

CHAPTER 1

Strategic Read-Aloud Lessons: What the Research Says

Mrs. Lee: (first-grade, general education classroom teacher) During story retelling, Manuel does not participate as much as [the other students]...because he is repeating what the other kids are saying. He tries hard. I briefly explain to him what is going on in the story and I tell him to pay close attention to the pictures. This helps him understand better... The other kids are able to remember what happened in the story and always want to participate. (Journal Entry, November 2002)

Ms. Octavio: (second-grade, bilingual education classroom teacher) Linda sigue teniendo dificultad para expresarse, no le salen las palabras, se paraliza. Me dice la maestra que ella tampoco ha podido sacarle palabras. (Diario, marzo 2003)

Translation: Linda continues having difficulty expressing herself; the words won't come out, she becomes paralyzed. Her teacher tells me that neither has she been able to pull the words out [get her to express herself]. (Journal Entry, March 2003)

Mrs. Lee, a monolingual, English-speaking teacher in a large urban school, is concerned that some of her first-grade ELLs do not participate in class discussions about the books she reads aloud to the class. Ms. Octavio, an experienced bilingual teacher and native Spanish speaker, worries about the difficulty her students have understanding challenging academic vocabulary and unfamiliar content that has little to do with their own lives. Such problems make discussions about texts difficult.

Although the dilemmas faced by these teachers are familiar to most educators, they are also confounding and raise perplexing pedagogical questions:

- How can teachers help second-language learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to comprehend and respond to challenging texts that include content significantly different from their own experiences?
- How can teachers of ELLs effectively scaffold instruction for students who are still in the process of acquiring oral language proficiency?

- How can teachers influence the development of oral literacy and listening comprehension skills in students who have difficulty reading and comprehending in their primary or secondary language and do so in ways that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and responsive?

The procedure and strategies described in *Dynamic Read-Aloud Strategies for English Learners: Building Language and Literacy in the Primary Grades* were designed to respond to these questions—and to do so in a way that reflects the latest research in the field.

A Research-Based Approach

Research has identified many critical components of an effective, balanced literacy program for ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006). Central to these components is the idea that if students are to build language and literacy skills they must connect with texts in meaningful, engaging, and purposeful ways.

The strategic read-aloud procedure we describe in this book provides an opportunity for students to do just that. What's more, the procedure is based on a theoretical framework made up of evidence-based research findings that addresses key elements of effective ELL programs. This chapter presents an overview of some of that research in an attempt to give readers the background information they need to understand the overarching framework behind strategic read-alouds as presented in this text.

We also describe how these research principles are incorporated into the design of the read-aloud strategies and procedures described in this book. Lastly, we visually depict the 10 steps involved in its design and implementation.

Forging Cultural Connections

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning takes place not in isolation but rather through social interaction dependent upon culture (i.e., as individuals interact within a social environment). His sociocultural theory contends that, in the initial stages of learning a skill, children attend and respond to adult modeling, teaching, and supportive encouragement. Over time, through varied means of adult encouragement and support—often referred to as *scaffolding* (Hobsbaum, Peters, & Sylva, 1996)—children develop the ability to use the skill independently and across contexts. The time between initial modeling of the skill by an adult or older, skilled child and the child's acquisition of and independent use of that skill, is referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978).

With respect to ELLs, language and culture influence learning both prior to and during learning activities within the student's ZPD (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). Children are *enculturated* (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997), or socialized, into the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a particular culture by that culture's elders—typically parents, other significant adults, or community leaders (Moll, 1994). In this way, children acquire much of what they know about the world and others through their cultural experiences and interactions, which of course vary among cultural communities and groups (Moll, 1994). They also learn particular ways of thinking about the world and others through this process of enculturation. In order for effective learning to take place, then, it must tap into the knowledge children gain through social and cultural experiences, as well as align with the way children think about the world and their expectations for acquiring new knowledge. This is best achieved through teachers' connections to and deep understanding of the culture of the child's family and community.

Moving From the Familiar to the Unknown

Vygotsky contends that learning is facilitated when there are connections forged between home (the familiar) and school (the unknown; Meacham, 2001). He asserts, for example, that reading comprehension is dependent upon a student's ability to draw parallels between the content of a book and knowledge previously gained via one's home or cultural connections. As a result, readers need opportunities to identify what is "culturally familiar within [a] culturally different" context—in other words, they must be able to connect the realm of the familiar to the unfamiliar to increase understanding (Meacham, 2001, p. 192). Consequently, effective reading comprehension instruction might focus initially on helping students understand text about familiar concepts that originate in the context of the student's life at home; in the long term, instruction might focus on teaching students to generalize from that kind of familiar context to multiple contexts.

