



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Implementing Dialogic Reading

Christopher Lonigan, Ph.D. • October 2007

**Topic:** Preschool Language and Literacy

**Practice:** Use Interactive and Dialogic Reading

### Highlights (short version)

- What is dialogic reading?
- The difference between dialogic reading and other types of shared book reading
- Key features and purpose of dialogic reading
- Explanation of the three levels of dialogic reading and what types of questions to ask at each level
- Demonstration of how to use each level of dialogic reading, ask level-related questions, and provide appropriate feedback to engage children in a story
- Why it's important to use dialogic reading and the impact of this practice on children's language development

### Highlights (extended version):

- What is dialogic reading?
- The difference between dialogic reading and shared book reading
- Key features and purpose of dialogic reading
- Value of using the dialogic reading approach with a small group of

children

- Explanation of the three levels of dialogic reading and what types of questions to ask at each level
- How to select good books for dialogic reading and plan lessons
- Demonstration of how to use each level of dialogic reading, ask level-related questions, and provide appropriate feedback to engage children in a story
- Why it's important to use dialogic reading and the impact of this practice on children's language development
- Providing professional development to help teachers learn how to use dialogic reading techniques and move up and down through the levels
- Value of using role-playing and providing classroom practice opportunities to help teachers develop questioning and feedback techniques
- Why it's important for teachers to understand that dialogic reading is a scaffolded language interaction about a book

### About the Interviewee

Dr. Christopher J. Lonigan is a professor of psychology at Florida State University and the Associate Director of the Florida Center for Reading Research. Dr. Lonigan received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology in 1991 from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. After completing his Ph.D., Dr. Lonigan was awarded a two-year NIH Postdoctoral Fellowship at the John F. Kennedy Center at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Lonigan's area of expertise concerns the development, assessment, and promotion of preschool early literacy skills. He is or has been the principal investigator for four of National Institute of Child Health and Development-funded research projects on the development of early literacy, an Institute of Education Sciences Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Project, a Department of Health and Human Services-funded project on the development and promotion of literacy skills in children attending Head Start, a National Science Foundation-funded project on promoting early literacy skills in children at risk for reading failure, a recently funded National Institute of Child Health and Human Development research project on the impacts of cognitive and socio-emotional curricula for 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old children, and an Institute of Education Science research project on the impacts of preschool curricula for reducing the need and utilization of special education services.

Dr. Lonigan has served in an advisory capacity on various federal, state, and local committees associated with the development of literacy in young children. He was a member of the National Early Literacy Panel and the What Works Clearinghouse. He chairs the Reading and Writing Review Panel for the Institute of Education Sciences grant reviews. He has been part of the advisory committees for the development of preschool learning standards for both Florida and California.

### Full Transcript (short version)

The typical reading you see in early childhood settings is where maybe the whole class is sitting around in circle time and the teacher is just reading the book, and the children are listening. In dialogic reading, what happens is that the typical role between the adult and the child, or the teacher and the children is shifted. So rather than just the children being passive listeners to the story, the teacher or the adult is having the children help tell part of the story. The teacher or the adult facilitates that by having the children answer some questions or provide additional expansions on things they've heard, or maybe even remembering other things they did that actually relate to the story.

Dialogic reading is interactive in a sense that the teacher is having a dialog with children about the story or using the book as a way to have the dialog. Whereas in regular shared reading, the teacher is just reading and the children are listening. So it's a very passive, receptive model of the book.

Now, there's another type of shared reading, which some people call interactive shared reading, where teachers may occasionally ask questions of children about the story they're reading, but it's not as organized, it's not as systematic as it would be in dialogic reading. And the focus of dialogic reading is really less about the book, and it's really more about having a language interaction around the book. Unlike the typical shared reading where you may be reading a book or a big book with a large group of maybe fifteen or twenty children, in dialogic reading you really want smaller groups of children. You want maybe three or five children, so that each child gets a chance to actively participate in the interaction.

