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# Text Talk: Capturing the benefits of read-aloud experiences for young children

*Keeping important text ideas in focus and scaffolding children's responses and ideas are keys to successful read-alouds.*

**C**oncern about young children's language development has recently centered on the large individual differences among children in vocabulary and comprehension abilities as they begin school (Biemiller, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995). The goal of the project we describe here is to enhance young children's language and comprehension abilities through in-depth and extensive experiences listening to and talking about stories read to them.

Of course reading aloud to children has been pursued at home and in schools for centuries, and indeed is probably the most highly recommended activity for encouraging language and literacy (Adams, 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Goldfield & Snow, 1984). Yet studies do not always show strong effects from reading aloud (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994). The issue at hand is to discern what makes read-aloud experiences effective for enhancing children's language development.

This article starts with consideration of what the research literature suggests about the kinds of texts and kinds of talk that are most beneficial for read-aloud experiences. We then discuss what we learned from observations of kindergarten and first-grade teachers reading to students. Next we provide an overview of Text Talk, an approach to read-alouds directed toward enhancing young children's ability to construct meaning. This section includes examples of teacher/student interactions and suggests aspects of reading aloud that need attention in order to make these experiences more effective for children's literacy development.

## What kind of texts?

Texts that are effective for developing language and comprehension ability need to be conceptually challenging enough to require grappling with ideas and taking an active stance toward constructing meaning. The point is that young children can handle challenging content. Yet the limits of young children's developing word recognition ability make it difficult to provide challenging content in the books they read on their own. However, because young children's aural comprehension ability outstrips their word recognition competence, challenging content can be presented to young children from book selections that are read aloud.

## What kind of talk?

Researchers suggest that the most valuable aspect of the read-aloud activity is that it gives children experience with decontextualized language, requiring them to make sense of ideas that are about something beyond the here and now (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Heath, 1983; Snow, 1993; Snow & Dickinson, 1991; Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, & Kurland, 1995). As Donaldson (1978) pointed out,

children come to school well able to think and reason about the world in situations that make human sense to them. What they have to learn to do in school is to think and reason in "disembedded contexts"...to use symbol systems and deal with representations of the world. (pp. 88-89)

The key to experiences with decontextualized language that make them valuable for future literacy seems to lie in not merely listening

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to book language, but in talking about the ideas. Cochran-Smith (1984), Heath (1983), and Snow and her colleagues (Snow, 1993; Snow & Dickinson, 1991; Snow et al., 1995) all highlight the role of the talk that surrounds book reading in becoming literate. According to Snow, quality talk around books can promote familiarity with

relatively rare vocabulary, understanding the lexical and grammatical strategies for adjusting to a nonpresent audience, identifying the perspective of the listener so as to provide sufficient background information, and knowing the genre-specific rules for various forms of talk such as narrative and explanation. (1993, p. 15)

Evidence for the role of talking about books in enhancing children's language development comes from studies by Dickinson and Tabors (1991), Freppon (1991), Morrow (1992), and Snow et al. (1995) who concluded, for example, that "talk surrounding the text" (Morrow, p. 253) or "getting children to think about what was going on in the story" (Freppon, p. 144) were keys to literacy growth.

More specifically, Teale and Martinez (1996) concluded that the most effective talk involved encouraging children to focus on important story ideas and giving them opportunities to reflect rather than expecting a quickly retrieved answer. Relatedly, Dickinson and Smith (1994) found that talk that was "analytic in nature," requiring children to reflect on story content or language, was most beneficial.

Dickinson and Smith's (1994) and Teale and Martinez's (1996) ideas about the most effective read-aloud strategies are quite consistent. The most effective features include focusing the discussion on major story ideas, dealing with ideas as they are encountered in contrast to after the entire story has been read, and involving children in the discussion with opportunities to be reflective. However, it is clear from these investigations that the most effective read-aloud strategies are far from the most common ones.

