

Teaching language and literacy in Grade R: The value of oral storytelling

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Introduction

The low early grade reading levels of South African children have been well documented (Van Staden & Gustafsson, 2022), and recent PIRLS results highlight challenges with reading comprehension at Grade 4 level. Recent research indicates that these reading challenges begin long before Grade 4. Many children are not acquiring alphabet knowledge early in their reading trajectory, and these children are more likely to struggle with reading fluency and comprehension in later years (Wills, Ardington & Sebaeng, 2022). In addition, we know that reading comprehension has a strong base in oral language which develops from the earliest years of a child's life (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; O'Carroll & Hickman, 2012; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Although young children are too young to read, "reading comprehension has an oral language complement, and oral language can be addressed at very early ages before children can read" (Spencer, Weddle, Petersen & Adams, 2017, p. 2).

Drawing on research and best practice for teaching young children, this paper highlights the key principles that underpinned the development of materials to strengthen oral language teaching in Grade R. These materials were developed as part of a story-based Home Language programme for the Gauteng Grade R Language Improvement Project, a provincial teacher training programme targeting all Grade R teachers in public ordinary schools, special needs schools and registered ECD centres in Gauteng.¹ This materials-development project provided a unique opportunity to develop an affordable, open-source, evidence-based programme for South African children and their teachers in the 11 official South African languages. The development team needed to ensure that the teaching and assessment activities for the project were curriculum aligned and covered the content in the CAPS Home Language for Grade R.



Learning Brief 1² describes the code-related aspects of the programme (letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness). This document, **Learning Brief 2**, concentrates on those aspects of the programme focused on strengthening the teaching of oral language.

1 The Gauteng Grade R Language Improvement Project is a provincial teacher training programme targeting all Grade R teachers in public ordinary schools, special needs schools and registered ECD centres in Gauteng. Further information about the project as well as creative commons licensed resources can be accessed here: <https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/grade-r-maths-and-languageimprovement-project/resources>, or contact the developers at info@wordworks.org.za
2 https://www.wordworks.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/GDE-Learning-Brief_Teaching-Lang-and-Literacy_Gr-R-Paper-2.pdf

Components of oral language that are developing at 5 to 6 years of age

Through listening to spoken language, and later through speaking themselves, children develop knowledge of word meanings (vocabulary). Very young children may convey what they mean by pointing to things in the environment, or by making gestures or facial expressions. Later, they learn the words for objects they see and actions that are happening, and they use simple language in a very concrete way to communicate about something that is happening at that moment in their immediate environment (the "here and now"). As children's language develops, however, they develop more sophisticated vocabulary and learn to use language to talk about more abstract things like feelings and thoughts, things that happened in the past or things that are planned for the future. They develop the skills to explain why things happened and learn to negotiate meaning using language without relying on gestures, facial expressions or environmental cues.

This type of complex, abstract language that goes beyond the "here and now" is sometimes referred to as "literate language" or "decontextualized language". Here are some characteristics of this type of language:

- vocabulary that is not common in everyday speech
- adverbs (*ran **slowly**; walked **carefully***)
- conjunctions (*and, yet, but, so, because*)
- mental verbs (*know, think, remember, decide*)
- embedded sentences (*the house **that has a swimming pool** is expensive*)
- elaborated noun phrases (*the giant, old oak tree, rather than the tree*).

Another marker of language development in 5- to 6-year-olds, is children's growing ability to use language to tell a personal or fictional story. Children's first narratives may be about something that happened in their lives, and may simply involve describing the actions. As their narrative skill develops, children may start giving context to their story, such as who was there (characters), where it took place (setting), and the specific order of events (temporality). They will also be able to explain how one event influenced another (causality). As narratives become longer and more complex, children begin to demonstrate an ability to take the perspective of different characters in the story, and make inferences about their goals, intentions and responses to events.

