CHAPTER 1

# In the Beginning

## *Oral Language and Learning to Read Words*



Learning to read is a developmental process that draws upon all that children have learned about language. It may seem obvious that reading comprehension relies on understanding speech, which relies on understanding the meanings of words (vocabulary) and acceptable sentence forms (syntax), and that comprehension of language begins to emerge in the first few years of life. More recently, we have begun to understand how oral language also contributes to children's ability to read words as well as to comprehend them.

As children learn to read, they concentrate laboriously on deciphering the words that form the text of sentences. Teachers assume that when text is simple children can use their oral-language abilities to work out the meaning of those sentences. That is not an improper assumption because, even in adults, listening comprehension accounts for most of the variation in reading comprehension (Palmer, MacLeod, Hunt, & Davidson, 1985). Because oral language, reading words, and reading comprehension are intimately intertwined, I begin this book with a discussion of how language contributes to reading development and how reading development contributes to the increasingly complex forms of children's oral language. The chapter ends with research-based recommendations for how teachers can improve the oral-language abilities of their students.

Oral language has its origins in mimicry and play. Children babble within a few months of life, and their babbling soon approximates the speech sounds of the languages they hear. The infant tries "ba-ba-ba," and the parent eagerly mimics back "ba-ba" to reinforce the baby's attempt at communication and to shape the

syllables toward the real word, *bottle*. The more the adults and children who surround the infant imitate and engage the infant in these early attempts to communicate, the earlier the child is likely to use discernible words. As young children learn to understand and say approximate pronunciations of words, they begin to name objects in the world around them. From objects, children link names to actions and desires, and the charming babble of the infant becomes communication. Between 2 and 4 years of age, most children show dramatic growth in language, particularly in understanding the meanings of words, their interrelationships, and grammatical forms (Scarborough, 2001).

Thus, the foundations for reading and writing begin years before children enter kindergarten (Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and children who enter kindergarten with higher levels of language and early literacy tend to become better readers (e.g., Duncan et al., 2007; Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007). Language experts estimate that, on average, children acquire roughly 2,500 words on their own as speaking vocabulary prior to entering kindergarten (Owens, 1999), which is a very good thing because most children in kindergarten love to communicate. In the sections that follow, I lay out the ways in which speaking and listening contribute to reading development.



## THE CONTRIBUTION OF ORAL LANGUAGE TO READING AND COMPREHENDING WORDS

The transition from speaking and listening to reading and writing is not a smooth one for many children. Although a well-developed vocabulary can make that transition easier, many children also have difficulty learning the production and meanings of words. To aid in understanding how difficult acquiring language can be, Catts and Kamhi (1999) define five parameters of language that work both independently and collaboratively as children learn the meanings of words. These parameters include phonology (speech sounds of language), semantics (meanings of words and phrases), morphology (meaningful parts of words and word tenses), syntax (rules for combining and ordering words in phrases), and pragmatics (appropriate use of language in context). The first three (phonology, semantics, and morphology) combine to enable development of listening and speaking vocabulary, but they also contribute independently to children's ability to read individual words. All five of these language features contribute to children's ability to understand sentences, whether the sentence is heard or read.

If children understand what they hear and can translate printed words into speech, they can use their listening comprehension to enable reading comprehension. For good readers in fourth grade and beyond, levels of reading comprehension and listening comprehension are roughly equivalent, and each kind of comprehension facilitates the other (Nippold, 1998). Much of this comprehension is based on understanding the meanings of words and phrases, and children's level of vocabulary knowledge is a good predictor of their reading comprehension (Duncan et al., 2007; Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001). Because of the

robustness of this relationship, Gough and his colleagues (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990) have proposed the "simple view of reading," in which reading consists of two components: reading words and listening comprehension (of words, phrases, and sentences). In this view, children's oral language, combined with their ability to read words, generates the basis for reading comprehension.

