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Katrin L. Blarney

Katherine A. Beauchat

Priti Haria

Heidi Sweetman

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Impact of Explicit Instruction on Head Start Students' Vocabulary Knowledge

by Katrin L. Blarney, Katherine A. Beauchat, Priti Haria, and Heidi Sweetman

Oral language and vocabulary are important building blocks for children's emergent reading. There is much research to indicate that children who enter school with rich vocabulary and language experiences become successful readers, while children with limited vocabulary and language experiences struggle with beginning reading and future reading success (Hirsch, 2006; Marulis & Neuman, 2010; National Early Literacy Panel, 2005). Unfortunately, the vocabulary gap forms early in life and widens as children progress through elementary grade levels (Biemiller, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995; Roberts, 2008). Thus, one of the instructional goals of early childhood educators preparing children for literacy must be to foster rich vocabulary development.

Research investigating effective instructional techniques for developing children's vocabulary indicates teaching vocabulary words in the context of storybook reading is worthwhile (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Beck & McKeown, 2007; Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009; Collins, 2010; Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Senechal, 1997; Walsh & Blewitt, 2006; Wasik & Bond, 2001). Indeed, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) collaborated on a joint position statement that suggested reading aloud to children is the single most important activity for building several literacy skills, including vocabulary and oral language.

Given that young children's oral language and vocabulary play an important role in their future reading careers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), it is essential that preschool educators have effective strategies for implementing vocabulary instruction within the context of storybook reading. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of using an explicit vocabulary instructional sequence, Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011), during shared storybook reading on children's vocabulary knowledge. Word Walk evolved from our work with preschool teachers to embed explicit vocabulary instruction into their daily read alouds with children. We began with what we knew from the research about effective vocabulary instruction during the context of reading aloud; however, much of this research has been conducted at the elementary level (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008).

Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011) consists of a set of instructional procedures for targeting word knowledge before, during, and after storybook reading within the preschool setting. First, research indicates the need to define new vocabulary words in child-friendly terms, using language that children already understand (Johnson & Yeates, 2006; Justice, 2002; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Wasik & Bond, 2001). Second, in order to make new words more concrete, research suggests providing picture cards or concrete props to aid children's understanding (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman 2006). Third, research also indicates the importance of asking children during the read aloud experience to point to, label, or discuss the words in the context of the storybook (Senechal, 1997; Walsh & Blewitt, 2006; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006).

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) suggest having students say aloud the word they are learning in order to have a phonological representation. Developed for elementary students, the Text Talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001) procedure incorporates discussion with students about how the target vocabulary words are used inside the context of the storybook and outside in alternative contexts correctly. By discussing the word inside the storybook context, the teacher helps solidify the way the word was used in the book; however, it is also important for children to learn that the word does not only "live" inside that one book. Therefore, teachers should also discuss how the word can be used in other contexts (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009; Scott & Nagy, 2004). Lastly, encouraging children to apply their word knowledge by constructing their own examples of using the target word in a new context helps the teacher to determine the extent to which children understand the target word (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Biemiller, 2003; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003).

As an instructional sequence utilizing research-based practices for explicit vocabulary instruction specifically designed for the preschool level, Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011) has the potential to inform future practice with a vulnerable population of children, including children at risk for reading difficulties and English language learners. Thus, the research questions that guided this study include: 1) What are the effects of using the Word Walk instructional sequence on young children's receptive vocabulary? and 2) What are the effects of using the Word Walk instructional sequence on young children's expressive vocabulary?

Method

This one-year study took place in 5 Head Start centers operated by one umbrella community organization in an urban area of a Mid-Atlantic state. The number of classrooms in a center

ranged from1 to 7; in all, 16 classrooms participated.

Classroom Characteristics

Each of the classrooms contained approximately 20 children and was led by a head teacher and assistant teacher. Given the large population of English language learners, the Head Start administration strove to ensure one teacher in each room spoke Spanish whenever possible. The participating teachers (n = 32) were female (n = 31) and male (n = 1). Teachers' ethnicity included 38% Hispanic, 18% African American, and 44% Caucasian. Participating teachers had various levels of education, ranging from a high school diploma to a master's degree in education, and varied years of experience, ranging from three to 34, as classroom teachers.