Children's narrative skills and their ability to understand and use more sophisticated vocabulary and decontextualized language are all critical for literacy development (Oakhill & Cain, 2012; Scarborough, 2001; Shanahan, 2006; Snow et al., 1998). There is a strong relationship between listening comprehension and oral narrative skills at 5 years of age and later reading comprehension (Babayigit, Roulstone & Wren, 2021; Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp & Wolf, 2004). Young children who have a good vocabulary at 5 years of age are also likely to be those that score well on reading comprehension tests in Grades 3, 4 and even 7 (Sénéchal, Ouellette & Rodney, 2006; Tabors, Snow & Dickinson, 2001).

Which activities are most effective in supporting the development of oral language in 5- and 6-year-olds?

Young children's language develops through interaction and is influenced by both the quantity and the quality of adult language (Cabell, Justice, McGinty, DeCoster & Forston, 2015; Hamre, 2014; Justice, 2004; Justice, Jiang & Strasser, 2018). Research shows that a growth in children's vocabulary, as well as an increase in their language production and comprehension is linked to the following classroom variables: teachers using sophisticated language that includes diverse and rare words, as well as more complex grammar; engaging children in extended conversations; asking open-ended questions; repeating and elaborating on what children say; following the child's lead and indicating interest, and commenting on what children are doing (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj & Taggart, 2004; Zucker, Justice, Piasta & Kaderavek, 2010).

While there are important opportunities for spontaneous adult-child interaction throughout the school day, our goal with the Grade R Language Improvement Programme was to design activities to be used during the language focus time that were most likely to increase opportunities for adult-child interactions and to improve children's early language learning environments.

The international literature points to interactive storybook reading as one of the most effective activities for exposing children to more sophisticated language, extending vocabulary and developing young children's narrative skills. Interactive or dialogic book-sharing involves an adult and child having a dialogue around the book they are reading together, talking about things in the book and about things that are not in the book itself. Children are active participants and engaged in discussions before, during and after reading. Storybook reading exposes children to decontextualized language and more sophisticated vocabulary, expands children's worlds and understanding of concepts, and enhances their narrative skills and ability to make inferences (Massonnié, Llauro, Sumner & Dockrell, 2022).

For these reasons, in many countries, shared storybook reading is the most widely recommended and frequently used language-focused activity in preschool classrooms (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017; Pelatti, Piasta, Justice & O'Connell, 2014; Piasta, 2016). In developing a language programme for Grade R, an obvious starting point was therefore to design the programme around interactive or dialogic storybook reading. However, we were aware that interactive book-sharing is not a common practice in homes in under-resourced communities. Recent surveys have shown that households in South Africa have very few books (only 35% of homes with children under 10 have one or more picture books), and many children do not have experiences of parents and caregivers reading stories in their homes (only 37% of adults report reading to children before the child can read themselves).³ These statistics point to the reality that for most Grade R learners, books are not familiar resources, book-sharing is not a familiar activity and "book language" is not a familiar language. While we are clear that children's worlds need to expand to include books, and believe that book-sharing should happen every day in Grade R, we wondered whether shared storybook reading was, in fact, the best anchor for a Grade R Home Language programme in our context. In a country with strong oral traditions, it seemed more likely that adult family members might use oral storytelling to share cultural values and views on the world. We wondered if oral stories could serve as a bridge into the language of books while simultaneously supporting the development of oral language. Could oral stories anchor the programme instead of books?

Our experience suggested that the practice of oral storytelling was seldom employed as a teaching strategy in ECD and Grade R classrooms. This did not seem to be unique to our context, with recent research in Latine immigrant communities in the US noting that "the emphasis of storybook reading in both educational practice, research, and interventions, however, has led to the unintentional disregard to oral forms of sharing stories, which tend to be more prevalent across ethno-cultural and linguistic diverse communities" (Melzi, Schick & Wuest, 2023, p. 487).⁴



3 <https://www.readingbarometersa.org/> and <https://www.readingbarometersa.org/system/files/resourcefiles/Reading%20and%20children%20NRB.pdf>

4 This is reflected in widely used teaching programmes and quality-assessment tools, which make no reference to oral storytelling as an activity, in addition to or as an alternative to storybook reading (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2014; Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010).

