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## The Power of Print: Supporting Emergent Readers Vocabulary Growth

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### Cover Page Footnote

Susan J. Chambre <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8646-5110> I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Institutional IRB was approved for this project and informed consent were obtained from participating subjects. No funding was used for this project. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susan J. Chambre, Marist College, 3399 North Road C/O Dyson 388G, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601. Email: [susan.chambre@marist.edu](mailto:susan.chambre@marist.edu)

# Vocabulary and Print Exposure for Emergent Readers

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Early childhood (EC) educators, referred to in New Jersey as preschool through grade three (P–3), play a critical role supporting young children’s oral language (OL) and vocabulary development (Gilkerson et al., 2017). Literacy rich classrooms initiate students into the world of language as a robust vocabulary diet during EC grades is key to subsequent literacy outcomes. Research indicates that struggles with OL and vocabulary acquisition are associated with failure to complete high school (Hernandez, 2011), and preschool language abilities account for nearly 70% of variance in ninth grade reading comprehension scores (Lyster et al., 2021). Early OL is especially critical since Farren and colleagues (2017) reveal that EC teachers spend 70% of the instructional day talking to children, interleaved between play and formal instruction. Clearly EC educators directly impact their student’s literacy abilities well after they leave the preschool classroom.

In my role preparing future classroom teachers, I guide future educators as they unpack multiple linguistic competencies such as vocabulary and emergent literacy skills. We discuss how integrating OL and vocabulary in impactful ways directly benefits students, resulting in higher scores on emerging literacy skill assessments (Barnes et al., 2017; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hadley et al., 2021, 2022; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). Supporting vocabulary acquisition is also critical as preschoolers face increased vocabulary demands from Common Core and NextGen Standards when entering grade school.

Learning standards and best-practices are just part of the literacy puzzle. To truly support OL and vocabulary development EC

educators must also understand the role of home, school, and community language interactions (NAEYC, 2005; NAEYC, 2019). I teach my preservice teachers about how language interactions during the early years occur via social interactions with parents, caregivers, educators, and siblings. These interactions initiate young children into cultural language conventions (Vygotsky, 1978), the foundation of later text comprehension. However, not all talk children hear during the foundational years translates to later reading achievement. Children must learn to navigate between two talk types: casual talk and academic talk.

The first talk type, casual talk (CT), is caregiver-child language interactions that are concrete and focused on everyday living (Halliday, 1978). Academic talk (AT) is formal language of learning used in classrooms including technical talk of abstract concepts (Schleppegrell, 2004). For example, students engage in CT when saying, “they’re making food.” Conversely, children are initiated into the world of AT when they hear a teacher ask, “Who can predict what will happen after the concrete is mixed?”, and state, more specifically, words like *predict* and *concrete*. Our role as educators is to guide children as they navigate between school and home talk, viewing home language as a compliment to AT in a term called “hybridity” (Hadley et al., 2022; van Kleeck, 2015).

While EC educators understand the importance of oral language growth, in my conversations with preservice teachers, I find little knowledge of language input via entry points referred to as talk types or registers (van Kleeck, 2015). These assumptions are supported by research about how little is known about the OL and AT training for EC

educators and how best AT practices are implemented (Barnes et al., 2020). It is important for EC educators and those preparing them to better understand integration and navigation between talk types, particularly since children enter school with varying exposure to OL.

Those who prepare future EC educators must also recognize that research on OL and AT does not always translate to classroom practice. Studies reveal a paucity of real-time minutes devoted to language instruction, thus limiting the number of academic words children hear daily (Barnes & Dickinson, 2017; Early et al., 2010; Winton & Bussey, 2005). Bratsch-Hines et al. (2019) note that students explicitly engage with OL and vocabulary activities only 9% of their school day. The National Center for Early Learning and Development indicates that students spend roughly 4% of their day completing OL activities (Winton & Bussey, 2005). These and other studies raise questions about how OL and vocabulary are enacted in classrooms and should prompt EC educators to reflect on their OL and vocabulary classroom interactions. Are we providing enough robust AT for our students? Do we audit our instruction to integrate high-leveraged language practices?

