RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

"Let's Read this Book Again": Using Repeated Reading to Support Literal and Inferential Language Skills in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms

Alina Mihai

Indiana University Kokomo

Gretchen Butera

Indiana University Bloomington

In their development as readers, children begin to acquire critical precursory skills long before they enter school. Young children's language development is particularly enhanced by their opportunities to actively engage in meaningful language interactions with those around them. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that early childhood classrooms provide all children with quality, accessible experiences that promote language development. This paper provides early childhood practitioners with a repeated book reading model which teachers can use to promote essential language skills. In particular, the repeated book reading model presented includes strategies to develop children's inferential language skills which may be critical to support reading comprehension. An opening and closing vignette is provided to illustrate the use of this framework in an inclusive early childhood classroom.

Keywords: literal and inferential language, vocabulary development, repeated book reading, Head Start

"Can we go outside now?" asked Jonathan in a wistful voice as Vivian finished reading the story for the day. "I've lost them again", she thought, with disappointment. Vivian proceeded to get the children ready to go out on the playground, as they always did after story time. However, she was distracted and was thinking that once again, the reading didn't go quite as she had planned. In the four years she had been teaching preschoolers, Vivian had learned to use a variety of strategies to engage children as they read books together. On a regular basis, she tried to talk to the children about the story she had just read, having them recall what had happened and explain what they saw in the pictures. She also made a habit of using completion prompts by asking children to provide a missing word or complete a sentence, especially when they read rhyming books, or books that repeated a few sentences throughout.

Oftentimes, Vivian pointed out letters and commented about words that were long, short, or looked somewhat alike when she was reading. She traced words with her finger on the book, especially on book titles, to help children understand the direction of reading and to point out specific words. Vivian knew she should also engage children in dialogue by asking open-ended questions starting with "wh-" prompts (e.g., "What…?", "Why…?"). She tried to do so regularly, but, most often, such questions remained unanswered. At times, children gave answers that made Vivian doubt they understood the story. Some children, including Claire, who was identified as having a significant language delay, never offered to answer questions and remained silent when Vivian asked a question.

Today, right before Jonathan broke the silence to ask if they could go outside, the class had just finished reading "A Sick Day for Amos McGee" (Stead, 2010) and Vivian asked the children, "Why do you think the animals went to the zookeeper's house when he didn't come to work in the morning?" Laurie, one of the usually more attentive children in her class, tried to explain, "Because…" and then she started playing with the Velcro on her shoe. "Because they wanted to get on the bus", said Conner who always loved to have the answer. Vivian thought about the story reading again. "Were the questions too hard for most of the children?" she wondered. Were the books too challenging? What could she do to get the children to really engage with the concepts and ideas in the book? "A Sick Day for Amos McGee" was one of her favorite books and a wonderful opportunity to discuss friendship and caring for others. Yet, her class had not gotten anywhere close to having a thoughtful conversation about the story and the problems it addressed.

Decades ago, Anderson (1985) wrote about how we could help children become lifelong readers. "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23), he asserted. Reading aloud to children finds support for a number of reasons. Aside from being a pleasant experience for both children and adults, book reading introduces children to more advanced language structures than they typically hear in classrooms. It engages them in extended conversations, helps them acquire new vocabulary, builds conceptual knowledge, and develops print awareness (Lennox, 2013; Reese, 2013). Numerous studies have investigated the impact of book reading on children's language and literacy skills with results indicating that book reading has a positive effect on children's oral language development and print knowledge (e.g., Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Surprisingly, research on book reading also suggests that the frequency of reading does not appear to significantly predict children's language and literacy skills (Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek, 2012). It may be that simply reading books to children is insufficient to foster early literacy development (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; McKeown & Beck, 2003). Rather, children's language development is supported when they actively participate in quality shared reading activities (Mol et al., 2008). To help children become good readers then, teachers need to model the often invisible behaviors of a proficient reader as they read-aloud to children (Cochran-Smith, 1984). For example, teachers may demonstrate how they make meaning out of what they are reading by stopping to reflect, comment, or make predictions about what might happen next (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). By modeling this meaning-making process out-loud and eliciting children's participation, teachers provide children with the opportunity to hear and begin to use inferential language that promotes comprehension skills.

This research-to-practice summary presents the framework that the teachers in our study (Mihai & Butera, 2019) used to engage the children in book reading activities. Further, the types of early literacy skills that children are developing in preschool are described, with a focus on understanding the differences between literal and inferential language, and the importance of providing learning experiences that support the development of both.

EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Children begin to acquire critical precursory skills long before they enter school (Duncan et al., 2007; Wasik & Newman, 2009). Broadly, these skills can be described as either code-based or meaning-focused. Code skills include alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and concepts about print. These skills generally develop within a limited period of time (e.g., children generally learn the alphabet between 4 and 7 years) and they address a finite set of skills (e.g., 26 letters in the English alphabet; Paris, 2005; Paris, 2011). In contrast, children have unlimited opportunities to learn meaning-focused skills and will continue to develop them throughout their lives (Paris, 2005; Paris, 2011).

In contrast to code-based skills, meaning-focused skills include the development of oral language, vocabulary, background knowledge, and inferential language (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Lennox, 2013). Meaning-focused skills are important to the development of reading comprehension. It also may be that meaning-focused skills are critical in the development of children's motivation to read. Meaning-focused skills become increasingly important as children move from learning to read toward reading to learn (Lennox, 2013). Nonetheless, both code and meaning-focused skills typically demonstrate substantial growth during children's preschool years and both aspects of language development should be targeted in classroom instruction and intervention.

A Definition of Literal and Inferential Language

Meaning-focused skills refer to both literal and inferential language development, but it may be important to understand the differences. Literal language is used to discuss things that can be readily perceived. For example, a teacher might show an illustration in a picture book and ask the children about it. Pointing to an elephant in the picture, the teacher might ask, "What animal is this?" Inferential language, on the other hand, extends beyond information that is directly provided and requires children to use their reasoning skills and background knowledge (van Kleeck, Woude, & Hammett, 2006). When reading a book and helping children use inferential language, a teacher might ask the children to make predictions, infer feelings, thoughts, and motivations of a character in the book, or make connections between what is happening in the story and the children's own lives. The teacher might point to the picture of the same elephant and ask? "Where might we see an elephant?" or pointing to the elephant's trunk she might ask "What do you think an elephant uses his trunk for?"

Looking back at Vivian in the vignette, it is apparent that the children in her classroom had difficulties engaging with the meaning-focused skills needed to respond to her question about the characters' decision. Vivian's question, "Why do you think the animals went to the zookeeper's house when he didn't come to work in the morning?", asked children to make inferences about the characters' thoughts and feelings, which requires children to think about the story in a decontextualized way. These skills require a higher cognitive demand than literal language skills.

Using inferential language to extend discussion about a book will require children to advance from using language to label, describe, or respond to what can be readily perceived in the book to using language to consider what they hear and reason about what they perceive in the story (Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978; Zucker, Justice, Piasta, & Kaderavek, 2010).

A Framework for Supporting Literal and Inferential Language

Although many preschool children are able to make inferences about what is read (van Kleeck, 2008), research suggests that these skills are not consistently supported in many preschool classrooms. Although most preschool teachers read books to children, they do not consistently engage children in extended talk during book reading activities (Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, & Morrison, 2008). It is estimated that approximately 70% of preschool teachers' language should be targeted at the literal level and about 30% at the inferential level (Blank et al., 1978). When teachers engage children with literal language about a story, children have opportunities to experience success by focusing on skills they have already mastered. On the other hand, providing input at higher levels challenges children's emerging inferential skills and supports learning (van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997).

Researchers focusing on the levels of abstraction in preschoolers' discourse describe a framework that illustrates how children can be supported in developing both literal and inferential language skills (see Table 1 in Mihai & Butera, 2019; Blank et al., 1978; Price, Bradley, & Smith, 2012; Tompkins, Zucker, Justice, & Binici; van Kleeck et al., 1997; Zucker et al., 2010). The first two levels in this framework focus on literal language, while levels three and four target inferential language. The type of language tasks listed under levels 1 and 2 might seem familiar to many early childhood teachers and easier for children to engage in (e.g., labeling objects or characters, locating objects or characters on the page, counting objects or pictures, describing objects or characters, completing sentences). Some of the tasks recorded under levels 3 and 4, however, are more difficult to address (e.g., making inferences, providing a point of view, generalizing about events, predicting, or problem solving). In some cases, teachers might try to target these more complex skills, as Vivian did in the vignette, without receiving an appropriate response from children. In such cases, rather than concluding that children are not able to engage in complex thinking about elements of the book, it is important to consider how children's learning can be scaffolded. Repeated book reading is a promising approach for supporting both literal and inferential language within early childhood classrooms (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Trivette, Simkus, Dunst, & Hamby, 2012).

Repeated Book Reading

The positive effects of repeated book reading on children's early literacy development have been acknowledged for several decades (e.g., Morrow, 1988). While steady progress has been made toward documenting the benefits of this approach to book reading (Trivette et al., 2012), more effort is needed to introduce repeated book reading in preschool classrooms.