In addition to facilitating comprehension, some aspects of oral language also contribute directly to reading words. Children with larger speaking vocabularies in preschool may have an easier time with phoneme awareness and the alphabetic principle because they can draw on more words to explore the similarities among the sounds they hear in spoken words and the letters that form the words (Metsala & Walley, 1998). More recently, researchers have also suggested that children with larger vocabularies find it easier to read words that have unusual spellings (Ehri, 2005). For example, to read a word like *bread*, children may sound out /br/-/ee/ -/d/ (decoding a word), decide that *breed* does not make sense in the sentence (oral-language comprehension), and replace *breed* with a word they know that does make sense (i.e., *bread*) and also shares some of the word's print characteristics such as the *br* at the beginning and the *d* at the end. Without a mental store of words to match the printed and spoken word against (specifically, oral language), children will have difficulty reading words with unusual spellings.

Oral language influences reading ability in different ways at different stages of reading development and may play a greater role as comprehension assumes a greater share of the reading process (Carver, 2003; Swanson & O'Connor, 2009). As mentioned earlier, young children with larger speaking and listening vocabularies find it easier to acquire awareness of the speech sounds in words, and this phoneme awareness directly influences acquisition of word-decoding ability, which in turn increases access to print (Ehri, Satlow, & Gaskins, 2009; Perfetti, 2003). During the primary grades, children who read develop more knowledge of the world alongside larger, more connected vocabularies, both of which improve reading comprehension (Stanovich, 2000). The empirical support for the link between vocabulary and reading comprehension has been well established (McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985). In fact, reading comprehension depends on high-quality understanding of the meanings of words as well as the ability to read them (Perfetti & Hart, 2002).

Although children can learn to read words in kindergarten and first grade even with impoverished speaking vocabularies (O'Connor, Notari-Syverson, & Vadasy, 1996, 1998), understanding print requires extensive experience with oral language. Evidence suggests that size of vocabulary in preschool influences reading development by enabling children to consider the meanings of word parts (Metsala & Walley, 1998; Reed, 2008). For example, if a child knows the meanings of *ball* and *basket*, then *basketball* is learned as an independent word and also as a meaningful combination of its two smaller parts.

Decoding, however, relies less on understanding spoken words and more on the instruction that children receive in phoneme blending and segmenting, in the sounds of alphabet letters, and in how to combine that knowledge into a process for translating printed words into spoken words. This distinction is important because

reading words and acquiring word meanings (vocabulary) appear to be complementary activities that work in a reciprocal fashion. Teaching students to read words can assist in the development of oral language and vocabulary, as well as the other way around (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004). When children are able to release words from printed text, reading becomes easier, they read more, and reading more exposes them to more new words, new phrasing, decontextualized language, figures of speech, and syntax outside the range of their everyday speaking and listening vocabularies (Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999). So, a large vocabulary helps children to read words, and reading more words helps to build vocabulary, which in turns makes reading words easier, and so forth (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

## STORYBOOKS AND ORAL LANGUAGE

Given the relationship between oral language and comprehending written words, it only makes sense to do all we can as teachers and parents to help children begin their schooling with a strong speaking and listening vocabulary. Unfortunately, not all children have equal opportunity to learn the meanings and usages of words. Home environment contributes to opportunity to learn (Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994), and differences between the vocabulary size of children from high- and low-income households have been documented in many studies (National Research Council, 2002; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). On average, children who are raised in higher-income households own more books and have more opportunity for prolonged conversation with adults that includes a rich store of unfamiliar words (Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, & Kurland, 1995). The vocabularies of children are strongly related to those of their parents (Hart & Risley, 1995). Nevertheless, access to books and conversation need not be limited by the socioeconomic level of a family, and even small improvements in home literacy environment can have especially strong effects for children who are raised in low-income households (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2001). Children benefit from extensive opportunities for listening to and using complex spoken language (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Where a home language is not the predominant language of the school, parents can be particularly useful in improving depth of vocabulary (Roberts, 2008).