Head Start centers utilized Creative Curriculum (Dodge & Colker, 1992) to guide their core classroom instructional plan. The classrooms included designated learning centers, including library, writing, science, art, socio-dramatic play, and toys/games. Several of the centers had Smartboard technology in the classrooms, while in others, classrooms had access to a Smartboard in the center's computer lab. The classroom schedule included breakfast, whole-group instruction, center play, small-group instruction, teeth brushing, outdoor or gym play, and lunch. The classrooms had available to learners identical toys, manipulatives, and books from a master inventory maintained and updated by the administration.

Student Characteristics

While the original sample included 313 students, because of the high absentee and transiency rate, a significantly smaller number of students had complete data sets to be included in the analysis. For the purpose of data analysis, students with incomplete pre- and post-test data were excluded from the study. Thus, in the final analysis 189 students were included between the intervention group (n = 97) and the comparison group (n =

92). Forty-nine percent of the sample was female, while the remaining 51% was male. The average age of students at the end of the school year was 5.01 years old. The overwhelming majority of the sample, 72.6%, identified as Hispanic. Students self-identifying as African Americans constituted another 12.9% of the sample. Finally, the remaining 14.4% of participants were split almost equally between students who identified as White (7.7%) and students who identified as biracial (6.7%). Head Start serves at-risk children and their families who are living below the poverty line. The children who participated in the study fit this profile, with 100% living in poverty. An analysis of the demographics of the intervention and comparison groups indicated little difference between the groups regarding gender, race, and home language.

Design

To determine the impact of the instructional intervention, a pre- post-test design was utilized. Classrooms were randomly assigned to one of two groups— intervention (i.e., Word Walk) or comparison group. Teachers in classrooms assigned to the intervention group (n = 8) implemented explicit vocabulary instruction during their normal classroom read aloud. Teachers in classrooms assigned to the comparison group (n = 8) read the same storybooks in the same weekly sequence as the intervention group but did not provide explicit vocabulary instruction during the read aloud.

All of the teachers followed the same five-day repeated reading sequence with the same book. On Mondays teachers introduced a new book with a picture walk. On Tuesdays through Thursdays teachers read the book aloud during whole-group instruction. On Fridays teachers invited children to bring the book to life through dramatization, puppetry, or artistic expression. The researchers provided the teachers with a calendar of one book per week at the beginning of the study. While all teachers read the chosen book each week, teachers were also free to supplement their instruction by reading additional books of their choice during other times of the classroom day.

Intervention Group

Teachers assigned to the intervention group were provided with professional development, totaling 6 hours. Professional development included training on both theoretical significance of vocabulary instruction in general and implementation of the Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011) instructional procedures specifically. Both lead teachers and assistant teachers participated in the training together so that in case the lead teacher was absent, the assistant teacher felt comfortable carrying out the instruction.

Teachers implemented the instructional two-day sequence on Tuesdays and Wednesdays of their normal whole-group read aloud weekly routines. Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011) includes a before-, during-, and after-reading sequence of explicit vocabulary instruction (See Figure 1). Before reading, teachers introduced children to the vocabulary word or words, provided a child-friendly definition, illustrated the definition with a picture card, and invited children to listen for the word while reading. During reading, the teacher paused on the page with the word, looking to see if students had heard the word and providing a quick child-friendly definition. After reading, the teacher provided the bulk of the instruction. She asked children to say the vocabulary word, provided the child-friendly definition, returned to the page in the book to discuss how the word was used in the story, and discussed examples of how the words could be used outside the story context.

