Triple R Teaching

Welcome back to Triple R Teaching. Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers. This

Last week, we talked about developmental language disorder (DLD). This week we're talking about how teachers can build oral language fluency routines into their school day and how those routines can help all students, including those with DLD.

Anna Geiger: I know in your presentation you gave for The Dyslexia Association, you talked about some specific classroom routines that would build oral language. Can you talk a little bit about those?

Martha Kovack: Number one is to build knowledge. As you said, reading comprehension is very comprehensive. Hugh Catts tells us that you cannot measure or remediate or teach comprehension. You can only bring about the conditions that will allow children to understand. One of the first things we want to do in terms of routines is build knowledge. With balanced literacy, I might do a language experience chart. Remember those?

Anna Geiger: Mm-hmm.

Martha Kovack: Then I would just have my chart paper, and I would write a little, like about what we did. I used to write what field trip we went on, who's in our family, what we did on the weekend, maybe a little fun poem, children's interests, and maybe I'd talk about who can find the C, who find the comma, who can find the period. It wasn't a very rich experience, but it was okay.

Now I will do the same balanced literacy type of activity, like a language experience poem or chart, but I will base it off of the knowledge that we're learning in our science and social studies.

For example, if we're learning about water and the three states of water, I might do a poem on my language experience chart that goes something like this. This is by Amy Ludwig VanDerwater, I just found it online, "Water is clearly a mystery to me. A solid? A liquid? A gas? It's all three. Freeze it. Warm it. Boil it. You'll see. Water is clearly a mystery to me."

That's an example of how my practice would change. You're going to have your poems and the things that you're reading as a large group together, not just for the purpose of decoding and learning about how to read those words, but for knowledge. That's number one. You're going to build knowledge, and you're going to choose the reading passages built off knowledge.

The thing about knowledge is that it has to, like a snowball, be built year upon year upon year.

What I love about Core Knowledge is, and some other programs do this, too, and I bet you we're going to have a lot more, in kindergarten, they learn about the five senses. In grade one, we're going to learn about human body systems. In grade two, we're going to learn about human cells and digestion, so we're getting more complex, and by the time they get to grade nine, that knowledge has been built instead of just haphazard knowledge about many different things.

Knowledge doesn't work that way. Comprehension depends on what we know.

Anything we go to write, if we want our students to write, we can use it to build that knowledge. In balanced literacy, I would have them write about their pets, and their siblings, and their trips, and their summer holidays. That's not building knowledge and that doesn't give them a whole lot to write about.

What I've learned is that we need to get right in there and give them more deep knowledge consistently because then they're going to have more to write about. They're going to have far more vocabulary to use. Their writing is going to be richer. Does that all make sense?

Anna Geiger: It does, and I would just like to say something quick. I remember, I went to a conference years ago, so it was probably early 2000s when I was a teacher, and they had language experience charts, like what you're talking about that you would write with your students. Then she recommended having this long calculator tape, like we used to have, taped to the wall next to it and that's where you would list all the

things that you taught.

For them, the purpose of doing this language experience thing was to have an opportunity to teach the skills we knew they needed, but we didn't want to drill. That was the place to teach phonics and the place to teach punctuation and things like that. But that was one of the only places.

I think what you're telling us is that the activity itself is valuable, but we have to think about what the point of it is. You can certainly draw attention to those things, but this is not explicit instruction in sound-spelling correspondences. But it is teaching knowledge, which is important for oral language.

Martha Kovack: Right. That is a huge difference. It's the biggest difference, really.

My point number two is that I do reinforce spelling, grammar, and punctuation with the language experience charts. However, I let those students know, "Oh, I haven't taught you this yet." That's what I say all the time, "Oh, I haven't taught you this yet, but when we see this dash, it means that the author is going to tell us more." Or, "I haven't taught you this yet, but the double E together says E."

I'm just really honest with children, "This is why I'm doing this with you. This is why I'm having you trace letters. This is where we tap the sounds and then say the letter names and then write in our words, write our five to ten words in our books. This is why we write sentences. Now we're over here, we're learning about water."

I make it very clear that there's a place for learning how to read and write this, and that I'm going to get there and we're going to learn how to do it all, but if you don't know how to read this, that's okay, and you're not supposed to know how to read this yet because I haven't taught you all how to spell "water." If you know how to do it, that's okay, too.

It's really, to me, about honesty with the children. Just be honest with them.

Anna Geiger: I appreciate that so much. Just today, I did a little reel on Instagram about the problem with the early guided reading books, level A and B. When I'd used them initially as a balanced literacy teacher, when I taught them to use the pattern and the context, I told them they were reading. I told them that's what they were doing.

