



## FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

### Teaching New Words: Embedding Vocabulary Instruction in Storybooks

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## QUESTIONS FROM MAY 21ST FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

**Q: How should we talk to infants and toddlers? Should we be using larger vocabulary words? What are your suggestions?**

A: You want to teach words that are developmentally appropriate, especially for kids who don't have a very large vocabulary. You probably are going to be teaching those more basic words, like maybe Tier 1 words. I think it's best to use Tier 1 words for preschoolers, and maybe Tier 2 words for toddlers.

You want to make sure you're using rich language, but not making it so complicated that they don't understand. If they don't have a very large vocabulary, you'll learn very quickly it's difficult to come up with definitions for those words.

**Q: What's your sense of how many words per week you would teach in a Head Start classroom? Is there a certain number that you've found to be more effective, and a number that seems to be too many?**

A: I think anywhere between two and four challenging, Tier 2 words — "protect," "enormous," "speedy" — per week. One thing we've done is pick a couple of challenging words, then a couple words that are a little easier. So maybe we'd use "enormous" and "protect," then two words that are a little easier, like "tallest" and "shortest," or other concept words. You can do explicit instruction with a handful of words. When we've tried to increase that to more words, we find that our kids get a little mixed up. They'll give the same definition for a couple of words or get the meanings confused. We usually try to read the same storybook two or three times, so that kids have opportunities to practice those words. We see them improving across readings.

We're talking right now about embedding this within storybook reading, but there may be other opportunities during the day to teach vocabulary, as well.

**Q: Regarding reading the same story more than once, would you say maybe you pick a book for each week, then identify some of the Tier 2 vocabulary words and really focus on them and that story for the week? Does that seem right?**

A: The first time they hear the story with our little embedded lessons, they may not respond completely or at all. But by the second time, they're getting the hang of it. By the third time, they're pretty fluent at producing the definitions and coming up with the words. Beyond that, we start to see the kids getting kind of bored.

Three seems to be a good number. If we have some students who need a little additional practice, we might form a small, additional group and read the story another time to that group. Then you can prompt them a bit more for those responses.

**Q: So what about ways that you've done home-school connections with this? Is there anything that you've done to extend to parents or families?**

A: Well, we've tried a few things, but this is an area that we need a little more work in, for sure. We've made little take-home books that include the page from the story where we taught that word. So for example, I have a picture from *Corduroy* for "searching." We type a sentence like "Corduroy is searching for his button," with some prompts to talk about that word. And we've sent those books home with kids. We've also seen teachers use these in newsletters or something that they're sending home to parents. They say, "These are the words we're talking about this week." The little take-home books are nice because we can practice with the kids. Then they can take them home, and maybe they can engage their parents — saying, you know, let me show you what I brought home.

**Q: Have you developed a list of books that you find offer more Tier 2 words, or is there another resource you could tell us about?**

A: We don't have official lists that we work from. We formed a list for this webinar by reviewing widely available curricula and noting which books show up often in those curricula.

Oftentimes, teachers get a pretty good idea of the books that kids like, because they request that the teachers read them over and over again. But it may, you know, differ in different regions of the country, in different populations and samples, and so forth.

**Q: Okay, do you do something different when you have dual language learners among your students?**

A: You might still have the words that you're planning to teach to the whole group. But for the children that you know have really limited language, you'll pick some additional, maybe more appropriate, targets for them to learn as well. For instance, concept words — you know, tall, short, above, below, first, last — are really useful and are going to show up again in the classroom. Looking at some of those lists of concept words might be a way to identify additional targets for some of the kids that you work with who have limited language.

If children have very rudimentary English proficiency, then what we would think of as Tier 1 words would be very appropriate for them.

Also, when we think about how we might modify the instruction, we can consider ways to give the kids additional practice opportunities. Some of the teachers that we've worked with meet with the small groups first — with the kids with the limited language — then they meet with the large group. This gives those students an opportunity to be successful when they do the large-group reading. You might also think about ways that the students can give nonverbal responses. For instance, they can point to the image that's "enormous," or show the ship on a certain page and tell if the ship is under or over the bridge. Keep to brief, engaging lessons, but change the expected response to something more appropriate to what those kids can do.

I think it goes back to our idea of taking advantage of your students' differences. We find that a lot of English-language learners are little sponges; they're ready to learn a lot of language. So, simply including them in the large-group story reading where they hear this rich instruction is going to be beneficial to them.

**Q: If you are going to identify words in a story, is it helpful or suggested that you teach those before you even read the story? Or do you recommend embedding mini-lessons in the context of the story?**

A: I think you could go either way. We have found it helpful to draw attention in advance to words that the kids will learn. Some of the research studies I've read talk about magic words, about identifying the magic words for each day. We might say, "We're going to learn some new words today. One of the words is 'enormous.' Say 'enormous.' Another of the words is 'different.' Say 'different.'" If you give the definition without a context, it's tough for kids to hold onto that information until later in the story. But saying, "Hey, there are going to be some new words, so pay attention," is probably a good idea.

**Q: So, if you introduce the word “search” or “searching,” would you also introduce “searches” or other versions of the word?**

A: Especially with verbs, we use different forms of the word so that they learn about how grammar and syntax work. And it helps distinguish, you know, verbs versus nouns and things like that. So we definitely use some variation of the various target words.

**Q: What if you’re working with teachers who might struggle with words themselves?**

A: Having a plan for instruction, and having those activity notes already scripted out, will help. As in, “The word we’re going to teach is this word; the definition we’re going to teach is this definition; here’s what you’re going to do.” I think you could also try having scripts. You know, “This is what you’re (the teacher) going to read and say during this activity.”

