



Before They Read: Teaching Language and Literacy Development through Conversations, Interactive Read-Alouds, and Listening Games

by Cathy Puett Miller

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Before They Read helps pre-school and kindergarten educators teach early literacy skills with engaging games and activities that are based on author Cathy Puett Miller’s “three big ideas” for early literacy development: great conversations, good listening skills, and interactive read-alouds. This book makes it easy to help every child move through the stages of literacy development at their own pace—from playing with sounds through advanced phonemic awareness skills. Early childhood educators learn how to:

- Take advantage of the learn-through-play style of the pre-school and kindergarten child.
- Play simple and effective games and activities that build core early literacy skills.
- Engage a child in the experience of reading a picture book to target essential concepts.

About the Study Guide

This study guide helps professional educators develop a clear understanding of foundational and developmental skills young children need to be ready to read conventionally. It is also an opportunity for professionals to build support networks that result in further learning. *Before They Read* supports and integrates easily into popular frameworks such as differentiated instruction and Response-to-Intervention (RTI).

This study guide may also be used in collegial book study atmospheres with pre-service teachers. It is recommended that chapter questions **in bold** be discussed before reading to determine current schema, then again after completing a relevant chapter to evaluate new understanding. This will inspire debate among professionals and enhance ongoing learning with this text.

NOTE: A companion title, *Anytime Reading Readiness*, is available from Maupin as well to help parents focus on these same big ideas. With the background teachers have gained through this book study, they can instigate a parent book club (see Maupin House’s website for a facilitator’s guide for this important element of literacy instruction).

Each of the six professional development sessions includes discussions points, guiding questions (pre- and post-reading), workshop activities, and classroom applications. To ensure a successful experience, consider the following recommendations:

- Before scheduling these study groups, **consider *participants' schedules***. Options include: using a portion of regularly scheduled staff meetings, setting up a stand-alone study group, conducting smaller mini-sessions of thirty to forty minutes within a lunch-and-learn environment, or using this guide in planning a “teacher’s retreat.” Prime impact will result when attendees are consistent and work cooperatively together. Schedule meetings so teachers have adequate time to apply concepts and share successes and challenges.
- Administrators can enhance the teaching team by connecting this learning event to ongoing professional development goals. If you facilitate this group as a peer teacher or reading specialist, confirm commitments (and send reminders) to the core group.
- Provide copies of *Before They Read* to all participants. Meaningful responses and application of the skills and activities discussed at each meeting will rely heavily on access to this material.
- Highlight the discussion questions to be addressed at each meeting (and those that will be discussed prior to reading a selected segment of *Before They Read*). Encourage your group to become familiar with the assigned areas of the text before attending the next scheduled study group. Spend a few minutes at the start discussing the “looking ahead” portions from the previous session and the last five to ten minutes of each meeting identifying current schema of participating teachers on the next selected topic.

Session One—Introduction: A Few Big Ideas and Chapter 1: Priming the Pump: The Overlooked Essentials of Preparing Children to Read

Guiding Quote

“Children who are immersed in activities that combine active experiences, rich conversations, and print-related activities are apt to develop the foundational skills required to become successful readers and writers” (vii).

Discussion Question (before *any* reading)

1. How do you know when the *time is prime* for a child to learn to read?

NOTE TO FACILITATOR: If you initially meet after the group has begun reading the book, pose this question via an email to provide a discussion vehicle before books are distributed.

Discussion Questions (after reading introduction)

2. What is emergent literacy?
3. Is earlier better when it comes to learning to read? Why or why not?
4. What are the three big ideas highlighted in this book as a foundation for learning to read?
5. What parallels do you see between skills listed in the age-related charts (pages 4-11) and your standards or teaching guidelines? (provide a copy of these guidelines for comparison to facilitate the discussion, especially when less experienced teachers are involved).

Workshop Activity

Ask all participants to identify three questions they would like to have answered on a topic from *Before They Read* by the end of this professional development series. Compile those questions into a group list and retain/post in a convenient place at each subsequent meeting. Check off questions as they are answered during the course of study and/or discussions. Any remaining questions can direct further book discussions or professional development.

During the last five to ten minutes, have participants individually create a list of what they consider the three most important essentials for a literacy-rich classroom (question posed to identify schema of participants before they read Chapter 2). Retain those for the next session.

Looking Ahead

Read Chapter 2 before the next scheduled session.

Participants partner with a colleague (preferably one within this professional development group) to evaluate the print in their classroom environments using the three questions posed in this chapter (page 18). Everyone should bring specific comments to the next session to share what they learned and what changes they will be implementing as a result.

NOTE: If the sessions are held in a building other than the one your attendees teach in, make this an additional assignment. If the meetings are held in the same place as where your attendees teach, make this part of the next workshop (see Session Two).