Our observations are consistent with those of Dickinson and Smith (1994) and Teale and Martinez (1996). At the start of the project we describe here, we observed kindergarten and first-grade teachers reading to their classrooms and found that they tended not to involve children in focusing on and discussing major story ideas. Among the reasons this is the case is that in reading to young children, creating a focus

on major story ideas is not as simple as it may first appear. This is because young children tend to respond to stories by using what is easily accessible to them in contrast to the linguistic content (Neuman, 1990). Specifically, we observed how children frequently ignored text information and responded to questions on the basis of the pictures and their background knowledge. The problem is that this reduces the opportunities for children to construct meaning from decontextualized language which, as we have noted earlier, is essential for building mature literacy skills.

## What we learned from observations

*Prevalence of responding on the basis of pictures.* Vivid, delightful pictures are a hallmark of children's trade books, and children are naturally drawn to them. However, if children rely on pictures to construct their understanding of a story, they may focus on characteristics of the pictures that interfere with constructing meaning of the story. As an example, consider our observation of a teacher reading a book called *Socrates* (Bogaerts & Bogaerts, 1992) to a class of kindergartners. The book's cover shows a sweet-faced dog wearing a pair of large red glasses. The teacher indicated that the little dog was Socrates and that they would learn about him in the story, and began reading.

The story opens with a heart-wrenching description of Socrates's parents being taken away by the dog catcher and Socrates being left an orphan with no friends and no one to care for him. After this opening, the teacher stopped and asked, "What do we know about Socrates so far?" The first response was, "He needs glasses." Clearly the child ignored the linguistic content about Socrates's situation and answered on the basis of the picture. Thus this child constructed a completely different problem as the central focus of the story.

In this case, the picture was not congruent with the text content at that point. But even when pictures and text are congruent, it was our observation that children often rely on the pictures for constructing meaning and thus miss opportunities to engage in constructing meaning from the linguistic content.

Children's reliance on pictures is easy to explain, as pictures closely represent what children are accustomed to encountering in the world

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around them. They can more readily derive information from pictures in comparison to text language. As Snow and Dickinson (1991) pointed out, comprehending and finding language to express ideas that go beyond the here and now is a new and challenging experience for young children.

*Prevalence of responding on the basis of background knowledge.* Research has shown that background knowledge is a very important aspect of understanding text (Anderson et al., 1985; Beck, Omanson, & McKeown, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1992; Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979). Attention to background knowledge has certainly found its way into instruction, to the extent that teachers customarily invite children to share background knowledge related to the story being read. The goal of invoking background knowledge is to integrate it with text content in order to assist comprehension. But in our observations we found that this is not necessarily the way background knowledge is used by young children. Rather, we observed a tendency for children to respond to questions from background knowledge alone and ignore what had just been read to them from the story.

For example, the story *Curious George Takes a Job* (Rey, 1975) begins as follows, "This is George. He lived in the zoo. He was a good little monkey and always very curious. He wanted to find out what was going on outside the zoo." At this point the teacher asked, "What do we know so far about George?" and the first response was "He likes bananas." Of course, because George is a monkey he probably does like bananas. But his fondness for bananas was not stated in the story, and more importantly it does not help establish the major story concept of George as a zoo-bound monkey who wants to know what life is like in the world.

In some situations children simply took a notion from the text and drew an association to something in memory that was irrelevant or, at best, tangential to the text situation. For example, in the story *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* (Kasza, 1987) a wolf leaves food for a chicken because he's trying to fatten her up for his dinner. Unbeknownst to the wolf, the chicken is feeding her large family with the food. As the story moved to its climax the teacher began to probe the children as to whether the chicken knows the source of the food. The teacher asked, "What did she think the food was for?" and a student

replied "Poison." The teacher pressed, seeming to probe the student for reconsideration, "Did she think it was poisoned?" Several students replied "Yes," and began to discuss incidents they had heard about involving poisoned Halloween candy. This discussion took the class a considerable distance from the story ideas.

Children tend to report on their own experiences because they can more readily derive information from them in comparison to text language. However, when what they report goes too far afield, children can be distracted from the story or the inappropriate associations that they bring in may be remembered as part of the story (Neuman, 1990; Nicholson & Imlach, 1981).

