



Explicit Vocabulary Instruction in Kindergarten: Case Studies of Students With and Without Language Disorders

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Abstract

Research demonstrates that children can make more significant gains through explicit instruction of vocabulary than implicit instruction (Blachowicz and Fisher in *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA, 2010; Dalton and Grisham in *Read Teach* 64(5):306–317, 2011). Effective explicit instruction often includes high quality conversations with teachers and peers (Towson et al. in *J Early Interv* 38(4):230–246, 2016; Wasik in *Read Teach* 63(8):621–633, 2010). Data for this study were collected from a larger study designed to explore students' use of vocabulary words following explicit instruction with the words during an interactive read-aloud. A deeper microanalysis of student discussion, scaffolded by adults, was conducted. The transcribed student discussions, recorded during peer talk, were analyzed using NVivo 10 (QSR International in NVivo (version 10). NVivo qualitative data analysis software, QSR International, Doncaster, VIC, 2012) software. These case studies describe the vocabulary development of two children with diagnosed speech and language disorders and one child without a speech and language impairment.

Keywords Literacy · Vocabulary · Oral language development · Early childhood education · Interactive read-alouds

Introduction

Researcher (R): This is one of my favorite new words: peevish.

Students (S): Peevish.

R: If you're feeling peevish, you're irritated; things are bothering you.

S: We heard that word before.

R: So, when I feel peevish, my face looks like this [makes peevish face].

S: Irritated.

R: Show me your irritated face. So, in this story, guess what? The chicken is feeling peevish. Do you know why? Because the cow wakes him up. Did someone ever wake you up and it irritates you? Like you're just in a good sleep and they say, "Hey, wake up!" You get peevish, or what's another word for peevish?

S: Irritated.

The above conversation took place with students before an interactive read-aloud of *Blue Chicken* (Freedman 2011). During the explicit teaching of the vocabulary word, the lead author introduced the novel word by providing a child-friendly explanation, a relatable example, and described the word as it was used in the text. Two additional words were explicitly taught before the read aloud, during which students were guided in the application of the words during peer discussions.

When students are provided with explicit vocabulary instruction, paired with opportunities for discussion and use of the new words, vocabulary development is enhanced. This may require teacher scaffolding; still, as Hammond and Nessel (2011) suggest, "Even the most reticent...will readily increase their capacities when they have opportunities for divergent thinking, active listening, intellectual risk taking, and reflection" (p. 102). In this manuscript, we describe our

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study of vocabulary instruction in kindergarten. We report on the progress of three students, including two with diagnosed spoken language disorders (SLD).

Theoretical Framework

Our study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-linguistic theory. Specifically, we applied Vygotsky's theory that cognitive development is enhanced through planned social interaction with a knowledgeable mentor. Such social interactions often involve tailored guidance, or scaffolding, to increase student learning or ability (Wood et al. 1976).

In this study, the daily interactive read-aloud (IRA) served as the context for social interactions. Each read aloud we conducted was based on Fisher et al. (2004) description of effective practices for implementing IRAs.

Literature Review

Vocabulary Development

Students enter school with varying experiences and degrees of knowledge; children with limited background knowledge may be at a disadvantage in learning new content (Arum and Roksa 2011). Vocabulary development is an important component of early language learning and literacy development. Extensive knowledge of words can enhance literacy development and text comprehension (Kindle 2009). Typically developing children acquire vocabulary words at a rapid rate in the early childhood years, often possessing a vocabulary repertoire averaging 10,000 words (Byrnes and Wasik 2010). However, some children do not develop vocabulary at this rate, leading to gaps in literacy learning. Children with limited vocabulary in the kindergarten are at risk of reading difficulty (Catts et al. 2001). Therefore, it is imperative for educators to strategically and explicitly teach vocabulary to support literacy development (Spencer et al. 2012).