Session Two—Chapter 2: Creating a Literacy-rich Classroom

Guiding Quote

“A classroom library should be more than a place children are *supposed* to go when they *have* to read” (18).

Discussion Questions

1. How did your understanding of the essentials for creating literacy-rich environments change after reading Chapter 2?
2. What did you learn with your “buddy” from the evaluation of posted print in your room (*if your group conducted the evaluation away from the session; otherwise, skip this question and see workshop activity #1 below*)?
3. Which of the three parent involvement tips regarding the classroom library are best suited for the families represented in your classroom?
4. What is environmental print? Give one example of how you use environmental print in your classroom.
5. Name one new idea for incorporating literacy into a classroom center or station you gained from reading this chapter.
6. Do you have a word wall in your classroom? What is its purpose and what changes should be made to frame new words in a context that is more meaningful to students?

Workshop Activity

Activity #1: If the sessions are held in your school or facility (and this activity was not already suggested in Session One), break the group into pairs or threesomes. Distribute index cards for note-taking. Each subgroup/pair visits only the two-three classrooms represented in their group for this exercise. Pairs answer the questions posed at the bottom of page 18 and spend ten minutes in each location, giving their partner(s) an honest evaluation, based on these questions, that includes both positives and areas in need of improvement.

Activity #2: When you return (or if you have already completed activity #1 in the previous session), have each attendee share at least one idea to improve the posting of print in her classroom—specifically ideas that will promote *student learning*.

Classroom Implementation

Before the next meeting, each educator should individually take a closer look at her classroom library’s contents and arrangement, as well as the tools in each station/center that support literacy learning. Each should identify at least one change to implement as a result of new information learned.

Looking Ahead

Be prepared to discuss specific successes and challenges everyone experienced in implementing these changes in their classroom environment. For the next session, encourage teachers to bring examples of student-created work that can purposefully add to their classroom’s literacy-rich environment, identify the purpose behind such selections, and examine how posted print will enhance student learning. Participants should also be encouraged to use the blank chart on page 24 to extend their thinking about the use of print in stations and centers.

Session Three—Chapter 3: The First Essential: Secrets to “WOW” Conversations in the Classroom

Guiding Quote

“If we are to increase students’ abilities to profit from education, we will have to enrich their oral language development during the early years of schooling” —Andrew Biemiller, author and professor at the University of Toronto’s Institute of Child Study (25).

Discussion Questions

- 1. Talk briefly about the assignment from last session (Looking Ahead). What successes and challenges did you experience? (Use five minutes or so to brainstorm solutions by referring back to the text and taking advantage of expertise within the group.)**
2. Why is conversation an important foundational skill for learning to read conventionally?
3. How do you take classroom conversation to the next level—more than just chats?
4. How can teachers find the balance between maintaining order in our classroom and allowing for great skill-building conversations?
5. Which of your centers or stations are the best for facilitating conversations with students and between students? Why?

Workshop Activity

Distribute a copy of the “What My Chats Look Like” quiz from pages 30 and 31 to each attendee. The facilitator should read the first two paragraphs of the instructions on page 29 and the Teacher Tip in the box at the bottom of that page before asking teachers to complete the quiz.

As a follow-up and additional learning experience, arrange partners (including participants in these sessions as well as support staff like reading specialists, administrators, media specialists, counselors, etc.) to facilitate an evaluation of classroom conversations using the same quiz. Having another’s perspective aids in learning—good assessments drive growth with teachers as well as students).

Based on the scores from the “What My Chats Look Like” quiz and the recommendations under “What Your Score Means” on page 31, have each participant set initial goals to improve opportunities for purposeful conversations in their classroom. The partner system recommended above will encourage and support change during the week.

Classroom Implementation

Teachers should take the initial goals set in the activity and implement/activate them. Identify “buddies” (different individuals than have been paired before) as a support system to encourage and partner to ensure changes are made.

Looking Ahead

Be prepared to discuss challenges and successes with the changes you implemented to encourage and accommodate purposeful conversations. Read Chapter 4.

Session Four—Chapter 4: The Second Essential: Revisiting and Reinventing the Read-aloud

Guiding Quote

“If we do not give children mostly positive experiences with reading when they are young, they will probably not choose to be readers” (53).

Discussion Questions

- 1. Follow up discussion from last week (Looking Ahead): What did you learn from your implementation of ideas for encouraging oral language development and conversation?**
2. What are three research-based benefits of read-alouds? Which do you see as most significant for the population of children you serve?
3. Which of the four research-based types of read-alouds are you familiar with? Which have you used in your classroom?
4. What is EIR (engaged interactive read-aloud)? How does it differ from the more traditional “sit still and listen” approach to reading aloud with students?
5. What challenges have you encountered with reading aloud to your class and what answers to those challenges did you find in Chapter 4?
6. How can you enhance students’ comprehension through reading aloud to them?