The main, unique feature about dialogic reading is really not about reading. It's really about having a conversation. So, there are lots of different ways you can think about it. One of the ways that I like to think about it is that there are different levels of dialogic reading. So anybody who has ever read a book with a young child knows that children like to be read the same book over and over again. They get favorite books, and often times they'll bring that book to you continuously to read over. So children are getting more and more familiar with books the more times that the book is

read to them.

Dialogic reading takes advantage of that in a sense that as children learn more about the book or have more conversations about the book, they're developing a vocabulary and a way of talking about the book.

So the first phase of dialogic reading is really just these simple "w-h" type questions: What is this? What's it called? What's it made of? What is he doing? So, it's about the big things in the pictures, the big actions in the pictures, and then what we like to do is have adults or teachers follow up correct answers with follow up questions. So like I said, if the child answers that it's a bicycle, maybe asking about parts of the bicycle like the pedals or the wheels or the handle bars.

In the second phase, or what I like to call Level 2, it's moving a little bit beyond the vocabulary. So the first phase in a book is really using Level 1 where the teacher or the adult is making sure that the child knows the words of the things that are pictured in the book. In the second phase, it's using that language in a way to really tell the story. So the types of question changes from the simple "w-h" type question to a more open ended question, like maybe turning to a page and just letting a child pick something to talk about. You know, "What do you see here?" The adult or teacher may ask, "Tell me about this page." Or, "What's happening?" So it really doesn't specify that you have to talk about the bicycle or anything like that. So it really gives a child ownership of what it is that they're going to tell about the book or what they're going to tell about the story.

And then in the final phase of dialogic reading is a phase where, maybe teachers will connect what's going on in the book—either the things in the book or something about the story—to something in the child's own life, or maybe connecting the end part of the book with the beginning part of the book. So really, building up a narrative about the book. So asking questions like, "Well, do you remember what happened at the beginning of the story and why is he doing this?" So that has the child talking about the story, but talking about it sort of distant from the page of the book you're on right now. Or say maybe the book is about going to the zoo or seeing different animals at the zoo, and maybe the class had done a field trip to the zoo. Or they had done some other activity about zoo animals. So maybe the teacher would ask a question that related that experience or that field trip to what's going on in the story. "Do you remember when we went to the zoo, and what was that like? Which animals did you see?"

We picked this book, *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*, because it was good pictures for Level 1 and Level 2. On this page, where it had the picture of the mop and the pail, the Level 1 questions might be, "What's this a picture of?" "It's a pail." "What color is it?" "It's yellow." "What do you use a pail for?" "To

carry water or to wash things.”

On Level 2, you might turn to this page and say, “Well, what’s going on here? What do you see here?” And the child who has already gone through Level 1 would say, “Well, I see a pail.” And the teacher might say, “I see a yellow pail. And what else do you see?” The teacher would ask and the child might say, “There’s a mop there.” And the teacher would say, “Yeah, there’s a mop and a pail of water.”

And then moving on to Level 3, the teacher might ask the child something that follows up on that sort of conversation. So, “You use a mop and a pail to clean things. Have you ever cleaned things? Who uses a mop at your house?” Level 3 type question is something that extends beyond the pages of the book to something in a child’s own life, or, “Do you remember yesterday when it rained outside and the rain came in through the window and the man had to come in with the mop and the pail? What was he doing with the mop and the pail?”

And what we know from the research is that when children are exposed to shared reading using dialogic reading, that they really do acquire greater levels of development in their vocabulary and other aspects of language. So not only is it designed to produce language, but there’s a number of research studies that actually demonstrate that children who are exposed to shared reading with dialogic reading, gained more vocabulary skills and other language skills than children who don’t get exposed to dialogic reading.

And the interesting thing there is that most of the studies had the children who didn’t get dialogic reading—is they got as much shared reading as the children who got dialogic reading. So it wasn’t a difference in being exposed to story books, it was a difference in how they were exposed to storybooks.

The idea is that there are different purposes for books. So understanding that doing dialogic reading doesn’t mean that you’re not going to have times where you just actually read a book with children, you might even read a book where just you are the one who’s reading and the children are listening during small group time, during large group time, or during circle time. But dialogic reading is a special time, it’s a special time to help children learn vocabulary and learn other language skills.

