Sharing Expository Texts with Preschool Children in Special Education

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Abstract

Although a general limited availability of expository texts currently exists in preschool special education classrooms, expository texts offer speech-language pathologists (SLPs) a rich context for addressing the language goals of preschool children with language impairment on their caseloads. Thus, this article highlights the differences between expository and narrative texts and describes how SLPs might use expository texts for targeting preschool children's goals related to listening comprehension, vocabulary, and syntactic relationships.

An important charge of the preschool classroom is to develop emergent literacy and language skills in children with and without disabilities. One context for developing emergent literacy and language skills includes shared book reading. According to the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) Report, shared book reading interventions suggests that interventions using fictional narrative texts exert a moderate effect ($d = 0.35$) on children's oral language skills (NELP, 2008). However, current educational standards, namely the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), emphasize children's exposure to and reading of expository texts in addition to narrative texts. Under the CCSS, educators are encouraged to engage children in practice with complex texts, work towards building a solid knowledge base on different topics, and help children use evidence to support their thinking. While the CCSS are implemented beginning in kindergarten, we believe using shared book reading with expository texts can expose children in preschool to the language structures of this genre early on in order to prepare them for the later reading comprehension demands they will likely face in the school-age years.

Preschool children in special education in particular access specialized services and therapies (e.g., speech-language therapy) and receive instruction targeting emergent literacy and

language skills. Of those children with disabilities receiving special education services, approximately 52% are identified special education services are identified as having language impairment as their primary disability (Carlson et al., 2008). Shared book reading of expository books with preschool children in special education offers a developmentally appropriate activity for addressing the language deficits characteristic of children with language impairment. For example, children with language impairment have an overall limited vocabulary and often lack words to signal complex relationships (McGregor, Newman, Reilly, & Capone, 2002; Montgomery, Evans, & Gillam, 2009). Given the vocabulary and different text structures inherent in expository text, it can be very appropriate to use this genre as a means for working on language skills and building content knowledge. Furthermore, empirical evidence on preschool children who are typically developing (Culatta, Hall-Kenyon, & Black, 2010) and school-age at-risk children suggests that young children are capable of understanding expository texts (Williams et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2007; Williams, Stafford, Lauer, Hall, & Pollini, 2009). Yet the majority of books present in preschool special education settings are predominantly narratives in nature or storybooks. For example, a recent study conducted by Guo, Sawyer, Justice, and Kaderavek (2013) examined the quality of the literacy environment in 54 early childhood special education classrooms. One of their findings indicated that 88.9% of classrooms had four or more narrative books, whereas only 48.1% had more than four informational books suggesting that there is limited availability of books constituting other text genres such as expository books in the classroom. This is an important finding given that access to a variety of book genres makes it possible to accommodate the reading interest of all the children in a classroom, including those with disabilities (Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993; Katims & Pierce, 1995).

Thus, the purpose of this article is to highlight the differences between expository and narrative texts and discuss how speech-language pathologists (SLPs) might take advantage of the language of expository books as a means for addressing the language goals of preschool children with language impairment on their caseloads. In particular, we will describe how SLPs can use expository texts to address language goals related to listening comprehension and responding to literal and inferential questions, expanding children's vocabulary, and extending children's understanding and use of syntactic relationships. We also provide examples of addressing these language goals within the expository picture book, *The Life Cycle of a Carrot* (Tagliaferro, 2007).

Differences Between Expository and Narrative Texts

In order to incorporate expository text in therapy with preschool children, it is important to first understand how expository texts and narrative texts differ. Expository texts provide information such as facts, explanations, and reasons for true-life phenomenon whereas narrative texts tell stories. Because of the differences in content, the presentations of these texts vary in at least three ways: text structure, language, and visual design.

Expository text organizes the text into text structures in order to show connections within the content (Dymock, 2005). For example, content that is sequential (e.g., how carrots grow) is organized into a sequencing text structure. Other text structures found in expository text include descriptive, compare-contrast, cause-effect, and problem-solution (Meyer & Ray, 2011). In general, expository text introduces a topic and then flows from subtopic to subtopic and within each subtopic different text structures may be used (Pappas, 1991; Maloch & Bomer, 2013). Alternatively, narrative text follows a predictable text structure, called story grammar, where the story provides settings, characters, plots, conflicts, and resolutions (Stetter & Hughes, 2010).