Workshop Activity

The facilitator should have a selection available from the list of picture books on page 52 for this activity as well as copies of the “Read-Aloud Guide” from pages 45.

Divide participants into groups of two (different partners than before). Each pair selects two books. Using the “Read-Aloud Guide”, each individual should plan a read-aloud and discuss the plan with the partner. The partner should add additional input and feedback (both positive affirmation and constructive criticism). Each partner’s goal should be to help the “buddy” improve on her plan.

After the planning, rotate partners and have each deliver the read-aloud using the techniques of EIR. While one is reading, the other should take notes to record positive implementation and coaching on challenges or improvements.

After these readings, allow groups to present a brief overview of what they experienced and learned.

Classroom Implementation

Choose a picture book from the list in Appendix F to read with your class several times during the coming week(s) before your next session. For each reading, focus on a different purpose, using the “Read-Aloud Guide” to direct student thinking and learning.

Looking ahead

Be prepared to discuss challenges and successes with the read-alouds conducted. Read Chapter 5. To prepare for next week, have each participant define “phonics,” “phonological awareness,” and “phonemic awareness” from her own knowledge base (don’t use a dictionary). Retain definitions for the discussion next week.

Session Five—Chapter 5: Listening to the Sounds of Words, Chapter 6: An Introduction to Phonological Awareness, and Chapter 7: Moving to the Next Level: The Middle of the Pool

Guiding Quote

“It is clear that a major effort in teaching phonological awareness at the earliest possible opportunity will have a significant impact on the number of individuals who require special services” —Dr. William Ellis, educator and learning disabilities advocate (67).

Discussion Questions

- 1. Briefly discuss the implementation of EIR in your classroom (challenges and successes). If a brief problem-solving session is warranted, limit it to a few minutes and encourage further individual discussion among participants.**
2. How did your definitions of key terms (see session four) written in last week’s session compare to the definitions in Chapter 5? How did these definitions help your understanding?
3. Why are listening skills an important precursor to learning to read?
4. What is the general sequence with which phonological awareness skills develop?
5. Which of the listening activities has the greatest potential for enhancing your students’ abilities (think of where they are right now)?
6. How do you know when your students are ready to move to the next activity/level of phonological awareness?

Workshop Activity

Divide participants into four groups (each group should teach the same level of students). Assign four activities from Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to each group so that all activities are covered by at least one group. Provide each group with the set of state/national standards shared in Session One.

Have each group read the assigned activities in turn and determine which level of phonological awareness (shallow, intermediate, or deep) is served with that activity, based on the guidelines in Appendices A and B. Each group should also identify which state or national standards each activity (and its core concept/standard) relates to.

The groups come back together, share their findings, and gain confirmation in terms of levels and connections to standards from the rest of the group. Those in the “audience” can note their own copies of the activities for future reference.

Classroom Implementation

Each participant selects at least two activities to use in the classroom in the coming week to either teach a concept, reinforce that concept, or confirm understanding. Include ideas for how to integrate this into existing classroom structure. Before implementing the activity, each participant should briefly note the standards addressed with that activity.

Looking Ahead

Be prepared for an overview discussion during the final week, and ask each teacher to bring a written plan for how she will integrate the teaching strategies and ideas gained from this book into her teaching for the remainder of the year. Again, remind the participants that tying those goals to standards will strengthen their focus and enhance their teaching.

Session Six—Review: Where Do We Go From Here?

Guiding Quote

“Reading is more than the tools of decoding,...fluency,...comprehension,...and vocabulary. It is bigger than its individual parts.” —Elizabeth Drew, American journalist and political author (89).

Discussion Questions

1. How has this book impacted your understanding of early language and literacy learning?
2. What is the most important tool you take away to improve student achievement?
3. What are the three big ideas—the three essentials—that serve as the foundation for learning to read conventionally, and how do they fit into the standards and goals our district has set for our students?

Workshop Activity

Divide the participants into three or four smaller groups and divide the chapters among them. Have each group scan a designated chapter or chapters and nominate the “most classroom-ready” ideas they want to implement from the “Get Parents Involved” boxes, Teacher Tips, or content.

Come back together and share with the whole group these important highlights. Visit Cathy Puett Miller’s blog for K-12 teachers at www.lighththesparkofliteracy.blogspot.com and share what was most valuable for that group in this experience with The Literacy Ambassador[®].

Classroom Implementation

Direct teachers to continue to implement strategies they have learned and participate in collaborative lesson planning and follow-up. Encourage those who have worked most closely together in this series of sessions to make a commitment to one another to partner and assist in helping to improve each other’s teaching of these three big essentials.

Looking Ahead

Identify desired resources and materials not currently available at your site and explore funding sources you can use to acquire these resources. Revisit the commitments and changes made by teachers to ensure that this experience has a lasting impact on their teaching.