DEVELOPING VOCABULARY THROUGH PURPOSEFUL, STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS

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Talking with children and purposefully integrating new words in daily conversations can help build children's vocabulary. Suggestions for incorporating vocabulary from read-alouds throughout daily activities are presented.

Vocabulary development plays a critical role in young children's learning to read and, as a result, their overall success in school (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, vocabulary remains one of the most difficult skills to teach (Dickinson, Freiberg, & Barnes, 2011; Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). Research suggests that providing opportunities for children to talk and use language in meaningful contexts can promote vocabulary development in preschoolers (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek, 2010). Although promoting conversations in classrooms can increase children's use of language, we suggest that to develop children's vocabulary, teachers need to engage children in purposeful, strategic conversations that focus on the explicit development of vocabulary words and help children

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construct the meaning of words through multiple activities and experiences.

Purposeful, strategic conversations are very different from the majority of conversations that adults have with children. As we discuss in this article, although all opportunities for conversations with children have value, purposeful, strategic conversations can be designed to explicitly develop children's understanding and use of vocabulary to develop young children's word knowledge.

This article begins with a brief review of the research on the important role that vocabulary development plays in young children's learning and a discussion of the nature of vocabulary instruction in preschool programs. Then, a description of the distinction between conversations versus purposeful, strategic conversations will be presented, along with specific examples to clarify the differences. Finally, opportunities to implement purposeful, strategic conversations during specific classroom activities such as book reading are discussed.

The Importance of Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development is one of the most important skills young children

Pause and Ponder

- Who is doing the talking in your classroom?

- How do you keep vocabulary from read-alouds as part of your daily conversations and activities?

- How much wait time do you give children to respond?

need to acquire to be successful in learning to read and in school. In most cases, young children acquire well-developed vocabulary from experiences with linguistically competent adults who scaffold children's language using rich and varied language. Specifically, research has also shown that the preschool years are a critical time for oral language and vocabulary development.

A recent meta-analysis found a high correlation between preschool language skills and reading competence at the end of first and second grade (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2009). Other studies have shown that language in the preschool years predicts reading in the later elementary grades (e.g., fourth grade) and middle school (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994). Moreover, early vocabulary and later reading fluency are both centrally implicated in children's math and science performance (Hindman, Skibbe, Miller, & Zimmerman, 2010;

Lopez, Gallimore, Garnier, & Reese, 2007).

The problem still remains that many children do not have access to linguistically rich experiences that promote vocabulary development. This is especially true for our most vulnerable children living in poverty. Hart and Risely's (1995) seminal work underscored that many households in poverty expose children to a limited number of vocabulary words and conversations that allow them to use the language that they hear. They found that middle-class families engaged in about five times as many conversations with their children and used more extensive vocabulary in these conversations compared with experiences in high-poverty homes.
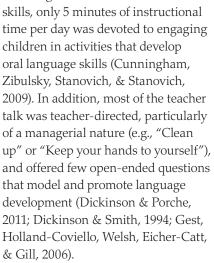
As a result, the middle-class children were adding to their vocabularies at a higher rate than children from high-poverty homes. Studies of nationally representative data sets such as Family and Children Experiences Study and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten also show that children in poverty enter preschool and kindergarten with language and

vocabulary skills nearly a full standard deviation below the national average, placing them at a high risk for academic difficulty or even failure (Administration for Children and Families, 2011; Lee & Burkam, 2002).

The hope that preschool experiences will compensate for the lack of rich home language experiences is not unrealistic; however, current practices do not appear to be designed to foster exposure to rich vocabulary. In a recent review of preschool curricula, Neuman and Dwyer (2009) concluded that vocabulary instruction was virtually nonexistent and that "strategies that introduce young children to new words and entice them to engage in meaningful contexts through semantically related activities are much needed" (p. 384).