From 2011, Wordworks began developing materials with oral storytelling as an anchor activity. We knew that oral stories would expose children to new vocabulary and concepts, and decontextualized language. To help children understand the story, teachers would need to explain word meanings, use language to describe events beyond the “here and now”, relate events in a sequential order, and help children to understand causal relationships between events. Oral stories could be a valuable pedagogic tool for teaching important components of oral language. Research on oral storytelling practices was encouraging, and showed the positive effects of storytelling on narrative comprehension and vocabulary learning (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer & Lowrance, 2004; Nicolopoulou, Cortina, Ilgaz, Cates & De Sá, 2015).



Very recent international research lends further support to the value of storytelling as a pedagogic practice. Melzi et al. (2023) compared oral storytelling and storybook reading in bilingual Head Start classrooms serving mostly children of low-income, immigrant families from Latin American backgrounds. Teachers were assigned to either a storybook reading programme or an oral storytelling programme. The storytelling programme was developed in partnership with preschool teachers and informed by focus groups in which the researchers explored family oral storytelling practices. The researchers found that children in the storytelling classrooms were exposed to more instances of rich teacher language input as compared to children in storybook reading classrooms. Children in the storytelling classrooms shared more narratives with less scaffolding from the researcher, and produced narratives that were longer and linguistically more complex than children in the storybook reading classrooms. Although there were no differences in the total number of words used, children in the storytelling classrooms included significantly more word types and were more likely to organize their stories chronologically and include more developed themes. The authors conclude that: “diversifying storytime activities to include oral stories might be a promising way to increase meaningful language exchanges between teachers and children, especially in classrooms with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (p. 498). Most importantly, the authors argue that: “Educational efforts such as these are necessary to disrupt the deficit lens so often used in our fields to understand the development of children from ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse communities, and to pave a more equitable and inclusive path for their learning” (Melzi et al., 2023, p. 500).

Storytelling has potential as a culturally relevant pedagogical practice that builds on cultural traditions, and means that classroom practices would be more likely to be close to the lived experience of teachers and children. In this regard, Ellis and Bloch (2021) propose that: “In settings which have been dominated by colonial and post-colonial education systems, reinstating story as a legitimate educational form is worthy in itself, as well as providing an obvious segue to written language” (p. 6).

Designing a Grade R language programme based on oral storytelling

It is clear that oral storytelling can hold centre stage in a South African Grade R Home Language programme because:

- It is good pedagogy to build from known to new knowledge and practice. Oral storytelling builds on a South African cultural tradition of storytelling, and is more likely to be a practice that is familiar to children and their teachers rather than book reading.
- Oral storytelling is age appropriate for children in Grade R. It has the potential to strengthen children’s oral language at ages 5 to 6 and to build many of the language skills that are so critical for reading comprehension and written expression.
- Oral stories have many of the structural and linguistic features of stories in books and can serve as a bridge between everyday language and the more decontextualized language children encounter in books.
- Oral story resources are significantly more affordable than books as a core programme resource.⁵



⁵ In resource-constrained environments with programmes being implemented at scale, the cost of storybooks in African languages is often prohibitive. There are few high-quality storybooks written or versioned in minority languages, and publishers are reluctant to print those that have been versioned because of lack of demand. Purchasing a set of 18 books as a focus for the programme at an average cost of R250/book would have made the programme unaffordable at scale (R4 500 for books alone without the additional cost of teacher’s activity guides and additional classroom resources). In contrast, a story-based programme based on open-source resources can be purchased at a cost of R2 400 (click [here](#) for more information).

