Developing Emergent Literacy Skills Through Storybook Reading

JILL HOWARD ALLOR AND REBECCA B. McCATHREN

This article describes strategies for using storybooks to facilitate emergent literacy. First, we provide critical background information about three areas of emergent literacy: oral language (vocabulary and narrative development), phonological awareness, and print awareness. Then we describe how teachers can facilitate the development of these three areas through purposeful, yet playful and developmentally appropriate, storybook reading activities.

Even though literacy is becoming more and more necessary for basic survival, illiteracy rates are on the rise in the United States (Chard, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Reading problems usually begin in the very early stages of reading acquisition, and once they begin, they are rarely overcome (Juel, 1988, 1991; Snow et al., 1998). Therefore, it is critical that children who experience difficulty learning to read or who are likely to experience difficulty learning to read receive assistance as soon as possible (Snow et al., 1998). This is of particular importance for those who experience so much difficulty learning to read that they will eventually be identified as learning disabled, a category in special education that has grown steadily since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Teachers of young children must focus on helping children to develop both the oral language and the emergent literacy skills that have been shown to facilitate learning how to read. In this article, we discuss key elements of emergent literacy and how these elements can be fostered in the context of literature. The activities described are typically appropriate for students who are in kindergarten or early first grade, but they would also be appropriate for primary grade students who are still

struggling with reading, particularly those with language-related disabilities, such as learning disabilities or communication disorders.

Emergent Literacy Development

Oral Language

Reading is a language-based skill that shares many of the processes and the knowledge used in understanding oral language (Kamhi & Catts, 1999). Many children who have difficulty learning to read also struggle with developing good oral language skills. Interactive storybook reading has been shown to produce substantial gains in oral language development, particularly for children from low-income environments who demonstrate language delays (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Karweit & Wasik, 1996; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). This interactive process involves the child, the mature reader, and the text. Always reading each word on a page from start to finish is often not the best way to read with young children. Instead, adults question, comment, and respond to children's initiations about the words and pictures in the books (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Cole & Maddox, 1997; Mautte, 1990).

Phonological Awareness

A second area of emergent literacy is *phonological awareness*, the understanding that oral language is made up of sounds or groups of sounds. The process of developing phonological awareness begins when a child recognizes that speech is composed of words (Pikulski, 1989). This understanding is then extended until a child is able to recognize that words are composed of sounds, or phonemes, and he or she is able to manipulate those phonemes to accomplish various tasks. One of the early phonological awareness tasks is to learn to recognize and generate rhyming words. Another more difficult task is to say words with phonemes deleted (e.g., Say *meat* without the /m/ sound).

Currently, we are not aware of any studies that specifically analyze the effectiveness of using storybooks to enhance the phonological awareness of young children. Although it seems reasonable to assume that orally reading books with a lot of rhyme and alliteration is likely to help some children become aware of the form of language, it is clear that this is simply not enough for many young children. Research demonstrates that directly teaching phonological awareness to young children causes them to respond more rapidly to beginning reading instruction and results in improved reading development (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1993; National Reading Panel, 2000; O'Connor, Jenkins, Leicester, & Slocum, 1993).

Although researchers agree that children must have phonological awareness skills to learn to read, concern has been voiced in the literature about teaching phonics skills in a decontextualized way to young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Providing direct instruction of phonological awareness skills using the words found in familiar storybooks has at least two advantages. First, it may be important in helping students, particularly students who are low-achieving, to understand how phonological awareness relates to print. Using storybooks will make the phonological awareness activities more meaningful and connect them more clearly to print. Second, it is likely that the relationship to familiar storybooks will be motivating to students and teachers, resulting in increased levels of practice. Phonological awareness instruction that centers on storybooks should complement and enhance more systematic programs, particularly for students with disabilities.