Of course, dialogic reading is supposed to be fun. It’s supposed to be fun for the children, it’s supposed to be fun for the teacher—so turn taking, and using different books, using them differently, sometimes using them for whole group, sometimes for dialogic reading, sometimes you just read. Seeing that that process is okay. Dialogic reading is flexible enough that it shouldn’t be seen as something other than fun. A fun way to use books and have conversations.

### Full Transcript: (extended version)

The typical reading you see in early childhood settings is where maybe the whole class is sitting around in circle time and the teacher is just reading the book, and the children are listening. In dialogic reading, what happens is that the typical role between the adult and the child, or the teacher and the children, is shifted. So rather than just the children being passive listeners to the story, the teacher or the adult is having the children help tell part of the story. And the teacher or the adult facilitates that by having the children answer some questions or provide additional expansions on things they've heard or maybe even remembering other things they did that actually relate to the story.

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Now, there's another type of shared reading, which some people call interactive shared reading, where teachers may occasionally ask questions of children about the story they're reading, but it's not as organized, it's not as systematic as it would be in dialogic reading. And the focus of dialogic reading is really less about the book, and it's really more about having a language interaction around the book. Unlike the typical shared reading where you may be reading a book or a big book with a large group of maybe fifteen or twenty children, in dialogic reading you really want smaller groups of children. You want maybe three or five children, so that each child gets a chance to actively participate in the interaction.

The main, unique feature about dialogic reading is really not about reading. It's really about having a conversation. So there are there are lots of different ways you can think about it. One of the ways that I like to think about it is that there are different levels of dialogic reading. So anybody who has ever read a book with a young child knows that children like to be read the same book over and over again. They get favorite books, and often times they'll bring that book to you continuously to read over. So children are getting more and more familiar with books the more times that the book is read to them.

Dialogic reading takes advantage of that in a sense that as children learn more about the book or have more conversations about the book, they're developing a vocabulary and a way of talking about the book.

So early on, in what I call Level 1, the teacher might just be asking for the names of things. So

looking through the book ahead of time, before the reading episode and identifying things that they really want to ask children. Do they know the name of those things? And if the children know the name of those things, then they might move on to some aspect of the thing.

So the first phase of dialogic reading is really just these simple “w-h” type questions: What is this? What’s it called? What’s it made of? What is he doing? So, it’s about the big things in the pictures, the big actions in the pictures, and then what we like to do is have adults or teachers follow up correct answers with follow up questions. So like I said, if the child answers that it’s a bicycle, maybe asking about parts of the bicycle like the pedals or the wheels or the handle bars.

In the second phase, or what I like to call Level 2, it’s moving a little bit beyond the vocabulary. So the first phase in a book is really using Level 1 where the teacher or the adult is making sure that the child knows the words of the things that are pictured in the book. In the second phase, it’s using that language in a way to really tell the story. So the types of question changes from the simple “w-h” type question to a more open-ended question, like maybe turning to a page and just letting a child pick something to talk about. “What do you see here?” The adult or teacher may ask, or, “Tell me about this page.” Or, “What’s happening?” So it really doesn’t specify that you have to talk about the bicycle or anything like that. So it really gives a child ownership of what it is that they’re going to tell about the book or what they’re going to tell about the story.

And then in the final phase of dialogic reading, is a phase where maybe teachers will connect what’s going on in the book—either the things in the book or something about the story—to something in the child’s own life. Or maybe connecting the end part of the book with the beginning part of the book. So really, building up a narrative about the book. So asking questions of like, “Well, do you remember what happened at the beginning of the story and why is he doing this?” So that has the child talking about the story, but talking about it sort of distant from the page of the book you’re on right now. Or say maybe the book is about going to the zoo or seeing different animals at the zoo, and maybe the class had done a field trip to the zoo. Or they had done some other activity about zoo animals. So maybe the teacher would ask a question that related that experience or that field trip to what’s going on in the story. “Do you remember when we went to the zoo and what was that like? And which animals did you see?”

