

## LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS: DO, PERFORM, PORTRAY - PLAY!

KATHY RUSHTON AND JOANNE ROSSBRIDGE

*Kathy Rushton and Joanne Rossbridge outline the theory and research about young children’s language and literacy development through play; and provide teachers with engaging and inclusive activities and resources to foster creativity and student engagement in the early years of schooling...*

### LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS

In the first years of schooling young children are encouraged to develop understandings about the use of language in a range of contexts - both oral and written. Before school, understandings and experiences have been developed through oral language interactions some of which may have been around the written word.

However, some children might experience the language to talk about language, metalanguage, for the first time when they go to school. Some children will be able to confidently discuss many aspects of how language works and how it is used in a variety of contexts, even if they are not yet independently literate.

Developing language for a range of purposes and the use of metalanguage to reflect on the choices speakers and writers make are most easily developed through play. Play provides opportunities for both individual choice and collaboration and, with a teacher’s support, in providing contexts and modelling language (Karaolis, 2023), individual students are enabled to develop and build on their own language resources. Scaffolding learning experiences to be both challenging and supportive (Hammond, 2021) is dependent on a pedagogy which supports language development as a catalyst for emergent literacy.

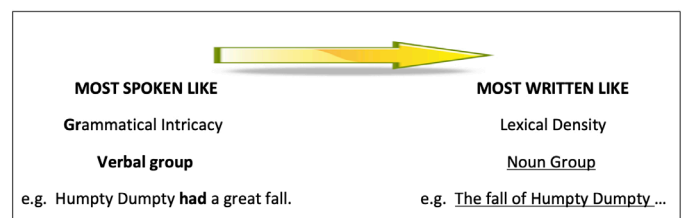
### DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AND THE LANGUAGE TO TALK ABOUT LANGUAGE: METALANGUAGE

In the school years students will engage with oral and written texts which are broadly categorised as imaginative, persuasive or informative. Within these broad categories there are a range of twenty or more genres (Derewianka, 2022; Humphrey, Droga & Feez 2012, p.199) which students will encounter and learn to both read and write. To comprehend or produce

a text, written or spoken, the choice of grammatical features is always defined by the audience and purpose of the text and the genre. Metalanguage is developed when teachers read, deconstruct and jointly construct texts with their students. In this way knowledge of language and grammar is developed in a familiar context through oral interactions about texts (Rossbridge & Rushton, 2010).

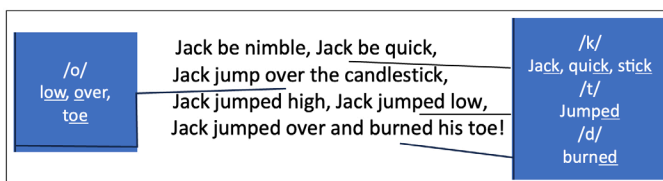
The first language or dialect is not taught to a young child rather it is developed through meaningful oral interaction. The use of the speech functions such as statements (greet, observe, play); commands (command, demand, play); questions (greet, demand, play), exclamations (demand, command, play) begin to be developed even before a young child can speak fluently. Within a range of contexts, the choices a speaker or writer makes reflect both the audience and the purpose of the text. Grammar “is a way of describing how a language works to make meaning.” (Derewianka, 2022, p.1)

The use of the concept of the *mode continuum* exemplifies the range of grammatical choices speakers and writers make to produce effective oral and written texts.



The picture books and traditional rhymes and songs that young children encounter, often use more spoken like text and are, therefore, supportive in developing decoding skills and sound and letter knowledge and phonemic awareness for emergent readers. However, as they are sung or recited in a

context in which the focus may be on movement the words are often ancillary to the main focus of the activity. We learn to use language to satisfy our needs as we play, perform and “do” the moves. If every song or rhyme also includes the presentation and exploration of the written text, there will be many opportunities to develop literacy.



Not only questions but also Think alouds (statements) can explore the meaning of the rhyme. Using the Here; Hidden; Head framework, comprehension and vocabulary can both be supported e.g. **Here:** I think I know what a candlestick is. **Hidden:** I wonder what ‘nimble’ means. **Head:** I wonder who Jack is and why he was jumping. Modelled and guided reading can be supported by jointly constructing texts developed in meaningful play-based contexts (Davis & Dunn, 2023 & Karaolis, 2023). Drama strategies like Readers Theatre; Freeze frame and drawing; Puppet Theatre and Interviewing can be integrated with the use of quality children’s literature to provide contexts for playing with ideas and language.