The concept of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar also defines how ELLs acquire word meanings and, ultimately, new knowledge and concepts in both their primary and secondary languages. According to Nagy (1988), knowledge is structured through relationships; students understand new information by relating it to what they already know—the familiar. Therefore, teaching vocabulary so that ELLs see relationships between sets of words and concepts helps them understand and remember new ideas and acquire new language.

Still, many teachers find vocabulary instruction challenging, not only because it is difficult to identify which words are most important to teach but also because it is difficult to implement effective vocabulary instruction that

encourages the development of deep and meaningful understanding of words, their connotations, and their uses across varied contexts.

Bridging Experience and New Learning

Research has found that a strategic read-aloud procedure is an effective way to develop the oral language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension skills of primary-grade children, in part because pre- and postreading activities can be designed to effectively connect learning with their past experiences (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson et al., 2006; Vaughn, Mathes et al., 2006). In fact, activities that “require students to reconstruct the story or make connections to life experiences” (Morrow & Brittain, 2003, p. 142) seem to be particularly beneficial in helping students gain vocabulary and comprehend text.

Such activities include discussions about the text the teacher plans to read aloud that activate prior knowledge about its content and make connections to that content in ways that promote inferential thinking. For instance, teachers commonly use statements like, “Tell me what you know about this....” to discern students’ prior knowledge about a particular subject before they begin reading. Teachers can also connect prior knowledge with new learning after students have listened to the text by asking students if they have ever had an experience or feeling like that of one of the characters; to draw connections, comparisons, or contrasts between the events in the text and events in their own lives; or to cite similarities or differences between the text and other texts they have heard or read.

Accordingly, the process of choosing interesting and engaging texts for strategic read-aloud lessons is integral to the process of establishing links between students’ backgrounds and new learning. The importance of ensuring that such texts are also culturally and experientially meaningful is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

First-Language Literacy

In addition to advocating for instruction that is responsive to a student’s sociocultural background, research also supports instruction in his or her native language whenever possible. Important considerations relative to native language literacy include the following:

- Most young children are experienced users of language. Their language has been acquired in the context of their homes and communities and within diverse cultural and linguistic settings. Their understanding of

language, their language skills, and the way they use language have all been acquired in interactions using their native language.

- Experiences with their own language allow children to develop phonemic awareness and other oral language skills, predictors of later reading success (August & Shanahan, 2008; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).
- The amount of formal schooling a child receives in his or her first language is “the most powerful variable” in second-language learning (Collier, 1995, p. 23). Children are more likely to become readers and writers of English when they already have a strong foundation in their native language (August, 2002).
- Research has found that in the United States ELLs who (a) have no prior, formal literacy in their first language and (b) participate in programs in which English is the only language of instruction, typically will require 7–10 years or more to reach the same age and grade-level norms of their native English-speaking peers (Collier, 1995).

Although a discussion of the larger context of “bilingual versus English-language only” programs in U.S. public schools is beyond the scope of this book (and in some ways tangential to the purpose for which it is written), a summary of the current research and thinking in the field is offered to provide the context for the strategies we present. There is much research evidence (see August et al., 2008, for a detailed and comprehensive summary of empirical research in this area) citing the “better performance” of language-minority students who receive instruction in their native language (primarily Spanish) while also acquiring English when compared to “language-minority students instructed only in their second language (English)” (Snow, 2008, p. 285). However, researchers characterize that difference in performance as “moderate,” noting that ELLs receiving instruction solely in English do, in fact, achieve in areas where that instruction is effective. They also contend that such students should be held to the same high level of expectations with respect to learning as their counterparts in bilingual programs.

In bilingual communities and contexts, the advantages of being bilingual are clearly noted. In such cases, the political climate and the availability of appropriate personnel and other resources may “favor providing bilingual instruction” with “no evidence-based disadvantages” (Snow, 2008, p. 285). In some communities and schools, however, due to a lack of personnel and resources, prevailing community politics, or the varied and diverse language backgrounds of ELLs, instruction is feasible only in English. Yet in both of these situations the most important predictor of positive learning outcomes

is the quality of instruction students receive. What's more, no matter which instructional approach they take, teachers must understand and value the sociocultural context that affects their students' learning and respect parents' preferences for their children's language development. Only then will they be in a position to help their students become successful members of their home and school communities (Collier, 1995).

