

Embedding Vocabulary Instruction in Storybooks

Front Porch Series Broadcast Calls

Beth Spencer: Hello. My name's Beth Spencer, and we're going to be talking today about embedding vocabulary instruction in storybooks. Here's a quick outline of our presentation today. In the first part, I'm just going to do a brief review of the evidence base for explicit vocabulary instruction, we're going to talk about why we do explicit vocabulary instruction, we're going to talk about how we might select vocabulary targets, and then talk a little bit about the way we would design instruction. So, this is going to be what the evidence has told us about good vocabulary instruction.

And then in the second section, we're going to talk about how we might apply that evidence-based practice. So the first step will be picking the words we want to teach; the second step will be designing our explicit instruction; and then we'll talk about how we might make a plan to assess what kids have learned as a result of our instruction.

I just want to draw your attention to an article here. This is an article that we published recently in the journal "Young Exceptional Children." There's a lot of overlap in the content of this presentation and this article. This is what we based our presentation on. So if this is a topic that interests you, there's some additional information in the article.

So, our first section is a review of the evidence base for explicit vocabulary instruction. So, what do we know about vocabulary instruction? We know that – that vocabulary is very important. There's a strong body of evidence that tells us that vocabulary really matters. It matters for children in their everyday communication with peers, with teachers. We also know that vocabulary is an important skill for later academic achievement. And particularly, vocabulary is a strong predictor of later reader – reading comprehension skills, so kids who have strong vocabulary tend to be really good at understanding what they read.

We also know that children who have limited vocabulary are at great risk for later reading disabilities; so children who have limited vocabulary in preschool and kindergarten are likely to have difficulty when it comes time to learn to read in later grades. One population that might be – you might be particularly concerned about are children who come from families with low socioeconomic status. As a group, these children tend to have more limited vocabularies than peers with middle and high SES. We'll also be concerned about the children we work with who have primary and secondary language impairments.

So, the good news: We know from the evidence base that we can teach vocabulary, and there's a lot of evidence out there that can guide us in how we can do effective vocabulary instruction. We know that this vocabulary instruction needs to be explicit. We know that we need to be careful in the way that we select our vocabulary targets. We also need to be intentional in the design of our vocabulary instruction. Also, effective instruction is linked to assessment. We need some measures that tell us what kids know about what we've been teaching them.

For preschool children and young children, shared storybook reading is an excellent context for embedded instruction. So when we talk about instruction being explicit, we know that children can learn a lot of words without those words being explicitly taught. They can learn a lot of words through exposure. But what we know for a lot of words – for a lot of children, they learn more word and more about those words when teaching is explicit. So when a teacher takes the time to do some intentional teaching about a word – give a definition, explain the context – children are more likely to learn about what that word means.

We also know that we need to be careful in the selection of our vocabulary targets. And in the article and in this presentation, we draw on a framework provided by Isabel Beck and her colleagues. She talks about a model of robust vocabulary instruction that categorizes words – categorizes words into three tiers. So at the bottom tier, there in the red box, we have words that are pretty common words: table, barn, run. These are words that are likely to show up very often in the preschool child's environment. They're probably words that children can learn without a lot of explicit instruction.

Up at the top, at Tier 3 in the blue box, you see some really rare words: peninsula, evaporation. Those are words that are unlikely to show up very frequently in the child's environment, and they might be tied to a particular topic – a science lesson.

And there in the green box, we have these Tier 2 words. These are challenging vocabulary words. They're words that are likely to show up – show up in the child's environment, and they'll have opportunities to use them. You can see some examples there: speedy, protect, enormous, wise. Beck and her colleagues make the case that these words are the best candidates for explicit vocabulary instruction because they're words that will be useful to children in their environment and they're also words that are linked to that later academic goal of reading comprehension. These are words that are likely to show up in the texts that children read when they get older. The challenge is here – there's a lot of Tier 2 words, and teachers will need to pick the best words within that broad category of Tier 2 words to pick the words that they want to teach.

Another thing the evidence base has led us to is that effective vocabulary instruction needs to be intentionally designed. It's really tricky to do good, explicit vocabulary instruction without planning in advance. We know that we want to teach for deep understanding so that children know a lot about a word. We know that for little kids – in particular, preschoolers – we need to give them opportunities for active responding. That needs to be a component of our instruction. We want to make sure that we give repeated exposure so that they hear the words and have these lessons more than once, and that they have opportunities to practice those words and opportunities to use those words.