*Teachers' interactions in read-alouds.* Thus far a major point has been that several things children "naturally" do in talking about a story—rely on the pictures and report their knowledge of things associated with the story—may stand in the way of their constructing meaning from story information. Now let us turn to the teacher's role in prompting children's interactions with text and the extent to which it supports constructing meaning.

In our observations of teachers reading to children, two types of interactions seemed to dominate. One was directed toward clarifying some content or unfamiliar vocabulary by asking, for example, "Does anybody know what a ukulele is?" The other appeared to be attempts to involve children in the ongoing story by asking a question about what was just read. However, these questions were virtually always phrased in ways that produced only brief answers about a detail. For example, "Harry likes everything except taking a what?" "What kind of place were Mr. and Mrs. Mallard looking for to hatch their ducklings?" The problem with such questions is that they constrain children's responses to a fact here and a detail there. Table 1 presents examples of questions we observed teachers ask while reading *Harry the Dirty Dog* (Zion, 1984), *The Mitten* (Brett, 1989), and *Brave Irene* (Steig, 1986) and the children's responses to those questions.

As can be seen, all the responses are correct, and thus it is easy for a teacher to assume that understanding is in place. But dealing with these local issues does not add up to developing understanding of a story.

**Table 1**  
**Examples of children's responses to constrained questions**

Questions	Responses
As they started scrubbing, what came off?	Dirt
What does George want to do with his friend?	Find him
How have things turned out for George, good or bad?	Good
How is George doing at his job right now?	Fine
George looks like he's in a lot of what?	Trouble
The mole found a new _____	Home
The mitten will be colored like snow, so it would be hard to what?	Find
Who needs the dress?	The duchess

### Text Talk overview

Our review of the research literature and our observations in classrooms motivated the development of Text Talk, which is an approach to read-alouds that is designed to enhance young children's ability to construct meaning from decontextualized language. This goal includes not only promoting comprehension, but also furthering children's language development.

The project began with the selection of stories for kindergarten and first grade, the development of questions for each story, and tryouts of these materials. In the second phase we implemented Text Talk in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms and worked closely with the teachers to modify and augment the interactions among the teacher, students, and text as issues arose. The school was located in an urban public school district in a high-poverty area. Seventy-five percent of the students received free or reduced-cost lunch. All the students were African American.

Text Talk interactions are based on open questions that the teacher poses during reading that ask children to consider the ideas in the story and talk about and connect them as the story moves along. Our development of Text Talk was informed by our Questioning the Author work (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997). Questioning the Author is an approach to text-based instruction that was developed around the principle of "teaching for understanding." Features of Questioning the Author align very closely with the features that Dickinson and Smith (1994) and Teale and Martinez (1996) identified as making read-aloud interactions

most effective. That is, Questioning the Author focuses on text ideas and encourages students' participation in building meaning from those ideas as they read the text. Among the major differences between Text Talk and Questioning the Author is that the latter is directed to intermediate-grade students who are reading their own texts in contrast to the focus of the current project, which is reading aloud to kindergarten and first-grade children.

The treatment of pictures and background knowledge in Text Talk was influenced by our observations, discussed earlier. In Text Talk the pictures are for the most part shown after children have constructed meaning from what has been read. When background knowledge is elicited, the teacher scaffolds children's responses to make clear the relationship of background knowledge to text ideas.

Beyond building comprehension of the specific story, Text Talk attends to children's language development in two ways. One is that the kind of questions asked elicit greater language production. The other is that Text Talk takes advantage of some of the sophisticated vocabulary found in young children's trade books by explicitly teaching and encouraging use of several words from a story after the story has been read. Table 2 provides an overview of components involved in read-aloud experiences and a description of how those components are handled in Text Talk.