A lot of times you might think about, “What are good books for dialogic reading?” Again, good books are books that you can look at and can decide that the book has a lot of pictures that are displayed in a way that children can actually get the names of. We usually think that a book that’s good for dialogic reading really doesn’t have a lot of text in it. Books that have beautiful artwork, but are overly stylized or overly repetitious are not good books for dialogic reading. They might be good for

other purposes.

We picked this book, *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*, because it had good pictures for Level 1 and Level 2. So on this page, where it had the picture of the mop and the pail, the Level 1 questions might be, “What’s this a picture of?” “It’s a pail.” “What color is it?” “It’s yellow.” “What do you use a pail for?” “To carry water or to wash things.”

It’s not just about asking questions and having children give answers. It’s about teachers providing the right level of feedback to the child’s answers. Now, we’re not talking about saying things like, “You’re right or you’re wrong.” We’re talking about things like providing a label if the child doesn’t know it, to providing confirmation if the child does know it. So, “What’s this a picture of?” And the child says, “It’s a blue car or it’s a blue duck.” Or something, and having the adult maybe respond confirming that that was the correct answer just by going, “Uh huh, a blue duck.” Then moving on to answer another question, or ask another question.

On Level 2, you might turn to this page and say, “Well, what’s going on here? What do you see here?” And the child who has already gone through Level 1 might say, “Well, I see a pail.” And the teacher might say, “I see a yellow pail. And what else do you see?” The teacher would ask and the child might say, “There’s a mop there.” And the teacher would say, “Yeah, there’s a mop and a pail of water.”

And then moving on to Level 3, the teacher might ask the child something that follows up on that sort of conversation. So, “You use a mop and a pail to clean things. Have you ever cleaned things? Who uses a mop at your house?”

At Level 2, moving on to the expansions, it’s very important that when doing expansions, that teachers only add a little bit to what the child has said. We’ve encountered situations where parents or teachers think that if a little expansion is good, then a really big expansion is a lot better. So you might have exchange with a young child say like, “Tell me about this page.” Uh, and the child says, you know, “There’s a duck.” And the adult says, “What else do you see?” And says, “Him swimming.” Right? Now a good expansion there might be, “The duck is swimming.” Right? Or, “He is swimming.” One would expand by putting a duck and the swimming together. The other one would be expansion by fixing the less mature version of the grammar to the correct form of the grammar.

But often times, you have teachers who just add too much. Like, “Yeah, there’s a yellow duck there. He’s swimming in a pond and he’s going very fast. And I think there are some other ducks. And they’re over there, but they’re sitting in the grass.” The problem is, with expansions—the way



expansions work is that it's almost like the child compares what they said to what the adult says. And if you add too much, the child loses the opportunity to do the comparison, right? Because what you've added is just so much more than what they said, it's hard for them to sort of see that connection. Right? So big expansions are not good, little expansions are much better.

Level 3 type question is something that extends beyond the pages of the book to something in a child's own life or you know, "Do you remember yesterday when it rained outside and the rain came in through the window and the man had to come in with the mop and the pail? What was he doing with the mop and the pail?"

And the other way that you can do Level 3 is really about the theme of the story, to connect things that are going on at the end of the story with the things that are going on at the beginning of the story. So one of the things that's going on is that there's a cat in the story, right. There's a cat and a spider, and they're going on through different things. At points the cat is chasing the spider, so a Level 3 type question might be, "Why do you think the cat is chasing the spider?" Right? It goes beyond what you can tell from the pictures or maybe even what's described in the book. Again, Level 3 should be used infrequently and really comes after children have the vocabulary and the familiarity with the book to answer that type of question.

A number of years ago we were doing a study of dialogic reading in a local school district. And we had teachers who worked for the project who would go out and they would do little episodes of dialogic reading with children in the classroom, in addition to what children were getting from their regular classroom teacher. What we found is even though these were teachers who had been trained by us and they were working for the project and they were given this explicit three level model, that when we went out to the centers and sort of looked at what they were doing in these groups, that they were jumping to that last level very very quickly. So they were very quickly going to what people have called distancing prompts, or types of questions that are really beyond the book.