The second variation is found in the language of expository and narrative texts. In particular, vocabulary found within expository texts tends to be more technical compared to the vocabulary found within narrative texts. This is because expository text is designed to teach readers about a topic or phenomenon and there is often specific vocabulary associated with the topic (e.g., seedling, sprout). Expository text also uses signal words, or words that help readers

determine how the text is organized. For example, in a sequencing text structure, signal words might include temporal words such as: first, next, finally, or last.

Finally, the visual designs of expository and narrative texts differ. Expository texts include table of contents, headings, diagrams, and photographs whereas narrative texts use illustrations and drawings to accompany the text. The use of table of contents and headings in expository text help organize the content into subtopics and inform readers of what information is included in the text. Diagrams and photographs provide visual support to the content. For example, in the book *The Life Cycle of a Carrot* (Tagliaferro, 2007) a diagram shows the steps of a carrot's plant growth from seed to carrot.

Expository texts also create very different learning experiences compared to narrative texts. Specifically, narrative texts follow a predictable pattern and children likely have had experience with this type of text whether at school or at home. As a result, with exposure and instruction, children can pick up this pattern, including children with language impairment, although at a slower rate (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001). Expository text offers a variety of text structures and is not as predictable, so it is harder for children to comprehend. Therefore, children will need multiple exposures to these different text structures to be prepared for the expectations of school-age children (Duke, 2000). By introducing more expository text during preschool, SLPs can help guide children through the text while reading. Overall, incorporating expository text, while still including narrative text, is important—because the differences between text types allow more diversity of instruction in text structure, language, and design, while exposing children to multiple text types.

Addressing Listening Comprehension Goals Using Questions with Expository Texts

Children with special needs, such as children with language impairment, have more difficulties comprehending text, learning new vocabulary, and connecting content to their background knowledge (Gersten et al., 2001). However, evidence supports engaging children in interactive discussions, including asking open-ended questions, during shared book reading as a way to monitor and develop these skills (Whitehurst et al., 1994; Wasik & Bond, 2001). Likewise, many SLPs target answering questions as a child's goal.

Like the differences between text types, there are also differences in question types. The two primary types of questions asked are literal and inferential. Literal questions place less cognitive demand on children because the answers can be found directly in the text, whereas inferential questions require children to go beyond the text, thus creating increased cognitive demand (Zucker, Justice, Piasta, & Kaderavek, 2010). When children are asked to make an inference, they must combine what was read with what they know or have previously experienced in order to formulate a response. There are many benefits to asking this type of question. First, the child is required to use language to generate a response, as with all open-ended questions. Second, the child is encouraged to synthesize and organize the text, which means they must first comprehend what was read. And third, it encourages the use of vocabulary and background knowledge. As mentioned previously, these are all of the skills that are often difficult for children with language impairment to learn.

Expository text provides a unique opportunity to ask children inferential questions. The content of expository text is based on true-life phenomenon, so children may have prior experience with the topic. And as experience is a component to answering inferential questions, children may be able to make the connection between their background knowledge and the content using the facts presented and photographs for support more easily than in a story with fictional characters and illustrated pictures. Expository text has also been shown to promote extratextual talk, or talk outside of the text on the page. In a study by Price, van Kleeck, and Huberty (2009) expository text encouraged significantly more talk, and for longer durations of time, than narrative text during parent and child shared book reading. Additionally, the type of talk was coded, revealing that

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expository text yielded over twice as many higher-level exchanges, including asking inferential questions, than narrative text.

