

Dialogic Reading: Enriching the Reading Process for Primary English Students

By Carmen Zavala

Cambridge Primary Reading Anthologies Teacher's Book uses dialogic reading to make it easy for teachers to effectively support students as they are reading in class.

I What Is Dialogic Reading?

Reading is much more than decoding and understanding individual words. Fluent readers construct meaning by interacting with a written text, that is, by engaging in a dialogue with the words and ideas on the page. Dialogue leads to interpretation, and fluent readers make connections with what they already know and by thinking deeply about what they have read.

In order to become fluent readers, students need to be made aware of the different comprehension strategies that can allow them to truly understand a text and to engage with it meaningfully. As teachers, we can model how fluent readers think about a text and how they problem-solve as they read. In this way, we can make the invisible act of reading visible. As you read a text with students, pause to ask them questions—questions that lead them to explore, analyze, and make connections. Simply put, foster their dialogue with the text.

Cambridge Primary Reading Anthologies Teacher's Book provides sample questions at point of use for every section of its fiction and nonfiction texts. This way, the dialogic reading approach can be implemented effortlessly.

II The Benefits of Dialogic Reading

- 1. Reflection:** Through dialogic reading, children are allowed to ponder the text. Instead of rushing through a reading, they pause every few lines, which helps them to take a step back from what they are reading and consider what it says.
- 2. Higher-Order Thinking Skills:** Asking relevant questions can help children gain a deeper understanding of a text by exploring aspects of it they might not have noticed otherwise. Essentially, dialogic reading questions scaffold the reading

process, breaking up learning into bite-size pieces and providing a tool or structure for each piece.

- 3. Learning to Read:** By modeling how to approach a text, dialogic reading is a proven way for children to acquire effective reading skills. It gets children into the habit of reading more thoroughly. This positive practice can be transferred to students' first language and will improve their reading skills for a lifetime.
- 4. Vocabulary:** One crucial element of learning to read is realizing you don't need to understand every single word in a text. However, fluent readers also use reading as a vehicle to learn new words from context. Through dialogic reading, students can learn how to manage unfamiliar words and improve their language fluency.
- 5. Motivation:** Questions can help students become more interested in the text or story. Thinking about the motivations of characters or what will happen next in a story, for example, will make it more engaging for students.
- 6. Personalization:** An important aspect of dialogic reading is connecting what children are reading to their own experiences and to wider reality. These connections help to link literature and nonfiction texts to the real world and to what students already know.

III Implementing Dialogic Reading in the Classroom

For dialogic reading to work, it is essential to create a safe environment in the classroom, in which children feel that they can ask questions, give opinions, and take risks without the fear of being judged or made fun of. Making mistakes is part of the learning process and is a byproduct of taking risks, which is a core part of the creative mindset.

Questions are not intended to assess students, although teachers may, of course, use them for that purpose. They are intended to bring as many children into the conversation as possible. This should be done in a

non-threatening way so that students don't feel pressure. You can direct questions to children strategically so that struggling students get easier questions and stronger students get more challenging ones. The idea is to encourage participation, not to intimidate. This strategy allows teachers to be constantly checking in with quiet or less confident students who might need more support.

Questions should be organized progressively, starting with straightforward, simpler questions and moving on to ones that demand more complex reasoning:

- 1. Simple questions** require answers to be extracted directly from the text. You can ask Yes/No questions or give students completion prompts about the text that require them to fill in a blank at the end of a sentence. These types of prompts are very effective when used with rhymes or repetitive phrases.
 For example: *Look at the picture(s). Is the horse red? Do the children cry? Did the farmer shout? The dog's name is ... Uncle Jim turns off the ... The horse is a good ...*
- 2. Expanded questions** are open questions that encourage children to explore different aspects of the text, including illustrations, titles, and vocabulary. The aim is for learners to notice details and to check their comprehension. It is also useful to have students say in their own words what has happened so far in a story. This way they can better understand a text or remember events.
 For example: *Look at the picture(s). Who is this? What color is her umbrella? How big is the dog? Where is the police officer? What's the weather like? What does "storm" mean? When did Mom come home? What happened to the boy? What's the first thing that the girl saw?*
- 3. Digging Deeper questions** are critical thinking questions that involve an in-depth analysis of the text, by making predictions, deductions, and inferences.
 For example: *Look at the title/pictures. What do you think this story is about? Why is the girl laughing? How do you think she really feels? Why do you think the boy went home? How do you know that the car isn't new? Who is the funniest character in your opinion? Why?*

- 4. Personalization questions** encourage students to make connections between the text and their own lives and reality, forming a bridge between the text and the real world.

