Shared reading with beginner readers

Shared reading is part of the rich reading curriculum, which also includes reading aloud to children, guided reading with small groups and independent reading. Each has a specific role within the overall picture but all contribute to ensuring that children develop as independent and enthusiastic readers.

This paper considers how teachers and practitioners can most effectively use Shared reading in the light of the Rose Report recommendation that phonics be used as the first strategy for reading unknown words during the early stages of reading, typically in Year R and Year 1.

Definition

Shared reading is where the practitioner or teacher works with the children to model fluent, expressive reading, the use of effective reading strategies and to encourage response to texts. It can be a vehicle for both teaching children to read (decode) and for teaching children about reading, including comprehension.

Shared reading enables children to access and enjoy rich, authentic texts which are slightly beyond their independent reading level. Sessions are generally planned in a sequence and involve re-reading for different purposes, with children using their developing skills and understanding as they become more familiar with the text.

Resources used for Shared reading include fiction, poetry and non-fiction texts. The text is enlarged to enable all children to see as well as to hear the text. Traditionally, big books have been the main source of material, but increasingly the range has been extended to include posters, class-made books and ICT texts, using an interactive white board (IWB).

Shared reading in the context of EYFS

From a very early stage, young children will begin to show interest in familiar stories, songs and rhymes and show preferences for particular favourites. As they develop, they will listen to and join in with stories and poems and have a growing understanding of how they are structured. Most children become increasingly interested in illustrations and print, both in books and in the environment. They learn to handle books carefully, holding them the correct way up and turning the pages. Towards the end of the EYFS, as they progress towards the early-learning goals, most children will enjoy an increasing range of books and know that they can be used to find information.

Practitioners must support children’s learning and competence in communicating, speaking and listening, being read to and beginning to read and write. They must also provide them with the confidence, opportunity, encouragement, support and disposition to use their skills in a range of situations and for a range of purposes. Shared reading sessions offer many opportunities for effective learning and teaching of communication, language and literacy including:

• providing opportunities for children to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings and build up relationships with adults and each other;

• giving opportunities to share and enjoy a wide range of rhymes, music, songs, poetry, stories and non-fiction books;

• providing time and opportunities to develop spoken language through conversations between children and adults in small groups, with particular awareness of, and sensitivity to, the needs of children learning English as an additional language, using their home language when appropriate;

• providing time and opportunities to develop their phonological awareness through small group teaching, when appropriate;
• planning opportunities for all children to become aware of languages and writing systems other than English, and communication systems such as signing and Braille;

• early identification of and response to any particular difficulties in children’s language development.

The Rose report and the teaching of early reading

‘The Simple View of Reading’, as described in appendix 1 of the Rose report provides a conceptual framework that clearly differentiates the two components of word recognition skills and language comprehension processes. ‘In this context, word recognition is the process of using phonics to recognise words; language comprehension the process by which word information, sentences and discourse are interpreted: a common process is held to underlie comprehension of both oral and written language’ http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/phonics/report.pdf. Within this framework, it is accepted that neither component is sufficient on its own; however, successful phonic work for word recognition is a time-limited activity whereas language comprehension processing continues throughout life. It therefore follows that when practitioners and teachers are undertaking reading activities, including Shared reading, they need to think carefully about which aspect or aspects of reading they are intending to focus on.

Figure 2: The simple view of reading

![Diagram showing the simple view of reading with two dimensions: Language comprehension processes and Word recognition processes. The top-right quadrant shows good language comprehension with good word recognition, the top-left quadrant shows good language comprehension with poor word recognition, the bottom-right quadrant shows poor language comprehension with good word recognition, and the bottom-left quadrant shows poor language comprehension with poor word recognition.](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/phonics/report.pdf)
Teachers and practitioners need to understand the implications of this conceptual framework, particularly:

- the cognitive processes involved in the development of both accurate word recognition skills and language comprehension;
- the fact that children may not necessarily show equal performance or progress in each dimension;
- careful assessment of children's performance and progress in each dimension will help them identify children's learning needs and guide further teaching;
- different kinds of teaching are needed to develop word recognition skills from those that foster the comprehension of written and spoken language.

This paper aims to clarify how teachers and practitioners can use Shared reading to teach these two distinct sets of skills.

The functions of Shared reading
Shared reading has a number of specific functions in the teaching of early reading.

Firstly, it inducts the child into the world of story, meaning and response. Through sharing texts, the child learns to participate in reading stories, poetry and non-fiction both through individually responding and by sharing in a collective response to the text, using his or her imagination to anticipate, empathise, visualise and animate the content. In addition, there may well be emotional responses to discuss. The adult models and prompts these responses and, in time, the child internalises them. With an accumulation of experience over time, children are able to make comparisons, to begin to predict possible outcomes and resolutions and bring their own experiences to bear in making sense of texts.