Similarly, descriptive classroom studies show that teachers do much of the talking in preschool classrooms with little opportunities for children to engage in meaningful dialogue. Dickinson and colleagues (Dickinson et al., 2011; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Dickinson, Watson, & Farran, 2008) observed early childhood classrooms to determine the amount of teacher and child talk. Their findings indicate that teachers produced, on average, 80% of all of the talking across various activities, including book reading. Of the limited amount of talk that children produced, less than 2% constituted children expressing their ideas.

Similarly, observations of kindergarten and first-grade classrooms during literacy instruction found that although 60 minutes was spent engaging children in activities that promote decoding skills, only 5 minutes of instructional time per day was devoted to engaging children in activities that develop oral language skills (Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2009). In addition, most of the teacher talk was teacher-directed, particularly of a managerial nature (e.g., "Clean up" or "Keep your hands to yourself"), and offered few open-ended questions that model and promote language development (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Gest, Holland-Coviello, Welsh, Eicher-Catt, & Gill, 2006).

Research has also shown that early childhood teachers spend an average of only five minutes per day explicitly developing oral language and vocabulary skills (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller, 2001; Cunningham et al., 2009; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003). This leaves little opportunity to engage children in conversations that can promote vocabulary development.

The fact that low-income children tend to have limited exposure to vocabulary-enhancing activities at home or in educational settings has led a number of researchers to develop various kinds of home-based or center-based interventions. Unfortunately, meta-analyses of the results of such interventions suggest that it has *not* been easy to increase the size of low-income children's vocabulary.

For example, the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research (PCER) evaluation examined 11 curricula that focused on language development and found that only one of these programs yielded significant gains for language and reading readiness skills in randomized controlled trials (PCER, 2008). Similarly, reviews of other large-scale interventions funded by programs such as Early Reading First, Head Start, and NELP concluded that most of these interventions also have not had much success in improving children's vocabulary (Jackson et al., 2007; NELP, 2009; Zill & Resnick, 2006).

These null effects likely reflect the fact that (as noted earlier) vocabulary learning is not generally automatic, but rather requires more than increasing the

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talking in classrooms through everyday conversations. Instead, what is required is a carefully prepared environment and strategic instruction that early childhood teachers do not often provide.

What We Know About Developing Vocabulary

The research on vocabulary development provides helpful insight into how young children learn words (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). First, research on vocabulary development suggests that with relatively rare exception, children need repeated, meaningful exposures to words to learn them (Biemeller & Boote, 2006; Hoff, 2003). However, simply hearing new words over and over—like repeating words in isolation in lists—is not likely to be sufficient, as certain contexts for exposure are optimally effective.

Children need to have opportunities to hear words several times in meaningful context so they can begin to solidify the association between a word and its meaning and how the word can be used in communicating with others. That is, children need to be able to relate unfamiliar words to what they already

know to construct the meaning of a word and be able to use the word in a meaningful way.

Second, children are more likely to learn unfamiliar words if they are embedded in the context of more familiar words, making the unfamiliar word more salient to them (Dickinson, Flushman, & Freiberg, 2009; Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Huttenlocher et al., 1991; Pan et al., 2005). It is difficult for children to learn new words if the majority of the words they hear are unfamiliar to them. For example, children are more likely to learn the new word *hippopotamus* if it is presented in the context of more familiar words such as *horse*, *dog*, and *sheep* (Huttenlocher et al., 2002).

Third, children learn vocabulary best from conversations with adults, who encourage them to talk and then

provide meaningful feedback on their remarks that scaffolds linguistic and cognitive development (Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006; Landry et al., 2009). For example, in a longitudinal study examining teacher–child conversations, high-quality conversations during free play and book reading were linked to gains in children's language production and comprehension (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Fourth, children learn vocabulary best when words are presented in a meaningful context or theme (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011; Neuman & Dywer, 2009). This finding is consistent with memory research suggesting that information is best learned when integrated around a story or concept, as opposed to delivered as a set of isolated facts (Bransford & Johnson, 1972).