I talked about in the reel how we're really giving them the ILLUSION of reading, and we're really not being honest. I didn't say this there, but it is dishonest, and it's confusing for them to think that's what reading is. They're going to think that, "Well, to read, I need the teacher to teach me the pattern. I need the picture to help me. I only have to use the first letter of a word."

But like you said, to use that chart and say, "I haven't taught all this to you yet, and that's fine." I think it's also great because some of the kids will actually be able to read that, and to have that opportunity for everyone is great.

I think sometimes we get afraid of showing something they haven't seen. I remember when I did have to use a very structured phonics program one year of teaching, and they wouldn't put directions on the phonics worksheets because they said the kids might see patterns that they haven't been taught yet. Which was a little bit silly because the same program made our math worksheets, which had the directions on them. But yeah, it was so silly.

Martha Kovack: It's illogical.

Anna Geiger: It's obviously not that we're going to blindfold our students as they go through life, protecting them from any exposure, but just understanding that we teach that over here, and we apply as much as we know over here.

Martha Kovack: Beautifully said!

Now, that brings us to fluency. This is what the language experience chart is going to be perfect for. Tim Rasinski is all about fluency, that's his whole thing, and he has this thing called Fluency Fridays. This is where you would have a poem, and again, it would be like a water poem.

On Monday, YOU would read the poem because, again, you haven't taught them everything. Or it could be in grade one, or kindergarten, you might be doing a nursery rhyme, something really simple, really familiar. On Monday, you're going to introduce it, and you read it and model the fluency and reread it.

On Tuesday, you're going to all read it together and, you know, model for the children how to read, and then they copy you.

On Wednesday, they're actually going to get that poem in their hands in large print, and they're all going to get copies and go into small groups and read that poem together as a small group. You're going to be, again, very clear with the children, "I haven't taught you how to read all these words yet. It's okay if you don't know them, but it's also okay if you memorize them and read along with your group. That's okay."

Then on Thursday, we're going to have a rehearsal where we are all up at the front of the room getting ready for the Friday performance.

Then on Friday, you're going to invite the principal to listen to your poem or invite some parents in to listen. That's it. It's very short. It doesn't have to take up a lot of your day, but it does give children a sense of what reading is supposed to sound like.

Here's my favorite thing. You have to go on to YouTube and look up Tim Rasinski's, I think it's called The Fluent Reader: Part 2. Yeah, that's what it's called, The Fluent Reader: Part 2. I loved this because there was an example where the students were learning about the food chain. What they did was they came up with a much more engaging way to talk about the food chain and they wrote poems. Now this was a junior grade, so they were more capable of this, but the students on the left were in the competition group and then the students on the right were in the symbiosis group. The students on the left were reading with the tone and body language that was tough and loud and strong. They had all these facial expressions and they were reading with this beautiful expression. The students on the right were all soft and smiling and reading with more flow.

It was just a perfect example of how you would do fluency with students maybe who do struggle with the decoding piece, but that's a separate issue. They absolutely shine when it came to being able to perform. He talks a lot about using the science in artful ways, and I just thought that that was a perfect example.

Anna Geiger: I'm going to play devil's advocate here because I know this is such a sticky, difficult topic in science of reading circles.

I know I have a lot of people that ask me to create decodable partner plays. I've tried. As of this recording, I have not released any because I have a hard time making them

interesting. I feel like if you're going to be doing something and performing it and there's no pictures, it's got to be able to tell a story, and it's got to be interesting, and I am just really struggling to get that figured out for a limited number of words.

However, I get where people are coming from because we know Jan Hasbrouck talks about fluency being automaticity. So are we creating the illusion of fluency when we have kids "read" these texts? Because if they can't read the words in isolation, we would maybe say they're not actually reading, or are we saying that what we're doing here is teaching an element of fluency, the element of speaking in phrases? Is this more of an oral language versus a reading activity? How would you explain that?

Martha Kovack: Yes. I would say balanced literacy versus what I know now is that my fluency is more of an oral language, knowledge, vocabulary, and bringing the art into it, it's so much more.

Whereas fluency before was just so that they could make sure their voice goes down at the period. Make sure their voice goes up at a comma. It was just really about how fast they could read, and Tim Rasinski calls this "fake fluency."

But I would also say, yeah, I can see your point that some people would say that it's fake fluency to just memorize, but again, it just boils down to awareness. It's okay to provide text that's more difficult so that it flows, so that it makes sense, so that it's engaging.

The caveat is that they have to be getting good quality decoding instruction over here. Where they're getting 95% success, and they're moving along tickety-boo, and they're going through the short vowels and the long vowels, and they're moving through all the syllable structures. If they're getting that, then you can morph the two together. But if they're not getting that, of course it's going to be fake fluency.