Spoken Language Disorders

Students with SLD may not acquire vocabulary at same rate as typically developing children (Byrnes and Wasik 2010; Conderman and Hedin 2011; Hulme and Snowling 2013). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association defines SLD as "a significant impairment in the acquisition and use of language across modalities (e.g., speech, sign language, or both) due to deficits in

comprehension and/or production across any of the five language domains (i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics)" (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association 2008, ¶1). Jessup et al. (2008) characterized a child as having a speech sound disorder if he or she substituted, omitted, or distorted any individual sound expected to be pronounced correctly given chronological age. Omissions are sounds left out of words, while substitutions are interchanging sounds in words such as (e.g., *w* for *r*), and distortions are deviations in speech sounds due to the misplacement of the tongue or missing teeth (Allen and Cowdery 2009).

In 2014–2015, approximately 20% of students receiving special education services had speech or language impairments (National Center for Educational Statistics 2017). Early intervention is essential for those who have speech and language disorders, to prevent Persistent Speech Disorder (PSD). This term is used to describe children "whose speech problems persist beyond the period of typical development" (Wren 2015, p. 27). Typical language development is commonly complete by age 8 (Wren 2015). Children with PSD are at risk for literacy and social interaction deficits (Conderman and Hedin 2011; Desmarais et al. 2013). Sadly, many students with speech and language impairments refrain from participating in classroom conversations due to their speech delays. Limited participation in collaborative conversations may decrease learning opportunities (Drogowski 2008).

Interactive Read-Alouds

Justice et al. (2005) suggest that children with delayed oral language skills may benefit from repeated exposure to words, particularly with interactive book reading. Further, Wasik et al. (2006) found that explicit discussions about novel words before, during, and after book reading enhanced vocabulary development in preschool students with low vocabulary. The interactive read aloud (IRA) is one instructional context in which teachers share the responsibility of discussion during a book reading (Smolkin and Donovan 2003). The teacher reads the text aloud while students actively engage in conversation by thinking within, beyond, and about texts (Fountas and Pinnell 2006) before, during, and after the reading (Meller et al. 2009). Both the teacher and the students are active participants in the discussion (Pantaleo 2007). During the IRA, the teacher fosters opportunities for students to turn and talk to partners at strategically planned locations (Santoro et al. 2008). This collaborative conversation can enhance comprehension and oral language development (Drogowski 2008; Kindle 2009).

Daily engagement in IRAs can have a positive impact on students' receptive and expressive vocabulary, specifically

for those students who have SLD (Spencer et al. 2012; Towson et al. 2016). Importantly, Pollard-Durodola et al. (2011) found that “children with lower levels of vocabulary can derive benefit from shared book reading, particularly on curriculum-specific vocabulary” (p. 178). Students with disabilities benefit from vocabulary instruction to prevent further reading difficulties (Biemiller 2001) which can be done before, during, and after an interactive read-aloud.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Students may implicitly acquire vocabulary through unplanned opportunities, such as when a novel word arises in discussion during text reading (Neuman and Roskos 2012). However, it is more likely for children to make significant gains through explicit instruction (Dalton and Grisham 2011). Explicit teaching involves “intentional design and delivery of information by the teacher to the children” (Spencer et al. 2012, p. 19). In vocabulary instruction, the teacher provides an explicit explanation of a word’s meaning prior to or during text reading.

Vocabulary instruction embedded in an IRA is an effective way to support students’ vocabulary development (McGee and Schickedanz 2007; Wiseman 2011). This instruction often involves the teacher leading a discussion of a word’s meaning by providing a child-friendly explanation, a synonym for the word, and several examples taken from the text and from students’ lives (Spencer et al. 2012). The teacher follows this discussion with opportunities for students to turn and talk about the word by relating it to the text and prior experiences. This allows the students to transfer the learning to their expressive vocabulary. This type of discussion is often referred to as analytic talk. When learners participate in analytic talk, they apply and advance their knowledge of novel words (Blachowicz and Fisher 2010). Effective, explicit vocabulary instruction couples textual experiences with opportunities for students to resolve unknown vocabulary with structural analysis, context clues, and discussion (Fisher and Frey 2008).