The strategic read-aloud activities described in this text were created in both English and Spanish for use with small groups of children in grades 1–3. The children were taught in the language of their core literacy program. For example, ELLs who were receiving their classroom literacy instruction in English participated in English read-aloud activities to develop oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension in English. Those ELLs who were receiving classroom literacy instruction in Spanish, through bilingual programs, participated in Spanish read-aloud activities to develop oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension in Spanish.

Thus, the same activities used to develop vocabulary and comprehension in the first language also can be used effectively with students in developing a second language—as long as teachers attend to the specialized needs of second-language learners. Furthermore, even when teaching in English, a teacher can clarify, if possible, key concepts or vocabulary in a student's native language as needed. For example, a teacher might explain an unfamiliar academic term such as *entire* to students in their native language to ensure that they fully comprehend its meaning and use.

Assessing Language Proficiency

Being able to accurately assess students' language skills and knowing how to help them gain language proficiency is the bedrock of ELL instruction. Language proficiency can be measured and assessed in both formal and informal ways, ranging from standardized tests to classroom-based assessments in the form of rubrics, state standards, or performance-based assessments. Teachers also discern ELLs language skills by (a) observing and recording examples of language use; (b) asking parents to describe their children's use of their native language and the amount of English-language exposure they have in the community; (c) meeting with an ESL specialist to discuss a student's formal language proficiency assessment scores and skill levels, informal measures of language development, and benchmark language behaviors; and (d) consulting district or state guides on student language proficiency levels and benchmark skills.

According to the research, teachers must be aware of students' language proficiency and literacy levels to effectively differentiate instruction in the areas of vocabulary and listening comprehension. This is true whether instruction is carried out in the student's first or second (or other) language (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006; Cummins, 1994).

Developing Language Proficiency

It is important to remember that the development of oral proficiency and other measures of linguistic competence in a second language take place in much the same way as in a first language (Collier, 1995). That is to say, in both first- and second-language development, individuals initially spend time listening to the sounds of the new language. The goal is to become accustomed to (a) the language's tones, and how, when, and for what purpose they are used; and (b) specific words, phrases, and patterns of words used in interactions. Next, individuals begin to experiment and take risks with the new language by using it independently to communicate wants, needs, and ideas; one- and two-word phrases are used initially, followed by increasingly longer and more complex phrases and sentences as language development occurs over time. Two key language skills that should emerge during this development are language *flexibility*—which is the ability to say what one wants to say using one's own words rather than mimicking or repeating the words of others—and *elaboration*—which is the ability to verbally clarify one's thinking or elaborate on one's ideas, either spontaneously or when asked to do so (Anderson & Roit, 1996).

Although there are identifiable levels of language development (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Tabors, 1997), the time it takes to advance within and through each level varies for first-language learning based on individual differences. The same is true of learning a second language, in part because some second-language learners, depending upon their age and level of cognitive development, have already developed many language skills in their first language. For bilingual students who have been taught to communicate in two languages simultaneously, perhaps since birth, the language development process differs somewhat to facilitate acquisition of two languages at the same time.

August and Shanahan (2008) point out that one key difference between the development of language and literacy in one's first language and one's second language is that

Second-language learners have an additional set of intervening influences—those related to first-language literacy and oral proficiency...[there is] ample research evidence that certain aspects of second-language literacy development

are related to performance on similar constructs in the first language; this suggests that common underlying abilities play a significant role in both first- and second-language development.... Well developed literacy skills in the first language can facilitate second-language literacy development. (pp. 7–8)