2

The Grade R Language Improvement Programme: Teacher's Activity Guides and classroom materials

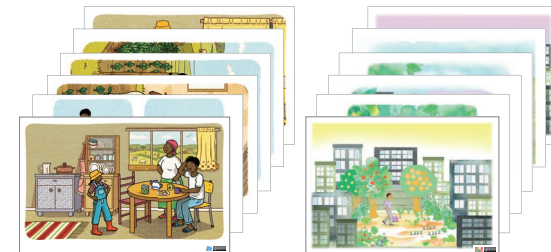
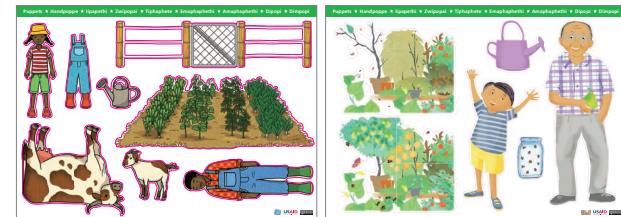
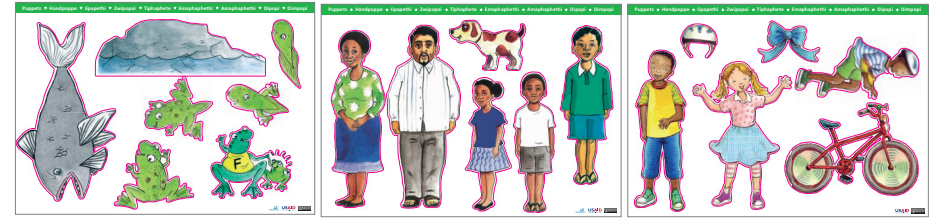
The programme provides guidelines and resources for daily whole class and small group teaching activities, focused on strengthening teaching practice and thereby providing children with high-quality language and literacy learning experiences. The Activity Guides for teachers are toggled in all official South African languages alongside English. This is in recognition of the fact that teachers may be teaching in their home language, but that their high school and/or tertiary education may have been in English and they may not have adequate written language skills or knowledge of technical terms in their home language.

There are 19 story packs with one activity per day for 2 weeks (36 weeks of teaching x five activities). Each story pack includes:

- an Activity Guide for the teacher, which provides guidelines for daily activities in a two-week cycle.
- a Big Book, a set of 2-D puppets, a set of sequence pictures, games and puzzles and a photocopiable little book.



A wide variety of stories were selected from creative commons published books and stories by [Book Dash](#), [African Storybook](#) and [Nal'ibali](#). All the texts were adapted for oral storytelling, to be of a similar length, and to be appropriate for 5- and 6-year-olds. Illustrations were selected from the original books or stories, and where necessary, the illustrators were contracted to provide additional illustrations. The stories have different authors, illustrators and cultural and language origins, and some include themes that are familiar to the children's lived experiences, while others aim to broaden their experience of the world. The oral storytelling materials include 2-D puppets for oral storytelling and a set of six sequence pictures.



A two-week teaching cycle

The 19 stories are the focus of a two-week teaching cycle of whole class and small group activities that balance oral language activities (telling stories, role play and sequencing pictures), meaningful print-based activities (reading a Big Book, shared writing, drawing and emergent writing, independent reading) and activities that focus on sounds and letters.





Week 1 – Whole class activities

Whole class activities	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Story-based activities	Storytelling and building vocabulary	Storytelling and singing	Storytelling and role play	Sequencing pictures	Make, draw and write
Letter and sound activities	Introducing a sound from the story	Forming the letter	Letter boxes	Listening for focus sounds	Blending and segmenting

Week 2 – Whole class activities

Whole class activities	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Story-based activities	More sequencing pictures	Shared reading – Big Book	Learning to listen	Read and do	Make, draw and write
Letter and sound activities	Introducing a sound from the story	Forming the letter	Letter boxes	Listening for focus sounds	Blending and segmenting