The active ingredient of language stimulation (such as imitating or extending what a child says) relates to teachers' and parents' use of high-quality language interactions (Turnbull Pence, Beckman, Justice, & Bowles, 2009). One of the best-documented methods for improving the vocabularies of children prior to school entry is through interactive storybook reading between children and their caregivers. Two theories on how reading with children improves oral language have been supported through research. In one theory, the child's vocabulary improves as a result of the conversations between the child and the caregiver who reads the story (Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, & Morrison, 2008; Weizman & Snow, 2001). These conversations are developed through dialogic storybook reading (Whitehurst et al.,

1988), in which the caregiver encourages the child to use the language possibilities of storybooks by following his or her interests. Children point out features of illustrations and ask the reader questions about them, which may or may not be part of the central story of the text. Children label these features and attach descriptive words to them. The book serves as a stimulus for conversation outside the immediate context, introducing words that are less familiar, and children have opportunities to incorporate these words into book-centered conversations.

When books are read repeatedly, these descriptions can be revisited and elaborated. The child becomes familiar with the story's vocabulary and begins to anticipate the storyline. Bus and colleagues (Bus, Belsky, van IJzendoorn, & Crnik, 1997; Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995) suggest that the story that is told interactively between the child and the reader may vary considerably from the printed story, depending on the child's interests and the reader's responsiveness to those interests. Pursuing the child's interests provides a motivational dimension to the conversation that can make new vocabulary more memorable to the child.

In an alternative but complementary theory, van Kleek (2004) suggests that sharing books provides the kind of invariant routine that many young children need in order to acquire language outside of day-to-day interactions. When storybooks are read over and over, caregivers offer children the experience of using language that is at a higher or more formal level than speech, either in repeating responses of particular characters, in role plays, or in storytelling, in which children use the pictures of the book as clues to deliver a pretend reading that is quite close to the author's rendering of the story.

Although most children have conversational language prior to school entry, the language of books is at an elevated level from day-to-day speech. This type of language—removed from the here and now, but common to storybooks—is decontextualized language. Children who are exposed to experiences that are not occurring in their immediate environment are more likely to understand and use decontextualized language (Hindman et al., 2008). Teachers note that following several readings of a story, children who cannot yet read independently often take the book into a corner of the room and "read" it to themselves and their peers, adopting the book's language as their own (Adger, Hoyle, & Dickinson, 2004). Mages (2008) and Morrow and Schickedanz (2006) reviewed the research on creative play to determine whether these pretend experiences common in preschool and kindergarten, in which children reconstruct a story and act it out, are linked to improvements in oral language. Although many of the studies reviewed were small, positive effects were found most frequently.

Children develop language through repeated routines. For children with developmental delays, routines help them acquire language and use it more intelligibly (van Kleek, 2004). Silverman (2007) compared methods of improving the oral language of kindergarten students through storybook read-alouds and found that teachers who engaged their students in conversations that used new words in contexts outside the storybook generated greater vocabulary gains. In a follow-up study Silverman and Hines (2009) considered whether multimedia (e.g., brief

science videos) could be helpful in improving oral language for students in prekindergarten through grade 2. In participating classes one-third of the students were English learners (ELs). Students who were native English speakers gained as much vocabulary in treatments with or without additional video; however ELs gained more when science vocabulary was enhanced with video alongside discussion.

Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007) also explored ways to use storybook reading and discussion. Typically developing children frequently learn new vocabulary through exposure and incidental teaching of word meanings; children at risk for long-term vocabulary problems are likely to need more intensive and extended instruction to learn the same core of words as children who are typically developing. To test this possibility, Coyne et al. compared the effects of extended instruction with incidental exposure to target words during storybook reading. For the incidental exposure condition, teachers read storybooks that included the target words but did not directly teach or discuss the words. The extended instruction condition included the same storybooks read aloud, but the students were encouraged to pronounce each of the words and to listen for, and raise their hands when they heard, the word in the story. Teachers provided a simple definition and reread the sentence with the target word. After the story was finished, children participated in a variety of related activities. These activities provided students with opportunities to discuss the words, to use the word in a number of different ways, and to make judgments on appropriate uses of the words. Children who received extended instruction were able to provide better definitions of words, and these gains were maintained on a delayed posttest weeks later, when compared to children who just received exposure. Follow-up experiments in kindergarten and first grade (Loftus et al., 2010; Maynard, Pullen, & Coyne, 2010) generated similar findings, where students improved their vocabulary and story comprehension when they received extended opportunities to discuss stories, use the language of books, and relate new and unusual words to familiar situations. Reading and discussing stories with children in small groups was consistently more effective than similar approaches in large classes due to more opportunities for students to use the words in conversation.