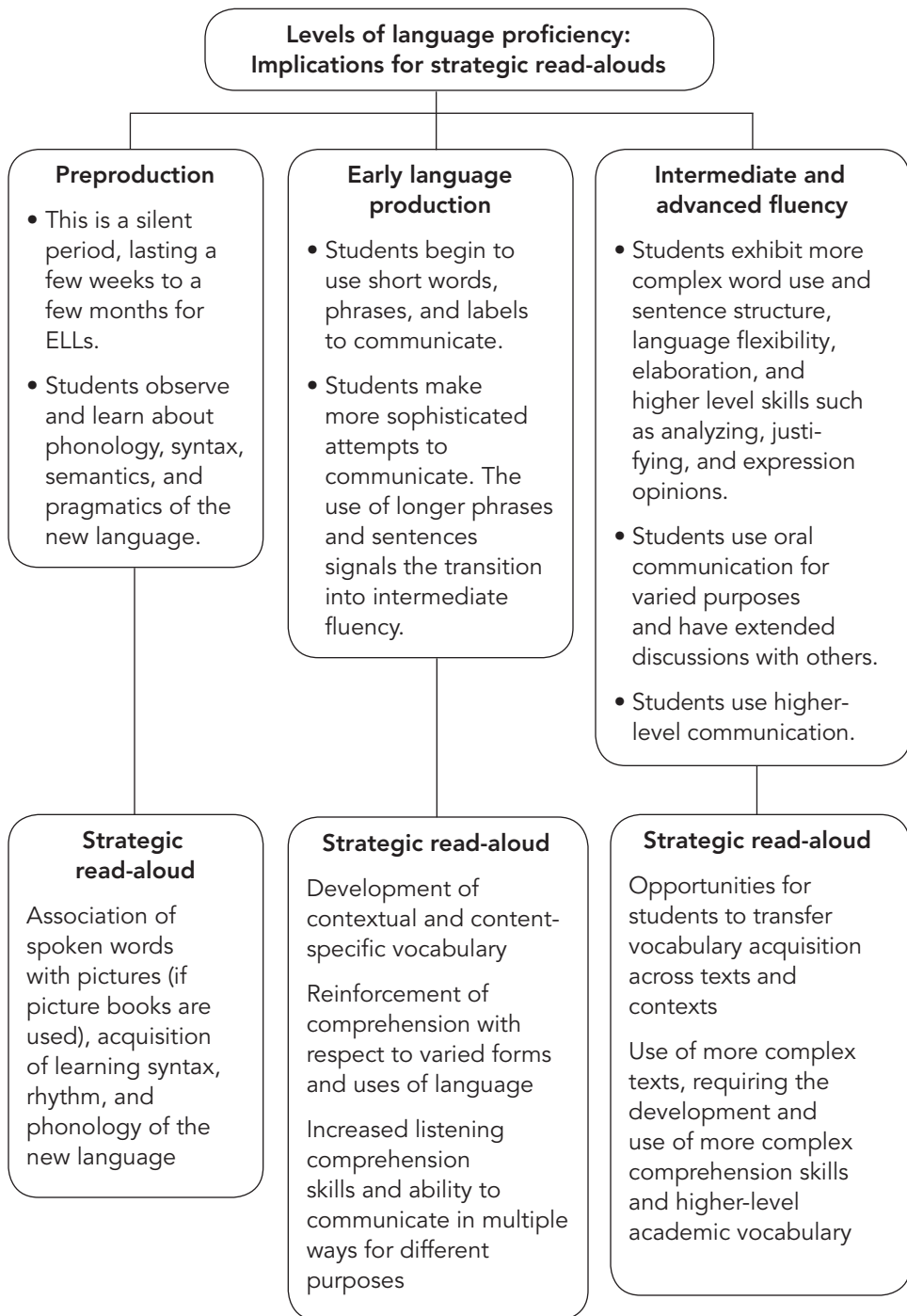
To develop oral language proficiency in a second language, students must have opportunities to use that language for varied purposes (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) with structured practice (August & Hakuta, 1997). For example, they should have a chance to learn—explicitly and through practical activities—how to use language to describe, request, convey information, ask questions, summarize, compare, justify, negotiate, and persuade. Moreover, they should be given varied opportunities to use these skills in the context of structured guidance and practice with different types of individuals (friends, those in authority, those with whom one is familiar and unfamiliar) and in different types of settings (one-on-one, small group, large group, familiar, unfamiliar, formal, informal). Such an approach ensures a depth and breadth of language learning and familiarity with the full range of pragmatic linguistic interaction.

During strategic read-aloud lessons, teachers regularly model proficient, fluent oral language as they read aloud to their students. Furthermore, structured class discussions and vocabulary activities provide opportunities for students to practice language production and explore varied contexts and purposes for word use. Teachers are encouraged to scaffold their instruction based on their knowledge of the continuum of oral language proficiency skills and their familiarity with the oral language skills of individual students in their class.

Figure 1 provides an informal overview of the stages of language development as an orientation to ways in which the strategic read-aloud procedure can be tailored to meet the language acquisition and learning needs of ELLs at three different levels of language proficiency (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Ramsey, 1987; Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center, 1998; Tabors, 1997).