For example, Christie and Roskos (2006) found that children better recalled and used vocabulary related to building materials (e.g., *hammer*, *hard hat*, *tool belt*) when they were presented in the context of a theme on building, rather than when they were presented in isolation. Similarly, Wasik and Bond (2001) found that when preschool teachers presented vocabulary in the context of a theme, highlighting words in storybooks and then in a variety of theme-related learning activities, children were more likely to learn the vocabulary.

Fifth, explicit definitions of words can increase vocabulary learning (Biemiller, 2006; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Weizman

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& Snow, 2001), especially for children with weaker language skills (Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002). These might include explanations of the function of an object (Booth, 2009), as well as pictures and props (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010; Wasik & Bond, 2001). However, explicit definitions need to be provided more than once to build children's word knowledge.

In sum, children learn vocabulary through multiple, meaningful exposures to words, nested within meaningful and integrative contexts, supported by high-quality definitions, and embedded within rich linguistic interactions with adults. How then can this information be translated into effective classroom instruction that can build children's vocabulary skills?

Using Conversations to Develop Vocabulary

The language that teachers use in their classrooms determines the amount and quality of the conversations that can support children's language and vocabulary development. One way to create meaningful context for children to learn words is to create conversations that support children's use of unfamiliar words. As suggested, young children will not likely learn new vocabulary words if the words are presented as an exercise of learning words from a list, an experience that is devoid of a meaningful context. Instead, creating a setting in which children have purposeful conversations using words and exploring the meaning of these words in the context of related experiences can support and build children's word knowledge.

Much attention has focused on the use of open-ended questions as a means of stimulating conversations and facilitating language and vocabulary development in young children.

Specifically, an open-ended question is defined as a question that requires more than a one-word answer, or a "yes" or "no" response.

For example, the question "Did you like the story?" allows for a very different response than saying, "Tell me two things that you liked about the story." Both are questions asking about children's reaction to a story, but the second question promotes a response that requires children to use more language and vocabulary to answer the question. Open-ended questions provide children with the needed opportunities to talk. Equally important, open-ended questions provide adults with the opportunity to scaffold children's language by providing thoughtful feedback to extend children's language.

Much research has explored the important role that asking opened-ended questions plays in children's vocabulary and language development (Páez, Bock, & Pizzo, 2011; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Early work by Dickinson and Smith (1994) showed that asking open-ended questions resulted in providing

children with more opportunities to talk and use language. In addition, the influential research on dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1994) demonstrated the important role that asking open-ended questions plays during book reading in providing opportunities for children to use extended language to discuss book concepts. However, the findings from research on professional development and book reading (Wasik & Hindman, 2011a) has caused us to look more closely at the role that questions potentially play in children's language development.

Several interesting findings emerged from our qualitative analysis of teachers' use of open-ended questions during book reading. It appears that teachers do ask open-ended questions, yet often do not allow children the time to respond to the questions. Observations of teachers asking open-ended questions shows that teachers frequently (a) do not wait for children to respond and (b) often follow up an open-ended question with a closed question, with the focus on children producing "an answer" without attention to allowing them to talk and

share ideas (Wasik & Hindman, 2011a). In addition, teachers rarely follow up an open-ended question with another question that would allow children to expand on their language.

Even though teachers were asking open-ended questions, they were not engaging children in conversations that increased opportunities for the children to use language and vocabulary and talk about ideas. Teachers' questions did not appear to allow children to discuss concepts and information that would expand children's knowledge or help support comprehension of the book. Also, the questions asked did not require children to think about or use a vocabulary word that related to the book or a recent classroom activity. Although open-ended questions, in theory, can promote children's talking, the specific information asked in open-ended questions influences the quality and the content of the language of children's responses. In sum, not all open-ended questions are equal and are not enough to help develop children's language and vocabulary skills. To develop children's language and vocabulary skills, children need to engage in more purposeful, strategic conversations.

