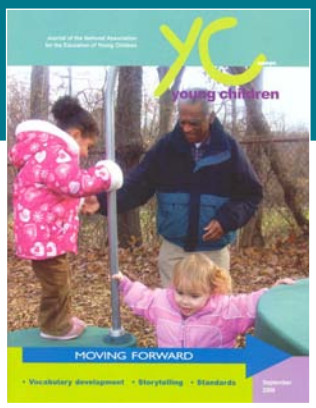
Developmentally Appropriate Practice

A reading from the CD accompanying *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, Third Edition.*

READING #15

Creating Classrooms That Promote Rich Vocabularies for At-Risk Learners



Deanna L. Nekovei and Shirley A. Ermis

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Creating Classrooms That Promote Rich Vocabularies for At-Risk Learners

Deanna L. Nekovei and Shirley A. Ermis

Young children do not acquire oral language effortlessly. Language development is a complex task involving, first and foremost, an inner desire to communicate with others. Language development also requires the ability to hear and make sense out of the sounds, words, and phrases of spoken language. In addition, children must acquire the ability to visually track cues that provide information about the give-and-take of conversation and listener emotion as well as other forms of nonverbal feedback.

For example, eye contact is important; it usually means that someone is listening to what we have to say. Language customs and conventions play a part in children's language learning. For example, in some cultures children are to remain silent and not talk with adults frequently; in others, children are encouraged to fully participate in conversation. To acquire good oral language skills, young children must be savvy language processors.

Some language learners acquire words at a much slower rate than others. These children may come from homes that lack reading and writing materials or from families with limited English and/or reading proficiency skills. Some children may have a learning or reading disability or may be language delayed. Research (Beck & McKeown 1991) shows that, whatever the reason, while school-age children who perform at lower levels learn one or two words per day, their higher achieving peers learn seven or eight. This pattern of limited versus rich vocabulary growth appears to hold regardless of when vocabulary is measured from first grade to grade twelve (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui 1995). Thus, children whose language skills are behind in kindergarten (those with vocabularies below the range of between 2,500 and 5,000 words) tend to stay behind throughout their lives (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui 1995).

The good news is that empirical evidence shows that "students who begin school behind typical peers in important areas such as vocabulary and language development can

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Deanna L. Nekovei, EdD, was an associate professor at Texas A&M University–Kingsville. She was very active in early childhood education, conducting research and serving as director of the King Ranch Family Trust Early Education Center. Deanna died on May 3, 2005.

Shirley A. Ermis, EdD, is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University–Kingsville. Shirley has conducted research and published articles in reading with a special emphasis on early literacy.

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Thanks to Velma Longoria, MEd, prekindergarten teacher at Harrel Elementary School in Kingsville, Texas.

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master basic reading skills as quickly and as well as typical peers under optimal instructional conditions" (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui 1990, cited in Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui 1995, 1). A good early care and education program can have an impact on children's vocabulary development by providing meaningful, rich language opportunities and by increasing the amount of talk in the classroom (Hart & Risley 2002). The use of extended discourse—that is, talking with children in ways that build on what they say and that take their words beyond the here and now—enhances the development of oral language (Dickinson & Tabors 2002).

For example, in response to a question such as "What did you do today at school?" a child is likely to say "Nothin'." More specific questions such as "What fun things did you do today outside with your friends?" prompt a fuller response and open up opportunities for asking, for example, "How do you play_____?" and encourage more complex conversations.

This article examines ways that one prekindergarten teacher enhances children's vocabulary growth in her classroom. Velma Longoria teaches 15 four-year-olds in a predominantly Mexican American community in South Texas. All of the preschoolers come from homes with low incomes, and several are English language learners. Specifically, we look at how Ms. Longoria and her class begin the year exploring the fall season. They continue a study of the four seasons throughout the school year.

The use of extended discourse enhances the development of oral language.

What is rich vocabulary?

Children with rich vocabularies are children who know lots of words (Brabham & Villaume 2002). Not only are their vocabularies extensive, but they also reflect an understanding of interrelated concepts that they can use flexibly to figure out the meaning of new words. Children with rich vocabularies also delight in learning new words and putting together known words to form a new meaning or to play on the words (as often mirrored in the jokes they tell).