To answer these questions, we need to examine how AT and OL are enacted in EC classrooms. Studies reveal that most AT in EC settings occurs during shared-book reading, a literacy practice which promotes OL and vocabulary development (Hadley et al., 2022). However, multiple barriers are associated with actualization of OL and AT instruction, areas students clearly need adult support with. For example, limited daily shared-book reading is reported during the school day (Barnes & Dickinson, 2017; Cabell et al., 2013; Chien et al., 2010; Early et al., 2010). One might argue that AT occurs during other learning domains such as science or social studies. Yet work by

Dickinson et al. (2014) reveals literacy-focused activities outside of shared-book reading result in less AT and little vocabulary gains are noted during small group instruction (Barnes et al., 2016; Cabell et al., 2013). Additionally, EC language practices are reported to lack uniformity and generalizability across the school day (Barnes et al., 2020; Dickinson et al., 2014). If observational research is demonstrating less than optimal OL and vocabulary instruction, maybe a shift in established classroom routines and procedures is warranted.

### **Solutions**

Several tools have been forwarded as ways EC educators can support OL and vocabulary instruction. First, teachers can think strategically about their talk. One suggestion is extending teacher talk with sophisticated words (Dickinson & Porsche, 2011). For example, instead of responding, “when free play is done, it’s snack time,” teachers can respond, “after free play is concluded or finished, we will commence or begin snack time.” Other methods of supporting AT include enhancing talk interactions via high-demand questions (Butler et al., 2010; Dickenson et al., 2011) and promoting more conversational turns between teachers and students (Perry et al., 2018). Teachers can move beyond yes and no answers by prompting students with open prompt questions such as “Why is that?” or “Can you say more?” Finally, encouraging teachers to use more wait time with students is helpful (Hindman et al., 2019). Teachers privilege students who rapidly answer questions, disadvantaging those who require time to process language, particularly those learning English or those with underdeveloped language skills. Hindman and colleagues suggest allowing students closer to 2.7 seconds response time, more than double the 1.0 wait time reported.

While these suggestions are impactful, many EC educators may already employ some or parts of these practices. How then do we reinvigorate our professional learning to reengage with robust OL and AT? One emerging line of research integrates several of these practices into a unified framework of vocabulary instruction with AT. The approach, grounded in theory, pairs vocabulary instruction with exposure to orthography or word spellings (Chambrè, 2020; Colenbrander, et al., 2019; O’Leary & Ehri, 2020).

Orthography is knowledge of word spellings, including one-to-one mapping of *graphemes*, letters, to *phonemes*, sounds. Orthography serves as a mnemonic element which binds to memory pronunciation, meaning, and word spellings (Ehri, 2014). When students see spellings, their pronunciations create word-specific orthographic images with vocalization serving as the “glue” to secure orthographic images to memory.

Research suggests that integrating print exposure during vocabulary instruction enhances vocabulary learning when compared to no print exposure (Chambrè, 2017, 2020; Colenbrander, et al., 2019; O’Leary & Ehri, 2020). Showing spellings also integrates two recommendations from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP; 2009): language-focused instruction and code-focused instruction (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Effects of orthographic facilitation on vocabulary learning are beneficial for typical developing children and learners with special needs (Chambrè, 2020). By incorporating print into classroom routines, EC educators can connect the power of print to the power of AT.

#### *Classroom Suggestions*

Print is routinely embedded in EC classrooms via morning messages, classroom labels, and bulletin board displays. Although some EC educators view drawing attention to

print as developmentally inappropriate, research reveals that print exposure supports EC learners’ understanding of print (Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2004; Justice, et al., 2009). Further, young children who capitalize on orthographic exposure learn new vocabulary, since basic knowledge of letters and sounds supports mapping sounds to print (Chambrè, 2017, 2020; Cunningham, 2005; O’Leary & Ehri, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012).

Two existing classroom practices can seamlessly integrate orthography: read-alouds and daily conversations. These practices are cost-effective, utilize existing classroom materials (Justice et al., 2009) and are easily adopted after a short training period. Exposure to orthography occurs across multiple contexts and settings throughout the school day, such as read-alouds, science instruction, or mealtimes, but most critically during the reported 44% of unused instructional time (Farren et al., 2017; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2014; McGinity et al., 2011). Interleaving orthographic exposure with AT during classroom content, provides EC educators with a new means of engaging students with print, OL, and vocabulary.

#### *Read Alouds*

In EC settings, read-alouds remain the predominant form of vocabulary instruction (Cunningham, 2005; Juel, 2006). Read-alouds expose children to definitions of targeted sophisticated words found in high-quality literature. Some EC educators view read-alouds as a space for enjoying literature, not focusing on print (Justice & Ezell 2000, 2004), yet exposure to orthography, pronunciation, and meaning during read-alouds enhances vocabulary learning for young students (Silverman, 2007). Supporting vocabulary development with print during read-alouds fosters AT and benefits students’ OL development.