For a lot of the children that they had in their groups, or for a lot of the familiarity that children had with that particular book, it was really much too fast. Because the children didn't really have the language skills yet to enable them to engage in that type of conversation about that connection between the book and other things, or between the character and what he might have done before in the book or what she might have been doing later in the book, or the reason. So I think that it is a good way to introduce some of those critical thinking ideas, or really even to teach the narrative or the story narratives of the book. You know, the books have plots and they have beginnings, and they have middles, and they have ends. And something happens to the main character across the book. But before children can do that, I think teachers need to make sure that they actually have

the language skills, the specific vocabulary and have had the opportunity to actually talk about the different things that are going on in the book.

And what we know from the research is that when children are exposed to shared reading using dialogic reading, that they really do acquire greater levels of development in their vocabulary and other aspects of language. So not only is it designed to produce language, but there's a number of research studies that actually demonstrate that children who are exposed to shared reading with dialogic reading, gained more vocabulary skills and other language skills than children who don't get exposed to dialogic reading.

And the interesting thing there is that most of the studies had the children who didn't get dialogic reading—is they got as much shared reading as the children who got dialogic reading. So it wasn't a difference in being exposed to story books, it was a difference in how they were exposed to storybooks.

The idea is that there are different purposes for books. So understanding that doing dialogic reading doesn't mean that you're not going to have times where you just actually read a book with children, you might even read a book where just you are the one who's reading and the children are listening during small group time or during large group time or during circle time. But dialogic reading is a special time, it's a special time to help children learn vocabulary and learn other language skills.

So it's really getting teachers to understand that there are levels that are keyed to what the child is able to do. Dialogic reading is really a scaffolded language interaction. It's meeting the child where they are. What skills do they have? What familiarity do they have with the book? And helping them up to the next level so they can really have a meaningful participation in telling the story or having a conversation about the book.

That should be the focus of professional development is having teachers understand that dialogic reading is really a scaffolded language interaction about a book. It's not really about reading a book. When we do help teachers learn how to do dialogic reading, often times we tell them the procedure, we tell them about the levels, we tell them about the types of questions to use with the different levels, and what the purpose of that is.

Then we ask them to role play, to pretend maybe that we're the children. And to go through the book doing it dialogically with us. So that we can really see about what pictures they pick, how they give children feedback, because dialogic reading is not a test. It's really just a way to structure a scaffolded reading interaction. So we want them to be able to let children know what the right answers are without having to tell children they're wrong. So if a child can answer or gives the

wrong answer, the appropriate response is to give them the answer and then move on. And maybe come back to that later.

So there is lots of different levels to helping teachers learn how to do this. One of them is helping teachers become comfortable with the process, to know that they can move up and down between the levels with a particular child, just depending on what the child knows. So explaining the process, giving them the types of questions, helping them understand about the levels, helping them understand that the process is really a scaffolded language interaction, and then watching them do it.

Then if a classroom is lucky enough to have a director or a literacy coach that could go in, maybe watching the teacher do it with a small group of children who often can be more challenging than adults who are role playing because you may ask a question of one child and another child wants to answer the question. So how do you do group management with that? So it really becomes more complex when you're doing dialogic reading with a small group of children, as opposed to an adult role playing. So being able to go in and watch teachers do that with children, both helps to see that they're using the types of questions, that they're using the levels and they're able to coordinate that within group management. Because we really don't want one child in a group to have all of the conversation. We really want teachers to be able to share it across all children in the group.

Of course, dialogic reading is supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be fun for the children, it's supposed to be fun for the teacher—so turn taking, and using different books, using them differently, sometimes using them for whole group, sometimes for dialogic reading, sometimes you just read. Seeing that that process is okay. Dialogic reading is flexible enough that it shouldn't be seen as something other than fun. A fun way to use books and have conversation.