In order to successfully teach students phonological awareness, either through words from storybooks or with specific phonological awareness programs and activities, it is imperative that early childhood educators recognize the various levels of phonological awareness. This awareness is necessary so that teachers will be able to provide activities that reflect their students' current level of performance. An observation checklist is provided in Table 1 to guide teachers as they assess their students through informal observation. In very early stages of phonological awareness, young children can recognize that sentences can be of varying lengths. The ability of children to label sentences as long or short indicates that they are becoming aware that language not only has meaning but also has form. When children are slightly more advanced, they will be able to break apart compound words and put two words together to form compound words. Next, a child begins to recognize the syllables within words. For example, a child named Thomas would know to clap twice to indicate the number of syllables in his name. Clapping while chanting nursery rhymes or singing songs can help children develop an awareness of word parts, and observing children during these activities can provide teachers with insight into their students' level of phonological awareness. The book *Hand, Hand, Fingers, Thumb* (Perkins, 1969) is an excellent way to emphasize syllables. After reading a few pages of the book several times, the students can clap once for each syllable. They may also

Table 1. Observation Checklist of Phonological Awareness

Developmental progression	No	Emerging	Yes
Early stages—child recognizes that speech is composed of words.			
Does child identify sentences as long or short?			
Does child identify individual words that compose compound words?			
Does child count (or clap) the number of syllables in words with up to three syllables?			
Phonemic awareness: Blending skills			
When orally presented with an onset and a rime (e.g., /s/ /un/), does child say entire word (*sun*)?			
When orally presented with three phonemes that make up a word (e.g., /s/ /u/ /n/), does child say entire word (*sun*)?			
When orally presented with four phonemes that make up a word (e.g., /s/ /t/ /i/ /k/), does child say entire word (*stick*)?			
Phonemic awareness: Segmenting skills			
When asked to say the first sound in a three-phoneme word, does child say the first sound correctly (e.g., when told *sun,* child says the first sound is /s/)?			
When asked to say the sounds in a three-phoneme word, does the child say at least two parts of the word separately (e.g., when told *sun,* child says, "/s/ /un/," "/su/ /n/," or "/s/ /u/ /n/")?			
When asked to say the sounds in a three- or four-phoneme word, does child say all of the phonemes individually (e.g., *sun,* child says, "/s/ /u/ /n/"; when told *stop,* child says, "/s/ /t/ /o/ /p/")?			

choose to chant with the teacher as she or he reads, "One hand, Two hands, Drumming on a drum. Dum ditty, Dum ditty, Dum dum dum" (pp. 4–5).

Later stages of phonological awareness involve sensitivity to phonemes and the manipulation of individual phonemes. At this level a more specific term, *phonemic awareness*, may be used. Rhyming is an example of an early, somewhat primitive, form of phonemic awareness because it requires that a child be sensitive to phonemic similarities and differences. Early phonemic awareness activities also include blending and segmenting onsets and rimes. The onset, which is the initial consonant or consonant cluster, is separated from the remaining part of the word, which is called the rime. These skills have been playfully fostered through educational programming for many years as children have heard actors saying /p/, /op/, /pop/ or /f/, /og/, /fog/. In more advanced stages, children can blend individual phonemes into words and segment words into their individual phonemes. All of these skills should be developed orally and gradually applied to print.

It is important that teachers carefully select words of appropriate linguistic difficulty, so words taken from storybooks should be words with simple linguistic structures. Phonological awareness tasks are simpler if words have small numbers of phonemes and do not begin with initial consonant clusters (Treiman & Weatherston, 1992); for this reason, choose young children's books with words

that are appropriate for phonological awareness activities. Teachers should choose words such as *fan* or *map* instead of words with initial consonant clusters, such as *stop* or *flag*. It is also easier to blend and segment words with initial phonemes that are continuous. Phonemes such as /s/ or /f/ can be "stretched," making words beginning with these phonemes easier to blend than those beginning with stop sounds, such as /t/ or /p/ (see Table 1). This is probably most important for children with disabilities who commonly experience great difficulty in learning to blend sounds. Lists of these sounds can be found in reading or phonology textbooks or by simply asking a speech pathologist for assistance. In addition, a speech pathologist can assist teachers in the careful pronunciation of phonemes. The pronunciation of some phonemes in isolation is not straightforward or intuitive.

Print Awareness

In addition to phonological awareness, literacy development is dependent on the understanding of certain basic insights and observations about the forms and functions of print (Adams, 1990). According to Durkin (1993), these insights include (a) knowing the difference between graphic displays of words and nonwords; (b) knowing that print corresponds to speech, word by word; (c) understanding the function of empty space in establishing word boundaries; and (d) understanding that we read from left