Bewitch, Rump, Shealy, and Cook (2009) used shared book reading with conversation to improve vocabulary of 3-year-old children in preschool. Across four sessions, the researchers read three storybooks multiple times. With each reading, which occurred one on one, the researcher made four comments and asked six questions of the child. In one condition, when children had difficulty answering questions about the words, the researchers used easier questions to facilitate children's responses and gradually used more complex questions as students demonstrated understanding of the word and used it in speech. Although students with higher initial vocabulary learned more from the intervention, students in the scaffolded condition (easier to more difficult questions depending on students' knowledge of words) made greater gains regardless of initial vocabulary knowledge, which suggests that the scaffolded approach could be useful with very low-skilled preschoolers.

One advantage of rereading books to children is that the routine is more stable than the time of day or the event of sitting with an adult with a book as the source of attention. The book is the same each time it is read, and through this repetitive sameness children learn not only language but also conventions about book handling, including the concept of the printed word and its invariance over time. An example of how adults can use storybooks to stimulate children's oral-language development is shown below.

### Storybook Reading (*The Teddy Bears' Picnic* by Kennedy & Theobalds) with Preschool and Kindergarten Children

| Parent or Teacher | Child |
|---|---|
| If you go down to the woods today you're sure of a big surprise. Yes, that sign points the way to the woods. If you go down to the woods today you'd better go in disguise. Uh-oh (*points to the boy with the large hat over his face*), he's all wrapped up so you can't recognize him. | (*Points to the sign.*) The woods! |
| | Just-guys. |
| Yes, he's wearing a disguise. When he wears clothes that make it hard to know who he is, he's in disguise. (*Says each syllable distinctly.*) | Disguise. He has a big hat. That's disguise. |
| It's almost Halloween, and you'll wear a disguise. | No, I'll wear a costume for Halloween. |
| A costume is like a disguise. When you wear your costume, nobody will know who *you* are. The costume will disguise you. | I'll wear a disguise. I'll be Superman. |
| Yes, you'll be disguised as Superman. | |
| (*Turns page.*) Look at all those bears! | |
| (*They sing together.*) For every bear that ever there was | (*They sing together.*) For every bear that ever there was |
| Will gather there for certain because | Will gather there for certain because |
| Today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic. | Today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic. |
| (*Turns page.*) Ev'ry teddy bear who's been good is sure of a treat today. | I can count the bears: 1–2–3–4–5–6–7–8 . . . |
| That's a lot of bears! That's an enormous number of bears. | Enormous number. Lots of bears, huh. |

(*Turns page*.) There's lots of marvelous things to eat.

(*Points at picture*.) Look at all that yummy food. This will be a marvelous picnic.

(*Points to the cake, the pie, the cookies*.) That's marvelous and that's marvelous and that's marvelous . . .

Regardless of which theory is more useful for explaining how language develops from storybook reading, it is clear that vocabulary improves as a result of the experience. For typically developing 2-year-olds, about 5% of their daily speech is acquired through storybook reading with older siblings and adults (Wells, 1985).

The language development that occurs through children's interactions with parents is clearly important, but teachers also have an impact on children's language development. Huttenlocher, Vasileva, Cymerman, and Levine (2002) assessed the unique effects of home and school environments on language and found that preschool teachers can positively influence language growth in addition to improvements attributed to the child's home environment. Wasik, Bond, and Hindman (2006) found that the more consistently teachers in Head Start preschools implemented vocabulary instruction and opportunities to use new words in conversations, the better the children learned in their classrooms. This impact was especially strong for the children most in need of improvement, a finding echoed in kindergarten classrooms (Dickinson, 2001; O'Connor et al., 1996; Payne et al., 1994). The importance of fostering early language development is evident in longitudinal studies in which receptive language in kindergarten strongly predicted seventh-grade reading comprehension (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Duncan et al., 2007).