Shared reading provides an opportunity for children to engage with the language of the written word, not only expanding their vocabulary, but also experiencing the differences between the written and the spoken word within a rich context of high-quality texts. Children begin to develop a sense of the authorial voice and can extend their speaking and listening skills through discussion of specific aspects of vocabulary and stylistic features, and through drama and role play. They explore the relationship between illustrations and texts, identifying how skilled artwork adds to meaning and enjoyment, and learn to appreciate that others may 'see' things differently. Sharing texts is part of belonging to a culture in which stories and messages have value and deserve attention.

Secondly, Shared reading provides multiple opportunities for teaching early reading behaviours. The recognition that print conveys meaning, the left to right directionality of English text, 1:1 correspondence – a spoken word represented by a word of print – the difference between words and letters, and the purpose of punctuation all have to be understood if young children are to become independent readers of English. Explicitly talking about these features may be especially important for some children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), and for children whose experience of books is very limited.

Thirdly, Shared reading provides opportunities to focus on the application of decoding skills on carefully selected occasions. The initial reading of a new shared text should focus on meaning and response and should be mainly uninterrupted. The focus for subsequent readings will be determined by the needs of the group of children.

The practitioner or teacher will need to carefully consider the purpose of each session, the relevant learning objectives and the opportunities the selected text provides to support this work.

If the purpose of part of the session is to encourage children to apply their phonic skills, directing their attention to phonics as the first strategy for decoding unknown words is vital. This will be preceded by the teacher modelling the strategy. Care needs to be taken not to entice children
away from using their phonic knowledge by prompting the use of other less reliable strategies, e.g. looking at the illustrations, re-reading the sentence, saying the first sound and guessing what might ‘fit’. Although these strategies might result in intelligent guesses, none of them is sufficiently reliable and can, in fact, divert children’s attention, prolonging the word-solving process and lessening their overall understanding. Children who routinely adopt alternative cues for reading unknown words later find themselves stranded when texts become more demanding and meanings less predictable. The best chance of developing independence lies in securing phonics as the first strategy when tackling unfamiliar words and using other strategies to confirm their attempts. This is a subtle but absolute difference between the use of phonics as the first strategy for decoding unknown words and the multi-cue approach as suggested by the Searchlights model.

In deciding which words to focus on for teaching decoding in Shared reading sessions, it is essential that teachers take into account the different stages of phonics knowledge and skills which the children are currently at. Other opportunities for modelling and practising the application of phonics should be provided within daily discrete phonic sessions and in Guided reading sessions, where the text will be carefully matched to the children’s independent reading level.

Beginner readers need to learn that there are some common words that occur frequently in written texts and are not completely phonically decodable, e.g. the, here, was, come. These are sometimes referred to as ‘tricky words,’ ‘high frequency words’ or ‘sight vocabulary’, and teachers must ensure that children’s attention is drawn to these words whenever it is appropriate in Shared reading sessions. Use of the words can be reinforced through Shared writing sessions to increase the frequency of children’s exposure to them.

Selecting texts to use in Shared reading sessions
which focus on developing decoding skills

It will often be possible for teachers and practitioners to use words, phrases and sometimes whole sentences from a Big Book or other enlarged texts to demonstrate the skill of applying phonic knowledge and blending phonemes to read words which are decodable, and which match the children’s current stage of phonic knowledge. However, teachers and practitioners can also make good use of the multiple opportunities that are readily available throughout the day in Year R and Year 1 to use homemade reading material, such as labels, captions, records of activities and temporary displays from all areas of the curriculum. Access to a digital camera provides the additional potential to add photographs to these short pieces of writing, and such personalisation can motivate young children to engage with written texts and understand their different purposes. Such pieces will often include high-frequency words that are not phonically regular and which the children must learn to recognise automatically. Examples from a typical classroom might include:

- captions for a recount of an outing, e.g. we went on the bus;
- labels for children’s work, e.g. this is Dylan’s box;
- captions for interactive displays, e.g. my cress is in this pot. Can you see the stems?
- Captions for photographs of an event such as a visit by firefighters, e.g. Iqbal had a go, but Celine got wet!

Fourthly, Shared reading can be a vehicle for extending children’s understanding of what is being read, that is their skills of comprehension. If the focus for the session is the development of comprehension it will be important for the teacher to model various strategies over time with different texts, so that children begin to internalise these strategies in order to apply them in their independent reading. It is important not to model too many strategies in a session as this may have the opposite effect from that which is intended and confuse the children rather than clarifying their understanding.
In the ‘Understanding reading comprehension’ flyers (DfES 2005) you will find numerous examples of comprehension strategies, summarised here as approaches that can be used before, during and after reading.

**Before reading**
- Activating prior knowledge / prediction.

**During reading**
- Constructing images (visualisation, drawing, drama).
- Questioning, including children generating their own questions, hot-seating, focus journals, questioning at different levels (literal, deductive and inferential, evaluative).

**After reading**
- Text-structure analysis, such as story maps and structural organisers.
- Sequencing texts.
- Summarising.

**Conclusion**
- In undertaking Shared reading, the key principle for teachers and practitioners to observe is the need to be clear about the purpose and learning objective, and not to confuse beginning readers by using Shared reading to teach word recognition and phonics alongside comprehension within the same short teaching session.