Table 2. Summary of Storybook Activities

Activity category	Broad purpose(s)	Example of specific activities: *Elbert's Bad Word* (Wood, 1988)
Storybook Preview	• oral language (vocabulary and narrative)	Look at the pictures, and describe the action. Possible new vocabulary: garden party, croquet, mallet, boa, magician, and oboe
Storybook Read Aloud	• concepts of print • oral language (vocabulary and narrative)	Use your finger to point to the words as you read them. Make sure that book is large enough or children are close enough to see the individual words.
Storybook Celebration	• oral language (vocabulary and narrative) • motivation	Have class make a list of "strong words to say how we feel." Put those words in a chart on the wall and use them.
Storybook Sounds	• phonological awareness	Clap the syllables in the names of the characters: Elbert, Sir Hilary, Madame Friatta, Aunt Isabella
Storybook Letters and Words	• print awareness • letter recognition • letter/sound correspondence	Choose words to introduce and/or review particular letter sounds. Use the "strong words" from the text and the "strong words" generated by the students in Storybook Celebration (see above).

to right and top to bottom. All of these insights are critical to literacy development and are gained through meaningful experiences with text (Durkin, 1993). Letter recognition is also sometimes included as a form of print awareness (Adams, 1990). Although much debate has centered on the necessity of teaching letter names, it is clear that children must learn how to quickly recognize and discriminate the visual shapes of letters before they can learn to read (Adams, 1990). Children should be exposed to letters in a variety of ways (such as blocks and magnetic letters), but it is important that their attention is also focused on letters in books (Lesiak, 1997). Meaningful literature is essential for optimal development of print awareness.

Using Storybook Reading to Foster Emergent Literacy

In addition to fostering language development, storybook reading has been correlated to a variety of reading factors, including children's eagerness to read, children becoming literate before formal schooling, and children's success in beginning reading in school (see Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Some components of emergent literacy cannot be developed apart from meaningful print. Although other components, such as letter recognition and phonological awareness, can be developed in isolation, it is important that these skills be connected to print in order to motivate children and prepare them to apply these skills to print in purposeful and meaningful ways. Following is a list of strategies for using storybooks to facilitate emergent literacy. A summary of these strategies is provided in Table 2. They are not intended to be used in any particular order, although Storybook Preview should be used

the first time a new storybook is introduced. The strategies are intended to complement and enhance, not replace, existing instruction.

Storybook Preview

The purpose of Storybook Preview is to increase expressive and receptive language development in the context of literature. It may be used to introduce a book or as a follow-up activity. Although it may be used with whole groups, it is important to conduct Storybook Preview with very small groups or individual students so teachers can interact effectively with students, responding to and expanding on each child's language. For example, the book *Abiyoyo* (Seeger, 1986) can be used to build vocabulary for such words as *ukulele* and descriptor words for the book's monster. In addition, when the monster begins to dance, the words are written in 2-inch letters, allowing discussion about how those words might be said and why they are printed so large. *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub* (Wood, 1985) has pictures of the king in the bathtub with a variety of interesting objects (e.g., an extravagant lunch, the queen with a billowing gown, worms, lily pads, a mandolin). In addition to naming items in the pictures, children can discuss their favorite toys to have in the bathtub.

In Storybook Preview, the child explores the content of the book by looking through and talking about the pictures. The teacher may provide labels for the objects, actions, or events the children are interested in to build vocabulary and respond to their communications. When looking at a book, a child may initiate a statement linking the book content to the child's life. For example, "We have a dog at home." The teacher then has the opportunity to ask questions about the child's dog and help the

child identify similarities and differences with the dog in the book, or have the child engage in narrative activities about his or her dog that relate to the content of the story. Teachers may wish to repeat general questions as the child tells the story, such as, "What do you think is happening here?" In addition, the adult can ask questions that will prompt language but also help children attend to other features of the pictures.

The important part of this strategy is that the adult responds specifically to each child's communications. For example, in the book *Sheep in a Ship* (Shaw, 1989), a child might point to a picture of sheep sailing on a ship and say, "My uncle has a boat." The teacher might respond, "What about this ship looks the same as your uncle's boat?" or ask questions about why one is called a boat and the other a ship. In addition, the teacher can also ask questions that prompt the child to tell a story of being on his or her uncle's boat, thus contributing to the development of narrative skills.