Purposeful, Strategic Conversations

The goal of purposeful, strategic conversations is to develop children's vocabulary and knowledge. Purposeful, strategic conversations create opportunities for a dialogue that intends to specifically develop vocabulary words and concepts by making definitions explicit and supporting connections between new vocabulary words and familiar words and ideas. Purposeful, strategic conversations include (a) asking open-ended prompts and (b) providing meaningful feedback to children's

responses to scaffold children's language and vocabulary. The outcome of a purposeful, strategic conversation is not only to share information, but also to build vocabulary and knowledge.

The concept of purposeful, strategic conversation has its roots in the research of the first author and her colleagues (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006; Wasik & Hindman, 2011b), in which teachers were trained to introduce vocabulary words during a book-reading experience and then systematically and thoughtfully continue to provide opportunities for children to use those words in meaningful contexts in other activities over time.

Teachers engaged children in conversations that resulted in children using the specific vocabulary words identified during the book reading. Teachers were trained to explicitly use the vocabulary words and have the children also use the words during multiple, related activities. The results from a series of randomized controlled studies show significant increases in children's vocabulary, suggesting that these strategies were effective in increasing children's word learning.

Purposeful, strategic conversations also intend to help redirect the attention from a narrow focus of having teachers ask open-ended questions as a means of promoting language to a more broad approach of having teachers promote conversation through various prompts that invite children's responses and provide meaningful feedback to children's comments. Although purposeful, strategic conversations focus explicitly on creating opportunities for

children to hear and use new vocabulary words in meaningful contexts, the back-and-forth exchange inherent in a conversation is also critical in developing children's oral language skills. In addition, the teacher feedback on children's comments helps scaffold children's word meaning and concept development.

The Table shows examples of teachers' responses that promote purposeful, strategic conversations. In the first column, these prompts are examples of statements that would provide opportunities for young children to talk and use language. In the second column are examples of prompts that promote more extended conversations. The difference, however, is in the

potential content of the conversation. In the prompts that foster purposeful, strategic conversations, children are provided with opportunities to both *hear* and *use* richer vocabulary words.

As the Table shows, children hear the words *turtle, casing, chrysalis,* and *transforms*—words that are probably unfamiliar to young children. In addition, children have the opportunity to connect the vocabulary words to concepts that they are learning about in school, therefore building both vocabulary and conceptual knowledge at the same time.

In purposeful, strategic conversations, children are provided with opportunities to use vocabulary words that they are learning and talk explicitly about concepts that are being taught. These opportunities come in many forms, including open-ended questions, open-ended statements and statements that include the unfamiliar vocabulary words, all allowing for children to provide more than one word responses.

Statements such as "We read that the chrysalis transforms into a butterfly. Describe what that looks like" allow children to hear an unfamiliar vocabulary word and then talk about that word. It also allows them to respond using another new word, *pupa*. Questions or statements that allow children to respond like this are

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designed to support children's explicit use of vocabulary in meaningful ways along with developing their conceptual knowledge. Teachers also encourage children to explicitly use the vocabulary words when responding.

A critical part of purposeful, strategic conversations is the feedback teachers provide to the children's comments. Teachers often engage children with a question or statement, and after a child provides a response, they either move onto the next child and ask the same question or proceed to ask another question. In purposeful, strategic conversations, teachers provide opportunities to scaffold children's language and their responses.

After the child responds, the teacher follows up with another prompt that allows the child to expand on what he said. If the child says in response to the statement "Describe what the chrysalis is" that "It covers the butterfly" or "It covers the pupa," the teacher can ask the child to "Tell me more about the chrysalis" or be

more specific, in scaffolding "Tell me what the chrysalis looks like." These open-ended questions and statements allow for richer conversations than asking, "Tell me if it is hard or soft" or "What color is it?" Some prompts that teachers can use to help scaffold children's language are as follows:

- Can you tell me more about…?
- Explain why….; Describe what….
- I wonder why…?
- Can you tell me why you think or feel that way?
- What else can you say about …?