### READING FOR MEANING (COMPREHENSION, VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AND DECODING)

Most students enter early years classrooms with an amazing resource which forms the foundation of language and literacy acquisition as they move through their schooling. This resource is oral language, and it is the foundation of all learning. When used in meaningful contexts to communicate with others, oral language serves to draw upon, not only existing language, but scaffolds both reading and writing. (Hammond, 2021 & Gibbons 2015)

### TALK AND PLAY AS A CONTEXT FOR READING DEVELOPMENT

An effective and engaging way to draw upon the language skills that students bring to classrooms is by

connecting speaking, listening, reading and writing in real world scenarios. By designing learning through play, students are given numerous opportunities to practise language and interact with others by drawing on their own background and experiences as well as the languages and dialects they use in the home and community. As a teacher models being a reader, and students engage with texts, they are not only active meaning makers but developing vocabulary and hearing the sounds and rhythm of language as they decode in the context of engaging quality literature (Adoniou, Cambourne & Ewing, 2018).

Careful selection of texts, such as picture books, can be the catalyst for designing meaningful learning situations which can be placed along the mode continuum. A context, theme, topic or concept can be selected as a starting point for text choice. The following texts were chosen for their representation of dogs and their interactions with humans. Obviously, looking at texts and interactions around getting and caring for a dog may not be the best choice for all students given their interests and background, but any context can easily lead to a range of possible texts and scenarios for play.

*Let’s Get a Pup!* (Bob Graham, 2001, Walker Books)

*When Billy was a Dog* (Kirsty Murray and Karen Blair, 2019, Walker Books)

*Too Many Cheeky Dogs* (Johanna Bell and Dion Beasley, 2016, Allen & Unwin)

*My Dog Bigsy* (Alison Lester, 2015, Penguin)

*Sad the Dog* (Sandy Fussell and Tull Suwannakit, 2017, Walker Books)

*A Human for Kingsley* (Gabriel Evans, 2021, Hardie Grant)

*Annie’s Chair* (Deborah Niland, 2006, Penguin)

‘*Let’s get a Pup*’ by Bob Graham (2001, Walker Books) is the story of a family who visit a rescue centre to get a pup but end up with not only a pup but also old, grey Rosy. It celebrates the interactions of humans bringing dogs into their family.

Using this book, in conjunction with opportunities

for play, and incorporating before, during and after reading strategies through shared reading (Gibbons, 2015), is an example of how to provide opportunities for comprehension, vocabulary development, and an explicit focus on sound and letter knowledge.

Before reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Floorstorm (display covers of all books above and ask students to share what they see)</li> <li>• Play sounds of dogs and humans interacting</li> <li>• List noises dogs make in different languages</li> <li>• Predict from front cover by focusing on human and dog relationships – record student ideas and vocabulary (add to after reading)</li> <li>• Take turns to walk in role taking a dog for a walk (with lead and dog puppet)</li> </ul>
During reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the book uninterrupted</li> <li>• Read the book again with think alouds using Here, Hidden and Head statements</li> <li>• Reread the book uninterrupted allowing students to respond</li> </ul>
After reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students draw their own interactions with a dog and share with class</li> <li>• Rank a list of words/pictures/nouns in order of importance of what a new dog might need e.g. food, water, bed, blanket, brush etc.</li> <li>• Group words from the book with the same sound such as 'u', e.g. pup and mum in comparison to cute and rescue</li> <li>• Role play human/dog interaction scenarios with puppetsIndependent play with:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a toy dog</li> <li>- a vet kit</li> <li>- dog washing/grooming kit etc.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

reading of a book as they provide opportunities to activate prior knowledge so students can bring their own life and language experiences to the book. They can also serve to provide knowledge and vocabulary needed for comprehension. Young children also feel a sense of satisfaction when they can confirm their predictions.

The first reading of a book needs to be uninterrupted, so students are able to take in the story as a whole and get the overall gist. When the teacher rereads with carefully designed think alouds, students are then exposed to what a reader does during the reading process whilst also being alerted to key meanings and language within the text. Subsequent readings invite the students to add their own thoughts and responses to the text. It is critical that the book should be read multiple times by the teacher throughout any teaching sequence.

When designing learning for after reading, strategies need to support response to the text particularly through the use of oral language and play. These strategies may need to be initially modelled and supported by the teacher but ideally the talk is coming mainly from the students as they use their own resources to directly engage with meanings in the text or beyond the text. With students controlling the talk, particularly during play scenarios, they are using their own language resources and building upon them with the meanings, language and vocabulary encountered in the book.



Before reading strategies are critical prior to the first

After reading is also an opportune time to explore targeted vocabulary and letter and sound knowledge in the context of the book as students are considering language choices, patterns and conventions based on meaning. They are in the position to discuss features with reference to meaning which is the time for the teacher to introduce metalanguage to explicitly talk about language. This might include the use of terms such as letter, word, sound, and nouns for naming things.

Extending access to a range of texts ensures students are exposed to a range of genres. Reading can be further supported through shared reading of a range of other texts related to the picture book. Based on student interests these may include:

- looking at websites on dogs for adoption
- viewing videos on how to care for dogs and dog training
- reading information texts on dog breeds
- locating pet products on pet shop websites
- comparing online reviews / star ratings of possible food and pet toys
- watching cartoons with dogs as characters.

