

Shared Reading with Informational Text: Teaching Text Features to Emergent Readers

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Instructional conversations focused on text type, text structure, and text complexity are common across grade levels due to the current emphasis on standards based curricula. For example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010), as well as many state standards, have generated discussion about teaching with informational text. These conversations highlight the importance of using a variety of text types with students to support learning opportunities. Specifically, these standards call for a balance between the amount of informational text and literature used for instruction beginning in kindergarten and throughout elementary school. Certainly, exposure to nonfiction text is vital and beneficial for students as they learn to read and read to learn (Fingeret, 2008). Emergent readers (i.e., students in the earliest stage of reading acquisition) are at the beginning of an exciting literacy-learning journey; engagement with informational text through shared reading provides opportunities for socially constructed collaborative interactions that can enhance content knowledge and reading strategies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014).

Students need early opportunities with informational text because once students reach the proficient reader level, they are often expected to read to learn content, which can be difficult if they lack early exposure to informational text (Duke, 2004; Stead, 2014). Further, when students have limited opportunities to engage with informational text, they may struggle to comprehend the content. Informational text can be easily integrated through a shared reading approach into thematic units to support emergent readers' content and literacy learning in preschool and beyond. The focus of this article is teaching emergent readers to navigate the unique text features found in informational text, which can in turn enhance comprehension.

Literature Review

Comprehension

The main purpose for reading a text is to comprehend it (Pressley, 2006). Research points to several comprehension strategies that can and should be taught to developing readers: predicting, visualizing, summarizing, questioning, connecting to prior knowledge, analyzing text structure, and determining important ideas (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). These strategies are important for readers to apply to all texts; in fact, proficient readers do apply these to all texts. All of these comprehension strategies can be modeled through shared reading with our youngest readers and explicitly taught to older students as well (Block & Pressley, 2007).

When students struggle to read a difficult text, comprehension can suffer (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Informational texts can exacerbate this issue, due to vocabulary demands and the lack of students' background knowledge (Allington, 2002). In addition, since young students often lack exposure to nonfiction texts, they are often unfamiliar with the unique text features found in this genre, which can further compromise comprehension (Duke, 2000; Hoffman, Collins, & Schickedanz, 2015). Teacher support and explicit comprehension instruction provided during instruction can help to mediate these issues for developing readers, and ultimately increase comprehension.

Text Features

Informational text is written differently than literature; there are differences in language and text structure. In addition, informational text often contains distinct text features. Text features are special portions of text that are set apart. For example, headings, the table of contents, photos with captions, and glossaries are all common text features. Authors include specific text features to supplement the information written in the text; this supplemental information is important for text comprehension and content understanding (Duke, 2013). When properly used, text features can help readers identify important information and ultimately enhance comprehension (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2010). Table 1 provides examples and descriptions of text features common found in emergent level informational texts.

While text features are designed to help the reader comprehend text more deeply, this does not always happen (Bluestein, 2010). Struggling readers may skip text features all together, thinking that the information is extraneous or too difficult to read. Even if students do glance at each text feature, they may be

confused by the way the information is presented (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2010). When considering emergent readers, it is unlikely that they will notice some

Table 1. Common informational text features in emergent level texts

Text Feature	Purpose
Table of contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps the reader to identify key topics • Provides page number to help with locating specific information • Located at the front of the book
Title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informs the reader of the main topic for the section • Usually located at the top of a page
Heading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divides the text into smaller chunks • Provides main topic of each section • Helps the reader locate important information
Glossary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A list of key terms and definitions which can help readers learn new vocabulary words • Usually located in the back of a book
Bold print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights important words or phrases • Sometimes bold print words are defined in the glossary or in another section of the text
Index	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An alphabetical list of information in the book • Provides matching page numbers for each item • Helps the reader locate specific information in the text • Usually located at the back of the book
Photos or illustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual aids designed to enhance understanding of concepts presented in the text
Diagrams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual aid • Provides an illustration of steps or parts of something described in the text • Provides a simplified version of information
Labels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies a visual aid or parts of it
Captions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often accompany a photo, illustration, or diagram • Explain the visual aid • Add supplemental information to the text

informational texts features, since print concepts of both informational and narrative text are new to them. Therefore, particularly with the youngest readers, it

is essential that we explicitly teach students how to navigate the text features found in informational texts (Duke, 2004).

Shared Reading

Shared reading, one component of a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, is often used to teach reading across grade levels (Frey & Fisher, 2007). This instructional technique is based on Holdaway's (1982) *Shared Book Experience*, which was first designed to emulate the one-on-one teaching that occurs between parent and child in the bedtime story. Simply put, shared reading is an instructional context where the teacher "reads with" students, using a big book or enlarged text so that all students are able to see the words and pictures. The teacher models reading strategies, inviting students to participate in reading specific portions of the text with him/her. This instructional approach is typically used in a whole group setting with a text that is just above the students' instructional reading level (Dougherty Stahl, 2012).

Typically, shared reading with emergent readers focuses on print concepts, phonemic awareness skills, high frequency words, and vocabulary instruction (Dougherty Stahl, 2012). However, shared reading is also a time when teachers can explicitly teach comprehension strategies, including how to navigate non-fiction text features. Because the text is enlarged, teachers can highlight and discuss specific text features so that all students have the opportunity to learn about these features with authentic texts in a scaffolded learning environment.