Researchers chose all vocabulary words targeted for instruction. Prior to the study, researchers met to choose high-quality children's literature from the classroom book inventory. Researchers organized the books into connected monthly themes, such as school, community, family and friends, feelings and emotions, weather, and nature. The researchers were limited to the books

Instructional Day	Reading Phase	Word Walk- Explicit Vocabulary Instructional Steps
Day 1	Before Reading	Teacher introduces word with picture card, prop, or activity
		Teacher says word and asks children to repeat word
		Teacher provides child-friendly definition
		Teacher asks children to listen for word during reading
	During Reading	Teacher pauses when encountering word in book
		Teacher provides child-friendly definition
	After Reading	Teacher reintroduces word with picture card, prop, or activity
		Teacher asks children to repeat word
		Teacher provides child-friendly definition
		Teacher physically goes back in the book to see how the word was used in the text
		Teacher provides examples of how word can be used outside of the text
		Teacher asks children what word they have been learning
Day 2	Before Reading	Teacher introduces word with picture card, prop, or activity
		Teacher says word and asks children to repeat word
		Teacher provides child-friendly definition
		Teacher asks children to comment on the word
	During Reading	Teacher pauses when encountering word in book
		Teacher provides child-friendly definition
		Teacher asks children how the word is used in the text
	After Reading	Teacher reintroduces word with picture card, prop, or activity
		Teacher asks children to repeat word
		Teacher provides child-friendly definition
		Teacher physically goes back in the book and asks children how the word was used in the text
		Teacher invites children to share examples of how word can be used outside of the text
		Teacher asks children what word they have been learning

Figure 1. Summary of Word Walk Two-day Instructional Sequence

included on the classroom book inventory, but whenever possible selected a mix of fiction and nonfiction texts for each theme. For each book, the researchers chose one to two target words. For books used at the beginning of the study, researchers selected only one vocabulary word. This was done for two reasons: 1) children at the beginning of the year would be adjusting to the classroom and read-aloud procedures, and 2) teachers at the beginning of the year would be adjusting to using the instructional sequence. After the first month of instruction, the number of words selected per book was increased to two. Based on previous experience with vocabulary instruction in preschool, the researchers believed more than two words in one read aloud would be too challenging for young children, many of whom are learning English as a second language.

To help select words, researchers used the tier system outlined by Beck and McKeown (2001). Researchers felt it was important to include Tier 2 words as high-utility words occurring frequently in printed text and across multiple contexts. In addition, because a majority of the students were learning English as a second language and had limited oral language proficiency, the researchers also selected Tier 1 words for instruction. Basic Tier 1 words common in oral language were chosen for instruction if understanding the word was essential for also comprehending the story. Figure 2 provides a list of texts and vocabulary words chosen for the instructional intervention.

Book	**Word(s)**
Corduroy	Enormous
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?	Looking
We're Going on a Bear Hunt	Beautiful
Polar Bear, Polar Bear	Growling
Chicka Chicka Boom Boom	Top
Alphabet Under Construction	Measure
If You Give a Mouse a Cookie	Excited
Click Clack Moo	Farmer, Furious
The Kissing Hand	Hand, Grinned
Llama Llama Red Pajama	Red, Alone
When Sophie Gets Angry	Angry, Explode
I Like Me	Tiny, Clean
The Snowy Day	Track, Firm
Peter's Chair	Stretched, Arranged
Jamaica's Find	Quietly, Squeezed
Have You Filled a Bucket?	Invisible, Empty
Who's in a Family?	Different, Family
Is Your Mama a Llama?	Graze, Kangaroo
Feelings	Generous, Brave
The Hungry Caterpillar	Caterpillar, Butterfly
Jump Frog Jump	Under, Around
Over in the Meadow	Meadow, Leaped
Inch by Inch	Gobble, Beak
Grouchy Ladybug	Grouchy, Insist
One Duck Stuck	Marsh, Slippery
In the Tall, Tall Grass	Wings, Glow
Make Way for Ducklings	Follow, Horrid
Growing Vegetable Soup	Growing, Vegetable

Figure 2. *Texts and Corresponding Vocabulary Words Chosen for Instruction*

In addition to a calendar of books and words, researchers provided teachers with materials to support their classroom instruction. During the initial professional development, researchers gave teachers implementation binders with planning sheets, child-friendly definitions of the words, picture word cards for display during reading and on the classroom Word Wall, and reflection sheets to record observations, questions, or comments occurring during the week.