Lastly, it is important to note that although language proficiency develops in a relatively predictable fashion, it occurs in response to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the learning environment and to factors related to individual learning style and language background (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006). As a result, teachers must consider factors ranging from students' literacy levels in their first language to their cognitive ability, age at time of second-language learning, and sociocultural background when selecting texts and designing activities to use in strategic read-aloud lessons aimed at developing vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension.

Figure 1. Levels of Language Proficiency: Implications for Strategic Read-Aloud Lessons



Note. From Krasher & Terrell, 1983; Ramsey, 1987; Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center, 1998; Tabors, 1997.

Maximizing Comprehensible Input

One of the most important ways teachers meet the language needs of ELLs, no matter what their level of language development, is to scaffold their instruction to provide students with a maximum amount of what researchers call *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1985, 1989). According to Gersten, Baker, and Marks (1999), teachers provide comprehensible input when they use words and language structures in ways that are both clear enough for students to understand and challenging enough to ensure that they learn new language.

Providing comprehensible input, because it stresses understanding and meaning-making, also involves the following:

Presentation of background and context, explanation and rewording of unclear content, and the use of...context or visual cues.... When input is comprehensible, students understand most aspects of what is required for learning, and the learning experience pushes them to greater understanding. (Gersten, Baker, & Marks, 1999, p. 7)

One way teachers can maximize comprehensible input during strategic read-aloud lessons is by choosing vocabulary words to teach based on students' individual oral language and listening comprehension levels. For example, teachers may choose to teach a lower-level, functional vocabulary word such as *save* to students with lower levels of proficiency while teaching the word *store* (meaning *to save up*) to students with higher levels of proficiency who already understand the meaning of the word *save*.

Language Acquisition vs. Language Learning

Krashen (1985) distinguishes between two complementary means of developing competence in a second language: acquisition and learning. Language acquisition involves the “subconscious process” of developing competence in a language; a student informally, and often without conscious awareness, develops understanding of word meanings, ways in which words and phrases are used, and the forms of language used in different situations with different people.

However, such information can also be formally and explicitly taught. In such cases, language develops consciously and as such is the basis for second-language learning. Through the use of explicit instruction, for example, teachers can give students opportunities to make meaningful connections between words, concepts, and the contexts in which they are used (Au, 1993; Barrera, 1992; García, Montes, Janisch, Bouchereau, & Consalvi, 1993).

It has been argued (Krashen, 1985) that instructional environments that promote natural language acquisition are often preferable to those focusing

exclusively on direct, explicit teaching of grammatical structures and “rules” associated with language learning. However, other research (e.g., Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Ellis, 1990) supports the notion of allowing students opportunities to acquire language through natural and authentic learning activities and interactions along with explicit instruction focused on formal language structures, forms, and uses.

An example of how second-language skills are acquired during strategic read-aloud lessons would include the incidental learning of word meanings and language patterns as students listen to a story being read aloud. Explicit instruction, on the other hand, can be delivered as part of the read-aloud experience through the structured and purposeful use of several best practice, evidence-based strategies. Those include (a) clearly communicating objectives to students so that they are aware of the important elements to attend to during the lesson (Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center, 1998), (b) targeting comprehension by activating existing knowledge related to a text before it is read and through explicit discussion of the ideas in the text and the application of those ideas to students’ own experiences after it is read (Grabe, 1991), and (c) teaching vocabulary words explicitly either prior to or following the reading of a text (Grabe, 1991).

By structuring the read-aloud experience in ways that not only support second-language acquisition but also provide explicit instruction that allows for second-language vocabulary and comprehension learning, teachers create opportunities for students to expand their language understanding and skill in multiple and varied ways. For example, as students discuss the texts read aloud, they draw on their knowledge of formal and informal language while incorporating the use of new language skills.

Interpersonal vs. Academic Language

Researchers in the field of second-language acquisition typically distinguish interpersonal language proficiency (language used to conversationally communicate with others) from academic language proficiency (formal language used in textbooks). Table 1 compares these two types of language proficiency and describes ways that each is developed through strategic read-aloud lessons.