### Texts

Our criteria for selecting texts were that they be intellectually challenging and provide the

**Table 2**  
**How components of reading aloud are handled in Text Talk**

Components	Text Talk approach
Selection of texts	Stories that exhibit an event structure and some complexities of events to provide grist for children to build meaning.
Initial questions	Interspersed open questions require children to describe and explain text ideas, rather than recall and retrieve words from text.
Follow-up questions	Questions scaffold students' thinking by using their initial responses to form questions that encourage elaboration and development of initial ideas.
Pictures	In general, pictures are presented after children have heard and responded to a section of text.
Background knowledge	Invitations for background knowledge are issued judiciously to support meaning building rather than encouraging students to tap into tangential experiences.
Vocabulary	Some sophisticated words are selected for direct attention after reading and discussion of the story is completed.

grist for children to explore ideas and to use language to explain ideas. In particular, in choosing stories we looked for some complexity of events, subtleties in expressing ideas, or presentation of unfamiliar ideas and topics.

Given our goal of promoting the construction of meaning from linguistic content, we sought books in which the linguistic content was primary—that is, the book did not rely too heavily on the pictures for communicating the story. A final criterion in consideration of constructing meaning was stories that exhibited an event structure rather than a series of situations, a format that is sometimes used in books for young children. Examples of this format include Seymour Simon's *Animal Fact/Animal Fable* (1979), which presents one-page essays about different animals in response to a question (e.g., Do porcupines shoot their quills when they're angry? Do goats eat tin cans?) and *Family Pictures: Cuadros de Familia* (Garza, 1990), which presents a series of pictures with extended captions explaining "what's going on" (e.g., celebrating a feast day, harvesting oranges). Although these are very attractive and interesting books for children to explore, they do not provide the extended, connected content for building meaning that is the focus of Text Talk.

### Initial questions

As noted above, we developed questions that teachers could use to initiate discussion at important points in a story. In contrast to the questions shown in Table 1, which constrain responses, questions developed for Text Talk prompt students to talk about ideas. Table 3 shows examples of Text Talk questions and the language they elicited from children collected from pilot work in kindergarten and first-grade classes. As with Table 1, the examples are drawn from read-alouds of *Harry the Dirty Dog* (Zion, 1984), *The Mitten* (Brett, 1989), and *Brave Irene* (Steig, 1986), albeit from different classrooms.

### Follow-up questions

It is important to emphasize that the kind of elaborated responses shown in Table 3 do not arise automatically from asking open-ended questions. Indeed, in our Text Talk work, we found that children initially have difficulty constructing these kinds of responses in contrast to the customary responses of a word or two. Helping students to construct meaning requires teachers to take cues from a student's initial response, which for young children is often very limited, and proceed from there. This territory between a first, likely sparse response, and an elaborated constructed response is the territory

that requires teacher effort in creating thoughtful follow-up questions to support students' construction of meaning.

For example, consider a kindergarten classroom in which the teacher was reading the story *Abiyoyo* (Seeger, 1986). After the part of the story in which Abiyoyo is introduced as "a giant called Abiyoyo...as tall as a tree and he could eat people up," the teacher asked, "Who is Abiyoyo?" Her intent was that the children describe Abiyoyo, and understand why people fear him—because he eats people. However, in the excerpt below it is clear that children do not get very far into these ideas. The discussion that ensued after the teacher's initial question "Who is Abiyoyo?" follows:

- S: A monster.  
 T: Did the story say he was a monster?  
 S: It's a big green man.  
 T: A big green man. But does the story say what the big green man was?  
 S: He's tall.  
 S: A giant.  
 T: He's a giant, and he's tall as a \_\_\_\_\_

- Class: Tree.  
 T: Tree, OK. So what's this all about?  
 S: Monsters.  
 T: What's this story all about?  
 S: Giant.

As the excerpt shows, the teacher made several attempts to get the children to expand their responses, but they did little beyond providing a word or two. Even when the teacher's questioning moved beyond focusing on Abiyoyo himself by asking "What's this story all about?" children stayed with simple one-word responses: "Monsters," "Giant."