For example: *Do you have any pets? How do you celebrate your birthday? What would you do if you lost your book? How would you feel if that happened to you?*

In **Cambridge Primary Reading Anthologies Teacher's Book**, the questions already follow the above progression so that teachers can easily and effectively manage the dialogic reading process.

IV Dialogic Reading Question Types

The types of questions you can ask can be broadly classified as follows:

- 1. Predicting**
Look at the pictures. What do think the story is about? What do you think is going to happen next? Will the tiger attack the girl?
- 2. Connecting**
The boy in the story hates broccoli. Do you like broccoli? Which vegetables do you like? Have you ever seen snow? What do you think it feels like? Has this ever happened to you?
- 3. Reflecting**
Do you see someone on this page who might be scared? Why are they scared? How does the character feel? Why is he crying? Could this happen in real life? Why or why not?
- 4. Evaluating**
Is the story trying to teach us anything? Is the character telling the truth? Why do you say that? Is this argument supported by evidence?
- 5. Speculating**
What if the dad hadn't called the police? What would you do if you were the cat in the story? What will happen if we don't protect coral reefs?

6. Giving Your Opinion

*Which illustration in the story is your favorite? Why?
 Do you like the main character? Why or why not?
 Would you recommend this story to a friend? Why or why not?*

7. Silly Questions

*Can you act like a cow? Show me!
 Is eating cake for breakfast a good idea? Why or why not?
 What would happen if all birds were purple?*

V Tips and Tricks

To make dialogic reading more effective, follow these tips:

- Keep it light. The questions are not meant to test students, so keep them light and fun, even silly. It is more important for children to be engaged than to deal with difficult content.
- Mix it up! Combine a bit of reading with some questions, then some more reading and some more questions.
- Vary the prompts and questions from reading to reading.
- Follow your students' interests. Find out what they like and focus on it. Do they have pets? Ask about their own pets after they read a story or text on pets. Do any of your students play a musical instrument? Ask questions to reveal what their related interests and knowledge are.

VI Frequently Asked Questions

1. How is dialogic reading different from traditional reading comprehension?

Traditional reading comprehension is usually literal and focused on summarizing the information in a text. Answers are often one-dimensional, that is, they are either right or wrong. Dialogic comprehension is richer because it calls for interpretation, inference, opinion, and critical thinking, in addition to discussing the literal meaning of a text.

2. Won't dialogic reading be too challenging for my lower primary students who are struggling to read?

To the contrary! Dialogic reading provides scaffolding to support vocabulary learning and comprehension while children are listening to the audio track or reading out loud in class. This strategy is especially helpful for struggling readers.

3. What if some students don't have the language to answer?

Since children in lower primary have a basic command of English, you might have to resort to non-verbal responses. You can also allow children to answer questions in L1 and then translate their answers into English.

4. How do I deal with mixed-ability classes?

You can easily adapt the questions to children's level. Closed-ended questions and completion prompts can be directed at weaker students, while open-ended and more complicated questions can be addressed to stronger students. However, don't forget to occasionally allow weaker students to attempt to answer more difficult questions, even if they have to resort to L1.

5. How do I deal with large classes?

You can combine whole-class answers with individual ones by using TPR, for example, *Stand up if you think the tiger will eat the boy. Thumbs up if you like the story. Thumbs down if you don't.*

You can also implement *What's your word?* questions, and have children write a one-word answer for a question. Then, you can elicit the words from several students. For example: *How do you think the girl feels? Write one word.*

For questions addressed to individual students, ask the question first and then call on a student to answer. This way, the entire class will be more likely to pay attention.

6. What do I tell parents?

Dialogic reading works. For more than a decade now, it has been implemented as part of integrated childhood development programs across the United States. Results of language development tests show that children who have been read to dialogically are substantially ahead of children who have been read to traditionally.

Helping Your Primary Students Make the Most of Reading

By Dr. Peter Watkins

The Importance of Reading

We read instant messages, social media posts, and personal emails to stay in touch with people who are important to us. We read newspaper articles and blog posts to stay informed about current events. We read novels for our entertainment and to be transported to exciting new worlds. We read cartoons and jokes to make us laugh, and we read textbooks to learn new things and improve ourselves. We read all sorts of different texts for different purposes, but one thing is very clear: reading plays a huge part in our lives. What's more, reading is crucial if we are to take advantage of life's opportunities, particularly with regard to education and employment. That explains why there is a focus on literacy in virtually all education systems around the world. Reading really does matter.

As our learners grow up in an evermore connected world, the need to operate successfully in more than one language increases all the time. Many of our learners may find themselves in future positions where they need to be able to read English fluently. It may be for study, for work, or simply for pleasure. However, reading is not just a hugely useful skill in itself. The exposure to natural English also helps to improve all-around English ability and particularly vocabulary growth. So, how can teachers best help their learners in the vital task of developing reading skills?