In providing meaningful feedback that encourages children to use the vocabulary words, it allows children to think about their responses, build on their knowledge, and continue to use vocabulary in purposeful, meaningful ways.

Suggestions for Integrating Purposeful, Strategic Conversations in Classrooms

In early childhood classrooms, there are multiple opportunities to integrate purposeful, strategic conversations in activities throughout the day. By focusing on similar vocabulary and concepts in each of these activities, children have multiple, meaningful exposures to words and concepts that we want them to learn. Conversations can occur during any activity, including during transitions, on the playground,

Table Teacher Responses That Promote Purposeful, Strategic Conversations

Promoting talking	Promoting purposeful, strategic conversations
What did you do last night?	From what we read, tell me what you know about the turtle's shell.
Tell me about your red shoes.	What did we learn about the seed and the seed casing?
What makes you happy?	The character, Finn, was thrilled about getting a hot dog. What does thrilled feel like?
Tell me about your pet dog.	We read that the chrysalis transforms into a butterfly. Describe what chrysalis is.

> *"Book reading can play a critical part in implementing purposeful, strategic conversations."*

and during mealtime. Suggested ways to implement purposeful, strategic conversations during three central activities—read-aloud, center time, and morning message—follow.

Read-Alouds

Book reading can play a critical part in implementing purposeful, strategic conversations. Books provide great opportunities to introduce children to decontextualized vocabulary, which is vocabulary that they may not have the chance to encounter in their everyday lives. For example, children who may never see or hear about a kangaroo in their daily experiences learn the word *kangaroo* and information about this animal through a book-reading experience.

To select vocabulary words to explicitly use during purposeful, strategic conversations, teachers are encouraged to select vocabulary words from books that (a) help support the current unit theme, (b) are unfamiliar to the children, and (c) are critical to the comprehension of the story. These carefully chosen vocabulary words can play a pivotal role in purposeful, strategic conversations if the words are strategically integrated into the conversations and questions and, as a result, are also a part of children's responses.

Vocabulary words that are introduced during book reading should be directly taught when encountered in the story. Teachers can explicitly provide a meaningful definition of a word and ask questions that help children understand the word within the context of the story. Returning to the butterfly example, when children are introduced to the word *chrysalis*, the teacher can promote a dialogue during book reading that support children's development of the definition of *chrysalis* so children can understand its meaning by making connections to what they already know.

For example, the teacher invites a discussion by asking, "How are a coat and a chrysalis similar," "Describe what the chrysalis does for the butterfly," and "Describe the covering of the pupa and use a new word you just learned." Throughout the book, teachers can initiate purposeful, strategic conversations to guide children's learning of new vocabulary and concepts and provide opportunities for children to talk about what they are learning and use language in meaningful ways.

Center Time

Given the research on word learning, we know that children need to use words in multiple contexts over time to ensure that they will actually incorporate new words into their everyday vocabulary. Center activities provide great opportunities for purposeful, strategic conversations that can prompt vocabulary. One advantage of center time is that it affords small-group experiences, where children have a greater chance for opportunities to talk and listen to both their teachers and peers.

In small groups, teachers have more opportunities to focus on individual children's comments and also provide meaningful feedback to children's responses, which promotes dialogue that can build vocabulary. Often times, focusing on one child's responses in a large group is difficult because of the demands of whole-group settings. Center time creates a welcoming context for teachers to have more extended conversations during which the teacher can scaffold children's responses and provide feedback that also can promote the explicit use of vocabulary words.

In addition, teachers can reinforce theme- and book-related concepts again during center time by inviting purposeful, strategic conversations.

Instead of teachers circulating from center to center and asking children, "What are you doing?" (which is an open-ended prompt, but does not accomplish what purposeful, strategic conversations can), teachers should engage children in discussions that facilitate language and vocabulary development.