Week 1 and 2 – Small group activities

Small group activities	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	Stella indicates which small group activities are teacher-guided each day.				
The blue group	Activity 1: Drawing and emergent writing 	Activity 2: Puzzles and games	Activity 3: Independent reading	Activity 4: Fine motor skills and handwriting	Activity 5: Pretend play
The green group	Activity 5: Pretend play	Activity 1: Drawing and emergent writing 	Activity 2: Puzzles and games	Activity 3: Independent reading	Activity 4: Fine motor skills and handwriting
The yellow group	Activity 4: Fine motor skills and handwriting	Activity 5: Pretend play	Activity 1: Drawing and emergent writing 	Activity 2: Puzzles and games	Activity 3: Independent reading
The red group	Activity 3: Independent reading	Activity 4: Fine motor skills and handwriting	Activity 5: Pretend play	Activity 1: Drawing and emergent writing 	Activity 2: Puzzles and games
The purple group	Activity 2: Puzzles and games	Activity 3: Independent reading	Activity 4: Fine motor skills and handwriting	Activity 5: Pretend play	Activity 1: Drawing and emergent writing 

The two-week activity cycle is structured to consolidate and build on the language of the oral story, and to then use this as a bridge into a printed story. The activities are in line with other story reading and storytelling interventions to support language development.

Telling the story

Teachers begin a two-week teaching cycle with oral storytelling. They are provided with a story text, and encouraged to read and practice telling the story beforehand so that they can put the text aside when telling the story to the children in their class. They are encouraged to become storytellers and engage children through eye contact, varying their voice for different characters and using puppets and props. In this way, the guidelines for teachers attempt to align the programme with “culturally-grounded oral practices” and cultural models of storytelling that include a performance element and an expectation of audience participation. In keeping with African oral storytelling traditions, stories also include opening and closing statements.

Opening statement

English	isiXhosa
<p>One mouth to talk and sing, Two eyes to see, Two ears to hear, Two legs to walk and run; Here are my hands Give yours to me – time for stories everyone!</p>	<p>Ngomlomo omnye ndiyathetha ndicule, Ngamehlo amabini ndiyabona, Ngeendlebe ezimbini ndiyeva, Ngeenyawo ezimbini ndiyahamba ndibaleke, Nazi izandla zam. Ndinike ezakho – lixesha lebalali kumntu wonke!</p>

Closing statement

English	isiXhosa
<p>And that is the end of the story.</p>	<p>Liyaphela apha ibali lethu.</p>

Many of the practices shown to be effective in interactive storybook reading were adapted for oral storytelling. Teachers are given guidelines for pre-telling, oral telling, and post-telling. Similar to storybook reading guidelines, during pre-telling, teachers set the stage for the story by introducing key content knowledge and vocabulary, and relating the story to the children’s lives. By setting the stage in this way, teachers gain a sense of the background knowledge children bring to the story.

The children are also likely to be more engaged because they have been introduced to key vocabulary that is necessary for understanding the story. Here is an example from one of the teacher’s Activity Guides:

You will need:

- Story: *Are you my mother?*
- Puppets: Mother Bird, Baby Bird, cow, goat, Gogo, tree, nest, egg, Baby Bird in egg
- Props: a piece of thick wool/string for a worm, a bird’s nest, a plastic egg, a toy chick, feathers, granny glasses frames, a basket
- Objects or picture cards for some of the words from the vocabulary list

Week 1 Day 1

Whole class activities

Say the rhyme *Two eyes to see* to bring learners to the mat for story time.

Storytelling and building vocabulary

1 Before you tell the story

- 1.1 Tell learners the title of the story and introduce the characters using the puppets.
- 1.2 Relate the story to learners’ lives: Where do birds live? Do you know how baby birds are born? What do baby birds eat?
- 1.3 Say: *“Before we begin, I want to tell you the meaning of some new words which we will find in the story.”* Discuss the keywords from the vocabulary list, and show learners an object or a picture to show them what a word means. For example, show them pictures of different nests.