Treatment Fidelity

The Head Start supervisors were trained to utilize a fidelity checklist to assess implementation of intervention. The Head Start supervisors conducted an unannounced observation of each teacher's read aloud. Researchers provided supervisors with a fidelity checklist to complete monthly for each teacher. Fidelity of implementation was evaluated according to the presence or absence of critical lesson components. The presence of a critical component in a lesson received a score of one; a score of zero was received if the component was absent. Out of 26 sessions of the two-day lesson cycle, the supervisors collected fidelity data for 12 sessions for each intervention teacher. The calculation of fidelity of implementation represented the number of items observed divided by the total number of items. The average fidelity of implementation was 88%, ranging from 83% to 100%. Examination of the fidelity checklists indicated that teachers were dedicated to implementing each step of the vocabulary instruction before, during, and after reading.

Data Gathering Tools and Procedures

Pre-testing began in September after the first full week of school and prior to the beginning of the instructional intervention. Post-testing began in April in order to have sufficient time to complete testing prior to the end of the academic year.

Test of Oral Language Development-Primary: Fourth Edition (TOLD-P-4)

The researchers utilized the norm-referenced measure TOLD-P-4 to measure students' expressive and receptive vocabulary (Newcomer & Hammill, 2008). Two subtests (i.e., Subtest-1: Picture Vocabulary; Subtest-3: Oral Vocabulary) were individually administered using standardized directions to measure preschool students' receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge, respectively. Both subtests were given before and after intervention.

Subtest-1: Picture Vocabulary (PV). The picture vocabulary test included 34 items, and it measured the extent to which a child understood the meaning of spoken English words (i.e., receptive vocabulary). The child was presented with a page of four pictures and asked to choose the correct picture by pointing to the one that represented the word the examiner said. Scores were out of a possible 34 points. A correct response received a 1, while an incorrect response received a 0. Once a student missed five items in a row, the examiner stopped the test. Scores were reported as number correct and then converted to the percent correct out of 34. A coefficient alpha of .84 was reported for the PV subtest.

Subtest-3: Oral Vocabulary (OV). The oral vocabulary subtest consisted of 38 items and measured a child's ability to give oral definitions for common English words (i.e., expressive vocabulary). The examiner said a word and the child provided a definition without looking at any-

thing. No response or incorrect responses earned 0 points, and a succinct response earned 1 point. Once students received five in a row incorrect, the examiner stopped the test. Subjects could earn a maximum of 38 points. Scores were reported as raw scores and converted to percent correct out of 38. A coefficient alpha of .91 was reported for the OV subtest.

Results

TOLD-P-4: Picture Vocabulary (PV)

To test the impact of the intervention on receptive vocabulary knowledge, PV scores were analyzed with an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Students' pre-test performance on the TOLD-PV was included as a covariate. Table 1 provides a descriptive summary of these results. The results were statistically significant, $F(1,187) = 45.116$, $p < .01$, indicating that the treatment group (M=42.23, SD=11.57) scored significantly higher on the post-test PV than the comparison group (M=31.18, SD=13.70).

Table 1. *Mean & Standard Deviation for Post-Test Scores on TOLD-P-4: Picture Vocabulary*

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Comparison	31.18	13.70	95
Treatment	42.23	11.567	95

TOLD-P-4: Oral Vocabulary (OV)

To test the impact of the intervention on expressive vocabulary, OV scores were analyzed with an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Students' pre-test performance on the TOLD-OV was included as a covariate. Table 2 provides a descriptive summary of these results. The results were statistically significant, $F(1,107) = 102.89$, $p <$

.01, indicating that the treatment group (M=42.97, SD=13.58) scored significantly higher on the post-test OV than the comparison group (M=20.16, SD=13.58).

Table 2. *Mean & Standard Deviation for Post-Test Scores on TOLD-P-4: Oral Vocabulary*

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Comparison	20.16	10.33	47
Treatment	42.97	13.58	61

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the explicit vocabulary instructional sequence, Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011), on young children's vocabulary knowledge. Findings indicated that children in classrooms in which teachers used the Word Walk (Blarney & Beauchat, 2011) vocabulary sequence twice a week during repeated reading of the same storybook made significantly greater gains in vocabulary knowledge than students in classrooms in which teachers read the same storybooks without explicit vocabulary instruction. Given that a large percentage of the study's population was learning English as a second-language from homes in which Spanish was the predominant language spoken, the significant gains made in expressive and receptive vocabulary in English are especially promising.

