The importance of interactive read alouds has been understood for many years. This article summarizes the generally positive research on nonfiction read alouds. In addition, it describes the use of nonfiction read alouds in several classes showing how the teachers used them to teach both literacy and content area skills and materials. The article ends with some suggestions as to how to improve the use of nonfiction read alouds in the classroom. These suggestions should be applicable to many types of classroom settings and with many types of materials and content area subjects.

Keywords: Read alouds, Nonfiction, Literacy instruction, Classroom instruction

The principal visits a class where the teacher reads to students. The teacher introduces the text providing background on topic, structure, vocabulary, and setting a purpose for reading. Students predict. The teacher reads as students verify predictions, clarify points, and answer questions. In another class, the teacher reads a text students could not read themselves. She supplies background information and connects prior knowledge to new. Typical fiction read alouds? No! Here, much literacy instruction uses interactive, nonfiction read alouds as a means of instruction. This article discusses research on fiction and nonfiction read alouds, describes classes using nonfiction read alouds, and makes suggestions for using nonfiction read alouds.

A widely held belief is reading aloud to children builds knowledge required for reading success (Anderson, Herbst, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Trelease, 2006), develops vocabulary and comprehension (Krashen, 2004), and provides models of good readers (Moen, 2004). Research conducted on interactive fiction and nonfiction read alouds, at various levels, documents this success (Press, 2007 & 2008; Press, Henenberg & Getman, 2009). Listening skills are more advanced than reading skills until the middle grades so reading to children opens up new experiences, subjects, and ideas they would not have access to (Coiro, 2003); develops interest and motivation; illustrates content area concepts; and contributes to personal growth and social response (Albright & Arial, 2005).

Language skills are fostered through read alouds. Toddlers mimic language patterns heard when read to (Coiro, 2003). Interactive reading produces gains in oral language development for language delayed children from low-income environments (Allor & McCathren, 2003). Reading aloud helps second
language learners develop English fluency, word meanings, oral language and thinking skills (Hickman, McCabe & Vaughn, 2004; Kelly, 2004).

Children not read to may find book reading routines puzzling and boring. They may appear off task, respond to stories in unconventional ways, find answering literal questions of little importance and make comments only tangentially related to the text. Children who have been read to understand the written word is a source of knowledge, and have such school related behaviors as listening quietly, understanding story structure, taking turns speaking, answering obvious questions and raising one’s hand (Meier, 2003).

Oral language uses context including intonation, gestures, facial expression, and so on for meaning. Written language does not have this context (Beck & McKeown, 2001). There must be specification for readers to determine the context from the words themselves and interactive reading bridges oral and written language (Sulzby, 1985).

Much reading is nonfiction. Boys often like facts presented in nonfiction more than they enjoy a story (Gear, 2009). Nonfiction texts may be short pieces that do not have to be read from cover to cover. Nonfiction capitalizes on children’s interests and leads them to be engaged readers (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Learning to read and reading to learn go hand in hand (Richgels, 2002). Nonfiction develops knowledge and vocabulary of topics children may never encounter (Moss, 1995). It helps children understand and use the distinct purposes for reading, and the types of comprehension strategies needed for each (Harvey, 1998).

Nonfiction structure is less familiar to children than the structure of fiction (Moss, 1995) and there is a decline in reading comprehension called the fourth-grade slump (Caccamise & Snyder, 2009) which occurs simultaneously with the introduction of expository text in classrooms. Nonfiction is often structured around a main idea that must be determined to make sense of the information. The text is organized into description, explanation, cause/effect, problem/solution, sequence, and compare and contrast (Harvey, 1998). Nonfiction read alouds develop this knowledge (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Nonfiction texts have features not found in fiction such as generic noun construction, unfamiliar uses of the verbs “to have” and “to be,” opening and closing statements, technical vocabulary and topical themes children may not understand (Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Print features in nonfiction alerts readers to important information. Such features as fonts, text structures clue words, graphics and text organizers are generally not found in fiction
and must be taught. Picture books provide experiences where meaning comes from both the written word and the visual image (Serafini, 2008). These texts assist students when reading multi-modal materials and enable children make judgments about text meaning and quality.

The authors observed classes in two Brooklyn, New York schools. In both, nonfiction read alouds were used as part of literacy instruction. The schools and educators allowed the use of their names. The authors looked at how teachers used nonfiction to teach literacy skills, and how students learned and used strategies presented.

Two teaching techniques used in the classes were observed. Think alouds are the “detailed process of making our thinking public by showing students how we construct meaning. Teachers share inner conversations about how they comprehend and model strategies used to make meaning” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Turn and talk occurs when teachers stop, ask a question and have students share ideas with each other by turning and talking to the student next to them.

First observed was a fourth-grade class with 26 students at PS 207. The teacher was Ms. Barbara Gonzalez. The text was *The Mary Celeste: An Unsolved Mystery* (Yolen & Stemple, 1999). Read alouds help children develop questioning techniques. When students ask questions and search for answers they monitor comprehension and interact with text to construct meaning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). The lesson’s aims were to help children use text features, develop vocabulary, connect with the text and understand text structure. Questioning here involved predicting, inferring, connecting and looking for “big” ideas (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005).