Although poorly developed oral vocabulary has been considered a serious impediment to learning to read, recent studies have provided good news for teachers, in that children who begin school with poorly developed vocabulary can make large vocabulary gains in kindergarten when instruction includes interactive book reading and discussion (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Coyne, Capozzoli-Oldham, & Simmons, 2012; O'Connor et al., 1996; O'Connor, 2000). Moreover, neither beginning level of vocabulary nor socioeconomic level depresses children's ability to learn to decode words in the primary grades when instruction has been careful (O'Connor, Fulmer, et al., 2005; O'Connor, Bocian, Beebe-Frankenberger, & Linklater, 2010).



## ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP CHILDREN'S VOCABULARY AND ORAL LANGUAGE

It would be useful for all children to start their schooling with richly developed oral language and knowledge of word meanings so that language and reading can optimally facilitate one another. In its chapter on vocabulary, the National Reading Panel's (2000) report on teaching children to read reviewed 50 studies on particular approaches to teaching children the meanings of words. An analysis of the most

effective strategies showed that they all had three features in common: (1) teachers taught children a meaning for a word, rather than asking them to guess; (2) teachers encouraged children to say the word and its meaning several times in appropriate contexts during the instructional sessions; and (3) teachers provided many opportunities to review the word over several days. Recent studies that have included these features have consistently raised students' knowledge of words (Bewitch et al., 2009; Coyne et al., 2012). The next section shows these three features threaded throughout research-based methods to improve children's vocabulary and language.

## Expanding the Child's Words

Conversing with children around a shared event, such as during mealtime, taking a walk, or reading a book, can improve their vocabulary over time (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Weizman & Snow, 2001). The particular feature of adult–child talk that seems to have the greatest influence is conversation in which the adult describes and explains objects and actions that are of interest to the child and encourages the child to repeat and expand the conversation. Although many of the studies have been conducted with parents and their children (e.g., Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002), similar results have been obtained when preschool and kindergarten teachers engage children in explanatory conversations (e.g., Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; O'Connor et al., 1996). The example below shows how an adult can encourage children to use more, and more complex, language.

### *Expanding a Child's Language during a Spring Walk in the Neighborhood*

| ADULT | CHILD |
|---|---|
| | Ooh. What is it? (*Points to the curled tip of a fiddlehead fern an inch above the earth.*) |
| It looks like a fern just starting to grow. | A fern. |
| The ground must be warming up. | It's cold! Brr. |
| Yes, the air is still cold, but the ground is warming up. Do you feel it? | (*Touches the ground and nods.*) It's warming up. |
| Do you feel the sun on your back? | (*Nods.*) It's warming up. |
| This plant has been hiding under the ground all winter. | It was hiding. |
| Hiding underground so it won't freeze. | Brr. It's freezing. |
| But now the fern feels that sunshine, just like we do. | I feel the sunshine. I feel it on my coat. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Now the snow is gone, and the sun warms your coat, and the sun warms the ground, and the plants start to grow again. | |
| | This is growing? It doesn't look like a fern. |
| It isn't grown up yet. See—the top is curled up tightly. Let's look again next Saturday and see if it looks more like a fern when it grows a little more. | (*Points to the tip of a daffodil leaf that is just coming up nearby.*) Is this a fern? |
| Do they look the same to you? | (*Examines each plant.*) This fern is curled up and brown, but this one is green and pointy. |
| So it must be a different plant, but the sunshine today is helping it grow, too. | (*Begins to notice other plants coming up in the gardens along the street.*) |

Both of the procedures that follow incorporate a similar kind of expansion of the child's language and concepts in the instructional routines.

### *Text Talk*

In their work in kindergarten classrooms, Beck and McKeown (2001) found that children with poor vocabularies often provide only one-word responses to teachers' encouragement to enter a conversation. They developed a read-aloud procedure called Text Talk to engage children in discussion of words and story concepts. The two key features of Text Talk are eliciting greater language production from youngsters and directly teaching the meanings of important and unusual words in the stories teachers read to children. In Text Talk, teachers begin by reading a story aloud to children and discussing the content and story concepts with them.