Clearly, explicit instruction of every unknown word is unrealistic; therefore, careful decisions regarding which words to teach must be made (Spencer et al. 2012). It is better to teach fewer words well than for children to memorize a list of words for an assessment. Students should be introduced to 3–5 new robust vocabulary words each day, specifically, words that will impact learning (Coyne et al. 2004; Santoro et al. 2008). Building students’ receptive and expressive vocabulary requires careful selection of words (Byrnes and Wasik 2009). The words chosen for explicit instruction for this study were selected using Beck et al. (2002) guidelines. Specifically, Tier Two vocabulary words were the focus of explicit instruction and collaborative discussions throughout the interactive read-aloud.

Description of the Study

We report on three case studies focused on the vocabulary development of two kindergarten students with an identified SLD and a third student who participated in their peer discussion group, but was not diagnosed with a SLD. The following research questions guided our study:

1. How do children with a diagnosed SLD use explicitly taught vocabulary words during their peer interaction?
2. Do children with and without diagnosed SLD acquire vocabulary in a similar manner when provided with explicit instruction?

Setting

We conducted the study in a kindergarten classroom located in rural, West Central Pennsylvania. Approximately 242, K-5 students, were enrolled in the school; 17 children were enrolled in the kindergarten classroom we observed. The school served a population representing an ethnicity ratio of approximately 95% Caucasian, 0.9% African-American, 0.4% Asian, and 3% Multi-racial. Approximately 46% of the students received free or reduced lunch.

Study Participants

The participants in this microanalysis of data consisted of one triad of students enrolled in the kindergarten classroom described above. Parent/guardian consent was provided for each participant. Permission for the study was granted by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board. The classroom teacher assigned all students to small groups for the purpose of discussion during interactive read alouds. The group described in this article consisted of two students who received special education services for SLD and one other student who was a member of their peer discussion group. We selected this group to study due to the presence of SLD and our interest in how this may affect vocabulary development. The participants, Helen, Jocelyn, and Sidney (all names are pseudonyms), were female.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data consisted of transcribed audio-recorded lessons and corresponding observation logs collected during 12 IRAs. Three observers, including the lead author, collected the

data. Each observer was trained to observe and document the analytic talk using a provided observation log (“Appendix”). The training included presentation, demonstration, and observed practice using a video-taped interactive read-aloud. This in-depth viewing consisted of observers using the observation log to document the dialogue and refine the coding scheme. Training continued until there was an inter-rater reliability rate of at least 80% among all coders.

Data Analysis

We reviewed transcripts multiple times to crosscheck the information, annotate the transcripts, and develop initial codes (Saldana 2013). The lead author revised and condensed the initial codes into focused codes by identifying categories and subthemes (Saldana 2013) of children’s analytic talk. The lead author then revisited the data and recorded the appropriate code on the transcript, allowing the team to look for meaning in the data instead of fitting the data to predetermined categories and themes. We then uploaded and coded the transcripts using *NVivo 10 Software* (QSR 2012). This software allows all documents to be uploaded, searched, coded, sorted, and organized; this helped to identify patterns and themes that emerged during the qualitative analysis.

Findings

To report the findings, we report each of the three cases separately. Although only two of the students were diagnosed with SLD, we wanted to provide a clear illustration of the dynamics of the entire group’s analytic talk. Each case description provides transcribed examples of students’ language development throughout the observed lessons.

Helen

Helen appeared to be confident in each of the observed conversations. This became evident as competition to speak during peer conversations increased throughout each read-aloud. According to her teacher, Helen had an identified SLD; specifically, she demonstrated difficulty with articulation. Still, accommodations were not required or provided during the collaborative conversations.

The fact that Helen could not articulate certain sounds in words did not prevent her from using explicitly taught vocabulary words in conversation. For example, during the peer talk about *Rocket Writes a Story* (Hills 2012), Helen was comfortable using the word “inspires” even though she was unable to pronounce it correctly.

R: Remember, inspiring means encouraging. Who is someone that inspires you? Go ahead, turn and talk.

Helen: My sister. She sires [sic] me to get my homework done. My sister sires me [sic].

Sidney: My mom always inspires me to get my homework done even though I don’t want to.

Helen: My sister sires [sic] me to get my homework done so we can play. Even though I don’t want to get my homework done because it’s 1–50 every day, I just have to do it; it’s just wanting to get there. I just don’t want to do it because then I can’t watch TV.