Although there are many ways to ask inferential questions, three types will be highlighted in this article: explanation, hypothesis, and identifying similarities and differences. An explanation question asks children to express what they know about a process, content, or definition that is outside the information presented in the book. Examples of explanation question stems include: "tell me about, how, explain," and "why". A hypothesize question asks the child to predict an outcome. These questions begin with the SLP providing evidence from the text, and then asking the question. Hypothesis question stems include "if/then" and "because". With identifying similarities and differences questions, the SLP establishes a frame of reference for the content either within the book or across books and then asks children to compare and contrast. Question stems for identifying similarities and differences include "same, different, alike, compare," and "contrast".

Table 1 displays these three types of inferential questions, question stems that SLPs might use when asking these types of questions, and examples of the kind of questions SLPs might ask during a shared book reading therapy session with children with language impairment using the expository book, *The Lifecycle of a Carrot* by Linda Tagliaferro. These questions might address general Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals aimed at children answering "what" and "why" questions during or after listening to a book or participating in an activity.

Table 1. Types and Examples of Inferential Question Use With an Expository Book.

Type of Inferential Question	Question Stems	Examples from The Life Cycle of a Carrot (Tagliaferro, 2007)
Explanation	Tell me about How Explain Why	Tell me about how a carrot plant grows. How do new seeds grow? Explain what sprout means. Why did this carrot grow flowers?
Hypothesis	If…then Because	Seeds need sunlight, soil, water, and warmth to sprout. If it is cold, what happens to the seed? If it doesn't rain, what will happen to the plant?
Identify similarities and differences	Same/Similar Different	Let's compare carrots and apples. How are they the same? How are they different?

As mentioned previously, inferential questions require higher level thinking and place greater cognitive demands on children. Because children with language impairment tend to struggle with inferential questions (Bradshaw, Hoffman, & Norris, 1998; Ford & Milosky, 2008), it is important to have a toolbox of strategies to elicit responses. For example, when asking the question, "What do you think will happen to the new seeds?" the child provides a response that is off topic, incorrect, incomplete, or no response at all, it is important to help the child develop his or her thoughts. The following strategies (see Figure 1) require varying levels of support from the SLP and varying levels of demands on the child's verbal expression (Notari-Syverson, O'Connor, & Vadasy, 2007). In particular, SLPs might (a) summarize the text by stating the important main ideas and details of the question, (b) provide hints by thinking aloud the steps to answer the question, (c) show the child pictures from the book that may help formulate the answer, or (d) ask the child to label or locate characteristics from the book related to the question by asking literal questions. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) should continue to use one or more of these strategies until the child uncovers, identifies, or uses evidence from the book to formulate a response to the question. Once the child has produced the response, it is helpful to verbally walk the child back through the answer to the inferential question.

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Figure 1. Strategies to Elicit Responses to Inferential Question.
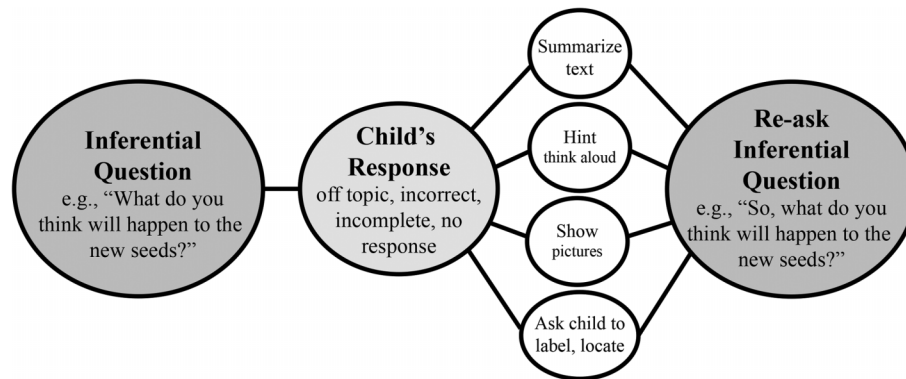
Addressing Vocabulary Goals with Expository Texts