But how does a child acquire such a rich vocabulary? Evidence suggests that rich vocabulary is developed through

- literature-based thematic instruction,
- background knowledge,
- oral language, and
- read-alouds.

Each of these four elements is highlighted in the pages that follow, with a description of how Ms. Longoria addressed it with her class.

The role of literature-based, thematic instruction

Early childhood educators know that literature-based, thematic teaching offers young children unified information, allowing them to see relationships within and between areas (Yorks & Follo 1993; Schubert & Melnick 1997; Lonning & DeFranco 1998; Smallwood 2000). Thematic instruction also considers the specific needs of learners and supports them in their language and literacy efforts (Bergeron et al. 1996).

The project approach takes thematic instruction further, involving the child in the decision-making process—from what to study to how to go about studying it and where to take the investigation from there. Projects typically have a research focus and engage the children in problem solving (Helm & Katz 2001). The project approach can be used in a standards-based classroom to make learning interesting and meaningful to young children (Helm 2003).

Most word knowledge is gained indirectly through participation in everyday experiences at home and in educational settings.

Embracing thematic instruction

As an early childhood educator, Ms. Longoria understands the value of literature-based, thematic instruction. She finds that the four-year-olds in her classroom benefit from reinforcement and repetition as she continuously relates new words and concepts to overriding themes. While using the project approach to explore themes such as fall, she ensures that the children gain essential knowledge and skills in preparation for kindergarten.

As Ms. Longoria encourages the children to take initiative in their own learning, she is aware that many of them have had limited experiences due to their age and the fact that they come from economically disadvantaged homes that have limited language and literacy resources.

Therefore, she tries to create an environment in which the children can acquire a common set of vocabulary words and experiences. This foundation enables the children to pose questions, problem solve, and fully explore their environment and subject matter.

The role of background knowledge

It is through participation that young children learn to communicate with others. "We do not learn most of our words by looking them up in a dictionary. Rather, we learn them in the context of our experiences" (Hodges 1984, 2). Although children learn some words through direct instruction, most word knowledge is gained indirectly through participation in everyday experiences at home and in educational settings (Baumann & Kameenui 1991; National Reading Panel 2000; Partnership for Reading 2001). "Incidental learning opportunities take place as parents and caregivers read aloud and carry on conversations about everyday life and as children engage in all kinds of play—including play with words" (Brabham & Villaume 2002, 265).

Further, children learn best when they can both study word meanings and use the words in context (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui 1995). "Building new concepts through experience provides necessary foundations for learning new words" (Brabham & Villaume 2002, 267). Children need opportunities to think about, talk about, and surround themselves with words. Researchers (Snow 1991; Snow et al. 1995; Beck & McKeown 2001) stress the value of learning experiences that emphasize *decontextualized language*—that is, language that gets children to talk about ideas and use words beyond the here and now. Essentially, we want children to able to use words in multiple contexts, especially to draw relationships between vocabulary in texts and their own personal backgrounds.

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Setting the stage

During the last week in September, Ms. Longoria's class discusses pumpkins. The children say pumpkins are big, round, and orange, and that they get them at Halloween. Pumpkins are not generally grown commercially in South Texas, so a visit to a pumpkin patch is not possible; but children say they see them at the grocery store.

The conversation turns to Halloween, to the custom of carving pumpkins into jack-o-lanterns, then to various kinds of foods made from pumpkins. Several children mention pumpkin pie. Ms. Longoria shows the children a pumpkin and asks them how they might go about making pie. The children say you have to cut the pumpkin and cook it on a stove, then add some milk and sugar and bake it in an oven. A couple of children add that pumpkin seeds are good to eat.

Ms. Longoria explains that cooked pumpkin is used to make pumpkin empanadas (Mexican pastries that have become a mainstay in South Texas). Due to classroom time constraints, she decides not to make empanadas with the children, but she does buy some and passes them around.

The class settles in to read *It's Pumpkin Time!* by Zoe Hall. Knowing that many of her children have limited book experience and find it difficult to sit for a story, Ms. Longoria uses the empanadas to focus the children's attention in a concrete and pleasant way and also as a tie-in to their Hispanic culture.

Following the reading, the children want to turn the pumpkin into a jack-o-lantern, like the children in the story had done. As they clean out the inside of the pumpkin and begin carving, Ms. Longoria encourages them to use the new vocabulary and concepts they have encountered. By having the children participate in story-extension activities, she facilitates the use of decontextualized language.