To elicit descriptive language from children, teachers repeat and rephrase each child's first response. By repeating and rephrasing, teachers illustrate how children's thoughts can be elaborated on and expressed grammatically. Imagine this conversation:

CHILD: Monkey say night night.

TEACHER: Yes, the monkeys said good night to their mama.

CHILD: The monkeys said, "Good night, Mama."

TEACHER: Now what do you think those monkeys will do?

CHILD: Jump!

TEACHER: The monkeys will jump on the bed?

CHILD: The monkeys will JUMP on the bed!

TEACHER: (*Turns the page.*) Are the monkeys jumping?

CHILD: The monkeys are jumping on the bed! Ooh, look, this monkey dancing.

TEACHER: This monkey is dancing on the bed.

In using Text Talk, teachers also teach children the meanings of new words and concepts. The following example is from the teacher's notes for *A Pocket for Corduroy* (Freeman, 1978):

> In the story, Lisa was reluctant to leave the laundromat without Corduroy. Reluctant means you are not sure you want to do something. Say the word with me: Reluctant.
>
> Someone might be reluctant to eat a food that they never had before, or someone might be reluctant to ride a roller coaster because it looks too scary. Think about something you might be reluctant to do. Start your sentence with "I might be reluctant to _____." After each child responds, call on another child to explain the response. For example, if a child says, "I might be reluctant to eat spinach" ask another child, "What does it mean that Mike is reluctant to eat spinach?" (Beck & McKeown, 2001, pp. 16–17)

To incorporate the frequent review of new words that is so important to developing an enriched vocabulary, Beck and McKeown recommend that teachers post a wall chart of new words with tally marks for each time the word is used or cited in a new context. Note how the procedures in Text Talk incorporate all three of the features found to be most effective for teaching vocabulary by the National Reading Panel (2000): teaching a meaning directly, encouraging children to use the word and meaning multiple times, and reviewing new words over several days.

### *Shared Book Reading (Dialogic Reading)*

Many variations of shared book reading have been developed, but perhaps the most researched version is dialogic reading, which was developed by Whitehurst and colleagues (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Commonly used in preschool, the simple procedures can also be used at home between parent and child or in kindergarten with groups of children. The cornerstones of dialogic reading include active engagement of children during reading and responding to children's words with more sophisticated language.

In dialogic reading, an adult reads a story to a child, but instead of passively listening, the child is encouraged to actively interpret the text and pictures and to elaborate the story beyond the words on the page. The parent or teacher asks questions along several structural dimensions ("What is he doing here?" "Why do you think he wants to do that?"). Whitehurst recommends that teachers begin by asking "wh-" questions (e.g., what, why, where) and repeating children's responses to elicit more elaboration from the children. He also provides a hierarchy of prompts to prolong conversations with children, including recall ("Do you remember who lives in the woods?"), open-ended questions ("Will he follow that advice?"), and distancing questions ("Has that ever happened to you?").

An example of an adult and child engaged in dialogic reading follows. It is clear from their conversation that the child has heard this story many times, so the adult is prompting the child to retell the story.

DIALOGIC READING WITH *ABIYOYO* BY SEEGER AND HAYS (1986)

| ADULT | CHILD |
|---|---|
| Once upon a time, there was a little boy who played the _____. | Ukulele. |
| Yes, there's the ukulele. Do the grown-ups like that ukulele? | No. |
| What do they say? | Take that thing out of here! |
| Yes, take that thing out of here. And here's his father. | And he's a magician. |
| Uh-huh. What is he doing here? | He has a magic wand, and he goes "Zoop zoop!" and things just appear. |
| They disappear. | They disappear. Zoop zoop! |
| And what happens? | They disappear. |
| That's right, they disappear. (*Turns the page.*) Uh-oh . . . | And she wants to drink the water, but the glass disappears. (*Turns the page.*) And the saw disappears. |
| Why is that a problem? | The men can't work without the saw. Zoop! No saw. (*Turns the page.*) Zoop! No chair. |
| (*Turns the page.*) And what do the people say? | You get out of here. Just get! |
| Yes, and here's that hard word, look—ostracized. Say that. | Ostracized. |
| The boy and his father were ostracized. That means they made them live on the edge of town. | All alone? |
| Away from their neighbors. They were ostracized. Why do you think they were ostracized? | 'Cause he plays tricks, and he plays the ukulele. |
| That's right. (*Turns the page.*) What's happening here? | He tells stories about the giant. |
| And the giant was called _____. | Abiyoyo! |

| | |
|---|---|
| Tell me about Abiyoyo. | He was tall as a tree, and he could eat people up! |
| Did the people believe Abiyoyo was real? | No, but he was real . . . |