And the last piece here is that effective instruction needs to be linked to assessment. So, we need some measures that tell us about whether or not children are learning from our instruction so that we can modify our instruction to be more effective.

And what seems to be the best approach here is measures that are sensitive to the vocabulary words taught. So if I teach you some of those Tier 2 words, like "enormous" and "protect," then what we want to assess is what you know about those words. Okay, so that was our quick review of what the evidence base has told us, how it can guide us in our explicit vocabulary instruction.

So in this next section here, we're going to talk about how we can apply that evidence base to practice. So, the first step is that we need to pick out the words we want to teach. And as I mentioned, we're going to talk about ways that you'll pick out words in storybooks. Preschool storybooks have lots of great words in them, but it's a challenge to, you know, narrow that down to some of those Tier 2 words that we want to focus our explicit instruction on. Explicit instruction is likely to take time. If you're going to teach a word in a story, you need to interrupt the story, provide some information, and then get back to the story, all while fitting that into the preschooler's attention span.

So, we want to apply some really specific criteria to the words that we teach so we can be sure we're getting the most out of that instructional time. So the first suggestion we're going to make here is that you pick new words. So, choose words that are unfamiliar to children. You want to pick some words that will increase the size of their vocabulary. I think that seems a little common sense, but for us, it's a good place to start. We want to pick some words that our kids don't know yet.

The next criteria we can apply to picking words is thinking about words that are likely to be useful. A word might be useful in a particular story. So, for example, we use a storybook that's about a porcupine and his quills protect him, so the word "protect" is a really great word for that story. It ties into the story events; and if you don't understand what "protect" means, it's really tough to understand the story. So, that's an example of a word that's likely to be useful in a particular story. "Protect" is also useful in other ways, too.

We can think about words that are useful in other classroom contexts. So if we're doing some social-emotional goals in our classroom, so if we're working on feeling words, there might be a great book about being disappointed; so teaching "disappointed" will be a good word that will be useful in other classroom contexts. You might also think about words that are useful for academic goals. So how might the words that we target in our explicit vocabulary instruction tie into other academic goals that we have for our children?

So the third piece here, when we're selecting the words, is to think about words that you can teach well. So sometimes I can think of a word that will be new to children and that's likely to be pretty useful to them, but when it comes time for me to think about how I'm going to teach it, it's difficult for me to think of ways that I can teach this word really effectively. So, one way you can judge whether or not a word's going to be easy to teach is thinking about whether or not you can define it with a simple definition. So, one of the words we teach is "enormous." I can think of some child-friendly definitions for that: really big. They already know the word "big," so it's going to be easy for me to define. In contrast, I've tried to teach the word "embarrassed" before. Well, coming up for a child-friendly, simple definition

for embarrassed is pretty tough. So, "to feel bad about something you did" is a pretty long definition; that might not be a word that I can teach really well.

You also want to think about whether or not the words that you're picking have lots of child-friendly examples. So for "protect," I can think of lots of preschool examples. Your mom might hold your hand when you cross the street to protect you. You wear a seat belt to protect you. Here's a bunch of examples that the children will be able to relate to. You also might pick a word that has a story context that gives a lot of information about the word. So, maybe that word shows up several times in the story; maybe it's tied to a key story event. You might also, using your storybooks, find words that have illustrations that give a lot of information about them. So sometimes we teach the word "accident," and we have a storybook that has lots of great illustrations of accidents – somebody accidentally breaking something, that sort of thing.

So when we start picking words, we're going to look for new words, words that we think will be useful, and then words that you think you can teach well; and here's a quick example where you can put some of those steps into action. On the next slide, I'm going to show you an excerpt from the storybook "Corduroy," and I'm just going to give you a couple minutes to make a quick list of some of the words that you think will be unfamiliar to your students. So thinking about the students that you work with, just scan through here and see if there's some words that pop out that you think will be new words. I'm just going to take a minute here.

Okay, that probably wasn't enough time for you to scan that whole piece, but I bet you found a couple in there, and I'll take you through a couple of the ones that I found. So when we think about the preschoolers that we work with, I was able, in just that short passage, to find all these words that I think would be new words, which they wouldn't know: evening, accident, palace, searching, toppled, mattress. Those might all be words that are new to preschoolers – unfamiliar. And then as we go through our criteria, we want to now think about words that will be useful to preschool children and then words that we can teach well.