Storybook Read Aloud

Storybook Read Aloud will target the development of concepts of print, as well as general vocabulary and oral language development. In the large group, the teacher can read the book in a way that is designed to hold the attention of all the children. As a follow-up, the teacher can read the story to small groups of children, pointing to each word as it is being read. For this strategy to be effective, the children must all be sitting close enough to the book to see the print clearly. The teacher can help each child choose his or her favorite page in the book for the teacher to read again more slowly, pointing only to one word at a time. Then the children can point to individual words for the teacher to read. These additional activities will be important to develop a clear understanding of where the words are on the page and the purpose of spacing. It is not essential that an entire story be read in each sitting. A teacher may wish to pull out a favorite book and read only certain parts of the story, possibly the beginning, end, or the children's favorite parts. Again, comparing the type size on most of the pages in *Abiyoyo* with the large type on the pages where the giant is dancing provides opportunities to make connections between the text and the life of the story.

Storybook Celebration

In Storybook Celebration, children respond to the storybook through a motivating activity related to the meaning of the book. Follow-up art, cooking, science, or other activities can extend learning and help children bridge what is in books to other parts of their lives. For example, if the teacher had recently read the book *Sheep on a Ship*, the children could make paper boats and act out some of the events from the book or make up their own stories. The various ways to celebrate storybooks are only limited by a teacher's imagination. The only stipulations for activities are that they (a) motivate, (b) relate to the meaning of the storybook, and (c) have meaning to the children. Storybook Celebration should be used to help students connect meaning from books to their own experiences. Skillful teachers will capitalize on students' past experiences, as well as provide students with new experiences that relate to the stories they are reading. Using the book *The Jolly Postman or Other People's Letters* (Ahlberg & Ahlberg, 1986), children could write or dictate letters to the characters in the book, respond in character to the letters in the book, or write letters to each other.

Storybook Sounds

Storybook Sounds focuses on the development of phonological awareness as it relates to specific storybooks. These activities should become part of a more complete plan to develop phonological awareness. Currently, an abundance of resources for phonological awareness activities exist (e.g., *Ladders to Literacy*, Notari-Syverson, O'Connor, & Vadasy, 1998; *Road to the Code*, Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 2000; *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children*, Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998). These resources should be an integral part of any emergent literacy classroom and can also be used to develop a multitude of Storybook Sounds activities. Storybook Sounds is different from general phonological awareness activities only in that the words chosen for practicing these skills are related to or taken directly from a storybook. Storybook Sounds is designed to supplement these programs, not replace them.

Many activities may be used with each storybook. Each activity should be very short and include enough items of varied difficulty to provide all children with opportunities for success. Providing appropriate activities is only possible through careful assessment of each student. This should include informal observation during Storybook Sounds activities. Table 1 may be used to help guide informal assessment. Teachers must constantly monitor and informally assess students to determine the level of phonological awareness that is appropriate for each student. Screening measures are provided in *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* (Adams et al., 1998) and in more thorough individually administered assessments, such as *Comprehensive Tests of Phonological Processing* (Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1999) and *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS; Kaminski & Good, 2002).

Storybook Sounds activities should relate to the content or the pictures in the storybook. For example, for Shaw's *Sheep on a Ship*, the objective could be for children to listen for specific beginning sounds, such as /sh/. Students would simply look through the book and point to the appropriate pictures. For each item, students should say the word and the sound. Another way to accomplish

should not hesitate to model the correct answer and require students to repeat that answer. These activities can and should be part of group instruction, but students who are low achieving will require at least some practice in very small groups or individually.

Initially, when planning for Storybook Sounds activities, teachers may wish to develop a few different activities and repeat them with different storybooks. These activities can also be incorporated into Storybook Read Aloud. For example, one activity that could be used with any book would be for the teacher to ask students to listen for a word that begins with a certain sound. Then the teacher would read one sentence or one page and ask students to name the word and repeat the initial sound. For example, before reading the sentence, "He slept for a long time" from *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkina, 1968), a teacher could ask students to listen for a word beginning with /t/. Before reading the sentence, "When tweetle beetles fight, it's called a tweetle beetle battle" from *Fox in Socks* (Geisel & Geisel, 1965), a teacher could ask the students to listen for a word beginning with /f/.

