Engaging Readers, Increasing Comprehension, and Building Skills: The Power of Patterned Books

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Abstract

Reading comprehension requires thoughtful interactions between the reader, the text, and the author. The author may assist the reader in building meaning by creating purposefully crafted conversations that are organized into predictable patterns also known as patterned books. In this article, three predictable patterns found within children's text are discussed.

Reading comprehension, also notably referred to as "the essence of reading" (Durkin, 1993), is an active and multifaceted-cognitive process that requires intentional and thoughtful interactions between the reader, the text, and the author (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). Not only do these three sources contribute to the meaning, but the context in which the interaction takes place also influences the transaction that occurs (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). This transaction has been described as a partnership — one in which the reader supplies prior knowledge and actively engages with the text and the author (Zipprich, Grace, & Grote-Garcia, 2009).

The author may assist the reader with building meaning by creating purposefully crafted conversations that are organized in predictable patterns also known as patterned books. Patterned books engage readers on various levels because they "contain a repeated linguistic or story grammar pattern that English language learners (ELL) or elementary students with learning disabilities (LD) in areas of reading can use to support their reading" (Zipprich, Grace, & Grote-Garcia, 2009 p. 294). Patterned books have also been reported to be effective instructional tools for students who are autistic and are often challenged with language and integrating aspects of communication to gain meaning in social situations (Gately, 2008). This increased support is often found within patterned books.

In this article, three predictable patterns found within children's text are discussed. Popular titles and classroom activities are given as examples. The featured texts are recognized by the International Reading Association (IRA, 2011, 2012, & 2013) as books "children really enjoy reading" (2012, p.1) and they can be found on IRA's 2011, 2012, or 2013 *Children's Choice Reading List*.

Each of these lists reflects the reading choices of 12,500 school children from different regions of the United States (IRA, 2013).

Patterned Books as Instructional Tools

Readers who comprehend well use a number of strategies such as activating prior knowledge, generating questions, drawing inferences, creating summaries, and identifying the text structure (NICHD, 2000; Pressley, 2000; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002). In fact, research from the past thirty-five years suggests that comprehension is enhanced when the text is organized into a well-known structure (Kintsch, Mandel, & Kozminsky, 1977; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Thorndyke, 1977). Zipprich, Grace, and Grote-Garcia (2009), reminds us that "the idea behind instruction with patterned books is that the hierarchical components represent frames or patterns that readers can use to store information in long-term memory, thus increasing comprehension" (p. 294). For example, Wilson (2011) uses rhyme to craft a predictable conversation that features a fluent rhythm in *Bear's Loose Tooth*—

> From the cave in the forest came a MUNCH, MUNCH, CRUNCH as Bear and his friends all nibbled on their lunch. Bear savored every bite. He gulped and he gobbled. Then there in his mouth something wiggled, and it wobbled" (Wilson, 2011, p. 1-2).

This purposefully crafted conversation, or rhythmic pattern, is continued throughout the book and serves as a scaffolding device that supports the reader with word identification, fluency, and ultimately comprehension. Readers of *Bear's Loose Tooth* are further guided by the circular pattern in which the author has structured the conversation. This circular pattern includes Bear's tooth becoming loose, his various friends attempting to assist him, and then finally losing his tooth. In addition, Bear's adventure returns full circle when, "he woke in the morning and found the sweet treat. Bear's friends came for breakfast. They sat down to eat. Bear gulped and he gobbled, and he felt something wobble….Uh-oh! Bear's loose tooth!"(Wilson, 2011, p.29-30). Readers of *Bear's Loose Tooth* are left to conclude that the spiraling story will take place once again.

Are patterned texts helpful learning tools for all students, including those at-risk or who have learning disabilities? The research says, yes. In an evaluation of multiple instructional programs, Williams (2005) suggests that "at risk children in the primary grades can achieve gains in comprehension, including the ability to transfer what they have learned to novel texts, when they are given highly structured and explicit instruction that focuses on text structure" (p. 6). Similar findings are reported in a meta-analysis of strategies used to improve the reading comprehension skills of students with learning disabilities. In the research findings, Sencibaugh (2007) reports that, two important findings emerged from the synthesis: (a) auditory/ language dependent strategies have a greater impact on the reading comprehension skills of students with learning disabilities compared to visually

dependent strategies and (b) questioning strategies involving self-instruction and paragraph restatements along with text-structure-based strategies yield the most significant outcomes" (p. 6).

