A comparison of preschool teachers' talk during storybook and information book read-alouds

Lisa Hammett Price [a,*], Barbara A. Bradley [b], Jana Michele Smith [c]

[a] Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA, USA
[b] The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA
[c] The Children's Developmental Services Agency, Greensboro, NC, USA

A B S T R A C T

Storybooks are the most frequently chosen genre for read alouds in preschool classrooms. However, growing evidence suggests that genre may influence the quantity and quality of talk produced outside of the text. The current study compared twenty preschool teachers' extratextual talk across read-aloud sessions with a storybook and an information book. Results revealed that teachers used significantly greater numbers of extratextual utterances during the information book read-aloud compared to the storybook read-aloud after accounting for differences in duration. Teachers' extratextual utterances also were coded for content, including behavior management, feedback, print and book conventions, and four levels of cognitive demand (with Levels 1 and 2 being concrete and Levels 3 and 4 being cognitively demanding). Rates did not differ across genre in the categories of behavior management, feedback, print, and Level 4; however, rates did differ significantly in the content categories of Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 on the continuum of cognitive demand, with the rates always being significantly higher in the information book read-aloud compared to the storybook. Teachers also reported less favorable perceptions toward reading information books aloud compared to reading storybooks aloud. This may be attributable to differences in how teachers read information books compared to storybooks. Teachers' level of education and the age of the children in the classroom in some cases were related to the teachers' talk during the read aloud.

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1. Introduction

Preschool teachers consider reading aloud to be an important activity in their classrooms (Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta, 2001; Hindman & Wasik, 2008), and indeed reading aloud helps young children to develop the oral language and early literacy skills needed for later literacy success (e.g., Dickinson, De Temple, Hirschler, & Smith, 1992; Kleeck, Stahl, & Bauer, 2003; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). From a social and cultural perspective (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Rogoff, 1990, 2003), the book sharing routine provides a learning environment within which teachers can scaffold and support children's growing knowledge and abilities. It is through extratextual talk (i.e., talk outside the reading of the text) during the activity that teachers encourage children's participation, expand and extend children's language and literacy abilities, and provide the support children need to be successful with tasks just beyond their ability to handle independently. There is also growing evidence that the books used during the activity can influence the types of extratextual talk that occur during the activity (Bradley & Jones, 2007; Moschovaki & Meadows, 2005b; Smolkin, Yaden, Brown, & Hofius, 1992; Torr & Clugston, 1999).

In spite of that, much of the research on reading aloud in classrooms comes from analysis of interactions around storybooks (e.g., Dickinson et al., 1992; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994, 1988) as opposed to other genres. Furthermore, the research base contains mostly intervention studies in which teachers have been asked or told to read a storybook in a particular manner. Although teachers do more commonly read storybooks aloud than information books (Gerde & Powell, 2009; Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, & Morrison, 2008; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Stone & Twardosz, 2001), we believe that a better understanding is needed of how teachers read aloud across various genres, particularly with information books, so that recommendations, interventions, and professional development take into consideration teachers' typical styles of reading aloud. Further, we believe that research should explore how the same teachers read different genres to better understand how they adapt their reading styles across genres.

The purpose of the current study was to compare preschool teachers' extratextual talk during classroom read-alouds using two genres of books, storybooks and information books. Storybooks are

* Corresponding author at: Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Special Education & Clinical Services, 203 Davis Hall, Indiana, PA 15705, USA. Tel.: +1 724 357 5687.
E-mail address: lprice@iup.edu (L.H. Price).

defined here as books that contain a fictional narrative and rely on conventional narrative structure including a goal, attempts to achieve the goal, and a final outcome or resolution (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Information books, on the other hand, are defined here as books designed to convey information about a nonfiction topic, and rely on expository text structures including presentation of a topic, description of attributes, events or activities related to the topic, comparisons or contrasts between members of a class, and an optional final summary (Kamberelis, 1999; Pappas, 1991, 1993, 2006). In the current study, we also explored, post hoc, whether teachers' level of education or age of the children were related to any of the variance across these two conditions. Finally, we considered teachers' perceptions of their own enjoyment and confidence during the read-aloud, and their perceptions of the children's enjoyment and attention, to explore teachers' views about reading these two genres.

In the following sections, we review research related to teacher talk during storybook and information book read-alouds. We also review research about how teachers' level of education might influence instructional practices; we discuss how child age can influence children and adults' behaviors; and we review research about how teachers' perceptions or emotional responses can influence teaching, and thereby, perhaps the read-aloud event.