Limitations

The study was limited by several factors. First, while the study began with a large population, by the end of the year the population was sizably reduced. Many children who began the year at a Head Start classroom dropped out by the end of the year. Several reasons explain the transiency—illness, changes in family employment and habitation, relocation to another Head Start center,

prolonged absence resulting in removal from the program, and, especially at the end of year, planned family travel. Unfortunately, an outbreak of flu hit one Head Start center during scheduled post-testing, resulting in a high absenteeism. While efforts were made to return several times for make-up testing, not all students had recovered in time to participate in post-testing.

In addition, the community organization in which the study took place was notified of an unexpected federal review coinciding with the end of the research study. As a result, administrators and teachers began preparations within their classrooms for multiple visitors and reviewers across several days, leading to reductions in time available to complete the study. In an effort to complete the post-study data collection prior to the review, the researchers moved up the timeline of the study, reducing the amount of time children were using Word Walk prior to post-testing. While the test results indicated statistically significant results, the results may have been even higher with several more weeks of instructional time completed.

Lastly, a few teachers in the intervention group reported a decrease in their motivation to use the procedure at the end of the year. While fidelity checklists indicated teachers followed the procedures reliably, the teachers themselves reported their lack of enthusiasm after having used the procedure for an entire year. This instructional "burnout" can be explained by teachers' repetitive use of the procedure each week, but is nevertheless alarming to the researchers. Knowing the effectiveness of the procedure and the impact increased vocabulary knowledge has on this vulnerable population, researchers reemphasized its importance with teachers participating in this study. However, the researchers believe this is an important consideration for their future work with teachers using the instructional intervention to support children's vocabulary development.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study have practical significance for educators of young children at risk for delayed literacy development. Oral language and vocabulary are significant predictors of later reading success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998); thus, identifying instructional interventions that effectively support children's oral language and vocabulary development is an important goal for literacy researchers and early childhood educators. For the young children in this study, the Word Walk instructional procedure contributed to important gains in vocabulary knowledge.

As a result, there are areas ripe for further examination. The researchers are interested in replicating the study to determine whether similar results could be found with other preschool children sharing similar socio-economic and language backgrounds. An important follow-up question is whether the gains in vocabulary made by these students are only temporary or whether the gains made in one year persist as students age. In addition, the researchers are eager to explore the issue of instructional burnout experienced by the preschool educators implementing the vocabulary read aloud routine, specifically looking at revising the routine to minimize instructor fatigue. If educators' motivation to use an instructional routine wanes, then its effectiveness with students may also decrease over time, if for no other reason than the lack of energy and enthusiasm students feel from their teachers. Finally, the researchers wish to explore how extending vocabulary instruction beyond the read-aloud context impacts vocabulary knowledge.

> While research indicates the importance of developing oral language and word knowledge early (Hirsch, 2006; Marulis & Neuman, 2010), less is known about effective instructional routines for fostering young children's receptive and expressive vocabulary. By examining the effectiveness of one routine, Word Walk

(Blarney & Beauchat, 2011), this study contributes to the instructional methodologies available to preschool educators working on the frontlines to combat the vocabulary gap.

Katrin L. Blarney is an assistant professor at De-Sales University in Center Valley, PA. Dr. Blarney's professional work includes examining effective professional development methods for preschool educators.

Katherine A. Beauchat is an assistant professor at York College of Pennsylvania in York, PA. Dr. Beauchat is passionate about helping pre-service teachers prepare for literacy education.

Priti Haria is an assistant professor of education at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Galloway, NJ. Dr. Haria works closely with graduate students conducting their own research on educational topics.

Heidi Sweetman is an educational researcher at the University of Delaware in Newark, DE. She is passionate about educational evaluation, investigating the effectiveness of statewide programs.

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