Research Assistant (RA): Okay, so you were saying that your mom inspires you to get your homework done?

Helen: No, my sister.

RA: Your sister inspires you to get your homework done. So then, what do you do after you get your homework done?

Helen: Um, we play.

Although the researcher and Helen’s peer accurately modeled the correct pronunciation of the word, she was unable to articulate the word; nevertheless, she was willing to use the word in conversation. Helen also took a leadership role within her group, as demonstrated in several IRA sessions when she was the first to engage in peer talk. For example, during the collaborative conversation of *Chopsticks* (Rosenthal 2012), Helen started the conversation:

R: With your talk partner, talk about a time that you had to declare something.

Helen: I declared that I couldn’t sleep.

RA: Why couldn’t you sleep?

Helen: Because my sister was waking me up.

RA: Oh so that upset you?

Sidney: My mom declared that I needed to brush my teeth at my dad’s house today.

RA: So that was a time your mom thought it was very important for you to brush your teeth. Was there a time that you declared something?

Sidney: Um, no.

RA: You’ve never strongly stated something?

Sidney: I did strongly state that I needed ice cream.

Helen’s leadership was also apparent in subsequent IRAs, including *Bear’s Loose Tooth* (Wilson 2011):

R: Perched! He was perched on it. Now...I want you to talk about a time when you saw a bird or something (I told you my chickens) that was perched somewhere.

Helen: I saw a bird perch on the end of a tree branch.

RA: Oh, that’s a good example.

Jocelyn: I can’t think of anything. I never see anything.

It was also evident that peers in Helen's group frequently mimicked her responses. For example, during the collaborative conversation of *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt 2013), Sidney echoed Helen's response:

R: Why do you think the red crayon declared that he needed to have a talk with Duncan?

Helen: Because the red crayon was tired of being worn out all year, so he decided that he needed to talk to him so he could have the day off.

Sidney: Because he was being used too much than the other crayon so he decided he needed a talk with Duncan.

Helen demonstrated her ability to consistently and accurately use novel words in context and expand on her responses. The IRAs, embedded with planned opportunities to turn and talk, seemed to enrich Helen's use of vocabulary.

Jocelyn

Jocelyn, a quiet and reserved student, also had an identified SLD; however, accommodations were not required or provided during the observed lessons. Unlike the other participants, Jocelyn initially seemed reluctant to talk as others dominated the conversation. Jocelyn often could not provide an accurate example when responding to the planned questions, even with additional prompting. For example, the following discussion transpired while reading *Bear's Loose Tooth* (Wilson 2011):

R: What is something you have eaten and you savored every bite?

Sidney: I savored every bite of my cookies.

RA: What kind of cookies did you savor?

Sidney: Chocolate chip.

Helen: I savored chocolate chips.

Jocelyn: I never did anything with my tooth loose.

Sidney: No, we are trying to speak anything about savoring.

RA: Good reminder; we are thinking about something we savored. A food that we enjoyed as long as we could.

Sidney: I enjoyed a cookie as long as I could.

Helen: I savored ice cream.

RA: That's a good example. What kind of ice cream?

Helen: Chocolate.

Jocelyn: I know what I wanted to say.

RA: Jocelyn you've thought of something. What is something that you savored?

Jocelyn: /kajk/, /ca/; I can't say it right.

RA: That's okay, try it.

Jocelyn: /kajk/

RA: Cake.

During the next IRA, the teacher read *Lenore Finds a Friend* (Katz 2012), Jocelyn attempted to provide elaborate examples about feeling grumpy without prompting. However, she did not apply the previously taught word in the conversation.

R: I want you to turn and talk about a time you felt grumpy and show your partner what your face looked like when you felt that way.

Jocelyn: Today, my mom said, "Get dressed and I can't take a nap."

RA: Did you make any faces to show you were grumpy? [Student made grumpy face]. That is a very grumpy face. Then what happened?

Jocelyn: Then I had to pick my clothes out.

In subsequent sessions, Jocelyn provided the featured words in her peer conversation with prompting. The following is an excerpt of a conversation that took place during the IRA of *A Leaf Can Be* (Salas 2012).