When Ms. Longoria wonders what the seeds can be used for, the children pipe up, "To make a jack-o-lantern patch!" They all want to plant their pumpkin seeds. Ms. Longoria asks them to remember when the children in the book planted their seeds. Some of the children shout, "In the summertime! We have to wait for summer." The class decides to save some of the seeds to make a summer garden—that way, none of their pumpkins will "catch cold and die."

Ms. Longoria suggests baking the remaining seeds so they can eat them during the reading of the next book, *The Pumpkin Patch* by Elizabeth King. This leads to many side discussions about pumpkins, pumpkin seeds, jack-o-lanterns, plants and planting, and Halloween costumes.

Throughout the children's study of fall, Ms. Longoria continues to provide meaningful, incidental learning opportunities, often tying in the children's cultural background. Through story-extension activities, she encourages the children to use new vocabulary and concepts in their daily conversations.

The role of oral language development

Like most skills, speaking does not come simply from listening to conversation but from being actively immersed in the give-and-take of oral language. As Hodges (1984) notes, vocabulary development is essentially a matter of concept development.

Children who have numerous opportunities to engage in language activities are likely to develop vast, interconnected vocabularies. Language-rich environments serve as a catalyst for vocabulary development (Brabham & Villaume 2002), allowing children to actively hear and participate in rich language through formal and informal activities (Morrow 1997). Children's literature is a rich source for vocabulary exploration (Snow 1991; Snow et al. 1995; Beck & McKeown 2001; Brabham & Villaume 2002).

Promoting oral language skills

To promote oral language development, Ms. Longoria encourages the children to sing songs, recite poems, play with words, and participate in puppetry and drama as well as class discussions. Each week the children learn at least one new song or poem about seasons. They listen to seasonal music (such as *Celebrate Seasons* by Sara Jordan) and to books on tape during naptime (like *Frog and Toad All Year* by Arnold Lobel). While the children are participating in activities, such as outdoor times, lunch, and play, they often sing songs learned in class.

During outdoor times they enjoy playing with the word *fall.* They say, "Fall is when the leaves fall down," laugh hysterically, and fall to the ground like leaves. Although children at this age are literal learners, the class clearly understands that *fall* has two meanings. Also during outdoor times, the children frequently act out parts of books. For example, after reading *The Apple Pie Tree* by Zoe Hall, they pretend to make apple pie and use the new vocabulary (*pick, fill to the brim, peel,* and *cut*).

During center time, the children have many opportunities to learn about fall. For instance, they can select from myriad art supplies, including acorns and leaves, and create collages, rubbings, drawings, and paintings related to their study of fall. The children dance, play musical instruments, and sing and listen to songs. They produce their own plays based on books and songs and conduct impromptu puppet shows for each other. In the math center, they count, measure, and graph pumpkins, seeds, acorns, and leaves. In the reading and writing center, they listen to story tapes, list fall words on the word wall, and dictate stories to Ms. Longoria.

The role of reading aloud to children

Research touts the benefits of reading aloud to children: "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson et al. 1985, 23). Children who are read to obtain substantial background experience about many things; have rich and extensive vocabularies; understand story structure; recognize that reading serves many purposes; *and* find reading pleasurable (Senechal et al. 1996; Bogott, Letmanski, & Miller 1999; Hargrave & Senechal 2000; Pankey 2000; Beck & McKeown 2001).

However, the amount of reading in and of itself does not boost vocabulary and comprehension abilities. Vocabulary increases when children actively engage in discussions and activities before, during, and after the read-aloud (Smallwood 2000). Thus, "the goal of invoking background knowledge is to integrate it with text content in order to assist comprehension" (Beck & McKeown 2001, 12).

Capitalizing on read-alouds

Ms. Longoria's goal for the children is that they be actively involved before, during, and after a read-aloud. Prior to starting the fall theme and reading a selected book, she records each child's response to her question "What is fall?" The four-year-olds respond: Leaves fall down. Acorns fall.

Squirrels eat acorns. Coconuts fall from a tree. Nests can fall. Pumpkins fall down. Leaves turn brown. Jump in leaves. Eat Halloween candy. They average 2 or 3 ideas each. Ms. Longoria notes that several children's concepts of *fall* seem to entail things that fall down, and she makes a mental note to herself to discuss with the children the meanings of the word *fall.* She then arranges a nature hike to activate prior knowledge and to develop background knowledge. This will allow the children to participate in the read-aloud to the fullest extent.

