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Building Language and Literacy at the Same Time: Strategies for Classroom and Home

By Pamela Luft

As teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents, we recognize the importance of providing deaf and hard of hearing children with full access to the languages around them. Language is the primary means by which children acquire knowledge of the world and academic content to become successful adults. Additionally, it allows us to make and maintain friendships and to engage with others in working and participating in the community. We have also seen the poor outcomes that result when children don't have full access to language; reading and academic achievement remain far below intellectual capabilities.

To help our deaf and hard of hearing students attain grade-level skills, we can take advantage of the interrelationships between language and literacy and help students gain language and literacy skills at the same time. The Continuum of Reading Activities (described by French, 1999) provides us with strategies that allow us to advance students' language development and address core literacy standards (Ohio Department of Education, 2017; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).

This continuum consists of four steps:

1. **Teacher-led reading aloud:** Teachers read to students using the students' preferred language and communication modality to engage them in the text.
2. **Shared reading:** Teachers ask students to read with them and share their decision making as they negotiate the text.

Photos by Matthew Vita, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center



Left: Teacher-led read-alouds help young students engage in the text.

3. **Guided reading:** Teachers divide text into segments. Students individually predict what will happen, then amend and discuss their predictions after reading each segment.
4. **Independent reading:** Students read independently across a range of genres and topics, with teachers offering occasional support, if needed.

When these steps are followed sequentially, they provide a gradual release of the teacher's involvement as students read with increasing independence (Hall et al., 2021). The interactive activities implicit in the Continuum have been effective in increasing students' reading independence, including the reading independence of students who struggle (Hall et al., 2021). The gradual release of teacher responsibility—often abbreviated GRR—includes:

- **Initially ... explanation and modeling:** Teachers retain primary

responsibility for demonstrating key skills but may probe and ask students to respond.

- **Then ... guided practice:** Teachers begin to shift responsibility for learning, decoding, and comprehending to the students, providing additional explanation, modeling, scaffolding, and peer support as needed.

- **Finally ... independent practice:** Students apply new skills and strategies without assistance from peers or teachers (Hall et al., 2021).

The four steps of the Continuum support the teacher's gradual move from guidance and modeling of skills and cognitive processes to sharing or supported reading and full student use of independent skills and strategies (see page 38). This process utilizes peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher interactions that promote full language fluency across all communication modalities and

Language is the primary means by which children acquire knowledge of the world and academic content to become successful adults.



Left: During shared reading, teachers ask students to read, sign with them, and share their decision making as they negotiate the text.

teacher and peer interactions. These procedures should be applied equally to nonfiction as well as fiction to prepare students for textbook reading that will intensify after the third grade and that often are neglected (National Council of Teachers

of English, 2023;

Zakariya, 2015). These strategies can help students with mathematics, science, social studies, or social science texts. Collaboration among all teachers in the use of these strategies will allow for shared approaches that can increase student achievement in all academic areas. The use of student-centered topics of interest is an important means for increasing students' motivation and engagement (Wiggins & McTighe,

language preferences. At the same time, students' individual language, reading, and cognitive skills are strengthened and refined.

The Continuum supports all learners—those who are just beginning to read, those who struggle, those who are developing and maturing, and those with and without disabilities (Luft, 2023). The teacher-led activities support increasing amounts of shared and independent reading while also providing students with multiple opportunities for social learning and language use. As texts expand in length and content, activities based in the Continuum provide increasing linguistic and cognitive challenges, all of which are mediated and scaffolded through teacher and peer interactions.

Shared and guided reading prepares students to take leadership roles in expressing and discussing their skills and strategies while they become increasingly independent readers. As teachers combine these activities with interactive and

dialogic bridging and directed reading and thinking activities, students build toward full independence, all the while expanding and refining their language skills and cognitive development.

Continuum strategies emphasize student participation and class-wide interaction to facilitate ongoing instructional engagement. These strategies provide increasing linguistic and cognitive challenges, all of which are mediated and scaffolded through

Right and far right: Shared and guided reading prepares students to take on leadership roles while they become increasingly independent readers.