Critical to the development of both types of language proficiency is the amount of contextual support afforded a student during a specific language exchange—or conversation. That support could come in the form of (a) visuals such as pictures, graphic organizers, or other types of media designed to help clarify key vocabulary or content; (b) gesturing or movement used to enhance

Table 1. Interpersonal and Academic Language Proficiency

Language proficiency type	Description	As used in strategic read-aloud lessons
Interpersonal Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1984; Scarcella, 2003)	Typically includes conversational skills (pragmatics, grammar) learned through informal social interactions in environments in which students receive contextualized language support	Students discuss and relate prior experiences to information in the text both before and after it is read aloud.
Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1984; Scarcella, 2003)	Typically demands more cognitively demanding, advanced language skills involving complex sentence structures and higher-level vocabulary that is often less contextualized Mastery requires “extensive knowledge of the vocabulary of everyday, ordinary situations” (Scarcella, 2003, p. 28) acquired through social interactions in which academic language is used to communicate	Students are provided with multiple opportunities to learn, use, and generalize academic vocabulary. Students are taught concrete representations of concepts. Students take part in multiple and varied activities and opportunities featuring authentic, real-life experiences related to such vocabulary and concepts.

meaning and understanding; and (c) linguistic emphasis (varied intonation, stress, repetition) on particular words, phrases, or content to highlight, emphasize, and clarify their use within specific phrases or contexts. The more contextual support provided, the easier it is for students to understand and master the type of language used in a specific exchange (Cummins, 1984, 1994; Edelsky, 1990).

Research has shown that with proper support, students can typically achieve effective interpersonal language proficiency within the first few years of language study. To achieve proficiency equal to that of a native speaker in academic language, on the other hand, typically takes 5–10 years, even with effective support (Collier, 1987, 1989).

Strategically embedding language development, vocabulary, and comprehension skill development into strategic read-aloud lessons helps develop both the interpersonal and the academic language proficiency of ELLs. However, given the need for ELLs to efficiently and effectively develop the academic proficiency necessary to access content area texts and to reach high levels of

academic achievement, more emphasis is dedicated in this book to describing how teachers can strategically plan and implement instruction that targets the development of their students' academic language proficiency.

One way strategic read-aloud lessons help build academic language is through activities that scaffold instruction in content area literacy (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1993; Scarcella, 2003). For example, teachers can make content area vocabulary words used in science or social studies texts more comprehensible to students through instruction that focuses on the way language and vocabulary words are structured, a process described in Chapter 3. In addition, texts used for read-alouds can be grouped by themes related to specific content areas. Examples of content-related themes appropriate for the primary grades include families, pets, insects, and ocean animals. Teachers can then choose to teach vocabulary words from each text that are more content-specific, or academic, in nature.