Not only do pattern books engage readers and increase comprehension, the interaction with the text also assist in building necessary skills such as phonological awareness and reading fluency. This is because the repeated linguistic patterns found in many patterned books provide opportunities for readers to play with language. For example, rhyming books such as *Bear's Loose Tooth* (Wilson, 2011) offer playful opportunities for children to hear the rhythm and prosody of language. The ability to recognize and manipulate the rhythm and sounds of language, also known as phonological awareness, is an early literacy skill that is necessary for reading success (NICHD, 2000). Likewise, prosody of language (the use of expression, phrasing, and intonation to convey meaning) has a symbiotic relationship with reading engagement, comprehension, and fluency. It is through these playful opportunities that a deeper understanding of reading fluently can be experienced. Pikulski and Chard (2005) argue that

> reading words, particularly reading them fluently, is depended on familiarity with them in their oral form. If the syntactic and meaning aspects of the word are to be activated, they must be part of what the reader knows through oral language development (p. 514).

These forms of play are significant factors for an emerging comprehension in young readers. For many emergent readers, fluency relies on the multiple exposures to appropriate text structures and consistent interactive opportunities to connect the printed word with their understanding of the role of oral language. Children are experienced at using "interactive play" at an early age to build an understanding of "world" and life stories through pretending and inventing (Dooley, 2011, p. 175). Evolving this schema into literary play with the text is a logical continuation of a readers early literacy experiences.

Three Common Text Patterns

In this section, the three predictable patterns of circle-tales, rhyming text, and repetitious stories are described. In addition, popular titles and classroom activities are explored for each pattern. The featured texts are also featured on IRA's 2011, 2012, or 2013 *Children's Choice Reading List* and reflect the reading choices of 12,500 school children from different regions of the United States (IRA, 2013).

Circle-tale Patterned Books

Circle-tale patterned books are typically adventurous stories in which, "the main character or characters leave from a starting point and go off on a great adventure…[which,] terminates back at the original origin" (Zipprich, Grote-Garcia, & Cummins, 2007). Below is a list of the circle-tale patterned books that were included in IRA's 2011, 2012, and 2013 *Children's Choice Reading Lists*.

2011
- Litwin, E. (2010). *Pete the cat: I love my white shoes.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Willems, M. (2010). *City dog, country frog.* New York, NY Hyperion.

2012
- Bliss, H. (2011). *Bailey.* New York, NY: Scholastic Press.
- Kann, V. (2011). *Silverlicious.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Long, L. (2011). *Otis and the tornado.* New York, NY: Philomel.
- Numeroff, L.J. (2011). *If you give a dog a donut.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Wilson, K. (2011). *Bear's loose tooth.* New York, NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books

2013
- Stower, A. (2012). *Silly doggy!* New York, NY: Orchard Books
- Willems, M. (2012). *The duckling gets a cookie?* New York, NY: Hyperion.

Readers of circle-tale patterned books can increase their recalling of story events by participating in activities that explicitly draw their attention to the story structure. For example, *Silverlicious* (Kann, 2011) tells the story of a young girl named Pinkalicious, who has lost her sweet tooth. With great concern for her inability to taste sweets, Pinkalicious writes a letter to the Tooth Fairy requesting help. As a clever twist to the story, Kann creates a chain of responses from the Cupid, the Easter Bunny, and a Christmas Elf. Finally when the Tooth Fairy responds to Pinkalicious' request, the story returns full circle and Pinkalicious discovers the source of true sweetness.