Right: In independent reading, students read independently across a range of genres and topics with minimal teacher support.

2018).

Parents may provide similar activities at home. With guidance and encouragement from teachers, parents can begin with read-/think-alouds. As their children develop reading skills, parents can use shared and guided reading to discuss meanings. Families should be encouraged to talk with their children about their texts, even as the children become independent readers.

These strategies support the language and literacy development of deaf and hard of hearing children. They support meaningful and stimulating interactions through bridging and scaffolding, from beginning to well-established skills, and they are effective for deaf and hard of hearing students with and without disabilities. They allow them to engage socially with their peers, family members, teachers, and other adults to build language, reading, and cognitive skills—and to become successful adults.



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Continuum of Reading Activities: An In-Depth Look

By Pamela Luft

Step 1: Teacher-Led Read-/Sign-/Think-Alouds

Teachers present the text in their students' chosen language and communication mode and model targeted reading skills. When doing so, they ensure students have visual access to the text either through use of a big book or by using a classroom projection system. Teachers read aloud in spoken English or with a visual cueing system, or they can read by "signing aloud" in American Sign Language (ASL). Teachers may pause frequently, modeling how to use phonics or word families to make informed guesses to decode words. They present, explain, and demonstrate a variety of word- and phrase-level reading strategies that support comprehension of connected text (Fisher et al., 2011).

Teachers also model comprehension-checking strategies, periodically stopping, asking questions about word and passage meanings, and noting how their comprehension aligns with text comprehension up to this point. Teachers describe their own decision making using "think-aloud strategies." This has been shown to be effective with deaf and hard of hearing middle school students, including those with disabilities. Fisher et al. (2011) reported a statistically significant difference and large effect size in the use of think-alouds. They also increased teachers' awareness of students' use of reading strategies.

Step 2: Shared Reading/Signing

Teachers engage students through instructional bridging. They ask students to share their own think-aloud and decision-making processes and to give reasons for their choices. Individual students volunteer to read and demonstrate their read-/sign-/think-aloud skills. Rather than rely solely on volunteers, teachers may wish to call on students, who can ask for class help if unsure. Another strategy: fake mistakes! Teachers' "mistakes" are often extremely motivating in soliciting enthusiastic student "corrections," including from those who are otherwise very shy.

The shared reading classroom discussions provide further interaction experiences for students, reinforcing skills in providing details and abstract explanations of their strategies and rationales for decision-making and cognitive strategy

choice. These expand their linguistic abilities to use of increasingly complex syntactic relationships and semantic elements and simultaneously support advanced reading skill acquisition and refinement.

Step 3: Guided Reading

This step utilizes the Directed Reading Thinking Activity, also called DRTA (Stauffer, 1969; Stahl, 2008). Teachers divide a piece of connected text into segments based on the students' abilities. The teacher shows students the title and asks questions to prompt a discussion of experiential and text-based background knowledge. This increases students' use of background experiences and related context to support word recognition and meaningful comprehension (Kyle & Cain, 2015; Marschark & Wauters, 2008; Schirmer, 2003; Schirmer et al., 2004). Teachers emphasize application of experiences and skills for comprehending the text to support students' increasing confidence; they do not review vocabulary.

After a conceptually focused introduction, students make a prediction about the book. Each student reads the first segment silently and then engages in class discussions related to their predictions of what will occur next. The teacher probes for further explanations and asks students to read aloud their evidence. Teachers do not ask comprehension questions; instead, they use the discussions to probe, scaffold, and support comprehension.

Step 4: Independent Reading

This is the ultimate goal. Students select materials and read across a range of genres, using their cognitive and linguistic resources to problem solve any comprehension challenges. Teachers support this process through the use of whole class reading selections, literature journals, literature circles, and reading workshops (Schleper, 2006; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Peer and teacher feedback can help to verify individual comprehension and interpretations and offer opportunities to extend perspectives and insights. If needed, teachers provide individual attention and intervention to specific students or small groups. Teacher conferencing monitors and supports students' skill refinement.

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