2 While you tell the story


- 2.1 Tell the story in a lively way and use different voices. Do actions and make use of the puppets and props.
- 2.2 Ask learners to predict what happens next in the story and involve them through open-ended questions, such as: *“Do you think Baby Bird is going to find his mother? How do you think Baby Bird is feeling?”*

3 After you tell the story

- 3.1 Ask learners: *“What did you like about the story? What didn’t you like? What was your best part? What questions do you have about the story? Have you been lost? Do you know what to do if you get lost?”*

Two eyes to see

One mouth to talk and sing,
Two eyes to see,
Two ears to hear,
Two legs to walk and run;
Here are my hands
Give yours to me – time for stories everyone!



In addition to introducing the characters and setting, an important part of pre-telling is to relate a story to children’s lives. The Activity Guides include suggestions for questions that teachers can ask in this regard, for example:

- “Who likes to run? Where do you run? Have you ever run in a race before?”
- “What is the weather like in autumn? What clothes do you wear in autumn?”

In the telling component, teachers are encouraged to tell the story in an engaging manner that captures children’s interest. Vocabulary is introduced by explicitly drawing attention to words, their meanings and their features, providing synonyms and translation into languages spoken by learners, and analysing the sound features of words. Teachers are encouraged to show children an object or picture or to do an action to demonstrate word meanings. Here are some examples of actions from the teacher’s Activity Guides:

- Make a worried face and ask learners to show you how they look when they are worried. Ask learners to say the word in their own language if they speak a different language at home.

- Ask learners to take off their shoes and show everyone how they wiggle their toes.
- Before the lesson you could ask colleagues or parents how you say some of the words in the languages learners speak at home. This will help learners to understand abstract words like “special”.
- Ask a learner to stand next to you and pretend to run a race together (just a few steps!). Talk about the start of the race, the finish and who the winner was.

The suggested questions in the teacher's Activity Guides are similar to the completion, recall, open-ended, wh-questions, and distancing (CROWD) techniques described in dialogic book-sharing and developed by Lonigan and Whitehurst (1998). Because we have found that teachers tend to more easily revert to completion, recall and closed wh-questions, the focus in the Activity Guides was on open-ended and distancing questions. We included questions to direct children's attention to key elements of the narrative (“Who was the main character and how did he feel?”) and questions that help children to connect the story to their own life (“How would you feel if that happened to you?”). These are often referred to as “distancing” questions. Here are some examples:

- What do you think the children will do when they get to the river? What will they have for lunch?
- What did you like about the story? What didn't you like? What was your best part?
- Do you think Baby Bird is going to find his mother? How do you think Baby Bird is feeling?
- Why did Thabi want to cry? What do you think Thabi wrote in the letter to her mom? What do you think the surprise was?
- How do you think Lindi felt when she was lining up to start the race? How do you think Lindi felt when she won the race?
- I wonder what Ali's mommy is going to do when she sees what he has done?
- Lindi was good at running. It was her special talent. What are you good at?
- Have you been lost? Do you know what to do if you get lost?
- Have you ever lost something? How did you feel when you lost something?



These questions help develop children's ability to understand the perspectives of different characters in a story and infer their feelings and intentions. This is a key skill for comprehending stories and will support reading comprehension once children learn to read. The understanding of our own and other people's mental

states, intentions and beliefs is referred to as “theory of mind”. Recent research on theory of mind and reading comprehension has shown that scores on a theory of mind task at 4 years old, indirectly predicted children's reading comprehension scores when they were 6 years old via language ability (Dore, Amendum, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2018). Importantly, it also directly predicted reading comprehension at 6 years old. This means that children's theory of mind at 4 years old is linked to growth in language development which supports reading comprehension, and it also has a direct link to reading comprehension.

It is also important to note that using stories in this way helps to build children's awareness of the feelings of others, their empathy and their ability to look at events from different perspectives. This has value in its own right because it strengthens their socio-emotional functioning and interaction with others.