**Q: Why should vocabulary instruction be explicit? Why can’t we just let children play and engage in conversations, and wait till a new word comes up or there’s an opportunity to explain? Why do we need to be so explicit about vocabulary instruction, especially with our Head Start populations?**

A: All those things that you just described — letting children have conversations and talking to them about words and providing rich language — are really important pieces of high-quality early childhood experiences. But we’re talking about doing explicit instruction in addition to that. One of the reasons that this is important — particularly for children who have limited vocabulary — is that we need to build really strong vocabulary for them so that they’re ready for academic skills and reading comprehension. The incidental exposure that you’re talking about, of using rich language around the kids, is unlikely to be sufficient to get children to the place they need to be in terms of strong vocabularies. Taking the time to teach words will increase their vocabularies.

Let’s say that there are benefits for the teachers and the children. Ordinarily, there isn’t very much vocabulary instruction occurring in preschool classrooms. So unless you plan for it, it’s not likely to happen. What we know about children is that the haphazard opportunities for learning and learning from context are not very efficient. Typically, we’re focusing on children who are much more limited in their vocabulary development, so doing explicit instruction is a way to try to catch them up. The children are not going to learn all the words, but this gives them a better opportunity to expand their vocabulary repertoire.

## QUESTIONS ANSWERED OUTSIDE OF THE WEBINAR

**Q: How do you involve parents or caregivers in this method if they too have limited vocabulary?**

A: To include parents or caregivers with limited vocabulary, you might choose to provide take-home materials that highlight the words and the child-friendly definitions taught. We have provided simple books with the word and definition printed on a copy of a page of the story. It might also be possible to include the child in the activity. For example, the child could share a picture he has drawn of something “enormous” with the word and definition included on the page.

**Q: How many words per week would you explicitly teach per week in a Head Start classroom? Is 20 words per week too many? How do you decide how many is appropriate to teach?**

A: For the embedded lessons in storybooks, we have found that 2-4 challenging vocabulary words are an appropriate number to target within a storybook. For vocabulary instruction across the school day, you should choose to target many more words. For example, in the World of Words supplemental curriculum (Neuman, Dwyer, Koh, & Wright, 2007), about 20 vocabulary words are taught in an eight-day unit. It can be very difficult to decide how many words to teach, and it is likely that there is no “right” number. Teachers will need to consider the needs and abilities of their students. It may be best to provide instruction on a variety of types of words. For example, teach a few challenging vocabulary words (e.g., enormous, protect), some basic concept words (e.g., tallest, shortest), and some more common nouns, verbs, and adjectives (e.g., jungle, skip, sweet).

**Q: How long could you teach from the same book? Is a month too long?**

A: For the purpose of embedded vocabulary instruction, we would recommend using a book for perhaps a week. In our experience, children generally maintain interest in a story for about three repeated readings. It might make sense to review a book and the vocabulary words taught within the month to promote learning. It seems that it would be difficult to maintain children’s interest in a story for an entire month or to identify enough appropriate words to teach to meet the goal of several words per week.

**Q: Has there been any research on using this method to teach foreign languages?**

A: We are not aware of any work that has examined explicit, embedded vocabulary instruction to teach foreign languages.

**Q: Do you recommend discussing the new vocabulary before you read the book so as not to interrupt the flow of the story — or waiting until you read the new word in the book and then stopping to discuss it?**

A: We embed our vocabulary lessons in the story so that we can use the context of the story and the illustrations to help teach the word. These brief lessons interrupt the story only for a minute or two. You might choose to introduce the words briefly before you read the book. For example, Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007) introduced and had children repeat words prior to the book, then asked children to raise their hands when a “magic word” was heard in the story. Or, you might choose to teach the words after the story is over. For example, Beck and McKeown (2007) provided instruction on vocabulary words immediately after finishing a story. To begin the lesson, children were reminded of the word’s use in the story.

**Q: Can you describe how the assessment strategies you described would inform instruction? Would it be appropriate to assess word knowledge based on whether or not students use the new words in their everyday vocabulary?**

A: We use the assessment strategies described to inform our selection of instructional targets and the design of our embedded lessons. We keep track of how many children learn each word and how children respond to questions, then use that information to tell us if words are too hard, too easy, or if we need to change a lesson. For example, in one study, many children learned the word “speedy,” but very few learned the word “unusual.” We looked at the children’s responses and decided that “unusual” was too difficult.

If children use the new words in their vocabulary, that would be an excellent indication that our instruction was successful. However, we have found that the words we teach rarely show up in spontaneous speech unless we provide specific opportunities for children to use the words. For example, we have asked children to retell the story and have prompted them to use the word. You might ask, “What is another word for big?”

**Q: I was recently told that I speak to an infant in my class with words that may be too much for her to grasp right now. Thus, I was instructed to communicate with the infant by using repeated sounds such as ba-ba, da-da, ma-ma, moo-moo, etc. Is this recommended, as opposed to talking to infants with fully-pronounced words in vocabulary building?**

A: It is appropriate to use words with infants. Infants are able to learn from language that includes whole words. You may choose to simplify your language when you speak with infants. For example, rather than a long sentence like “Next, we are going to sit down at the table and eat our snack,” you might say “time for snack”.

**Q: How should a teacher modify their approach to the number of words to learn per week with a 2-year-old or 3-year-old classroom?**

A: In a classroom with younger children, the number of words taught may not need to be modified — but instead, the difficulty of the words taught may be changed. The tiered approach recommended by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) can be applied to younger children. Tier 1 words might be the simple words that many 2- and 3-year olds already know. Tier 2 words might be more challenging words that are used frequently in the classroom. For example, words like “jump”, “under”, “paint,” and “ears” might be appropriate words for instruction for younger children.

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