1.1. Teacher talk during storybook read-alouds

Storybooks are by far the most prevalent text genre that preschool teachers choose to read aloud in their classrooms (Gerde & Powell, 2009; Hindman et al., 2008; Pentimonti et al., 2010; Stone & Twardosz, 2001) and reading storybooks aloud supports children's language and early literacy development (e.g., Dickinson et al., 1992; van Kleeck et al., 2003; Wasik et al., 2006). For example, research reveals that reading storybooks aloud exposes young children to rich vocabulary (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988) and teachers can implement storybook interventions in which they engage children in conversations that enhance vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Wasik et al., 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994, 1988). But what type of extratextual utterances do teachers naturally make when reading storybooks aloud?

Dickinson and Smith (1994) studied a sample of 25 teachers reading to their classes of 4-year-old children (mean class size was 15) from families from low-income homes and identified three naturally occurring styles for reading aloud: (a) a co-constructive approach; (b) a didactic-interactional approach; and (c) a performance-oriented approach. Five teachers engaged in a co-constructive approach, which was characterized by both teachers and children engaging in high amounts of talk during book reading that involved extensive high-level clarification in order to extend conversations. Ten teachers engaged in a didactic-interactional approach that involved limited talk throughout book reading by both the teacher and children; when teachers did talk, they primarily engaged children in low cognitive demand interactions such as repeating phrases and recalling information, and they tended to engage in more talk related to managing the activity compared to teachers in the other style groups. Finally, 10 teachers used a performance-oriented approach during which they engaged in talk primarily before and after reading rather than during the reading. In this approach, the teachers rarely engaged in talk related to management and instead engaged children in high cognitive demands such as making predictions and text-to-child/life connections, or analyzing vocabulary. Following one target child per class over time, Dickinson and Smith (1994) found that children whose teachers employed a performance-oriented approach had greater gains in their vocabulary knowledge 1 year later, compared to children whose teachers used the other two approaches.

Martinez and Teale (1993) described how six kindergarten teachers read aloud the same four storybooks to their children (i.e., 20–22 children per class, 5–6-years-old). They analyzed the data based on the following categories: (1) focus of teachers' talk; (2) type of information teachers presented; and (3) instructional strategies teachers used. Martinez and Teale (1993) found considerable variability across teachers; all six teachers had distinct read-aloud styles based on variations within each category coded. They also found that two teachers consistently engaged children in high cognitive demand extratextual talk and one teacher talked relatively little compared to the other teachers. Martinez and Teale (1993) concluded that, "...one style is not necessarily better than another. Rather, teachers with different storybook reading styles may move their students along different paths in literacy development" (p. 196). Similarly, another study that used a qualitative design (Dickinson & Keebler, 1989) found that the three teachers in the sample differed substantially from one another; however, each teacher was remarkably consistent with herself across the four books read.

Other studies also have considered the degree to which teachers used cognitively demanding talk during storybook reading. For example, in Hindman et al.'s (2008) study of 23 teachers reading to preschool-aged children from primarily middle-income homes, teachers used more cognitively demanding talk compared to concrete talk when reading a self-selected storybook, and use of cognitively demanding talk was positively associated with children's later vocabulary skills. Similarly, Allison and Watson (1994) found that 52% of teachers' talk was cognitively demanding when reading to kindergarten students from low-to-middle income homes, and teachers' use of cognitively demanding talk was associated with children's emergent reading skills. Yet, Gerde and Powell (2009) found that only 29% of book-focused utterances were cognitively demanding in their sample of 60 Head Start teachers who also read aloud a self-selected storybook, and children's receptive vocabulary growth was related to greater use of book-focused talk as opposed to behavior-focused talk.

In sum, teachers' read-aloud styles during storybook reading do differ and different styles have been found to be related to differences in children's abilities. Therefore, it is important to understand teachers' natural styles of reading aloud so we can begin to explore why they use particular strategies, and, as appropriate, make changes to their read-aloud styles to better meet the needs of their students. Yet, teachers are being asked to read not only storybooks, but also to increase their use of information books (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008; Stephens, 2008; Whitin, 2007). It is important to understand how teachers interact around information books and whether those interactions differ from how they read storybooks.

1.2. Teacher talk during information book read-alouds

Now, as the emphasis to include information books in the primary grade curriculum (Duke, 2004; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Smolkin & Donovan, 2003; Yopp & Yopp, 2000) is finding its way into the preschool curriculum (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Pentimonti et al., 2010; Yopp & Yopp, 2006), we believe it is important to understand how teachers read information books aloud in order to better inform intervention studies and professional development. Two naturalistic studies investigated how preschool teachers read aloud information books as compared to how they read aloud storybooks (Moschovaki & Meadows, 2005b; Torr & Clugston, 1999); and one study described information book read-alouds without such a comparison (Zucker, Justice, Piasta, & Kaderavek, 2010).

In one study, Torr and Clugston (1999) observed 11 adults (six mothers and five teachers) reading the same information book and storybook aloud to a 4-year-old child. They found that adults asked