



Promoting code-focused talk: The rhyme and reason for why book style matters

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ABSTRACT

Extra-textual talk during shared picture book-reading is hypothesized to scaffold children's early literacy skills; however, observational research has shown mixed results. This study compared meaning- and code-focused talk in rhyming versus non-rhyming picturebooks in relation to children's language and literacy skills. Forty-five parents were audio-recorded reading two picturebooks, one rhyming and one non-rhyming, with their preschool-aged children. Children's concurrent oral language and early literacy skills were also assessed. Parents made higher proportions of inference/predictions in the non-rhyming book, and higher proportions of print- and sound-focused talk in the rhyming book. Further, parents' meaning-focused talk predicted children's concurrent oral language skills, and parents' code-focused talk (both print- and sound-focused) predicted children's concurrent early literacy skills. These associations differed by book style and were moderated by children's age, such that parents' print-focused talk in the rhyming book was positively associated with early literacy only for older children. These results suggest that rhyming picturebooks may elicit code-focused talk, and non-rhyming picturebooks may elicit meaning-focused talk. Moreover, print-focused talk may be more useful for older than for younger pre-schoolers.

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1. Introduction

The ability to read depends on many foundational oral language and early literacy skills that start developing before formal schooling begins (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In terms of oral language skills, children must first be able to understand and produce words (receptive and expressive vocabulary) and understand that words can be joined together to form a coherent story (narrative). Further, in terms of early literacy skills (skills predictive of successful reading acquisition; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010) – children must also know that language is made up of sounds (phonological awareness), which are represented by symbols (alphabet knowledge) before they can decode and understand unfamiliar text. Indeed, children who score higher on measures assessing these precursors of conventional literacy skills go on to become more competent readers (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Scarborough, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Fortunately, for most children, these language and early literacy skills develop through a broad range of repeated adult–child interactions, such as conversations, literacy-related activities, and shared book-reading, with different kinds of interactions related to different kinds of skills (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). For example, Sénéchal et al. (Sénéchal & LeFevre 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998) found that storybook exposure predicted kindergarteners' concurrent and longitudinal oral language skills (vocabulary and listening comprehension), but not early literacy skills (alphabet knowledge, invented spelling, and decoding). Conversely, parents' early literacy teaching predicted kindergarteners' concurrent early literacy skills, but not oral language skills. Thus, they concluded that different types of interactions in the home predict different aspects of children's language and early literacy skills.

The fact that storybook exposure did not predict children's early literacy skills seems counterintuitive, as shared book-reading involves modelling independent reading; however, the extant research supports Sénéchal et al.'s (1998; 2002) Sénéchal et al., 1998 findings. Links are consistently found between the frequency of shared book-reading and children's oral language skills (particularly vocabulary), but not children's early literacy skills (for

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meta-analyses, see [Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995](#), and [Mol & Bus, 2011](#)). Instead, studies on the links between the quantity of shared book-reading and children's phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge have produced diverse and seemingly disparate results (see [Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010](#)).

One potential explanation for these mixed results is that the aforementioned studies did not take into account *how* adults shared the books. For example, some adults may just read the text, whereas some adults may also talk about the story or use shared reading as an opportunity for teaching early literacy skills. Consequently, research attention has shifted towards the *quality* of shared book-reading to assess whether certain kinds of book-reading interactions, and certain kinds of books, better scaffold preschool children's developing oral language and early literacy skills.

1.1. Quality of shared book-reading

In particular, research on the quality of book-reading interactions has focused on parental extratextual talk, encompassing all verbal interactions beyond the written text (e.g., [Anderson, Anderson, Lynch, Shapiro, & Kim, 2012](#); [Price, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009](#)). These interactions are largely classified as being either meaning-focused (i.e., utterances that focus on story content) or code-focused (i.e., utterances about letters, letter sounds, and other code-related skills; [Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014](#)). In addition, extratextual talk is often graded by complexity (e.g., [Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996](#); [Price et al., 2009](#)). Meaning-focused utterances range from lower-level interactions (e.g., summarizing the text; labelling pictures) to higher-level interactions (e.g., requests for story inferences and predictions; word definitions; discussing a character's mental state; relating experiences in stories to children's lives). Similarly, code-focused utterances range from labelling individual letters or words to talking about rhyme and alliteration and encouraging children to read. Consequently, due to parents' reading styles, children can experience the same picturebook in a variety of ways, from passively listening to actively co-creating the narrative.