Ms. Gonzalez read the title and modeled the question, “What is the mystery in the text?” She used sticky notes to
model questioning, and think alouds to demonstrate strategies. Text features such as vocabulary listings, side-bars and picture captions were discussed to gain a better understanding of the text. Students asked and answered more of their own questions. At several points the students “turned and talked” to determine big questions about the text. They read aloud parts that answered questions, but realized that some questions were not answered. By the end of the book, students understood there were six possible theories of what happened to the ship, The Mary Celeste, but no definite answer. This was the mystery. The follow-up activity was to write a letter describing a possible seventh theory as to what happened to the ship.

An observation of a fourth-grade inclusion class with Antonia Cracchiola, general education teacher, and Julie Courgis, special education teacher, was next. The aim was making connections to improve comprehension. The lesson started with, “What do you think of reading a passage and answering questions about it?” The answer was, “It’s boring.” Students were asked, “What strategy helps us remember what we read?” Students discussed reading log responses and jotting down ideas; acknowledging underlining was not the best way to remember information. Ms. Cracchiola read an article on girls’ education from the Comprehension Tool Kit (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). She provided background and distributed copies of the article which students read silently as the teacher read aloud.

The class discussed genre, text features, and graphics of nonfiction literature. A second, related article was read to the class. The teachers modeled jotting down reactions, questions students should ask themselves, and connecting new knowledge to prior schema.

For the third article, students were divided into ability groups using articles on the same topic, at different levels. Students “turned and talked” to arouse prior knowledge and make predictions. They monitored comprehension by jotting down ideas and filled in a chart with the columns: “I think (facts)” and “I wonder (questioning)”. Each group read and discussed the article. Some groups read aloud, others silently. The next day groups would share information and reflections with the class, describe strategies used and state why strategies were chosen.

The third class, a fifth-grade gifted class, was taught by Vanessa Morgan. The objective was determining word meanings from context where readers take what is known and gather clues in the text to find the definition (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Both students and teacher had copies of a text about the Titanic. The equation “background knowledge plus text clues = inference” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005) was presented. In small groups, students “turned and talked” about background knowledge of The Titanic. Ms. Morgan read while students used picture and context clues and background knowledge to figure
By helping students use what they knew and making connections with information in the text, the basis for understanding new content was set.
expand and clarify issues. The students responded that they would be afraid, anxious, confused and upset by what was going on around them.

A fifth-grade language arts class taught by Ms. Donohue was observed at P.S. 170 in Brooklyn. Students read *The Full Scoop* by Gail Gibbons (2006). To arouse prior knowledge, students wrote descriptions of five drinks or desserts made with ice cream. A poem on ice cream was read aloud. Students discussed the author’s feelings towards ice cream.

The KWL (Ogle, 1986) chart helped develop and use reading strategies. The K, “What I already Know”, activates prior knowledge and motivates students. The teacher helped students share knowledge and she listed information in the K column. Student responses included such ideas as where to buy ice cream, favorite flavors, different types and recipes using ice cream. Using the “think aloud” process the teacher modeled classifying information. The “W”, “What I Want to Learn”, column allowed students to set a purpose for reading, generate questions, make predictions, and determine how to resolve conflicting information. The questions helped students monitor understanding and activate “fix-up” strategies if comprehension broke down. Students wanted to know how ice cream is made, what new flavors are planned, where does most ice cream come from, what is the best ice cream and what milk other than cow milk is used in ice cream. Finally, Ms. Donohue read the text and students completed the “L”, “What I Learned”, column which helped students answer and review questions previously asked. Students learned who invents new flavors, what types of milk are used in ice cream, and what the manufacturing process looks like.

Assessment consisted of three follow-up questions: “What fact did you learn about ice cream?” “Why has ice cream been a favorite dessert for years?” “What flavor ice cream would you create?” The questions helped students think about their written responses. The students wrote acrostic poems creating new flavors and describe how ice cream is created.

Having the opportunity to observe these classes gave the authors an indication of the type of nonfiction, read aloud instruction that was possible in school. Several effective practices are included in figure 1. The materials included both commercially available curricula and trade books that teachers utilized in new and different ways. Students of all ability levels can profit from this type of instruction. The students understood how important their understandings were and worked hard to develop the reading strategies that would help them learn more.

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**Figure 1: Effective Classroom Practices**

During classroom observations, the following practices were found to be effective:

1. Know the goals, objectives, strategies and skills to be taught. What standards are being met? What aspects of literacy are being stressed?
2. Read many genres (Moen, 2004). Especially in nonfiction, print features, graphics, organization and font need to be explained and their use demonstrated.
3. Read the beginning of a long text and have students finish it. This develops interest, background knowledge and connections between the text and the student.
4. Introduce new vocabulary words and explain how to pronounce them. This is important for students with limited decoding skills and second language learners.
5. Use open-ended questions to help students to determine how they would act or feel during important events. What moral choices would they make?
6. Let students read to other students. Students who write exceptional pieces can read them to the class as examples of good pieces of nonfiction. Older students can read to younger ones.
7. Teach listening skills and note taking.
8. Many students cannot determine the main points and structure of the text. Help them create graphic organizers for each type of text.
9. As a follow-up to read alouds, have written copies of the text available. Audio versions of the text should be available as well so they can see and hear the text.
10. Instruction in reading graphic materials and their connection to the written material is also suggested.
REFERENCES


**CITED CHILDREN’S BOOKS**


**MATERIALS USED**


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