McGee and Schickedanz's (2007) repeated interactive read-aloud framework provides a way to use repeated book reading with young children. This repeated book reading framework actively engages children in asking and answering questions and allows teachers to systematically model and help children develop more complex language skills (see Table 2 in Mihai &Butera, 2019). This type of scaffolding in which teachers systematically and deliberately target more

complex language skills elicits child engagement and inferential language use (McGee& Schickedanz, 2007).

The repeated book reading approach places emphasis on the instruction that takes places before, during, and after a book is being read, particularly teachers' inferential talk during this time and children's responses to it. These conversations are known to motivate children and promote comprehension (Wasik & Neuman, 2009). As such, before reading, children benefit from making predictions, responding to questions that build on their background knowledge, and learn key vocabulary that may be instrumental to understanding the book. During book readings, comprehension is extended through teachers' comments, modeling of analytic thinking, and asking questions that require children to make further inferences. After reading, additional open-ended questions engage children in extended abstract talk.

As they plan opportunities for children to actively engage in book reading activities, teachers need to be aware of how instruction can be designed to allow all children to participate. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are an important resource for planning instruction in that UDL supports provide access for all children (Conn-Powers, Cross, Traub, & Hutter-Pishgahi, 2006; Horn & Banerjee, 2009). UDL can be embedded within each repeated book reading with multiple means of representation and engagement emphasized as teachers introduce books or explain vocabulary in the first reading, and multiple means of expression increasingly evident as children take a more active role in the interactions in the second and third readings (see Appendix A). In this manner, learning opportunities are created to address different learning styles and levels of ability, ensuring that children are engaged, motivated, and provided with a variety of formats for demonstrating their learning. Further, to enable children to make meaningful connections over time, activities should allow for the lessons in language and literacy learned in book reading to be integrated across the day and over the school year into an overarching curricular thematic framework designed to solidify learning.

Along with much needed rest, fall break always brought opportunities for teacher professional development at the Primrose Early Learning Center. Vivian had been delighted to see that other teachers also wanted to learn how to use storybook reading to support children's learning. She was excited about the new ideas she had gathered at a session focused on using repeated book reading to support language development. She also really liked the presentation on Universal Design for Learning she had attended and was excited to try out new ideas related to its use. As she planned for the first few weeks after break, she picked a few books and made plans for reading these with the children while they also learned about fall and forest animals. One of her favorite books was "Fletcher and the Falling Leaves" (Rawlinson, 2006), which told the story of a tiny fox named Fletcher and his favorite tree. Fletcher was worried when the tree's leaves started turning brown and began to fall – he thought his tree was sick. Fletcher tried to help the tree, but all the leaves fell off despite his efforts. He was happy when he realized that the tree did not die and that something magical had happened.

Knowing about her children's love for nature and the outdoors, Vivian knew they would love reading about Fletcher and his adventures. She also thought she had some good ideas about how to keep them engaged! Vivian planned to read the books three times (see plan in Table 1) and designed several activities to extend the theme into the learning centers. They were going to take nature walks, collect

and sort leaves, paint with leaves, examine leaves in the Science center, and use leaves to warm up their nests while pretending to be forest animals. Vivian also planned to focus on helping the children to learn several new words each week and picked "worried", "autumn", "bark", "den", "magical", and "icicle" to start.

After using this repeated book reading approach for several weeks, Vivian was pleased to note the children's renewed enthusiasm for story time. Her purposeful modeling of inferential thinking, the systematic teaching of vocabulary, and the opportunities provided for children to actively engage in the reading had transformed story time in their classroom. In just a few weeks, the children switched from "Not this book again!" to "Let's Read this Book Again!", to Vivian's delight. The repeated book reading approach extended the opportunities for the high-quality language interactions that Vivian was hoping to foster in her classroom and provided all children with opportunities to meaningfully participate. Even Claire would often respond chorally or repeat a peer's response, and seemed to have fun acting out words, pointing to pictures, or answering simple questions.