Some Key Principles for Teaching Reading

There is no doubt that understanding how sounds match to letters and combinations of letters—a phonics approach—is important in the beginning stages of reading, and learners need systematic instruction in it. However, as well as helping learners to understand “the code” behind reading, it is also important for teachers to help learners see both the fun in reading and its usefulness. This can be achieved by selecting texts that are relevant and interesting to learners, that are attractive, and that are pitched at an appropriate level so that they can be read relatively easily. Importantly, learners should look forward to reading rather than experiencing reading as a stressful

and anxiety-provoking experience. Texts that appeal to learners and make them excited, happy, or curious—in other words, texts that create an emotional reaction in the reader—will promote this enjoyment.

Reading is a skill, like many others, that gets better with consistent and dedicated practice. If reading can be made fun, learners are more likely to read regularly, and instilling good reading habits in learners is a crucial part of a reading teacher's job.

In short, the best way to get better at reading is by reading. For teachers at primary level, the need to shape attitudes toward reading is arguably even more important than for teachers at other levels because primary teachers are working with learners at such a sensitive point in their development. Positive attitudes toward reading created in childhood may sustain motivation in the reader/learner for years to come.

Extensive Reading

Using reading anthologies that are graded to the level of the learners offers teachers the opportunity to expand the reading syllabus beyond what most course books can offer. Most course books use relatively short texts that are studied in detail and the texts are often quite difficult for learners to understand. However, extensive reading develops reading skills in different ways. The texts tend to be graded in terms of grammar and particularly vocabulary so that they are relatively easy for learners to understand. This grading is important because when reading becomes easier, learners are more likely to enjoy the texts that they are reading and consequently want to read more.

Many people intuitively feel that texts need to be difficult for learners to benefit from them and that only great challenge will lead to improvement in language skills. However, that is not true. There is plenty of evidence that reading large amounts of relatively easy texts is a very good way to develop all-around reading skills. In short, texts do not necessarily have to be difficult to be useful to learners. Extensive reading tends to focus on developing reading fluency, and there is a lot of evidence that, as

learners develop reading fluency, they also become more accurate in their reading, understanding more of the details of the text. In other words, if learners read plenty of relatively easy texts, they also get better at understanding more difficult texts.

As well as being a potential source of pleasure, there is also evidence that extensive reading can lead to vocabulary growth, helping learners to learn new words and also to become familiar with how words are used in combinations—how words collocate. Grammar knowledge can also improve through extensive reading, probably because exposure to large amounts of English is crucial to grammar development. Extensive reading also brings improvements in writing as well as helping learners develop their knowledge and understanding of the world.

The key to unlocking all of these advantages is to make reading a habit—something that is undertaken on a regular basis. Creating these habits may start in the classroom but will ideally extend beyond the classroom, with learners willing and able to read independently at home in the future.

Group Reading and Individual Silent Reading

The ultimate goal of all reading programs is for learners to become independent, efficient, silent readers because that is what they will need to be able to do as they become older and read outside the classroom. Nearly all more advanced reading will be individual and silent.

However, particularly at primary level, reading gives the opportunity for an enjoyable shared classroom experience. For example, a teacher could read to the class with the learners following the text. The teacher can ask supporting questions along the way, gently checking understanding or inviting speculation about what will happen next. If there is dialogue in the text, the teacher could model it and draw attention to the emotions the characters convey and which words they stress before asking the learners to practice the same section of dialogue with a partner. As the learners perform the dialogue, their role is to read the text, rather than learn it by heart, and to copy the model of the teacher. These shared activities, based around a text that learners enjoy, help build rapport among members of the class and also promote collaborative learning.

Variety is important for keeping motivation levels high. So, as well as reading to the class, the teacher could ask the learners to silently read some sections of the text. These activities could start with very short sections, taking just a few minutes, but could gradually include longer sequences to help the learners gain independence. After the silent reading, the learners could be invited to share their reactions to the text, and the teacher can check general understanding.

The Three Stages of Classroom Reading

In classroom situations, reading is often seen as a three-stage process, with *before-reading*, *while-reading*, and *after-reading* stages. The teacher's task before reading is to build the learners' interest in the text and their desire to read it. It is also an opportunity to provide support for the following stages of the lesson. Support might come in the form of teaching vocabulary that is in the text, asking the learners to anticipate what the text will be about, or inviting them to share what they already know about the topic. This before-reading phase is important because good preparation can help make texts easier to understand.