Extending and building on the story

The two-week activity cycle is structured to consolidate and build on the language of the oral story, and to use this as a bridge into a printed story. Activities that build on and reinforce each other are essential for language development as children have multiple opportunities to hear and use new language. Words are not learnt in isolation, but are made real and meaningful to children in the context of a story or a theme and through participation in a conversation or activity. A cycle of activities also provides teachers and children with routines and structure that enhance learning.

The teacher tells the story for the first time on Day 1 of a new two-week cycle. Then, the following day, the teacher begins by asking questions to check children's recall of the story and vocabulary, and then the story is retold. Studies have also shown that children generally participate more in later readings of the same text, which can include more speculation and interpretation (DeTemple, 2001). After hearing the story again, children are introduced to a song or rhyme that includes words and phrases from the story. Research has shown that in order to develop their understanding of and ability to use new words, children need to encounter these words many times in a range of different situations.

Research has also shown that when teachers use extra activities before or after interactive story reading sessions, children have superior oral language and print knowledge than those who were not provided with extra activities (Mol, Bus & De Jong, 2009) and learning is enhanced by an opportunity to use the words from a story in a song or during play (Barone & Xu, 2008).

On Day 3, children are invited to participate in role playing the story. Children start to own the language of the story and new phrases can be tried out in the context of a familiar storyline. When children participate in dramatic types of play, they copy and practice the words they have heard others saying and this helps to reinforce vocabulary and gives them opportunities to use language that is different to everyday talk.⁶

Week 1 Day 3

Whole class activities

Storytelling and role play

- 1 Sing the song.
- 2 Ask learners if they can remember the meaning of words from the vocabulary list. For example: Ask them to act out these action words: "fly" and "tap".
- 3 Choose learners to play the characters in the story.
- 4 Talk about each character in the story. Tell learners who they are going to be in the role play and show them the props that will be used to tell the story.
- 5 Explain to learners that you (the teacher) are going to be the storyteller, also known as the narrator. The acting learners are going to act out everything you say. Help them to organise where they are going to stand.
- 6 Start telling the story and encourage learners to do the actions to match your words while the rest of the class watches the role play.
- 7 If there is time, you may want to repeat the role play with different learners.



On Day 4, the teacher models retelling the story using a sequence of pictures. This helps give children a sense of story structure and logical sequencing of events and strengthens children's ability to sequence their own stories in a coherent way. At this age, a key aspect of narrative development is to understand temporality (events happening in order) and causality (one event leading to another).

⁶ In addition to this whole class dramatic play activity, children are given a chance to revisit the theme of the story in a small group pretend play activity. A specific kind of language is used in pretend play, where children need to explain their play and attribute actions, thoughts or feelings to inanimate objects. It also involves assigning roles and enacting typical scripts or routines of everyday events or making up a story about someone or something.

The development of these skills is facilitated by teachers modelling the sequencing of pictures and engaging children in thinking about temporal order (what happens next), and how one event is caused by another.

You will need:

- Big sequence pictures

Week 1 Day 4

Whole class activities

Sequencing pictures

Stella says:

These are useful questions to ask about each picture:

- "Who can you see?" (characters)
- "What is he/she/it doing?" (verbs and actions)
- "What else can you see?" (looking again)
- "Where is the ...?" (naming places/position)
- "Why do you think ...?" (creative thinking, expressing opinions)



- 1 Sing the song again.
- 2 Introduce new words from the vocabulary list.
- 3 Choose one of the sequence pictures and hold it up. Ask learners what they see, then talk about the picture in detail.
- 4 Once you have discussed each picture, stick it on the board so learners can see it. Make sure the pictures are not in sequence at this stage of the activity.
- 5 After talking about all the pictures, ask learners: "Are the pictures in the correct order?"
- 6 Ask learners to point out the picture for the beginning of the story. Work together to arrange the sequence of the pictures so the story makes sense.
- 7 Keep learners actively involved in this process. Ask questions like: "What happened next? Who can remember the next part of the story?"
- 8 When the pictures are in the correct order, invite a few learners to retell the story in the correct sequence.