Another common goal for young children on SLPs' caseloads includes developing children's word knowledge. In fact nearly 50% of kindergarten and first-grade children served by SLPs have IEP-goals specific to vocabulary (Schmitt, Justice, Logan, Schatschneider, & Bartlett, 2014). The prevalence of vocabulary goals on children's IEPs is likely due to documented research showing that children with language impairment tend to learn words more slowly and use fewer words than their peers (McGregor et al., 2002; Oetting, 1999). These vocabulary deficits in children with language impairment are concerning given the significant contribution of vocabulary skills to later reading comprehension (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001) and writing ability (Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, & Mackie, 2007). Using expository texts during a shared book reading context is one way to develop children's breadth and depth of word knowledge particularly because the vocabulary in expository text tends to be more specialized while the vocabulary in narrative texts tends to be more general and include mental state language not typically found in expository texts.

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who want to use expository texts to address young children's IEP goals related to vocabulary should use principles of rich vocabulary instruction which have been well-established through decades of empirical research (Beck & McKeown, 2007; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985; Robbins & Ehri, 1994). Two principles especially relevant to expository text is to select words that are important and useful and to teach words selected explicitly and directly (for a review of all principles of effective vocabulary instruction see Neuman & Wright, 2014). Vocabulary instruction that employs the thoughtful selection of words to teach and direct teaching of those words, compared to vocabulary instruction that does not employ these principles, demonstrate significant and large effect sizes (for a meta-analysis see Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, & Compton, 2009).

With regard to selecting vocabulary words, three criteria may be used for selecting vocabulary words to teach during expository book reading. First Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) tiered framework for selecting vocabulary words can be applied to expository text in the same way it is applied to narrative texts. Specifically, Tier 2 words or those words that occur frequently and are useful for learning the specific content in the expository book can be selected (e.g., describe, experiment). Tier 2 words are differentiated from Tier 1, which are high frequent, everyday words (e.g., plant, grow) and Tier 3, which are highly specified words used in a specific topic carrying content meaning (e.g., pollinate, transparent). Second, the words selected should be based on their critical importance to understanding the concepts and particular features associated with the topics (Neuman & Dwyer, 2011; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2009). Last, vocabulary words that can be defined in everyday language should be considered so that children with language impairment will eventually use these vocabulary words in their own conversation during interactive discussions and informational retellings (e.g., a "pod" is a "hard pocket with seeds inside").

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Once target vocabulary words are selected, teaching individual words to children should include explicit and extended discussion of the words during the book reading (Coyne et al., 2010; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005). Fien et al.'s (2011) implementation of rich vocabulary instruction with first-grade children with low vocabulary skills involved researchers following an instructional routine designed to increase children's comprehension of expository content. Within the context of reading aloud an expository book, researchers would: "(a) say and repeat the target vocabulary word, (b) say and practice the definition, (c) discuss examples and non-examples related to the word, and (d) have an extended conversation about the word" (p. 310). Thus, a similar routine might be applied to explicit discussion of vocabulary words with preschool children with language impairment during shared book reading of an expository picture book.

Using our example of *The Life Cycle of a Carrot,* the word "sprout" as a verb is an important vocabulary word in the book for understanding the sequence of how a carrot plant grows. Using the routine above, explicit discussion of the word "sprout" during shared book reading might look like the following:

> "That sentence has an important word in it, 'sprout.' Let's read that sentence again with the word 'sprout' in it. 'Carrot seeds need water and warmth to sprout.' 'To sprout' means to begin to grow. Look, this picture shows a green stem beginning to grow up through the dirt. The stem is coming from the seed underground. I'm going to read this sentence again. I'm going to use 'begin to grow' in place of 'sprout.' Carrot seeds need water and warmth to 'begin to grow'. What does sprout mean? Let's say sprout together."

Addressing Syntactic Relationship Goals using Expository Texts

In addition to semantics, young children on SLPs' caseloads also frequently have goals related to syntax, most likely because difficulty with the understanding and use of language structures is one of the more salient characteristics of children with language impairment (LI; Montgomery et al., 2009). Specifically, research shows that children with LI use shorter sentences, more simple sentence structures, and use fewer words to signal complex relationships compared to children with typical language skills (Bishop, 1982; Bishop & Donlan, 2005; Rice et al., 2010; Van der Lely, 1998). As mentioned earlier, one of the differentiating features of expository books compared to narrative texts includes the variety of ways information is organized in an overall pattern to express complex relationships.