R: Discuss how you could conceal yourself when playing hide and seek.

Jocelyn: I played hide and seek with my sister and her can't [sic] find me outside.

RA: How did you conceal yourself?

Jocelyn: I wore purple and I go hide in purple.

RA: You wore purple and you what?

Jocelyn: Concealed.

RA: So, you wore purple. What did you hide in that was purple?

Jocelyn: My bed.

RA: Is your bed purple? What did you do to hide yourself?

Jocelyn: Pull the blankets up.

The need for scaffolding decreased in later sessions as Jocelyn attempted to use words in her responses. During several IRAs Jocelyn used feature words without support, and was even the first to speak in her group after the researcher posed a question. For example, Jocelyn attempted to use the word "adventure" during the IRA with *Otto the Book Bear* (Cleminson 2011):

R: What was one of your favorite adventures, and why was it your favorite?

Jocelyn: I like to adventure in the woods.

RA: What do you do when you go on an adventure in the woods?

Jocelyn: Look at the lake.

RA: Do you go with anyone?

Jocelyn: Sometimes with my dad and my sister, sometimes by myself.

As described above, the nature of Jocelyn's participation in peer discussions changed over the course of the study. In

our later observations, she spoke more, provided examples, and attempted to use the previously taught words throughout her peer talk. As the IRAs continued, Jocelyn seemed to be less intimidated by her peers' responses and confidently participated in the discussions.

Sidney

Sidney seemed to long for peer attention in small group and whole class discussions. This often led to competition with other peers. She demonstrated a strong desire to share her thoughts spontaneously. For example, during one of the first IRAs, *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt 2013), Sidney was quick to respond during the introduction of the words:

Researcher: Here is that word we've heard three times now.

Sidney: [Yells out] Declared.

Even though Sidney was willing to express her thoughts in the beginning of the study, she often repeated her peers' responses during the times allocated for peer talk. The following excerpt illustrates this example from the discussion of *Rocket Writes a Story* (Hills 2012):

R: I want you to turn and talk about a time that someone declared that you do something.

Helen: My mom declared I would get homework done and I did.

Sidney: My mom declared I would get homework done so that I could watch SpongeBob and play with the dog.

RA: I heard both of you say that your moms declare that you get your homework done. Is there anything else? Has anyone ever declared that you do something very important?

Helen: Um, my sister declared that I could swim without my floaties, and I did.

RA: Because she...strongly stated that you could swim without your floaties, you tried it. How did you do?

Helen: I did good. I can swim without my floaties now, in the deep end even.

RA: What about you, Sidney?

Sidney: My mom said I could swim underwater.

Later during the whole group discussion of this book, Sidney was eager to share her thoughts, and required reminders to raise her hand to volunteer.

Sidney elaborated on her responses and often extended examples back to experiences occurring in her home life, which showed the impact from her family's experiences. For example, while talking about a time she felt

grumpy during the conversation of the story, *Lenore Finds a Friend* (Katz 2012), Sidney talked about the time her mom failed to honor the promise to take her to her dad's house to visit.

R: I want you to turn and talk about a time you felt grumpy and show your partner what your face looked like when you felt that way.

Sidney: On my day off, my mom said we would be going to my dad's house but then she didn't go because she had to the doctor's because she had the feeling of stomach pain and she found out she was actually pregnant.

RA: How did you feel?

Sidney: Grumpy that we couldn't go to my dad's house.

It seemed that Sidney gained independence with her examples provided during the peer talk despite the fact that her peers may have responded before her. During a conversation about *Bad Apple: A Tale of Friendship* (Hemingway 2012), Sidney provided an accurate example:

R: I want you to discuss a time when you felt fearless, or not afraid.

Helen: I felt fearless because one time my dad was stepping and he was holding me in the ocean and he fell. He slipped on the seashells and I plugged my nose and breathed out of my nose.

RA: And you were in the water and you were not afraid? You were fearless. What about your dad, was he fearless?

Helen: Mhmm.

RA: So, you know how to swim then? Good for you, Helen!

Sidney: One time when I saw a bear in my dad's back yard, I wasn't afraid.