Another kind of student response that requires consideration and careful follow up is related to a major theme of this article—children's difficulty interacting with decontextualized language. Consider, for example, a kindergarten class read-aloud of *The Giant Jam Sandwich* (Lord, 1972), a story about a town beset by a swarm of four million wasps. As the problem develops, the villagers hold a meeting to discuss how to solve their problem, but no one can come up with a solution. At this point in the story, the teacher asks, "What happened at the meeting?"

**Table 3**  
**Examples of children's responses to open questions**

Questions	Responses
How does what Harry did fit in with what we already know about him?	He doesn't really want to get clean, he just wants to stay dirty.
When the family looked out and said, "There's a strange dog in the backyard," why did they call Harry a strange dog?	Because when he got all dirty, his family didn't know who he was.
What's Harry up to now?	He decided to dig a hole and get the brush so he could wash, and then they would recognize him.
They called Harry "this little doggie." What does that tell us?	That means that they don't know that it's their doggie. They don't know its name, so they just call him little doggie.
Why do you think the children shouted, "Come quick"? It says that "the mitten swelled and bulged, but Baba's good knitting held fast." What does that mean?	Because the kids knowed that that's the dog they had. That it was strong, and she's a good knitter.
What do you think Baba meant when she said, "If you drop one in the snow you'll never find it"?	The gloves are the same color as the snow. That if you drop it in the snow it's colored like snow.
It says, "Mrs. Bobbin...was tired and had a bad headache, but she still managed to sew the last stitches in the gown she was making." What's going on?	She's sick, but she is still going to try and finish her dress.

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but the children seemed unable to deal with the just-read linguistic event that the villagers could not come up with a solution to the wasp problem. The teacher calls on three different children to answer the question, "What happened at the meeting?" but each child talks only about the general situation of the wasps in town:

S1: There was the bees.

S2: Everyone was running around the town.

S3: They were stinging them.

The teacher asked the same question again, but got a similar response:

S: Trying to sting them.

The teacher then reread the story portion about the meeting, with exaggerated expression, and repeated, "What happened at the meeting?" The next child's response was more related to the events of the meeting:

S: He's trying to get those things out of there so they don't sting.

Children's difficulty in responding to the question likely occurred because it was much easier for the children to respond to the general situation of wasps in town. That concept had already been discussed, and is more vividly imaginable than a meeting of indecisive villagers. Thus it was difficult for children to focus on and respond to the meeting and its consequence. As such examples arose, we and the teachers began to understand in a deeper way the difficulties children faced when asked to respond to decontextualized language, as much as the language may have seemed explicit and clear to us as adult readers.

As these examples illustrate, initial questions may not bring forth meaningful responses from young children. Yet simply asking more questions will not necessarily prompt richer comments. Thus a great deal of our emphasis in working with teachers as they implemented Text Talk was focused on how to follow up children's initial responses in productive ways. Several concepts were developed that seemed useful. One that was used frequently was to repeat and rephrase what children were saying. This both encouraged more elaborated language and invited other children to connect to the ideas that

were being discussed. This approach to following up children's responses confirms findings from several studies. Orsolini and Pontecorvo (1992) found that 5-year-old children's talk was more likely extended when preceded by teacher repetition and rephrasing of what students had said. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found that teachers who employed uptake—incorporating previous student responses into subsequent questions—had a strong positive effect on students' understanding of literature.

Another approach to following up children's initial responses included generic probes that prompted them to explain: "What's that all about?" "What's that mean?" We also found that when children had difficulty responding to a probe it was useful to reread the relevant portion of the text and repeat the initial question. This helped students to focus on the text language as the source for their responses. And even with all this, it takes time for students to expand their abilities to construct meaning from decontextualized language.

## Pictures

As noted earlier, during our observations we became very aware of how children often ignored the linguistic content and relied on pictures to respond to questions about a story. Thus, as we developed initial questions for Text Talk stories, we were alert to how children might use the content of pictures. There were two situations in which we deliberately decided to wait to show pictures until after reading and discussion of a story portion.