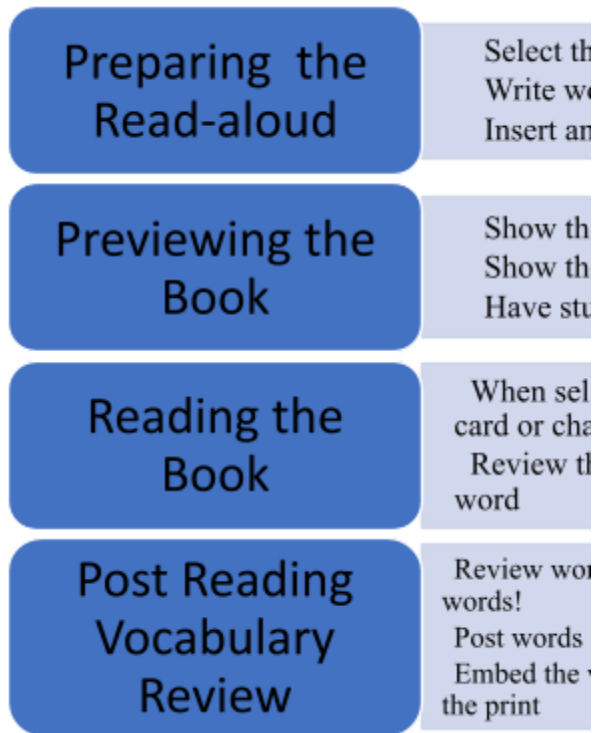


Figure 1. *Sequence for vocabulary enhanced read-aloud with print exposure*

### Practical Application

As outlined in Figure 1, EC educators should prepare read-alouds that support AT with orthographic exposure. First, select a text and specific vocabulary words. Begin by creating a list of all unknown words or phrases (see fig. 2). Choose as many as you like; you will narrow down your selection later. Next, pick three words to teach during the read-aloud. I selected *whistle*, *practice*, and *shadow* from Ezra Jack Keats' book *Whistle for Willie*. Create a word card or chart with child-friendly definitions on the back. Preparing definitions ensures that explanations are accessible, brief, and consistent, avoiding wordy inconsistent off-the-cuff definitions. You may also decide to add images to the cards or chart, an additional layer to support all learners. Finally, mark specific stopping points where words appear in the text as a reminder to reference the print and definition (see fig. 2). It is unnecessary to stop every time, rather mark specific pages.

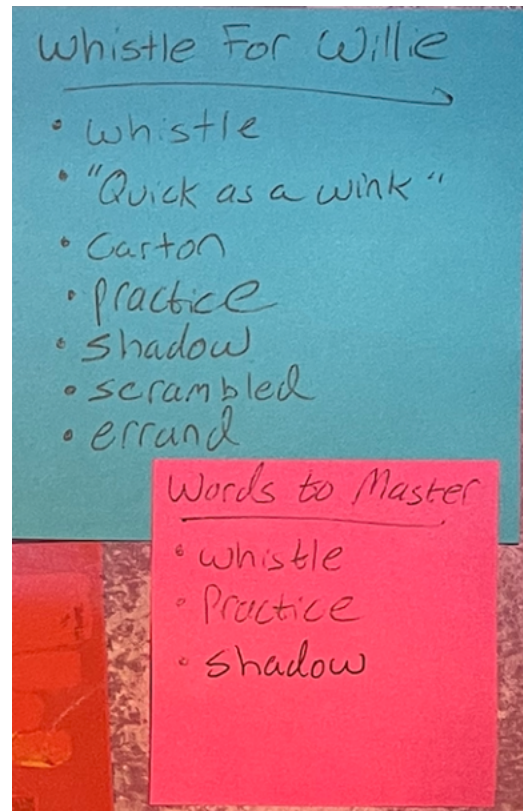


Figure 2. *Sample vocabulary selection from Whistle for Willie*

After preparing your words, preview the book using your usual classroom routines and existing teaching strategies which align with your district or school curriculum. Rather than planning specific vocabulary lessons, reinvigorate your existing practices by showing the word cards and definitions. Follow preexisting procedures closely, trying not to interrupt the flow of the read-aloud with lengthy conversations or multiple examples. Attention to print and definitions should be brief, simply pausing and pointing to the word card or chart, with students repeating and reading the word. After reading the book, include time for a final word card or chart review. Again, keep instruction as close to preexisting routines as possible. The goal is to reinvigorate your instructional practices, not develop new procedures.