RA: Are you kidding me?! I don't know, I think I would be afraid. You were not afraid to see a bear?

Sidney was also able to provide support to her peer during a read aloud session. The previously cited example about *Bear's Loose Tooth* (Wilson 2011) illustrates this. The researcher asked the students to discuss something they had eaten and "savored every bite."

Jocelyn: I never did anything with my tooth loose.

Sidney: No, we are trying to speak anything about savoring.

Sidney consistently participated throughout the remainder of the read-aloud sessions. She continued to seek attention for her thoughts, knowledge, and willingness to be the "helper." She also demonstrated how strongly her family

Table 1 Student application with decreased scaffolding

Theme	Definition	Student response
Applied experience	Students applied background knowledge and personal experiences when discussing newly discussed words	<i>Helen</i> I think I like it because we get to swim in the pool. My Grandma and Grandpa get to come over <i>RA</i> You like it why? <i>Helen</i> I like it because, the sun, when it lingers all the time, I like when my Grandma and Grandpa come over to my pool
Increased confidence	Student confidently participated in peer conversations with little to no prompting	<i>R</i> Talk about a time when you felt peevisish. Go ahead, turn and talk <i>Jocelyn</i> I was peevisish when my dad kepted [sic] waking me up for school when I didn't wanted [sic] to
Integration of vocabulary words despite articulation issues	Student integrates vocabulary words into peer conversation even with articulation difficulties	<i>Researcher</i> What was one of your favorite adventures, and why was it your favorite? <i>Sidney</i> I ventured off to my dad's house <i>RA</i> This is an adventure. Venturing off means to go somewhere. What is your favorite adventure? <i>Sidney</i> Going to my dad's house <i>RA</i> You ventured off to your dad's; so where were you coming from? <i>Sidney</i> Pennsylvania

influenced her life as she continued to connect every conversation to a family event.

Discussion

Results of our analysis seem to indicate that all three students learned the meanings of new vocabulary words, as demonstrated through their ability to apply the words in peer conversations. It is important to note that students with and without SLD used explicitly taught words with decreasing amounts of scaffolding as the study progressed. This is consistent with what Pollard-Durodola et al. (2011) found; all students can benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction embedded in the interactive read-aloud. Students who initially hesitated to participate in our observed lessons, began to demonstrate greater participation throughout the succession of each IRA. As students' comfort levels increased, competence in vocabulary acquisition increased. In addition, students who demonstrated difficulty with articulation continued to integrate new vocabulary throughout their peer discussions. We also noted that the more prior experiences a child had with particular concepts, the more depth of knowledge that child demonstrated with explicitly taught vocabulary words related to those concepts. We provided examples of student dialogue with prompting in the "Findings" section of this manuscript. Table 1 provides examples of conversations those same students participated in, after explicit vocabulary instruction, providing evidence of decreased need of scaffolding.

Implications

Despite the obvious importance of vocabulary for lifelong literacy development, studies show that vocabulary instruction does not receive adequate attention in the early childhood curriculum. Too often, young children are expected to "pick up" words through incidental learning (Robbins and Ehri 1994) rather than learn vocabulary through intentional, explicit instruction. It seems clear that explicit vocabulary instruction, embedded in the IRA, can enhance vocabulary development for all students, including those with identified speech and language disorders.

Limitations

The sample of this study was limited to three kindergarten children. Clearly, different results may emerge from a larger population; therefore, generalizations cannot be made from this descriptive study. Furthermore, the small, rural school in which the study was conducted may not be indicative to results in other schools. In addition, the context of this study was limited to specific routines to vocabulary instruction embedded in IRAs. It may be inappropriate to make assumptions about vocabulary instruction when only one facet of the curriculum was examined. Students were only assessed during the conversations before, during, and after the interactive read-aloud; therefore, maintenance of the taught words over time were not measured.

Appendix

Observation Log

Date	Time	Observer	Place
Participants: S-S (student to student) T-S (teacher to student)	Introduction/review of vocabulary: Teacher input: Students' input:	Routine/procedures: (mini-lesson)	Students' quotes: Student A: Student B: Student C:

Additional comments:

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