To date, observational and experimental studies have consistently found positive links between both the quantity and quality of parental extratextual talk during shared book-reading and children's vocabulary and narrative skills (see [Reese, 2015](#)). For example, preschoolers have more advanced vocabularies and narrative skills when adults make more high-level, meaning-focused utterances and use open-ended questions during shared reading ([Haden et al., 1996](#); [Hindman et al., 2014](#); [Reese, 1995](#); [Whitehurst et al., 1988](#)). Preschoolers also learn new vocabulary more effectively when adults increase the cognitive demand of extratextual questions across repeated readings ([Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009](#)). In sum, extratextual talk during book-reading is important for children's oral language development.

However, in terms of children's early literacy skills, observational research on parental extratextual talk during shared book-reading has, again, produced mixed results. Although [DeTemple \(2001\)](#) found positive correlations between the quantity and quality of parental extratextual talk and children's early literacy skills, other studies have found no statistical links ([Anderson et al., 2012](#); [Hindman et al., 2014](#); [Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal 2005](#)). For example, when parents shared narrative picturebooks with their preschool children, neither meaning-focused ([Anderson et al., 2012](#)) nor code-focused talk ([Hindman et al., 2014](#)) were reliably related to children's phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, or letter-sound knowledge.

The fact that meaning-focused talk and children's early literacy skills were unrelated makes sense, as it is becoming increasingly clear that early literacy skills need specific scaffolding to

develop (see [Sénéchal, 2015](#)). However, the lack of links between code-focused talk and children's early literacy skills is surprising, especially considering the previously found link with parents' early literacy teaching ([Sénéchal & LeFevre 2002](#); [Sénéchal et al., 1998](#)). One potential explanation for these results is that [Hindman et al. \(2014\)](#) found low levels of code-focused talk during shared book-reading, potentially undermining the variable's predictive power. Almost no mothers talked to their children about letters or sounds (<1%), and only 10% encouraged their child to read. Indeed, discussions surrounding literacy are often sidelined for discussions about the narrative when sharing narrative books ([Ezell & Justice, 2000](#); [Stadler & McEvoy, 2003](#); [Price et al., 2009](#)).

Experimental research, however, tells a different story. When adults are taught to explicitly draw children's attention to print during shared book-reading, both adults and children increase their code-focused talk ([Ezell & Justice, 2000](#); [Justice & Ezell, 2000](#)). More importantly, children's early literacy skills increase ([Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2002](#); [Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009](#)) and longitudinal gains are seen in children's decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling skills ([Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012](#)). Therefore, to advance research and practice in early literacy, it is important to investigate when and where code-focused talk occurs naturally in the context of shared book-reading, and how and in what context code-focused talk enhances children's early literacy skills.

1.2. Genre and extratextual talk

Although many studies have investigated the communicative style between parents and their children during shared book-reading, few studies have investigated differences across genre. Because parents report reading books from a variety of genres to their children ([Price et al., 2009](#); [Robertson & Reese, 2017](#)), and different genres often feature stylistic differences in their layout and use of text, it is important to assess whether these differences shape parent-child interactions. For example, expository picturebooks often provide lists of facts and definitions rather than following a narrative structure ([Duke, 2000](#)). Similarly, alphabet books, most commonly characterized by the sequential presentation of individual letters from A to Z, often rely on visual conventions instead of presenting a textual narrative ([Nodelman, 2001](#)). Finally, rhyming books are akin to poetry, with their rhythm and repetition bestowing a song-like quality to the text ([Read, Macauley, & Furay, 2014](#)). Therefore, these different features may alter the way in which adults talk during shared picturebook-reading and, for children, facilitate different oral language and early literacy skills.

Indeed, genre appears to affect both the quantity and quality of shared book-reading. For example, when reading alphabet books to pre-schoolers (in comparison to narrative books), book-reading sessions are longer ([Stadler & McEvoy, 2003](#)) and parents make more references to print features such as letter names, sounds, or spelling ([Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, & Morrison, 2008](#); [Stadler & McEvoy, 2003](#)). However, little research has been conducted on rhyming books. This lack of research is surprising, as rhyming books are ubiquitous for preschool-aged children ([Read et al., 2014](#)). Surveys have found that rhyming books make up: 38% of home libraries, 48% of parents' favourite books to share with their children, and 20% of the 'top 100 children's books of all-time' ([Children's Books Guide, 2013](#); [Read et al., 2014](#)). Finally, preschool children have reported liking rhyming stories better than their non-rhyming counterparts ([Hayes, Chemelski, & Palmer, 1982](#)).

Further, rhyme is theorized to benefit children's oral language and early literacy skills. For example, rhyme may heighten children's phonological awareness through the manipulation and emphasis of syllables ([van Kleeck, 1995](#)). Moreover, experimental studies have found that rhyme within picturebooks enhances

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