One situation was when pictures mirrored the linguistic content of a text. For example, in the story *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* (Kasza, 1987), after a wolf has been following a chicken, the text reads: "The wolf crept closer. But just as he was about to grab his prey...." The picture on this page shows the wolf on his hind feet about to pounce on the chicken. We wanted children to talk about what was happening in the story at that point, so we posed the question "What's happening?" If the children saw the picture as they were being asked that question, they certainly could ignore the linguistic content and respond just from the visual. Because we wanted them to construct their idea from the text language, we did not show the picture until students had responded.



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Another potential problematic situation with pictures was when the content of pictures was in conflict with what was going on in the text. For example, in *The Bremen-Town Musicians* (Plume, 1980) there is a section in which a dog is explaining to a donkey that he has run away because his master planned to shoot him. The donkey then suggests that the dog join him, and they leave for Bremen Town. The picture, however, shows the dog hiding behind a tree and a man with a rifle in his hand looking for him. This illustration represents part of the story that the dog was relaying to the donkey. But the idea that builds the plot of the story is that the dog and the donkey have joined forces and are on their way to Bremen Town. The vividness of the picture could well lead children to misunderstand what was happening in the story at that point. Thus, we posed the question of "What's going on?" and elicited responses before showing the picture.

Our observations of Text Talk showed us that, for the children, the format of seeing the pictures later took some getting used to, but they soon came to understand the expectations of Text Talk and became more attentive to the linguistic content as it was read. Several times when we observed teachers presenting Text Talk read-alouds early in the year, we noticed children being caught off guard, unable to answer the questions and asking to see the pictures. It struck us that they had paid little or no attention to the words and were awaiting the pictures to fill them in on the story. When children were unable to respond, the teachers would reread the portion of text and explicitly remind children to listen to the words of the story to answer the question. With this support, children were able to respond. As the implementation progressed, we noticed that the teachers became alert to the importance of timing for presenting pictures in order to keep the linguistic content primary. With this new awareness, they were surprised at the extent to which pictures were often the primary source from which children answered questions.

The use of pictures needs to be considered from the perspective that constructing meaning from text content is a major feature of what prepares one for becoming a successful reader. Thus care needs to be taken that pictures do not cause students to skip attending to the language component of stories. That is, in the course of read-

ing to children, teachers should use pictures judiciously. Often this means after some event or idea has been explained linguistically.

## Background knowledge

As noted earlier, during our initial observations we became aware of how often children responded to questions about the story based on their background knowledge alone. As we worked with teachers in Text Talk, they too became cognizant of when children were using just background knowledge rather than story information. From these experiences teachers developed ways of acknowledging a student's comment while pointing out the distinctions between their own experiences and the story. For example, following the exchange about Curious George presented earlier, the teacher responded to the child by saying, "Monkeys do like bananas, but let's think about what the story told us about George."

Additionally, consider the exchange from our earlier observation of *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* read-aloud, when children focused on the idea that the food left for the chicken might have been poisoned. When we brought this example to the teachers during a meeting about Text Talk, they had some suggestions for dealing with this type of situation. The tack they decided they would take was as follows: "We sometimes do hear about food being poisoned, especially bad people doing that at Halloween, but let's think about what's happening in the story. Why did this food get left for the chicken? Who can remind us?" Presumably children would recall that the food was left to fatten up the chicken. From here the teacher could lead children to see that the food therefore would have been good food, not poisoned.

Using the kind of exchanges noted above, teachers helped children sort out the difference between simply responding from background knowledge and responding from story information. Children need help in bringing background knowledge to bear in appropriate ways, rather than simply tapping into tangential experiences. There is evidence that readers' elaborations of knowledge and experiences that are not integrally related to text information can disrupt the process of comprehension rather than enhance it (Strang, 1967; Trabasso & Suh, 1993).

## Vocabulary

The acquisition of vocabulary is an obvious focus for any program aiming to enhance children's literacy, because of the strong, well-documented relationship that vocabulary has to reading proficiency in particular and school achievement in general (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Sternberg, 1987). Additionally, an important motivation for providing vocabulary experiences stems from the huge individual differences that exist in vocabulary size. In particular there is an enormous discrepancy between high- and low-achieving learners (Graves & Slater, 1987; Seashore & Eckerson, 1940).

