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Building Language and Literacy at the Same Time: Strategies for Classroom and Home

By Pamela Luft

As teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents, we recognize the importance of providing deaf and hard of hearing children with full access to the languages around them. Language is the primary means by which children acquire knowledge of the world and academic content to become successful adults. Additionally, it allows us to make and maintain friendships and to engage with others in working and participating in the community. We have also seen the poor outcomes that result when children don't have full access to language; reading and academic achievement remain far below intellectual capabilities.

To help our deaf and hard of hearing students attain grade-level skills, we can take advantage of the interrelationships between language and literacy and help students gain language and literacy skills at the same time. The Continuum of Reading Activities (described by French, 1999) provides us with strategies that allow us to advance students' language development and address core literacy standards (Ohio Department of Education, 2017; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).

This continuum consists of four steps:

1. **Teacher-led reading aloud:** Teachers read to students using the students' preferred language and communication modality to engage them in the text.
2. **Shared reading:** Teachers ask students to read with them and share their decision making as they negotiate the text.

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Left: Teacher-led read-alouds help young students engage in the text.

3. **Guided reading:** Teachers divide text into segments. Students individually predict what will happen, then amend and discuss their predictions after reading each segment.
4. **Independent reading:** Students read independently across a range of genres and topics, with teachers offering occasional support, if needed.

When these steps are followed sequentially, they provide a gradual release of the teacher's involvement as students read with increasing independence (Hall et al., 2021). The interactive activities implicit in the Continuum have been effective in increasing students' reading independence, including the reading independence of students who struggle (Hall et al., 2021). The gradual release of teacher responsibility—often abbreviated GRR—includes:

- **Initially ... explanation and modeling:** Teachers retain primary

responsibility for demonstrating key skills but may probe and ask students to respond.

- **Then ... guided practice:** Teachers begin to shift responsibility for learning, decoding, and comprehending to the students, providing additional explanation, modeling, scaffolding, and peer support as needed.

- **Finally ... independent practice:** Students apply new skills and strategies without assistance from peers or teachers (Hall et al., 2021).

The four steps of the Continuum support the teacher's gradual move from guidance and modeling of skills and cognitive processes to sharing or supported reading and full student use of independent skills and strategies (see page 38). This process utilizes peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher interactions that promote full language fluency across all communication modalities and

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Left: During shared reading, teachers ask students to read, sign with them, and share their decision making as they negotiate the text.

teacher and peer interactions. These procedures should be applied equally to nonfiction as well as fiction to prepare students for textbook reading that will intensify after the third grade and that often are neglected (National Council of Teachers

of English, 2023;

Zakariya, 2015). These strategies can help students with mathematics, science, social studies, or social science texts. Collaboration among all teachers in the use of these strategies will allow for shared approaches that can increase student achievement in all academic areas. The use of student-centered topics of interest is an important means for increasing students' motivation and engagement (Wiggins & McTighe,

language preferences. At the same time, students' individual language, reading, and cognitive skills are strengthened and refined.

The Continuum supports all learners—those who are just beginning to read, those who struggle, those who are developing and maturing, and those with and without disabilities (Luft, 2023). The teacher-led activities support increasing amounts of shared and independent reading while also providing students with multiple opportunities for social learning and language use. As texts expand in length and content, activities based in the Continuum provide increasing linguistic and cognitive challenges, all of which are mediated and scaffolded through teacher and peer interactions.

Shared and guided reading prepares students to take leadership roles in expressing and discussing their skills and strategies while they become increasingly independent readers. As teachers combine these activities with interactive and

dialogic bridging and directed reading and thinking activities, students build toward full independence, all the while expanding and refining their language skills and cognitive development.

Continuum strategies emphasize student participation and class-wide interaction to facilitate ongoing instructional engagement. These strategies provide increasing linguistic and cognitive challenges, all of which are mediated and scaffolded through



Right and far right: Shared and guided reading prepares students to take on leadership roles while they become increasingly independent readers.

Right: In independent reading, students read independently across a range of genres and topics with minimal teacher support.

2018).

Parents may provide similar activities at home. With guidance and encouragement from teachers, parents can begin with read-/think-alouds. As their children develop reading skills, parents can use shared and guided reading to discuss meanings. Families should be encouraged to talk with their children about their texts, even as the children become independent readers.

These strategies support the language and literacy development of deaf and hard of hearing children. They support meaningful and stimulating interactions through bridging and scaffolding, from beginning to well-established skills, and they are effective for deaf and hard of hearing students with and without disabilities. They allow them to engage socially with their peers, family members, teachers, and other adults to build language, reading, and cognitive skills—and to become successful adults.



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