The teacher's questions encourage the child to use the author's language, which is often more advanced than the day-to-day words the child uses to communicate. When the story is read in this interactive fashion several times, children are able to use increasingly sophisticated language and will offer more open-ended comments on their own. The adult can repeat and elaborate on each child's responses and observations, continuing the conversation that contains complex language.

These activities are useful for children during the preschool years (Bus, 2001; Roberts, 2008), and they continue to be useful during the first years of reading acquisition in kindergarten, first, and second grades (Biemiller, 2012; Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992) because learning the meanings of words and learning to read them can be mutually facilitative. At least through the early grades in school, an interactive style of reading to children—in which children's questions about words, their meanings, and story events are encouraged—promotes growth in vocabulary more than just reading stories straight through (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Wasik et al., 2006).

## SOME CAUTIONS ON THE RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF ORAL LANGUAGE IN READING WORDS

Research suggests that the influence of oral language on reading ability depends on which aspects of reading were studied (e.g., decoding, reading comprehension), the age of the participants in the studies (e.g., children in preschool or the primary grades, adults), and the way in which oral language was measured (e.g., receptive or expressive vocabulary, listening comprehension). For students of average intelligence in kindergarten, receptive vocabulary exerts very little influence on children's learning of letters, sounds, phoneme awareness, or decoding (O'Connor, Jenkins, & Slocum, 1995; O'Connor, Bocian, et al., 2010), and this lack of strong influence persists into first grade (O'Connor, Fulmer, et al., 2005; O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999; Vellutino et al., 2008), although the role of receptive vocabulary grows as children progress through school. Poor readers often have vocabulary difficulties (Catts, Compton, Tomblin, & Bridges, 2012; Scarborough, 1990); however, poor vocabulary need not inhibit learning the skills that contribute most to reading words, such as those described in the next few chapters of this book.

Although abundant evidence suggests that children with oral-language difficulties can acquire letter–sound relations and decoding skills, persistent language difficulties that influence vocabulary growth are likely to impede reading comprehension by the middle elementary grades (Nation & Snowling, 1999). Not only are students with language difficulties in preschool prone to continued language

difficulties later in school (and life), but these early language problems also increase the likelihood of reading problems (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999).

This body of research suggests two very important points. First, oral language is important for reading comprehension, and, therefore, parents and preschool teachers should do all they can to increase the opportunities young children have to develop vocabulary and listening comprehension. Second, if children enter school with poorly developed vocabulary, it is not too late. Good teaching and increased opportunities with books and stories can continue to exert a positive influence on language and reading development through the first several years in school. The key notion here is that children can and do learn to read words even if their oral language is impoverished, and as those children are learning to read words, teachers can continue to work on improving their oral language.

## TRY IT!

1. *First:* Choose a storybook that would interest children in preschool or kindergarten. Read it aloud to yourself and consider words that are unusual in conversations among young children. Choose at least one of these words.
2. *Prepare:* How are these words used in the storybook? How else can they be used? Generate a definition that young children could understand that fits all of these contexts.
3. *Teach:* Show children the page in the storybook where the word is used first. Read the sentence and explain the meaning of the word in child-friendly language. Engage the children in conversation that allows them to say the word aloud in and out of context. Read the storybook and pause on the page that uses the word. Talk with them about how the word is used and how the word contributes to the story, or setting, or character (whichever is most appropriate).
4. *Reinforce:* Plan to use the word in conversation with children later in the day and over the next few days. Generate conversational contexts in which children could use the word appropriately. As they do so, comment on their use of the word to raise their awareness of their growing use of oral language.





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