Storybook Letters and Words

Storybook Letters and Words includes activities that foster the development of a variety of prereading skills in the context of literature. These skills will vary according to the needs of students but should include letter recognition and letter–sound correspondence. Similar to Storybook Sounds, Storybook Letters and Words should provide children with opportunities to develop emergent literacy skills as they explore and play with letters and words. These activities may include matching letters, matching capital letters to their lowercase counterparts, matching letters to their most common sounds, and spelling or "building" simple words. The following example could be used to focus on the very basic skills of naming letters, matching letters, and recognizing that words are made up of letters. It could also be adapted to help students learn the sounds for some letters. After a teacher has read *The Napping House* (Wood, 1984) she or he could ask students to list the people and animals who were napping on the bed. As students list the people and animals (flea, mouse, cat, dog, child, granny), the teacher would give students index cards with the words written on them, being careful to have enough cards so that each student has two to four words in front of them. Next, the teacher would hold up a flashcard of a letter (or write the letter on the board) and ask students to name the letter and see if they have a word with that letter in it. To reinforce the sound of "m," the teacher could ask students which word begins with "m" and then write the letter on the board. Children could list other words (not from the story) that begin with the same sound and write those on the board.

a similar objective would be to point to a picture and have the students name the picture and then say the first sound in isolation. Remember, it is easier to isolate phonemes that are continuous. Easy words from *Sheep on a Ship* include *sheep*, *sail*, *ship*, *lap*, *nap*, and *map*. At this level, words with initial blends should be avoided, such as *flap*, *trip*, and *storm*. Another activity for *Sheep on a Ship* might be to think of words that rhyme with *sheep*. If needed, the teacher could provide the onsets, and children would say the new word (Teacher: What rhymes with *sheep* and begins with /l/? Students: *Leap*).

Like all phonological awareness activities for young children, the children should view these activities as games. Teachers should encourage and reinforce any attempts made by the children, always providing them with the correct responses and requiring them to repeat those responses whenever possible. As teachers of young children realize, repetition can be motivating and is an essential part of learning. Teachers must model by providing answers when children are incorrect or when they hesitate to respond. Generally, if a child is unable to respond in approximately 3 to 4 seconds, it is best for the teacher to supply the answer. However, students with language processing difficulties will need a longer response time. It is also important that the student repeat the correct answer. Many students who are low achieving or who have disabilities require a lot of modeling and many opportunities to attempt to "copy" the teacher before they are able to develop phonemic awareness. All attempts and partially correct answers should be praised, but teachers

Storybook Letters and Words activities focus on pre-reading skills and are intended to help prepare children for explicit instruction in phonics. However, as children advance, they can include the building of simple, phonetically regular words, helping students make the connection between phonological awareness and print. For example, students could use letter cards to practice building "-op" words from *Hop on Pop* (Geisel, 1963). These activities would also be appropriate for primary grade students who are still struggling with reading, particularly those with disabilities; however, they are not intended to replace explicit instruction in phonics.

As in the Sounds activities, multiple activities should be developed for each book, making sure that children have the requisite skills for performing the tasks. Following is a description of two possible activities to be used with the book *Sheep on a Ship*. The child would look through the pages of the book and find words that began with "sh"; the teacher would respond and say the words emphasizing the "sh" sound by stretching it for at least 2 to 3 seconds. Another activity would be to have one or two simple words, such as *map* and *nap*, from one page in the book written on the board. The teacher would tell the students the words and have the students repeat the words and then find the words on the page. The teacher should then draw attention to the individual letters by spelling the words with the children. Students could also trace the words with their fingers or build them from a small set of magnetic letters. For most students in the early stages of emergent literacy, the teacher would need to give a set of six or seven letters, including the letters needed to spell the given words. The purpose of this activity is *not* to learn to read the given words but to become more familiar with concepts of print, such as (a) knowing the shapes of letters, (b) knowing that words are made up of letters, and (c) knowing that print corresponds to speech. Again, these activities should complement more systematic instruction, particularly for students with special needs.

Conclusion

Emergent literacy can and should be developed within the context of literature. Storybook reading has become much more than simply reading a book to a child, page by page, word by word. Rather, storybook reading activities should be carefully designed to develop and capitalize on children's love of literature. These types of activities have been shown to foster the development of vocabulary and narrative skills. Phonological and print awareness activities that use words selected from storybooks can also enhance systematic instruction in these areas. We have discussed key elements of emergent literacy and described specific strategies for developing these elements through storybook reading activities. These types of activities should be included in the daily routines of literacy classrooms. Providing children with meaningful literacy experiences designed to teach the skills most closely associated with success in learning to read in a developmentally appropriate way may substantially reduce the number of children struggling to learn to read.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jill Howard Allor, EdD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University. Her current interests include learning disabilities and the development of early literacy. **Rebecca B. McCathren,** PhD, is an associate professor in the Special Education Program in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education, University of Missouri, Columbia. Her current interests include autism and the development of language and literacy. Address: Jill Howard Allor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Louisiana State University, 223 Peabody Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.

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