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Appendix A

Example of a Repeated Book Reading Targeting Literal and Inferential Language

First Reading	Second Reading	Third Reading
Before Reading		
Introduce *main ideas*: Show the front cover of the book and ask the children if they know what kind of animal it shows. *[Literal Language]* Tell them that they will hear the story of a tiny fox named Fletcher and his favorite tree. Fletcher is worried when the tree's leaves turn brown and begin to fall – he thinks his tree is sick. Fletcher tries to help the tree, but all the leaves fall off by the end. He is happy when he realizes that the tree did not die, but that something magical had happened. Ask the children if they know why the leaves might have been falling in the story. *[Inferential Language]* Show *front cover* of book: *"What color do the leaves turn in the fall season?"* Look at the cover to see the different colors of leaves or show leaves you have in the classroom. *[Literal Language]* Give *clues to key vocabulary.* Explain that autumn is another word for fall. *[Inferential Language]*	Review the *main ideas/ vocabulary*: Remind children that they have read this book before and ask them if they remember what happened to Fletcher and his favorite tree in this story. *[Literal Language]*	Review the *main ideas/ vocabulary*: Remind the children that they have read this book two times before and ask them to recall the title of the story. Ask them in what season this story takes place and how they can tell. *[Literal and Inferential Language]*
While Reading		
Provide *vocabulary support*: As you open the book, show Fletcher's picture on the first page. Explain that he is feeling worried and sad by using facial expressions. Emphasize other	Provide *vocabulary support*: In this reading, when vocabulary is read, provide an explanation. For example, Fletcher was "worried" because he thought something	Integrate a retelling of the story: Retell the story events and focus on the problem of the story by reading some of the text and having the children retell part of the

key vocabulary words as you read. *[Inferential Language]*

Support/ extend comprehension: As you read, make comments in 3-4 essential points in the story to model thinking and promote children's understanding. Concentrate on Fletcher's feelings. For example, after reading the first page where Fletcher was beginning to get worried comment "I think Fletcher is going to try to do something about the tree now" and then ask "Why do you think he went to talk to his mom?" As you read, make additional comments and then ask questions "Why did Fletcher put the leaf back on the tree?", "How did he feel when he saw the bare tree?", "Why did he put the leaf in a little bed?" *[Inferential Language]*

bad was going to happen to the tree. "Bark" is what trees are covered with. *[Inferential Language]* When you go outside to play, have the children touch the trunk of a tree and remind them of the new word.

Support/ extend comprehension: As you read, stop to make comments that model extended thinking and then ask questions to help children make inferences. In this reading, focus on the other characters in the book. For example, "The squirrel thought it was wonderful that the leaves were falling off the tree. Why do you think she wasn't listening to Fletcher who told her not to take them away?", "Why was she not worried that the tree was losing its leaves?" Also, "Here, the friendly birds picked up the leaves and put them back on the branches. Why do you think they put the leaves back on the tree?" *[Inferential Language]*

text. Carefully ask a few focused questions that elicit children's responses. For example, "We all remember what happened to Fletcher and his favorite tree in this story. Who would like to share with us?" Showing selected illustrations ask the children "What's happening here?" and follow-up to ask what will happen next. *[Literal Language]*

Have the children not only recall, but also explain events in the story and the character's thoughts and feelings. Prompt with questions as needed. For example, have the children explain why Fletcher was worried, why the squirrel and porcupine were not worried, why the birds helped put the leave back on the tree, why Fletcher tried to save the last leaf, and how he felt at the end of the story. *[Inferential Language]*

Continue to emphasize vocabulary: Encourage children to use the key vocabulary words when reconstructing the story. For example, does anyone remember what it means to be worried? What are trees covered with? Work to connect word meanings to contexts that are familiar to children and encourage children to use new vocabulary words in their responses. "Sometimes we

		are worried when we think something bad might happen (give an example: when the kids go outside in the cold weather without warm clothes, you are worried they might get sick). When have you felt worried?" *[Inferential Language]*

After-Reading		
Ask "why" questions to promote continued thinking: "Why was Fletcher trying to help the tree?" "Why was he no longer worried at the end?" *[Inferential Language]*	Ask questions that promote continued thinking: "What would have happened with the squirrel if the tree hadn't lost its leaves?", "What will happen to the tree after the winter passes?" *[Inferential Language]*	Ask questions that promote continued thinking: "Why did Fletcher feel happy at the end of the story?"; "Why did he go right back to his den to have a warm breakfast after he saw the tree covered with icicles?" *[Inferential Language]*

Universal Design for Learning

Multiple means of representation
- ✓ Emphasize main ideas to highlight critical events in the story
- ✓ Activate background knowledge related to season changes
- ✓ Use pictures, verbal explanation, facial expressions, gestures, and point out new words.

Multiple means of action and expression
- ✓ Allow children to respond verbally, by pointing, or acting out
- ✓ Allow children to respond by following the teacher's or a peer's model
- ✓ Allow children to respond chorally and individually
- ✓ Ask questions with different levels of complexity

Multiple means of engagement
- ✓ Make connections to what children are learning in the classroom and at home about animals and the fall season
- ✓ Follow the children's lead and make connections between their experiences and concepts in the story
- ✓ Engage the children in using facial expressions and gestures
- ✓ Make connections between the children's contributions.

Note: Adapted from McGee and Schickedanz (2007)