### DEVELOPING WRITTEN TEXT: PLAY AS A CONTEXT FOR WRITING

Many of the strategies suggested in the table above for after reading are play based and do not involve writing. For students with developing literacy, oral language is drawn upon when looking at responding to text and can be again drawn upon with the move into writing. Students can be supported to write through teacher modelling and joint construction and again the focus text and play opportunities can stimulate the creation of a range of real-world scenarios which provide a purpose for writing.

Purposes for writing could include:

- a shopping list before going to the pet shop
- description of a favourite dog
- an animal meal plan or pet menu

- instructions on how to care for a pet
- recount of events with a pet
- narrative about a problematic adventure with a pet.

### WRITING FOR A PURPOSE AND JOINT CONSTRUCTION

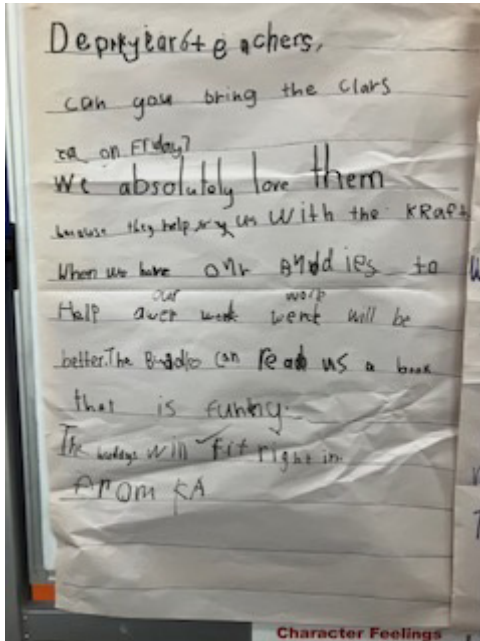
To prepare for writing students can be involved in independent play such as visiting the vet, introducing a pet to other pets or friends and family, or shopping at the pet shop. This can be developed through use of props, costumes, toys and puppets.

The vet kit shown below provides opportunities for students to take on the role of a vet, client or pet. Students will need to make different oral language choices given their roles. The props such as stethoscope and thermometer also stimulate talk appropriate for the context. The mobile phone, clipboard and medication provide numerous opportunities for role playing both literacy and numeracy practices. From this play students are then able to transfer their experience and oral language to jointly constructing a text such as recounting an experience to the vet, writing a list of supplies and equipment needed by a vet or writing instructions on how to care for a pet. In doing so, language choices move from the spoken to more written-like choices along the mode continuum and possibly from a home language or dialect to include English.



When joint construction occurs with students there is a balance between the talk of the teacher and the students. The teacher acts as a guide to make thinking explicit whilst the students contribute ideas and discuss choices (Rossbridge and Rushton, 2014)

& 2015). In the example below, students and the teacher were sharing the pen resulting in greater participation in the joint construction by students.



Thank you to Marie Bashir Public School

During joint construction the teacher can support explicit discussion about the purpose and audience for the writing as well as the use specific metalanguage. For example, when writing instructions, action verbs will tend to be at the beginning of commands. When writing a recount, the focus will also be on the actions undertaken but in past tense. When writing a list, the language will be noun groups such as ‘medicine, dry food, dog treats’. If the students don’t have this language, they are able to share the experiences of other students through play which not only supports ideas for writing but also the development of metalanguage.

## CONCLUSION

The school years are focussed on the development of literacy as well as developing knowledge about literature and language. When teachers recognise the differences between spoken and written language, they are most effectively able to build on individual students’ knowledge, understanding and use of language - both oral and written. As young students begin to explore the audiences and purposes of a range of genres, the diverse voices available in quality children’s literature can both expand

and confirm children’s experiences of the world and help them to make connections to their own lives. Quality texts exemplify the effective use of language and provide great models for writing as well as opportunities to explore language and grammar in context and to develop metalanguage. Perhaps though the most important aspect of the early learning experience is that it is engaging, inclusive and enjoyable for all our young students. Play provides a context which can foster creativity and student agency as they engage with the challenges and rewards of becoming literate.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Joanne Rossbridge** is an independent language and literacy consultant working in both primary and secondary schools and with teachers across Australia. She has worked as a classroom teacher and literacy consultant with the DET (NSW). Her expertise and much of her experience is in working with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Joanne is particularly interested in student and teacher talk and how talk about language can assist the development of language and literacy.



**Kathy Rushton** is interested in the development of language and literacy especially in disadvantaged communities. She has worked as a classroom teacher and literacy consultant and provides professional learning for teachers in the areas of language and literacy development. Her current research projects include a study of multilingual pre-service teachers and the impact that teacher professional learning has on the development of a creative pedagogical stance which supports translanguageing and student identity and wellbeing.