Trade books are superb sources of vocabulary, and our Text Talk project takes advantage of this by explicitly emphasizing vocabulary. From 80 books (40 targeted to kindergarten and another set of 40 targeted to first grade) we identified about 1,500 words that could be taught to children. A word was considered a good candidate if it seemed likely to be unfamiliar to young children but was a concept they could identify with and use in normal conversation. We selected two to four words per story for direct teaching following the story, and thus kindergarten and first-grade children are provided instruction for approximately 100 fairly sophisticated words per grade. To illustrate the kind of words we included, Table 4 presents the words from three of the stories used in Text Talk.

The instructional activities for each word began by bringing to mind the use of the word from the story and explaining its meaning. Then students were involved with using or responding to use of the word. Each activity also included having children repeat the word so they had a phonological representation of what they were learning. The following are teachers' notes for the activity for the word *reluctant* from *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 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 [child's name] is reluctant to eat spinach?"

Our previous program of work in vocabulary (see for example, Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Perfetti, 1983) demonstrated the importance of maintaining words after initial instruction. That is, if children do not think about and use a word after initial instruction it is unlikely to become part of their vocabulary repertoire. Borrowing from our previous work, especially the "Word Wizard" device (where students earned points for seeing, hearing, or using words they had been introduced to), we developed a simple way for teachers to encourage and keep track of children's awareness of instructed words. Specifically, we created charts of the words from each story, which enabled teachers to tally each use or citing of a word. This appeared to be quite successful, as each time we visited classrooms we noticed the continuing accumulation of tallies next to words. Attention differed a great deal according to individual words. For example, the words *nuisance* and *commotion* were favorites among kindergartners, who often identified which of their classmates were being a nuisance and pointed out commotions in the classroom or hallway. Additionally, we observed and the teachers reported that often in story reading children recognized and remarked on the use of a word they had learned from an earlier story.

## Focus, monitor, and scaffold

Enhancing young children's comprehension and language capabilities is essential for promoting literacy growth. Reading aloud and discussing what is read is an important avenue for helping children deal with decontextualized language. But there are discrepancies between common classroom practices in reading aloud and those practices that have been found most effective for laying the foundation for children's future literacy capabilities. Thus, in an effort to make reading aloud more beneficial for young children, we developed Text Talk, an approach to enhancing young children's ability to build meaning from text in which the teacher intersperses reading with open questions and discussion, and follows each story with explicit attention to vocabulary.

From working with teachers as they implemented Text Talk, we can point to several con-

**Table 4**  
**Example of instructed vocabulary from three stories**

Story	Vocabulary
<i>Abiyoyo</i> (Seeger, 1986)	disappear precious foolish
<i>Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse</i> (Lionni, 1969)	adventure searched envy
<i>Amos &amp; Boris</i> (Steig, 1971)	miserable immense leisurely

cepts that can guide the development of more effective read-aloud experiences. They include the following:

- awareness of the distinction between constructing meaning of ideas in a text and simply retrieving information from the text;
- understanding the difficulty of the task young children face in gaining meaning from decontextualized language;
- designing questions that encourage children to talk about and connect ideas and developing follow-up questions that scaffold, building meaning from those ideas;
- helping students to meaningfully incorporate their background knowledge and reduce the kind of surface association of knowledge that brings forth a hodgepodge of personal anecdotes;
- awareness of how pictures can draw attention away from processing the linguistic content in a text, and thus attention to the timing of the use of pictures; and
- taking advantage of the sophisticated words found in trade books by using them as a source of explicit vocabulary activities.

Although reading a story to children is not a difficult task for a literate adult, taking advantage of the read-aloud experience to develop children's literacy is complex and demanding. Even with awareness of what makes reading aloud most effective, it is difficult to keep discussions consistently focused on the most productive features. Especially for young children, there is much to manage in conducting a good

read-aloud discussion. Key to the task is keeping important text ideas in focus while monitoring children's often limited responses and scaffolding their ideas toward constructing meaning.

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