settings to clarify an activity’s purpose.

Determining educators’ knowledge about language comprehension (or any concept targeted by the program) is a logical starting place before adjusting strategies or adopting a new approach no matter how well-researched it may be. Kindle (2011) studied shared reading experiences by comparing four teachers within the same program as they read identical storybooks. Study results showed that preschoolers’ opportunities for interaction and teachers’ expectations varied widely. Some children were encouraged to “think beyond the page” (p. 20) while other children were expected to listen quietly or answer simple content questions. Despite numerous training programs targeting literacy principles, early learning professionals can sometimes lack understanding of the concepts that comprise effective early literacy instruction, or may disproportionally emphasize one aspect (such as letter recognition) over another (Folsom, Smith, Burk, & Oakley, 2017; Vesay & Gischler, 2013). Differences in understandings or training may result in a lack of equity in children’s learning experiences. Prior to making any change in approach or curriculum, even one as fully developed as Let’s Know!, it is critical to find out what is currently happening in the everyday routines and lived experiences of the teachers and children. Professional development opportunities must mesh with staff needs, while being based on current, reliable, and valid research.
Reviewing and Using Curricula

The *Let’s Know!* curriculum grew out of a meticulous research design framework, involved multiple sites, and had clearly stated and focused learning objectives that resulted in significant improvement in child outcomes. As professionals, we should demand this same sort of rigor in any curricular choice (whether literacy-based or not) that we make for our programs. Every early childhood program has a **plan for learning**, a widely accepted definition of the term *curriculum*. Some programs’ plans for learning (curriculum) follow an overall philosophy that includes developing and creating learning experiences using an emergent approach. In others, curricular decisions are made as a part of policies and administration for multi-site, multi-year programs and goals. Still other programs choose curricula independently, pulling their daily plans from a variety of sources. In every setting, however, administrators and teachers should thoughtfully examine their plans for learning to reflect best practices that maximize learning experiences for young children. Programs need a vital and clear process to evaluate current curricular choices as they consider changes or adjustments, whether it is the excellent *Let’s Know!* curriculum or another one under consideration.

Fostering Collaborative Learning

Collaboration and interaction were apparent throughout this research project. Fourteen investigators, a 40-member advisory panel, hundreds of teachers and over 1,500 students from pre-K through third grade played a part in this study and in shaping the recommendations and outcomes. Effective shared-book reading that stimulated curiosity and wonder and increased understanding was collaborative and interactive—a co-creation among the children, the teacher, and the written words they shared. The recommended strategies facilitated an atmosphere where children felt empowered to exchange ideas, ask questions, or request clarification. As a result, children grew in their abilities to make inferences and fill in gaps in stories. These collaborative activities foster interpretations and insights that might not occur in individual book experiences (Hoffman, 2011).

Throughout the study, the core construct of language comprehension was examined within a context where children and teachers learned together (Curtis & Carter, 2008) in contrast to a didactic model where teachers dispense information and children receive it. Learning concepts in key developmental domains can effectively translate from theory to research to
practice in environments that echo the very one that Hogan describes. Such a setting welcomes give and take, input and discussion, and trial and error. The Let’s Know! program was an authentic product of co-created meaning among researchers, teachers, and advisors and, of course, the children listening to real stories in real classrooms. Using this project as a model, programs can re-frame many program decisions as a “shared-book reading” sort of experience, in which all those involved in the educational goals of the program (including children) have a voice about what happens during learning experiences. Even though research affirms that early learning professionals have gaps in their understandings of the key elements of early literacy (Vesay & Gischler, 2013), there are experts among each staff who have specialized knowledge and training.

Looking Ahead with Confidence

In early reading, the stakes are high. An effective early childhood literacy program has the potential to impact children’s comfort with the written word and their abilities to make meaning from print throughout their educational careers and on into their adult lives. Regardless of how well-researched, no teaching practice or curriculum, no engaging activity or philosophy, can be effective until it is fully embraced by the people who live it on a day-to-day basis in real classrooms with real children. Early childhood educators regularly make decisions about how to create rich learning environments for young children. In the content area of literacy alone, the array of programs, strategies, activities, and approaches can be overwhelming. It is not just a good idea for early educators to stay abreast of the latest research. Professionals have the responsibility to ensure that what happens on a day-to-day basis with young children is not only developmentally appropriate, but research-based and current (NAEYC, 2011). A plan for learning should make a meaningful difference in the educational lives of the children for whom it is written. It is not always necessary to look far afield or make major changes to the everyday practices we engage in with young children. Sometimes, we can start with something that is right in front of us: a treasured story book, a group of young children, and an informed early educator who is eager to make the most of that important learning experience.

References


Resources

Reading and Comprehension

Reading Rockets www.readingrockets.org

This excellent free resource has information on teaching reading, including numerous resources on comprehension. It also has professional development opportunities and information for parents.
Resources focus on infants and toddlers. Check out the Early Literacy Tab, which contains a section that is packed with videos and articles that are suitable for teachers and parents.


Although this report is now 10 years old, this comprehensive report has a wealth of information about professional development effectiveness, and reviews studies in reading comprehension. The Executive Summary is also available.

International Literacy Association (Formerly International Reading Association). Search the site for Early Childhood Resources and Reports. [https://literacyworldwide.org/](https://literacyworldwide.org/)

Zero to Three [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

Curriculum Review or Evaluation


Curious about a particular curriculum and the research that supports it? This Government site has a wealth of information about early childhood curricula and their effectiveness. Literacy is just one of the areas that is featured.


This article contains the Checklist for Preschool Curriculum Decision-Makers—a tool for examining the quality of a curriculum and whether it is a good fit for your program.


This book focuses on how to co-create an emergent, responsive curriculum with young children and is applicable to many early childhood settings.