

# Strategies for Developing Pre-reading Skills for Nursery AAC Users

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In August 1994 a new reading scheme, the *Oxford Reading Tree (ORT)*, was introduced at Graysmill School. There was a need to modify the approach to the teaching of reading so that the users of voice output devices could successfully develop reading skills, using the ORT (See Girdler and Frame, 1995).

The resulting background reading led to several important findings regarding the early literacy experiences of pre-school A.A.C. users. It was felt that these issues should be addressed with this population group in Graysmill Nursery if they were to be ready for more formal reading at school age.

Pierce and McWilliams (1993) believe that there is compelling evidence to suggest that parents reading of storybooks to their pre-school children enhances language development and significantly affects reading comprehension in the early school years. However it is the quality of the conversational interactions surrounding this activity which adds to the impact.

## *Qualitative and quantitative differences in storybook reading interactions*

### **A.A.C. users**

v

### **Non disabled peers**

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> parents dominate interaction                               |  | <input type="radio"/> child has active role          |
| <input type="radio"/> child seldom fills in line from text                       |  | <input type="radio"/> child pretends to read         |
| <input type="radio"/> few opportunities for participation                        |  | <input type="radio"/> child asks questions re: story |
| <input type="radio"/> minimal involvement in taking meaning from text            |  | <input type="radio"/> child talks about story        |
| <input type="radio"/> emphasis placed on physical manipulation e.g. page turning |  |  |

Light et al (1994) highlight in particular the differences in opportunities given to users of A.A.C. in storybook reading situations.

Before beginning to address these differences Light discusses the “contracts of literacy” - i.e. the skills which are established through storybook reading in all pre-school children.

The child should learn to:

- give attention to books
- derive meaning from books
- “talk” about the content of books
- handle books as objects of thought, not toys
- follow the topic established through the story
- interpret the pictures and text as symbolic representations not the real thing

It is also relevant to bear in mind other factors particularly those mentioned in books by educationalists regarding the early literacy development of non-disabled pre-schoolers. Meek (1991) comments that children do intend to make meaning from their very early marks on paper and will read aloud their own messages. Clay (1991) notes that all pre-school children know something about print from their environment. This leads them to form simple hypotheses about letters, words or messages. It is also noted by Beard (1990) that they must show an awareness of how written language functions and that this must be developed before learning to read.

We felt therefore that the expectations placed on able bodied children with regard to literacy development should be born in mind when working with A.A.C. users. However we also needed to teach the A.A.C. users to communicate during literacy experiences and to do so frequently.

Therefore the nursery routine was adapted to allow individual storybook reading sessions for two girls with the teacher or speech and language therapist, which would compliment the existing group story sessions.

*This is a revised version of a paper which first appeared in Widening the Perspective (1995)*

### ***Storybook Reading Sessions***

A selection of books was made using the 5 – 14 Curriculum Guidelines. Books should:

- have a familiar vocabulary
- have an appropriate sentence length
- use predictable and repetitive language
- be at an appropriate developmental level
- reflect different genre of books
- demonstrate alliteration and rhyme
- be appealing

We then needed to adapt the presentation of each book in order to facilitate the child's active involvement in the literacy experience, so that it could be similar to that expected of a non disabled peer.

A variety of strategies were planned based on the findings of the aforementioned articles:

- multiple readings of a small number of books which would gradually enable more active involvement of the child
- the adult would respond to the child's attempts to participate and attribute intention and meaning to them
- use of silent pauses and cloze procedure to provide time and opportunity for the child to participate
- use of low-tech communication to encourage participation by
  - eye pointing
  - frequent yes /no responses
  - symbol topic charts
  - gross actions
- the adult frequently obligate the child's involvement

A deliberate decision not to expect high-tech A.A.C. use in these activities was made. Primarily because neither child was ready but also because "*low-tech systems can offer the user a quick, powerful and highly flexible method of communication*" (Scott, 1994) and this would be less likely to disrupt the flow of the story.

Five books were selected for each child. All the books were popular ones and might be found in environments other than nursery or home. The teacher and the speech and language therapist discussed which modes of communication each child could be expected to use in each of the books. Raygan has dystonic cerebral palsy affecting all four limbs. It was anticipated that she would use verbal *yes/no* signalling, vocalisations, eye pointing and a symbol topic chart to make book choices and to predict outcome. Emma has cerebral palsy with total body involvement and a visual impairment. She was expected to use *yes/no* signalling, symbolic noises, gross gestural movements and eye pointing.

### ***Literacy Related Experiences***

Storybook reading sessions are not the only important early literacy experience. Van Kleek (1990) comments that experience of literacy artifacts e.g. a variety of books, labels, letters, and writing utensils, should be embedded in literacy events taking place in the home environment. She goes on to suggest that to facilitate the foundations for reading, literacy related episodes should be promoted in pretend play i.e. activities of daily living practised in a secure environment.

This made us look carefully at an imaginative play group organised on a weekly basis by the teacher and the speech and language therapist. The group consisted of both non verbal and verbal children all with a physical disability. We decided, as key adults, to introduce informal literacy experiences to this group and to develop these experiences in order to incorporate new ideas weekly. Everyone in the group would be expected to participate in drawing, writing and reading. This would be in addition to the already existing emphasis placed on the use of all modes of communication.

The children had been involved in playing at 'Going on Holiday', so we introduced over a period of time:

- simple travel brochures – consisting of 4 pictures
- envelopes – names and addresses were read and given to correct person
- tickets were written out and received
- money was made – amounts read out

- ice cream cones were made – colours matched flavours
- a pictorial menu was made by the children, which also included written labels and prices
- postcards were received, bought, written and given to friends

### Summary

The nursery staff have been aware of the 1:1 storybook reading sessions but have not been specifically involved. An informal discussion has been held to highlight the skills being encouraged, the strategies being used by the adult and the modes of communication the child has been expected to use. A handout has been produced to summarise this information as well as a recording sheet. It is the intention to continue this approach in the next academic year.

The parents have been informed about the early literacy work but not actively involved in it. At this stage we agree with a number of articles which suggest that parent-child storybook reading sessions have a different function.

The development of this project has meant that we have had to rethink and reset the goals for the imaginative play session in order to incorporate the early literacy aims. It is envisaged that much of this initial work should continue in the Class 1 setting in parallel with the development of more formal literacy learning.

Raygan and Emma have each developed preferred story books with preferred people. When these familiar books have been used in group story sessions, the children using non-oral communication are secure in their responses and able to take a more active role.

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