So from that list of words that I found that I think will be unfamiliar, first I went through and circled the words that I thought would be most useful. So, "carefully" – I think that'd be a really useful word. It's a word I probably use a lot with preschoolers, and I'm not sure they know what I mean when I say, "Careful," "Be careful," "Do that carefully," but I can think of lots of classroom contexts where that would be useful. I didn't circle "palace." I don't think that that's a word that is as useful as some of these other words. I can't think of times that it would be – show up in the classroom as often as words like "carefully," "searching," "toppled."

And then, I underlined the words that I thought that I could teach well. "Searching" – I can think of a child-friendly definition for that: to look for something, or just to look for something – just to look for. I can also think of child-friendly examples. Think about all the times you're searching for something in the classroom or they're searching for their shoes before they go outside to play. So, of this list of words,

I've been able to whittle it down here to two words that I think would be the most useful and that I could do the best teaching of.

So, that's just a quick example of the steps that you might go through to pick out the words that you want to teach, and then the next step is to decide how you're going to teach those words. So, I'm just going to take you briefly through a way that you could design this explicit instruction to be embedded in storybooks. So, we want to design brief, engaging, embedded lessons. So when you're thinking about your storybook reading, again, I mentioned you're going to need to interrupt the story to teach this word. You want the interruption to be brief so that you can get back to the story so that it doesn't interrupt the flow of the story too much.

You also want these activities to be very engaging. For our preschool children, this means we give them opportunities to respond. Sometimes we give them an opportunity to do something – make a gesture, make a face, something like that – and then we want to make sure that we use really consistent, instructional language. And one of the advantages we've found to using this consistent, instructional language is that the children we work with come to expect that language. They know what it – what the language is going to be like when they're taught a new word. In that instructional language, you provide information about the word's meaning and use. So, we'll give an explicit definition: "Enormous" means really big. We'll give the children opportunities to say the word, whether it's just repeating it or in response to the question, giving them opportunities to say the definition.

We also make a connection between the word and children's everyday experiences. And this last piece is really important, so we try to give a couple of contexts for a word that could happen in that child's life. And I think one of the real advantages here is you're giving them contexts for a word so that that word makes sense to them, but you're also showing them that this is a word that they can use. There will be an opportunity to use "enormous." When you're in the block center and you build the big tower, you can say "enormous" to describe that tower.

Another piece of designing explicit instruction is making a plan for practice opportunities. So, maybe a brief review of some of the words that you taught at the end of the story – when you're done reading the story. Also, providing some opportunities in other classroom activities to use the word and practice with the definition.

So, these are some – this is a framework that we use to design our explicit instructions. These are the components that exist in each of our embedded lessons. So, we connect the vocabulary word to the context of story, give them opportunities to say the word, make those connections. We also have some sort of an activity – something for them to do – and then we ask children to provide the definition of a word as part of this, and then model that definition for them.

This is some sample instruction here that includes all those components. And just at first glance, I think you can see how often the target word "thrill" shows up, so there's lots of opportunities to say it. "Yes, I'm thrilled. Say 'thrilled.'" Give them an opportunity. We tell them the definition. We give them some

contexts for the – that connect to their life. "So, when are you thrilled? What about when your friends come over to play?" And in this example, I used a picture that's not from the story; it's just another photo that gives a context. I think every preschool children has been thrilled about a party. And you can see at the end, we ask children to give us the definition. "So, what does thrilled mean?" So, that's just an example of how brief these embedded lessons might be. But all the spaces there – you can see there's lots of opportunities for children to respond and engage during that embedded lesson.

So, another component of our instruction will be some sort of review and practice. One opportunity will be just right after the story we've read. So, "I'm thinking about one of our new words." Give a reminder of what that word is, a reminder of the definition, giving children some opportunities to respond. Sometimes you can use the story context. So, "Remember in the story..." and give an example. You also want to give some opportunities to use and demonstrate knowledge of the word in other contexts. So here we've given an example where you could ask children to tell you some things that they think of that are enormous, or giving them some non-examples. "What about a mouse? No, a mouse is not enormous." So, those non-examples are really useful to children as they figure out what these words mean.