For this story and other circle-tales, a linear timeline does not accurately reflect the story structure. Instead, consider creating a retelling that is circular in nature with a "timecircle" (creatively named by a second-grade reader). Timecircles assist readers with rebuilding the story events in circular patterns to retell the rounded structure and to explore the author's purpose for writing in this pattern. Figure 1 provides an example of a timecircle for *Silverlicious.*

Analyzing the circular structure of the text can lead readers to build a deeper understanding of the character's journey. In this particular text, Kann (2011) has Pinkalicious return to the onset of her problem to emphasis that the answer to her problem rested within her, even at the beginning of the story, and throughout each story event. Kann did not explicitly state this message; instead, the circular structure guides the reader in inferring it. Circular text patterns play a very important role in creating deeper messages within stories.

Rhyming Patterned Books

Rhyming patterned books provide opportunities for children to hear the rhythm of language. As children gain this ability, they also begin to develop phonemic awareness — the ability to take notice of, recognize, and manipulate the individual sounds of speech. Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the "two best school-entry predictors of how well children

will learn to read during the first 2 years of instruction" (NICHD, 2000, p. 7). A list of the rhyming books featured on IRA's 2011, 2012, and 2013 *Children's Choice Reading Lists* is provided.

2011
- Litwin, E. (2010). *Pete the cat: I love my white shoes.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

2012
- Beaumont, K. (2011). *Shoe-la-la!* New York, NY: Scholastic Press.
- Litwin, E. (2011). *Pete the cat: Rocking in my school shoes.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Wilson, K. (2011). *Bear's loose tooth.* New York, NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

2013
- Rosenthal, A.K. (2011). *Plant a kiss.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Schwartz, C.R. (2012). *The three ninja pigs.* New York, NY: Putnam Juvenile.

Rhyming patterned books naturally guide readers to read with rhythm, phrasing, and expression. Therefore, they are great tools for fluency instruction. For example, in *Pete the Cat: Rocking in my School Shoes* (2011) author Litwin introduces readers to a rhythmic beat on the very first page — "Here comes Pete strolling down the street, rocking red shoes on his four furry feet" (Litwin, 2011, p. 1). This rhythmic pattern provides a guide for chunking meaningful phrases and encourages the reader to engage in increased expression.

Not only do rhyming patterned books encourage readers to read with greater fluency, but they can also assist in word recognition because rhyming patterned books provide opportunities to practice applying multiple cueing systems. For example, if the teacher were to read "here comes Pete strolling down the …"(Litwin, 2011, p.1), listeners would use the rhythmic pattern, syntactic structure of the sentence, and the semantic evidence of the story to generate the word, "street". This activity reinforces the idea that skilled readers depend on a variety of cueing systems while interacting with the text and the author.

Repetitious Patterned Books
Repeated linguistic patterns and repetitive story events assist readers with predicting subsequent words, phrases, sentences, or even story events. They also offer opportunities for developing readers to engage in familiar dialogue. Consequently, repetitious patterned books "are manageable for emergent readers, struggling readers, and ELL students" (Zipprich, Grote-Garcia, & Cummins, 2007). A list of the repetitious patterned books from IRA's *2011, 2012,* and *2013 Children's Choice Reading List* is provided below.

2011
- Willems, M. (2010). *City dog, country frog.* New York, NY: Hyperion.

2012
- Litwin, E. (2010). *Pete the cat: I love my white shoes.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

2013

- Litwin, E. (2012). *Pete the cat and his four groovy buttons.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

In *City Dog, Country Frog*, Willems (2010) tells the story of City Dog traveling to the country to visit his friend, Country Frog during the spring, summer, fall, and winter. In the beginning of the tale, the characters meet in the spring as Country Frog sits on a rock. When City Dog questions Country Frog about his actions, Country Frog replies that he is waiting for a friend, "but you'll do" (p. 4). Each of City Dog's repeated journeys to the Country to visit Country Frog is accompanied by familiar phrases and repeated sentences. The story also unravels into a circular pattern – one in which City Dog meets a new friend and the reader can assume that the story of this new friendship is accompanied by the same familiar phrases and repeated sentences.

