The Value of Conversations for Language Development and Reading Comprehension

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As Marie Clay says in her article on the importance of oral language development, "We have known for a long time that conversation with an adult was the best tutorial situation in which to raise the child's functioning to a high level" (1991, p. 70). For all first graders, that "high level of functioning" includes both continuing oral language development and new competencies in reading and writing.

With young children in their preschool years, such conversations can happen easily and frequently with familiar adults. According to one recently-reprinted earlier study, British psychologist Barbara Tizard found that "familiarity" is an important facilitator of those conversations:

> Familiarity helps adults to interpret little children's meanings, and their communications. It also enables them to help children connect together different aspects of their experience. In my study of four-year-olds at home and at school, I was able to show how the mother's familiarity with her child allowed her to relate the child's present experiences to past and future events, and in this way give added meaning to them. In contrast, the nursery staff, who were relatively unfamiliar with the children … often had difficulty communicating with them.
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> Familiarity thus facilitates not only attachment, but responsiveness … [and] responsiveness also plays an important part in learning—it is essential if an interactive sequence is to be sustained and if a high level of social [and cognitive—CBC] skill is to be developed….Aspects of children's intellectual functioning thus seem to be intimately related to the social relationships in which they are embedded (Tizard, 1986, pp. 29-30; also Tizard & Hughes, 1984/2002).

Whereas Tizard contrasted the greater familiarity of children's mothers with the relative unfamiliarity of their preschool teachers, two other researchers contrasted the familiarity of Brazilian parents who had, or had not, been with their children during an experience the young child was later trying to recount. They found that attempts to tell narratives of past experience usually occurred first in a dialogue in which the adult asked questions that acted as prompts. For example, when a young child reported "Fell ground," the adult prompted more information by asking how and where it happened and "Who pushed you down?" These early reports were most successful when the adult had been with the child at the event and later asked the child to relate what had happened to some third person (Stoel-Gammon & Cabral, 1977).

Even though Reading Recovery teachers are talking with children older than those in either of these research reports, their relative lack of familiarity

with their 6-year-olds' out-of-school lives can make sustained conversation difficult. And first-graders who are still learning English may well be similar to those younger children in their need for communicative support for their language learning.

The principle underlying the importance of familiarity is its role in helping child and adult achieve in their conversation a "Meeting of Minds"—the apt title of the 2002 book by New Zealander Stuart McNaughton (keynote speaker at the 2005 National Reading Recovery & Early Literacy Conference). Think of really good conversations you have had with family or friends recently—didn't that feel satisfyingly like a true meeting of minds? In the first paragraph of the prologue to his book, McNaughton quotes Jerome Bruner's description of "the central task of effective teaching and learning: …how human beings achieve a meeting of minds, expressed by teachers usually as, 'how do I reach the children?' or by children as 'What's she trying to get at?'" (McNaughton, 2002, p. 8, quoting from Bruner, 1996, p. 45).

So what can Reading Recovery teachers do? Some topics that may come quickly to the teacher's mind—like family members—can generate mostly proper names, and they add little to children's need for concepts and vocabulary they'll encounter often in varied contexts.

Diane August, an expert on strategies for teaching English language learners (ELLs), suggests that teachers "provide students with a concrete experience—anything from an everyday read-aloud to a science experiment to a field trip—and have a conversation about that experience" (2002, pp. 127–128). That advice fits classroom teachers, but it's harder for Reading Recovery teachers to do within the 30-minute lesson. So they have to be alert for other sources of the conversational possibilities of the kind August suggests. What experiences do child and teacher have together that can become the grist for good talk?

One day, when a Boston Reading Recovery teacher entered a first-grade classroom to collect Bobby (not an ELL child) to walk him down to his lesson, she noticed that all the children were very engaged in a science activity. Later, she asked Bobby about it as a possible topic for his writing.

Ms B: I saw you were doing some research upstairs.
B: About barracudas.
Ms B: What did you learn?
B: Some barracudas are six feet long!
Ms B: That would be a great sentence to write.

Conversation on that topic could have been extended, even during the rest of their walk together:

"Really! How did you learn that?"
or

"I've never seen a picture of a barracuda. What do they look like?"
and so forth.

Other children may notice something on one of the walls along their way. Maybe one of their own drawings, or even one by a sibling or friend. Or even some "naughty" litter on the floor. Teachers of young children who take a group on a field trip to a special location like a museum or zoo often remark that what caught the children's interest above all was the open manhole they passed just as a man was climbing down into it. Nothing is too trivial for a valuable conversation if the child's attention and interest is engaged.

And then, once in the Reading Recovery room, there are always books, perhaps the best conversation source of all—books the child has already read and chooses to reread, and books the teacher will introduce. Clay has shown in detail that what may seem like casual conversational exchanges during book introductions actually offer many opportunities for language learning as well as reading comprehension (e.g., Clay & Cazden, 1990 and elsewhere).

A Reading Recovery teacher leader in New Hampshire told me how, as one Reading Recovery teacher was introducing a book that took place near the ocean, she realized that the child didn't understand the concept of an ocean and had never seen an ocean, even though New Hampshire's Atlantic coast is not far away.*

> When teachers expect [or realize—CBC] a word to be unfamiliar to a child, they first talk toward the meaning, describe some relevant object, setting, or use, and only last label or name the word; cognitive context is necessary in order for the child to "receive" the new word with understanding" (Clay & Cazden, 1990, p. 121).

Using pictures in the book, and drawing out the child's experiences with, say, a pond very near the school, the teacher can simultaneously help the child begin to construct a new conceptual understanding and contribute to her reading comprehension of the new book as well.

Sometimes, it is not a word and the concept it represents that are unfamiliar, but the book's language structures. In her article, 'Working with English Language Learners: The case of Danya" (2001), trainer of teacher leaders Patricia Kelly pays special attention to "structures that may be outside of the child's control":

> Although it is common practice in Reading Recovery lessons to have children hear and say some of the language structures that they will encounter in print, I had Danya repeat many

*I am grateful to Ellen Phillips for this example.

> more phrases and sentences than I have done with most native English speakers. …I learned that the more generous I was in providing language during the book introduction, both through having her hear new structures and having her repeat some of the language of the book, the better Danya was enabled to do the increasingly more demanding visual processing as she progressed into upper levels. Rather than reducing Danya's opportunity to hear and rehearse text language at higher text levels, I continued to model and have her repeat novel structures throughout our lessons (2001, pp. 8-9).

Hearing those new language structures, and perhaps especially repeating them—always in the context of the book and its illustrations as a whole—make it that much more likely that they will be assimilated into the child's expansion of his invisible, internal, English language system.

My last suggestion, specifically for children whose family is most fluent in a language other than English, may seem the most surprising. Home conversations about book topics in that language—whether Spanish or Haitian, Russian or Hmong—can contribute as well. Both the child, and whoever the teacher may talk to as family liaison, such as an older sibling, should be encouraged to do so. Yes, we are working to help children learn, and become literate in, English. But we should be at the same time trying to help them build the conceptual base for "high level functioning" to which Marie Clay refers.

Imagine that child who can now read the book about the ocean taking that book home. It's very likely that immigrant parents will recognize the meaning of "ocean" from the pictures, and may even have personal experiences to relate. Strange as it may seem to teachers who are not bilingual, it is quite possible for a text written in one language to be discussed in another language. In the process of doing so, parent and child can enjoy what may become a habit of conversations about books. And when the book comes back to school to be reread in a future lesson, the child may then have new ideas about the text to talk about—now in English again—with the Reading Recovery teacher.

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