On the day of the hike she asks the children to look for signs of fall. One child offers, "Look, the leaves are turning brown." Another notices the leaves on the ground. Ms. Longoria restates and expands on the comments, explaining that in other regions leaves change from green to red, orange, or yellow—not mainly brown like the mesquite trees in South Texas. As they continue their walk, another child points to a flock of birds. Ms. Longoria responds, "Yes, that too is a sign that fall is here! Starting in the fall many birds fly south for the winter months."

"Butterflies fly south, too," says another child. Since some of the children have family in Mexico, and many have visited the country, Ms. Longoria adds, "Yes, that's right. The monarch butterflies fly across Texas during the fall months and go and visit Mexico for the winter."

Ms. Longoria draws the children's attention to other aspects of fall: the crunching sound of leaves beneath their feet, the coolness of the air, and the fact that they have begun to wear sweaters to school in the morning.

Vocabulary increases when children actively engage in discussions and activities before, during, and after the read-aloud.

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At grouptime, Ms. Longoria and the children discuss the title of the chosen book (*Fall Leaves Fall!* by Zoe Hall), and she asks the children what they think the book might be about. Many children shout, "The leaves fall down." She then previews for them the pages of the book, stopping briefly to comment on some of the pictures and to use vocabulary that she wants the children to learn. Ms. Longoria then reads the book to the class. She periodically stops to check for comprehension and to briefly discuss the story and the illustrations, all the while maintaining the flow of the story.

After the read-aloud, everyone discusses how the nature hike was similar to and different from the text. Using mesquite leaves they collected on the hike, the four-year-olds create pictures. Ms. Longoria encourages them to use new vocabulary while talking with each other. She then shows them pictures of various other leaves (maple, sassafras, oak, ginkgo, and beech). Several children point out that South Texas has oak trees and acorns too.

In the following days, Ms. Longoria reads aloud other books about fall, always connecting prior knowledge and new vocabulary and checking for comprehension.

At the end of the children's study of fall, she again asks each child, "What is fall?" The average number of ideas this time is a little over 7. Ms. Longoria notes the children's responses are longer than the first time and contain many new words and concepts: Leaves are different colors. Squirrels put food in their mouth. We wear sweaters to keep warm. Birds fly south to find a warm place. The wind blows. Colder storms come. Grandpa rakes up the leaves and we jump into them.

Conclusion

The experience of Ms. Longoria and the children in her class illustrates how one teacher can successfully create an environment that promotes the development of rich vocabularies. Through theme-based teaching, Ms. Longoria provides a scaffold for the children to learn new vocabulary and to make connections within and across content areas. To deepen these connections, she plans opportunities for the children to relate the new vocabulary to their own experiences. She creates a learning environment in

which the children feel comfortable trying out new words in multiple contexts. Finally, through read-alouds, Ms. Longoria helps the children make books their own by encouraging them to relate the literature to their own backgrounds and by affording them experiences with decontextualized text and extended discourse.

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10-Creating Classrooms That Promote Rich Vocabulary for At Risk Learner.

Although the material you just read is a major part of DAP. Remember it is through close observation and interaction with the individual children in their classrooms that skilled teachers assess where children are and thereby know how to best guide them.

Use the Table Below to Fill in the Blank

1. Some language learner's _____ words at a much slower rate than others.

2. A good early care and education program can have an impact on children's vocabulary development by providing meaningful, rich language _____ and by increasing the amount of talk in the classroom

3. Children learn best when they can both study word _____ and use the words in context.

4. Children who have numerous opportunities to engage in _____ activities are likely to develop vast, interconnected vocabularies.

5. Vocabulary increases when children actively _____ in discussions and activities before, during, and after the read-aloud.

6. Create a learning environment in which the children feel _____ trying out new words in multiple contexts.

1	**meanings**	**2**	**language**
3	**engage**	**4**	**comfortable**
5	**opportunities**	**6**	**acquire**

List three ways you will use this information:

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The presentation consisted of hands on training, questions and answers, and lecture.	1 2 3 4 5
Overall effectiveness of training (I feel the training was clear and easy to understand)	1 2 3 4 5
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