Text Selection

Text selection is important for effective lessons, including shared reading. Teachers may choose to use fiction or nonfiction (informational) texts materials to support instruction; note the focus of this article is the use of informational text. As with any instructional context, teachers should select books that are well-written and engaging (Lane & Wright, 2007). Further, given the high number of newly released books each year, Stead (2014) recommends working collaboratively with the school librarian and other teachers to find, locate and then use a variety of high quality materials that could be used for shared reading experiences.

It is important to understand that informational text, as with most texts read to and with emergent readers, will be above students' reading levels (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Selecting texts that are above students' reading levels is recommended for shared reading, since this allows the teacher to scaffold and support students as they interact with the text. This teacher guidance with the text keeps students engaged and motivated to read the words, while preventing frustration in reading.

In addition, the shared reading format allows teachers the opportunity to introduce or review specific text features through a think-aloud, modeling how to navigate informational texts, while the students follow along or practice the strategy. Further, when choosing a text that provides enough challenge, it is important to consider the length of the text. An emergent level shared reading lesson is often limited to 15 minutes in length. Short, focused lessons ensure maximum student engagement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the selected text must be aligned with instructional goals (Layne & Wright, 2007). In this case, it is important to choose a text that contains grade level appropriate and required content, as well as the text features to be taught. When reading with emergent readers, it is particularly important to select texts that present the content in a clear, concise, and engaging manner. Hoffman et al. (2015) highlight the importance of “complex, yet accessible” language, accurate and current content, and clear visual information (p. 366). Since emergent readers are typically found in preschool, kindergarten, and grade 1, teachers should consult their content curricula for appropriate topics. Below is a summarized list of important points for consideration when selecting texts for shared reading:

- Aligned with instructional goals
- Engaging topic and presentation
- Short in length
- Accurate content
- Current content
- Above instructional reading level

Teaching Text Features

Shared reading is the perfect vehicle for demonstrating how to navigate the text features in informational text. The enlarged text required in shared reading allows the teacher to point to, name, and define specific text features. For example, Ms. Sawyer engaged her kindergarten students in a unit about ocean life. She used big books and enlarge projected texts about the ocean for all of her shared reading lessons throughout the unit. It was in this context that Ms. Sawyer introduced her students to the Table of Contents page. The following classroom snapshot illustrates how Ms. Sawyer introduced the lesson:

Ms. Sawyer (pointing to the heading on the page): Boys and girls, this says ‘Table of Contents.’ Can you read that with me?

The class (answering chorally): Table of Contents

Ms. Sawyer: Well done! Can anyone tell me why the author writes a table of contents?

Gabby: It tells what is in the book?

Ms. Sawyer: Yes, it does! The table of contents tells us readers what we can read about in this book, and which page to find the information we need. For example, if I want to read about shells (pointing to the word shells) I can turn to page 5 (moves her finger to the page number.) If I want to read about coral (points to the word coral), I need to turn to page 7 (points to the number 7).

In the conversation illustrated above, Ms. Sawyer explicitly explained the purpose and demonstrated the use of the text feature. In the several days following this lesson, Ms. Sawyer released responsibility to the learners. An example of one conversation follows:

Ms. Sawyer: Today we are going to read *Ocean Life* during shared reading. I'm so excited to learn about sea creatures! Let's start with the table of contents (opens to the page). Who can tell me which page has information about dolphins? (Several students volunteer by raising their hands. Finn?

Finn: Page 4!

Ms. Sawyer: How did you know?

Finn: Because the table of contents says Dolphins, dot-dot-dot, page 4!

Instead of re-explaining how to use the table of contents, Ms. Sawyer asked a student to demonstrate knowledge of how to use this text feature. This exchange provided an opportunity to informally assess the understanding of select students. Ms. Sawyer may conduct assessments with all of the children in small group or individual settings as well. She can also use this information to determine whether she needs to explicitly re-teach a specific text feature, or simply provide opportunities for the students to practice using text features throughout the day.

Over the course of the school year, Ms. Sawyer will use shared reading to explain how readers use the table of contents to locate information using a text, predict what they may read about, and even select appropriate texts based on the information. Once most of the children are able to identify and use the table of contents, Ms. Sawyer will introduce a new text feature (Table 1) during shared reading. While many children in the classroom may not be able to read all of the words in every shared reading text, they will begin to learn the function of the features commonly found in informational text. Because the instructional context is shared reading, Ms. Sawyer can read the words to and with the children.

Conclusion

Our purpose is to describe how teachers can explicitly introduce common features of informational text to emergent readers through shared reading. When planning for shared reading, teachers must be mindful of text selection and instructional focus. When introducing emergent readers to informational texts, we suggest that teachers explicitly focus on the unique features of these texts. Teachers of young children may use various resources, such as the school-based or community librarian, to locate and access informational texts. This ensures opportunities to provide rich examples of text features during shared reading lessons.

In addition to enhancing content knowledge through discussion and questioning, shared reading provides an excellent opportunity for students to interact with text features. Through shared reading, teachers can explicitly explain and demonstrate the purpose of various text features, while providing guided practice for students. Increased content comprehension, interest and curiosity in content, and engagement with informational materials are all goals of shared reading. Through multiple exposures, students should be able to apply what they learn during a shared reading experience to their independent reading.

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