#### *Daily Conversations*

The second suggestion for enhancing AT with orthographic exposure is raising one's

own word consciousness during daily conversations. Word consciousness is defined as the awareness of words and language (Graves, 2016). Word-conscious teachers foster discussions about new words, encourage students to ask questions about words, and help children delight in the nuances of language. (See table 1 for an example.)

For this suggestion, EC educators should pause and reflect about the words they use with their students. Take stock of the words you choose when teaching and begin to intentionally think about your word choice. Finally, and most critically, write words down for children to see and notice the spelling, thus reengaging your literacy and language practices in more nuanced ways. A word-conscious teacher interleaves novel words during classroom conversations and AT during all instructional blocks, especially during the 44% of unengaged classroom time!

Table 1  
Sample Print Referencing Script

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Bella: *Teacher, what is that a picture of? (points to bulletin board labelled "community helpers")*

Teacher: *Bella those are pictures of different types of community helpers.*

Teacher points to the words "community helpers."

Teacher: *"Community" is a great word to know. It means a group of people who live in the same area. We live in Springfield, and all these different people help our community.*

Teacher points to the word "community."

Bella: *Yeah, my mom works at the post office!*

Teacher: *That's right; she helps our community – the place where we live – by delivering the mail each day.*

Teacher points to the word "community."

Teacher: *Who else here knows someone who is a community helper?*

Teacher points to the word "community."

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#### *Practical Applications*

Teachers need to consciously think about writing words down for their students to see. When teaching insect body parts, jot down key terms on a dry erase board. When reviewing community types, words like

*urban, suburban, and rural* should be readily accessible via a chart or cue cards on student's tables. When students ask questions about word meanings, provide definitions *and* spellings of the new word. Table 2 provides real-world examples of

words kindergarteners heard and asked their teachers to define.

Another example of intentional word selection can occur by integrating print during morning message, a routine in which teachers provide information to students about their upcoming instructional day. The messages that greet students typically include simple sentences with factual information such as, “Good morning, Room 203. Today is Monday. It is sunny outside. We have art today.” This message outlines key events of the school day, but AT is notably absent. Teachers can reframe their morning message by using complex language, such as the following reimagined example (words italicized for emphasis). “*Greetings*, Room 203! Today is Monday. The weather is *currently* sunny. We have art *following* lunch.” Educators should be mindful to point to word spellings and draw attention to new vocabulary. By reimagining existing classroom practices, EC educators can boost vocabulary learning for all early learners by developing the habit of connecting pronunciation, meaning, and orthography. A small instructional mindset

shift can reinvigorate your AT with powerful results.

### **Conclusion**

A classroom that reconceptualizes the role of print will help facilitate OL and vocabulary learning for all students. In this classroom, teachers are mindful of their word selection, choosing to raise the level of discourse by integrating AT, not using words students already know and use. Read-alouds are carefully chosen and previewed to target high-quality AT words. Classroom discourse includes writing words for students to see. Word conscious educators also integrate open question prompts and wait time so children can describe their thinking, not simply respond yes or no. As a low-cost and easy-to-implement practices, utilizing existing storybooks and purposefully interleave attention to print with AT creates classroom conversations that actively promotes word consciousness. Pairing print with AT provides EC educators with another tool to raise literacy achievement and reengage with OL and vocabulary development for all students.



Table 2  
Example Vocabulary Teacher Interactions with Print

Content Area	Unknown Vocabulary Word	Teacher Says	Teacher Action
Math: Reviewing shapes	Parallel	“Parallel is a math word that means when two lines are drawn next to each other but never touch. They can be drawn for miles and miles, but will never touch. In this square we have two sets of parallel lines, across from each other on both sides.”	Points to sets of parallel lines on square projected on Smartboard. Labels both sets with different colored markers and writes the word “parallel.” Draws and extends two parallel lines with a yard stick. Students repeat word.
English Language Arts: Phonics lesson	Nasal	“Nasal is something that is related to your nose. Nasal sounds are sounds that change because of air moving through your nose.”	Points to image of a nose on word wall. Writes word “nasal” next to image. Models for students how to hold their nose while saying the sounds /m/ and /n/.
School Announcement: Teacher schedule changes	Daily Sporadic	“Sporadic means when something is <i>supposed</i> to happen regularly, but there is a change, and it happens irregularly. So, we have every Thursday at 10:30, but if every once and awhile, we have art at 9:30, that is sporadic.”	Following announcement, teacher pauses morning class work. On an index card, write the word “sporadic.” Moves Art to daily classroom schedule pocket chart. Selects one content card, i.e., Art, and moves Art card to different times in the school day. Hold word “sporadic” next to Art card.

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\*Denotes children's literature.

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