Anna Geiger: More devil's advocate. Someone could say, "Okay, you're teaching phonics over here, but then to say, 'Over here, we're doing something different,' that sounds to me like old balanced literacy where it was, 'I'm teaching you phonics, but now I'm going to give you these leveled books where you can't really use it.'" How would you respond to that?

Martha Kovack: Teaching reading is more than teaching phonics adequately. I would go back to oral language. How about this? How about it helps children with a sense of belonging? I think the difference still is the awareness that we didn't have before about

how decoding can be taught so much more effectively and efficiently. That was non-existent, and then you match that with the memorizing and the three-queuing system. That's a disaster. That's harmful.

I think awareness is the only answer here. You have to be a very aware teacher with lots of knowledge about decoding, and then, like yourself, you can build these reading passages that have more to do with fluency and oral language and knowledge. They're based on knowledge and learning about knowledge. I don't know. I don't think there's an easy answer to that.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, it is such a complicated thing to work through. I think it's very hard because we don't want to make the same mistakes we used to make where we thought that these fluency exercises were actually teaching decoding. They can support decoding, but they're not the explicit instruction that students need.

Yet, at the same time, like you said, we don't have to be afraid to tell them something we haven't taught. Some kids will get it when you just tell it to them that one time.

I did a podcast episode a while back with Dr. Chase Young about Reader's Theater, and he had a routine that he does with his second grade. The first day, I can't remember what it was exactly, but I think the first day was you read it to them. The second day, they read it in groups and he's moving around, and if they can't read a word, they circle it. He comes there and explains that this is how you sound out this word. He teaches it to them. It's not guessing. He will help.

Now can all of them read all those words in isolation? No. That's where we get uncomfortable a little bit, trying to figure out exactly where this fits. But I think learning more about the research about Reader's Theater and how that's successful with kids of all different levels, and how it actually does improve comprehension and decoding, even though it's above their independent level. I think it's really important to remember that we're scaffolding. This is not independent work, so that's something else to keep in mind.

For me, I'm still struggling in terms of understanding exactly how it fits in K, 1, and 2, but thank you. This has given me a lot to think about, and I'm going to look into some resources that you share with me later so I can learn more about it.

I think this tension between decodable and nondecodable text is hard to understand exactly how it all fits, but I think we can know that research does not say the only text

they should have access to is decodable. It doesn't actually say that. We don't have anything to verify that. So we need to remember the purpose of decodable, and that it is the primary teaching tool, but think about other things with teacher support. We need to keep thinking about that and figuring out how it all fits.

I would love for you to talk a little bit about what you're doing now and what you share. I know you've got your website and then some things that you sell. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Martha Kovack: Yeah, those card games I made back in the late '90s are still kicking around. I tried to shut it down, but the teachers kept asking and asking for them, so I made them again. They're at soundreaders.com. You can find out about that there.

The other thing I have is letsgetreadingright.com. I really like this website because it's just a place where I put everything that I've ever known and all of my favorite things. I put them into this website, letsgetreadingright.com. I do some blogs. There's a resources page. Now for that resources page you have to be on, unfortunately, your laptop or desktop, but if you click there, I have decodable suggestions. You're on there, Anna. I've got lots of resources available there.

One of my favorite things on there right now is if you go to reading programs and you scroll down, you will see a video by Matt Burns, who talks about partner reading. This is also really great. Then Lindsay Kemeny does a video with PaTTAN. She explains... Have you seen it?

Anna Geiger: Yes! I was just talking to some teachers about both of those videos this morning. They're amazing!

Martha Kovack: Well, they're right there. If you want links to them, if you go under resources, letsgetreadingright.program, the two links are there. I just love them because Lindsay Kemeny shows us how to do it. They're finding a lot of success with partner reading, even with text that's nondecodable. We've just got to make sure we're getting decoding right, and then we can just keep open-minded and reduce the tension. I don't feel any tension here with you, even though we don't know what's exactly the right answer, but these are the conversations that need to continue.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you very much. I'm looking forward to sharing links to your website and your products as well as any articles that we talk about after I turn the recording off. We'll add anything that we can share to help people dig deeper into this

themselves.

Martha Kovack: Awesome. Thank you so much for having me! I really, really enjoyed this conversation. I am a big fan of everything you do, Anna, and it's such a pleasure to speak with you today!

Anna Geiger: Thank you! The pleasure was mine.

Well, I hope this episode has given you a lot to think about. I'd love to hear your thoughts. You can leave them in the show notes where you'll find links to the things we discussed today at reachallreaders.com/episode113.

Talk to you next time!