And then, thinking about some examples for some practice opportunities in classroom routines. So for kids to really develop that depth of knowledge of words, we want to give them the lessons in the story, opportunities to review, and then also opportunities to practice across the school day. Ideally, we'd think of some opportunities for them to practice at home with their parents. So, thinking about some classroom activities, I think I already mentioned using the block center to build an enormous tower, sorting pictures of things that are enormous and things that are small. It's also going to be important for us to make a plan to prompt children to use these words. So when we taught the word "enormous," a lot of times kids just still say "big," so you might need to prompt them. Just say, "Can you tell me another word that means really big?" so that that new word becomes part of their expressive vocabulary.

This is a sample lesson for one of those words I picked from "Corduroy." So, the word I picked was "search;" the definition would be "to look for;" and then this is an example of just the kind of notes that a teacher might make to have with her as she's reading her story so she remembers to do that embedded lesson and has a plan for what that embedded lesson will include. I found these big Post-it notes that sometimes you can just stick on the back of the storybook, and then you have it handy so you have these notes for yourself when you get to this spot of the book. This is a picture of the page on which I might teach "search." You can see that Corduroy is kind of looking for something, so there's a picture that would give some information about what the word means.

Okay, so our third piece here is to make a plan for assessment. So, we want to have some measures that help inform our instruction. That means that the measurement needs to be closely aligned with instruction. One type of assessment might just be observations of child responses during instruction. So when you give them an example, when you give them an opportunity to respond, how many of the kids

are responding? How many of them are responding correctly? So if you say at the end of your embedded lesson, "What does enormous mean?" how many of them are able to give you the definition?

You might also choose to include some brief individual assessments to directly assess – assess children. When you're doing those large group assessments, it can be hard to tell how many of those kids were getting it right and how many of them were imitating their friends. So, doing a brief individual assessment in which you ask children to give a definition of the word, maybe to answer some questions that relate to the word, and also think about some receptive tasks. Providing a definition of a word is a very challenging task for a preschooler; but in our work, we've discovered that you can get a child to the point where they know enough about the word to be able to give you a definition, and that's a really strong indication that they know a lot about what that word means.

Here's some quick examples of some of the questions you might use to measure vocabulary knowledge. So rather than the straight definition, you might give a choice of two: "Does enormous mean really cold or really big?" Sometimes we find that children seem to know something about a word, but they're not quite ready to give us that definition. So, giving them an opportunity to show us with a gesture: "Show me with your arms what enormous means. Give me an example of something that's enormous." Or this choice of two examples: "Which is enormous, a mouse or an elephant?" You could also include some receptive tasks; so, "Point to the picture of the one that's enormous." So for children who maybe have more limited language and aren't ready to give those expressive answers, they might be ready to do a receptive task like this.

So we're wrapping up here, but I just have four quick tips for practice. So, our first tip is to plan ahead. So I've tried to do embedded instruction where I don't make a plan, and it's really hard. It's hard to pick the words; it's hard to plan the instruction. So, our – one of our big tips here is to plan ahead. Read the book before you read it. Pick out the words you want to teach. Make some notes on what the definitions will be that you teach and some of the ways you're going to teach the words. Thinking in advance on what those specific – what the specific components of your instruction will be will make your instruction much more effective.

Another tip for practice is: Get active. Give your students lots of chances to respond and participate. So when we plan activities that are quick and fast-paced, we're much more able to keep kids interested. We also have our students answer as a group. So rather than calling on an individual child, we ask them to do choral responding, so that means that everyone gets a turn. And if you've got some students who need some extra practice, finding some time to call on them again to give them another opportunity.

Another tip for practice here is to be flexible, which is something I'm sure is familiar to anybody who works with young children. When you're doing these embedded vocabulary lessons, find ways to take advantage of how different your students are. So when you teach words that are really easy for some of the kids in your class – if you have kids who have really strong vocabulary, even if you're teaching a word that's easy for them and they already know, they have a chance to be successful. All of your students

can benefit from hearing these explanations about challenging vocabulary words, from participating as a group, from listening to the story.

And the last tip for practice we included here is: Try again. So, we've been working on designing these embedded lessons for three years now. So I have to tell myself often, it's okay if some of what you planned just doesn't work. Whittling down to what are really good words and what's really good instruction is going to take a couple different tries. So, try something different the next time and figure out what works best for your students.