Through role play and describing sequence pictures, children move from being an audience to the narrators to gradually taking ownership of storytelling. In a follow-up activity, children are given a wordless little book to fold with the pictures from the sequence picture activity. They are encouraged to use the little book to tell the story to their family at home.



In Week 2 of the two-week cycle, the teacher models reading a Big Book that includes the same pictures as the children have seen in the sequence cards and little book, but now includes text. Seeing the same story in written form opens the door to the magic of the printed word – words that are spoken can be represented on a page!

You will need:

- Big Book: *Are you my mother?*
- An A5 “f” letter template for each learner
- Jumbo wax crayons

Week 2 Day 2

Whole class activities

Shared reading – Big Book

- 1 Encourage learners to look at the cover picture and talk about what they see and recognise.
- 2 Read the title of the story to the class. Point to each word as you read. Read it again and ask learners to read with you.
- 3 Take learners on a picture walk through the book, discussing the pictures and encouraging learners to ask questions.
- 4 Point out the page numbers and talk about what number will come next.
- 5 When you have “walked” through the whole book, go back to the beginning and read the title again. Then turn the pages and read each sentence in a clear and natural voice. Point to each word as you read.
- 6 Read the book again and encourage learners to “read” with you.



Through observing a teacher while he or she is reading, children learn important concepts about print such as reading from left to right and the difference between pictures and print. They begin to understand that print is speech written down, and even without being able to decode words, they may begin “reading” by making up or reciting a story to match the pictures in a book. Paging through a book themselves and “reading” to an audience gives them a sense of being a reader. Reading becomes part of their identity and reading is associated with enjoyment and excitement.

In a whole class activity, children contribute to a written text linked to the story through expressing their opinions, giving input and co-constructing texts with the teacher. They are also given an opportunity to draw their favourite part of the story. The teacher writes their words describing their picture or they are encouraged to add their own “emergent writing”.

This exposure to and generation of text is supported by the daily development of phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge throughout the two-week cycle. The story is used as a familiar and meaningful context from which sounds are drawn, and learners extend their engagement with these sounds, and link them to letters, in a number of play- and activity-based contexts. This component of the programme is explored in more detail in Learning Brief 1.

Conclusions

In designing a programme to support Home Language in Grade R, Wordworks was tasked with ensuring a range of integrated activities that target both code-based and oral language skills. The programme was required to be cost effective to produce and relevant for low-resource environments. The content and type of activities needed to be evidence-based, appropriate for young children and sensitive to the cultural context. Despite the large evidence-base and widespread support for dialogic book-sharing as the gold standard for teaching language, we chose to build the programme around oral storytelling. Teachers are still encouraged to read stories to their children daily, but we chose not to use books as the basis for building teaching routines and activities.

Recent research has confirmed the value of this approach, not only for enhancing language learning opportunities, but also as a teaching practice that is strength-based and builds on experiences that may be familiar to many teachers and children in our context.

Wordworks has developed a sister-classroom programme for pre-Grade R (4- and 5-year-olds),⁷ also structured in two-week cycles with activities anchored in storytelling. Together, these provide teachers and children with two years’ worth of rich language, and opportunities to build vocabulary, narrative skills and confidence in understanding and using the type of language they will encounter in written texts. Observing teachers’ growing confidence in using oral stories for building language-rich classrooms, and children’s eagerness to contribute to storytelling activities, has confirmed the potential value of oral stories for building vitally important foundations for literacy.



⁷ https://www.wordworks.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Programme-information-sheets-2023_Little-stars.pdf

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Wordworks is a South African non-profit organisation that focuses on early language and literacy development in the first eight years of children’s lives. Since 2005, Wordworks has developed and shared its programmes and materials with those adults best positioned to impact on young children’s language and literacy development (www.wordworks.org.za).

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Further information about the project as well as creative commons licensed resources can be accessed here: <https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/grade-r-maths-and-language-improvement-project/resources> or contact the developers at info@wordworks.org.za.