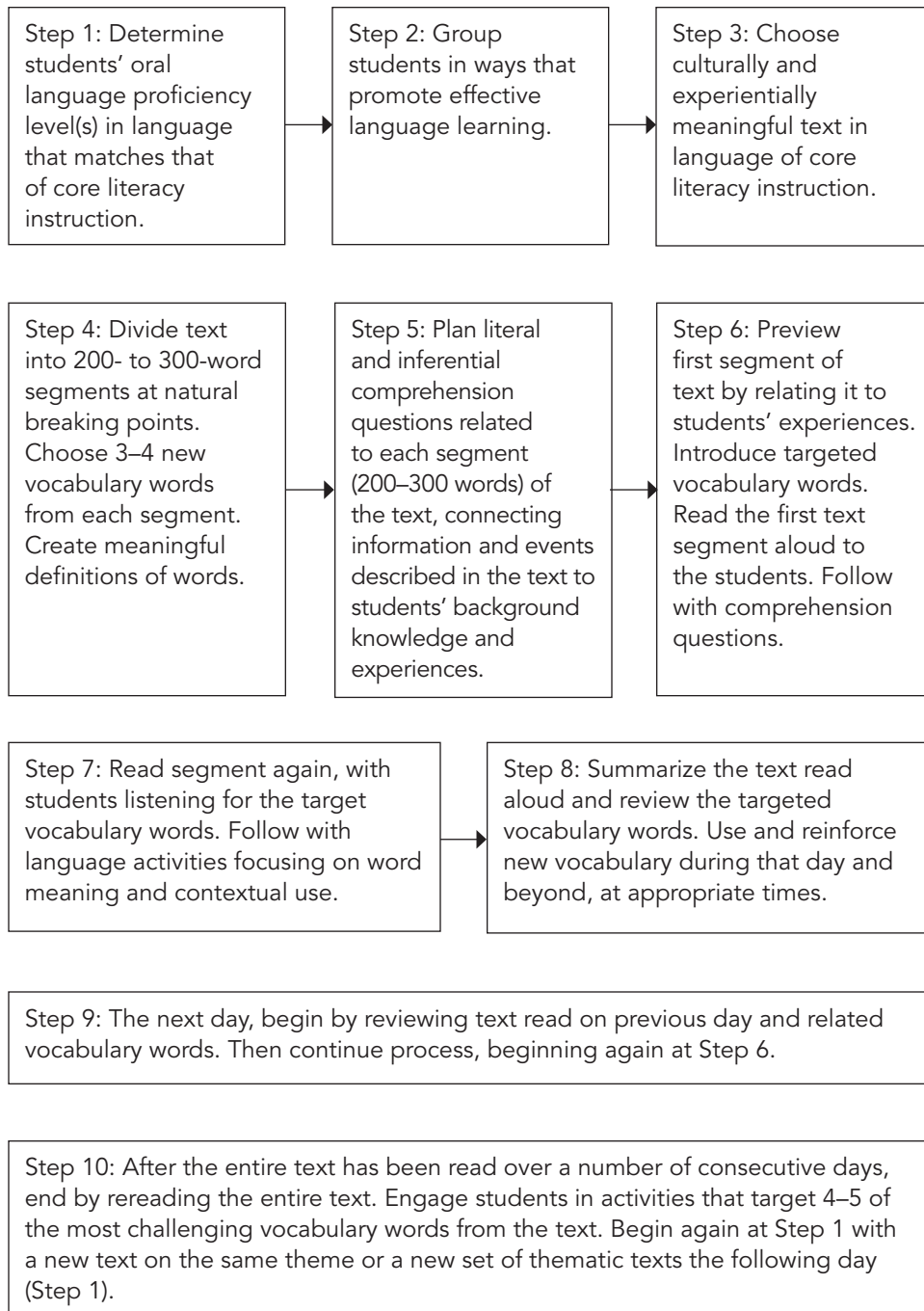
Strategic Read-Aloud Lessons: Scope and Sequence

Figure 2 summarizes the easy-to-follow scope and sequence of the 10 steps involved in designing and carrying out the strategic read-aloud procedure described in this book, referencing at each step one or more of the critical components of an effective literacy program for ELLs discussed in this chapter. As stated earlier, Chapters 2–4 discuss each of these steps in detail, and Chapter 5 describes sample lessons that incorporate all of these elements.

Research to Practice: Reflecting on Teaching and Learning

1. Many states provide rubrics for informally evaluating the language proficiency levels of students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking and offer suggestions for instruction at each stage of mastery. Consult your state or district website for information that will help you determine the language proficiency level(s) of your students and effectively adapt instruction to enhance language development at their level(s).
2. Reflect on your previous experiences reading books aloud to ELLs. Which, if any, of the steps included in the strategic read-aloud procedure described so far in this book did you incorporate into the read-alouds you implemented? Compare and contrast the procedure you used with the intervention procedure presented here. What do you see as the benefits of

Figure 2. Overview of the Scope and Sequence of the Strategic Read-Aloud Procedure



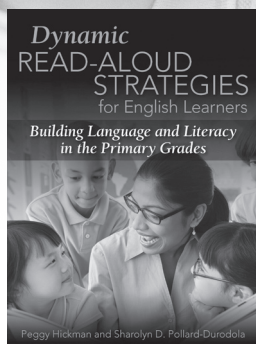
modifying read-aloud activities in the ways suggested here? What do you see as the challenges?

3. Identify two of the concepts discussed in this chapter that you would like to learn more about in relation to implementing the strategic read-aloud procedure described thus far. Let these goals guide your reading of the remaining chapters of this book.

Suggested Readings for Further Study

- Gottlieb, M. (2006). *Assessing English language learners: Bridges from language proficiency to academic achievement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Hickman, P., Pollard-Durodola, S., and Vaughn, S. (2004). Storybook reading: Improving vocabulary and comprehension for English-language learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(8), 720–730.
- Vaughn, S., Mathes, P.G., Linan-Thompson, S., and Francis, D.J. (2005). Teaching English language learners at risk for reading disabilities to read: Putting research into practice. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 20(1), 58–67. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5826.2005.00121.x

Reading aloud means even more to your English learners



Dynamic Read-Aloud Strategies for English Learners: Building Language and Literacy in the Primary Grades Peggy Hickman, Sharolyn D. Pollard-Durodola

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