While reading is when the learners actually interact with the text and build their understanding of it. There may be exercises for them to do while they read (such as answering questions), but where these are used, the teacher should take care that the "testing" dimension of using questions does not provoke anxiety and take away reading enjoyment. The questions should not become the sole focus of the lesson and should not detract from the learner experience of the text.

If questions are used and a learner gets some answers wrong, it does not need to be seen as a failure by either them or the teacher. It is simply an indication that they need to reread the text and try again. A low score is just a stepping stone to gaining a higher score. Also, teachers can include tasks that do not have a single factually "correct" answer, so students' answers cannot be judged as "wrong." For example, teachers could ask learners which character in the story they most like (or dislike) and why, or which events are the most important. These types of questions, while having no single correct answer, still allow the teacher to monitor how much learners have understood because the reporting of answers gives

learners the opportunity to demonstrate understanding and particularly the prioritizing of key information over more peripheral information, which is a strong indicator of comprehension. It is important to remember that learners do not necessarily have to understand every word or be able to analyze every item of grammar to understand the overall meaning of the text and to have benefited from reading it.

As we have seen, while-reading activities should not only be about being able to answer comprehension questions correctly. They should also give learners the chance to practice the reading strategies and skills that they are learning. One of the most important of these strategies is for readers, even young readers, to monitor their own understanding of a text. So, it is a good idea for teachers to encourage learners to ask themselves, "Do I understand what is happening?" at regular intervals as they read a text. When the answer is "no," learners can be encouraged to adopt a simple repair strategy, such as going back a few lines and rereading the text from that point or using visual material to support their overall comprehension.

After-reading activities give learners the chance to share their reactions to the text, saying what was most interesting, exciting, or memorable. Students may be asked to express these emotions in a variety of ways, such as by discussing the story, doing a drawing based on what they have read, or writing a review of the text. These activities help the learners to see reading as something genuinely communicative because they use their understanding of the text to inform some other piece of communication.

Some Things to Try in the Classroom

- **Be a role model.** One of the most important parts of a teacher's job is to inspire and enthuse learners, and this is hugely important at primary level. So, be a reading role model for your learners. Share what you have been reading with them and what you read at their age. Explain why reading is important to you, and above all demonstrate an enthusiasm and passion for reading in English. This enthusiasm will be transmitted to the learners.
- **Monitor and support progress.** Teachers will not be surprised that learners are likely to learn and develop their reading skills at different rates. Strong readers can become much stronger very quickly as they choose to read more and more. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true: weak readers can rapidly become much weaker than the rest of the group. This can happen when the frustration and anxiety caused by reading leads them to read less and less. Look out for weak or reluctant readers, and, if at all possible, offer them additional support and help so that they remain engaged with the reading program and can gain the benefits of reading. If necessary, help them select easier texts to read so that they start to gain some confidence in reading.
- **Recycle.** As noted above, fluency in reading can also lead to gains in accuracy. One way of developing reading fluency is to ask learners to review and reread texts. It is a very underused strategy in the teaching of reading, perhaps because teachers are afraid that repeating something may be seen as a waste of time. However, there are many ways to make it a fun activity. For example, a teacher could copy out a section of a previously-read text, making just a few incidental changes (for example, to places, ages, or names). Ask learners to read the rewritten text to find the differences with the original.
- **Create a word bag.** A word bag is a very simple idea. Keep a bag (it could just be a large envelope) in your classroom along with a supply of blank slips of paper. When you encounter a new word or phrase in the text, write it on a slip of paper and put it in the bag. As the number of new words and phrases in the bag grows, take time at the beginning or end of the lesson to review some of the words. Ask learners what they mean, whether they can remember the text they came from, and the context in which they were used. As learners get the idea of the word bag, you could invite them to add words to the bag from the texts they read. This simple idea is a way of recycling new vocabulary, which is a very important step in it being remembered.
- **Use the whole package.** Like any teaching resource, reading material needs to be fully exploited. For example, the way that a text is illustrated is not just for decoration but can actually help with comprehension of the text. Before reading, draw learners' attention to the illustrations and ask them questions about how they think the images will relate to the text. They may be able

to speculate about the setting of the text, the characters involved, and so on. Encourage learners to adopt this strategy when they read independently—they should take a few moments to think through what information the pictures give them. Recordings of the text can also be useful because they can again help develop fluency in reading. Learners are pushed to follow the text at the rate at which it is read rather than slowing down too much and reading very slowly. If a teacher wishes to check that the learners are following the text, the teacher can occasionally stop the recording and ask, *What is the next word?*, thus checking that learners are following successfully. Of course, teachers may also check that learners are understanding the key points of the text by having them summarize what just happened, for example.

Above all, make reading in English an enjoyable and positive experience for learners.