Oftentimes the repeated structure of the text can be used to discover hidden messages. These messages can be discovered by combining the text structure, the content of the story, and the reader's prior knowledge. To assist readers in this process, we have created the Hidden Message Map. On this map, readers write the repeated words, phrases, or events. They also write a brief summary of the story and their prior knowledge of content related to the story. The reader then combines these three pieces of information to discover possible hidden messages. Figure 2 displays a completed Hidden Message Map which is a graphic organizer used to scaffold this process.

Through this scaffolding process, the literary conversation between the reader and the author is extended. The critical interaction to uncover the hidden message opens a dialogue between the reader's opinions about the character's situation and the author's written words. From this conversation, the reader forms a "critical/analytical stance" about the reasons for the character's problems, resolutions, and possibilities not specifically addressed by the author (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001, p. 381). Repetitious pattern books offer the opportunity for the reader to build personal value for the reading process through the use of deductive reasoning based on their prior knowledge and personal opinions.

Final Thoughts

Teachers who use patterned books have an opportunity to model and scaffold comprehension building processes used by proficient readers. When considering the structured format of patterned text, all readers are offered fluency and comprehension support. When teachers provide repeated exposure to the text, readers gain awareness and sensitivity to the unique text structure. It is the very nature of patterned books which provides a friendly environment for readers to become involved in the meaning-making process through the rhyme, repetition, and circular story pattern.

Patterned books engage readers, increase comprehension, and assist readers in building necessary skills. They provide readers with the

opportunity to socialize with the text through the act of repeated exposure to words, phrases, or events. With patterned books, simple text becomes a journey of traveling back to where the reader began (Circle-tale pattern), a rhythm for conversation building (Rhyming pattern), or a mystery to uncover the "big" picture found among the recurrent events (Repeated pattern). With instructional tools such as Timecircles or Hidden Message Maps, teachers can assist readers in building meaning-making relationships with books. Additionally, the use of these graphic organizers provide structure for emerging readers and highlights that fluent and engaged readers are in an active process of thinking about what the text reveals. Furthermore, the thoughtful and purposefully crafted conversations offered through patterned books between the author, reader, and teacher enhances the reading comprehension partnership.

Figure 1. Example of a Timecircle for *Silverlicious* (Kann, 2011). A young reader created this timecircle to represent the events in *Silverlicious* (Kann, 2011).
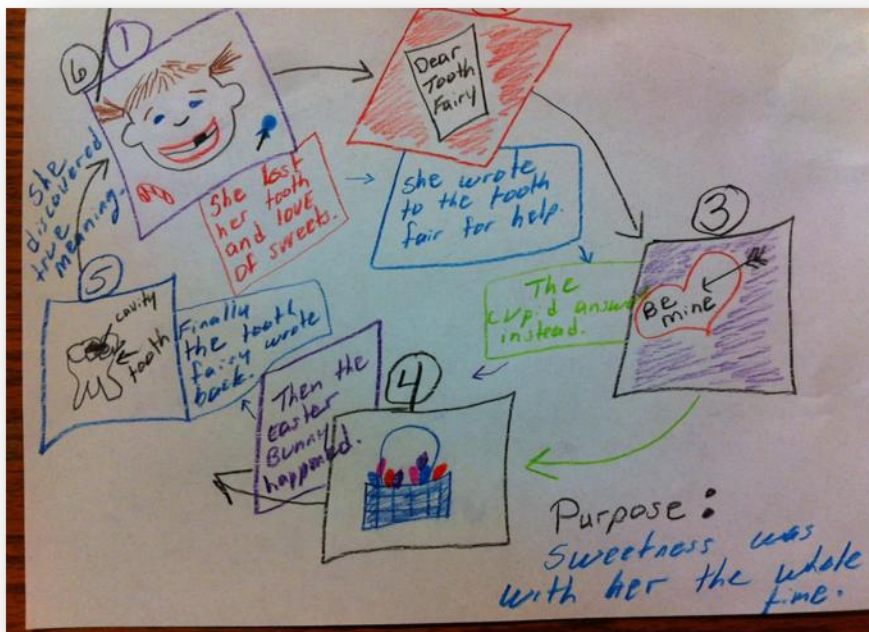
Figure 2. Example of a Hidden Message Map created by a reader completed to identify possible hidden messages

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