Five of the most common types of organizational patterns or text structures include description, sequence, compare-contrast, cause-effect, and problem-solution (Meyer & Ray, 2011). The means by which these organizational patterns are signaled is through specific language structures such as temporal order words including "first, next, last" for sequence and comparative conjunctions such as "but" and "although" for compare and contrast. Table 2 displays each text structure and its associated language structures. While there are more sophisticated language structures associated with each text structure, we included those structures in Table 2 we deemed developmentally appropriate for preschool-age children.

*Table 2. Text Structures and their Associated Signal Words.*

Text Structure	Signal Word Examples
Description	Red (colors), round (shapes), large (sizes), smooth (texture)
Sequence	First, second, next, before, after, then, now, today, steps
Compare-and-Contrast	Same, similar, different, but, also
Cause-and-Effect	Because, cause, effect, if/then
Problem-and-Solution	Prevent, problem, solve, make better, help

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Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who are interested in addressing therapy goals related to syntactic relationships such as "After listening to a story or participating in an activity, student will order two or more events sequentially, with one verbal or visual prompt, with 80% accuracy in 4 out of 5 trials" might find expository texts especially amenable to working on such goals. Using the book, *The Life Cycle of a Carrot* (Tagliaferro, 2007) again, the overall organization of the book is sequential because it provides a step-by-step account of how a carrot seed grows. Therefore, SLPs might model and use target language structures, or signal words, in their questions to students while reading such as,

> "*First* you plant a carrot seed. *Then* what happens?" Or you might ask open-ended questions that attempt to elicit the language structures from the child such as, "Let's talk about growing a carrot plant. My turn first. *First*, you plant the carrot seed. Thomas, now it's your turn."

In addition, graphic organizers can be used to model and elicit language structures. Because *The Life Cycle of a Carrot* (Tagliaferro, 2007) includes a sequence or steps, a graphic organizer as depicted in Figure 2 might be used with the boxes representing the steps of the growing plant and the arrows representing the language structures such as "first, next, then, and finally." Because preschool age children are most likely unfamiliar with graphic organizers, it is important to model how to use the graphic organizers and use them repeatedly to retell the information from the book. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) might gather four pictures from the book, one picture representing each step and cut it into a square. Then they might place the pictures in the corresponding boxes and tell the children that they are going to tell the steps of how a carrot plant grows using the pictures and arrows. Point to the arrows while modeling and tell the children the arrow means "next" (e.g., "First you plant a seed in the soil. Next, the seed sprouts"). Modeling and using graphic organizers as part of a larger expository book reading experience with preschool age children has shown to be an effective strategy for increasing children's comprehension and expression of language structures associated with two text structures, compare-contrast, and problem-solution (Culatta et al., 2010). As a result, expository books can be one effective context for addressing children's language goals related to syntax and language structures.

Figure 2. Graphic Organizer for Sequence Text Structure.
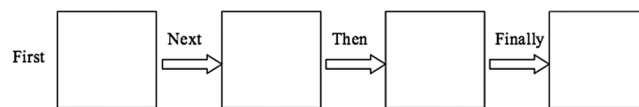
Conclusion

As discussed, current practice in preschool special education classrooms includes little exposure to expository texts, although this practice is growing in large part due to implementation of the CCSS. Expository shared book reading, compared to shared book reading with narrative texts, offers SLPs a novel and innovative context for addressing important language goals on preschool children's IEPs such as responding to higher-level questions, vocabulary, and syntactic relationships. Children with special needs such as language impairment need explicit and active instruction and practice with the structures and content of a variety of texts including those that are expository in nature to make significant improvements in language and emergent literacy skills. Thus, SLPs are encouraged to embrace expository books as a means for addressing language goals with children they serve on their caseloads. Using expository shared book reading can provide a purposeful and systematic approach for targeting language and expository text skills for preschool children in special education classrooms.

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