For example, continuing with the butterfly theme: (a) teachers can ask children in the dramatic play area to pretend that they are butterflies coming out of their chrysalis, (b) children in the science center can be engaged in lively conversation as they "think like lepidopterists" and use their magnifying glasses to track metamorphosis to chrysalis (inexpensive kits are available on the web), and (c) children in the writing center can work together to discuss butterfly gardens, describe what they look like, and, with the teacher's encouragement, use words such as *chrysalis*, *pupa*, and *butterflies*.

They compose and record their text, allowing for invented spelling, peer tutoring, and shared writing, and then illustrate their butterfly garden. The teacher can circulate from center to center talking with children about explicit contexts that support their use of specific vocabulary. The more opportunities children have to talk about concepts and purposefully use new vocabulary words, the more these words and concepts will become a part of their everyday knowledge.

Morning Message

Morning message time also offers great opportunities for teachers to engage children in purposeful, strategic conversations. Incorporating vocabulary words from the books being read in the classroom or from the current unit theme into the morning message promotes multiple exposures to words in different contexts. For example, in planning the morning message as a shared reading and modeled writing activity, teachers should use new vocabulary. The message could read: "Our butterfly has developed a chrysalis that covers her body."

In engaging children in purposeful, strategic conversations during morning message, teachers use both new concepts and new vocabulary in context. Students then have a dual focus: to practice print concepts and phonemic awareness skills while engaging in rich opportunities for purposeful, strategic conversations. Teachers can ask questions such as, "*Chrysalis* is a word we have heard before; can anyone recall what we read about chrysalis in our book yesterday?" and "What does the chrysalis do for the butterfly as it is growing? Let's think and talk about that." This allows children to talk about the vocabulary in a meaningful way and to continue to make connections between the new vocabulary and familiar experiences.

The morning message activity creates great opportunities to support vocabulary and language development as well as making connections between developing theme concepts and new vocabulary words. In providing questions and comments that invite children to talk, children have opportunities to practice using new words, interacting with them as they are written by the teacher, and to inquire about new concepts in the context of meaningful dialogue. Teachers should scaffold children's responses by asking additional questions such as "Tell me more about what you know" to encourage them to reflect on what they said and to add more information. In doing this, children learn to be active participants engaging in purposeful, strategic conversations.

Creating an Environment for Purposeful, Strategic Conversations to Work

There are critical factors that must be addressed for purposeful, strategic conversations to be effectively implemented in early childhood classrooms. These three factors are planning, implementing wait time, and developing active listeners. These factors need to be in place to create an environment for purposeful conversation to occur. If in place, the classroom environment can support vocabulary development through purposeful, strategic conversations.

Planning

Planning for purposeful, strategic conversations is critical for these conversations to occur. We are not suggesting that teachers script these conversations, because this will detract from the spontaneous nature of conversations being cultivated in classrooms to support the building of context-based language. However, without planning for a few questions to generate meaningful discussion, purposeful, strategic conversations may not occur.

"Planning for purposeful, strategic conversations is critical for these conversations to occur."

When planning book reading, center time, and morning message activities, write a few questions to initiate purposeful, strategic conversations. These questions should focus on having children use or hear the vocabulary from the books read in a theme. Having these questions on sticky notes as reminders on applicable pages within the read-aloud book, as well as in centers, will ensure that teachers ask questions that require children to think about their answers and use their vocabulary knowledge in answering. Encourage children to say the vocabulary words and talk about the meaning of the word. Planning for explicit prompts that include the use of vocabulary words, supporting children's responses, and requiring children to answer using more than one word responses helps us to create opportunities to develop vocabulary and language daily.

Implementing Wait Time

As teachers, we tend to jump in to answer our own questions when a child does not respond immediately. Providing wait time for children to answer a question allows them to gather their ideas and then communicate them. However, because our typical wait time is usually about three seconds, teachers must understand the importance of wait time and how it can be used to support young children's thinking and learning.

To help children understand the concept of wait time, teachers can say,

"When I tell you to 'think big,' I want you to take some time and think about your answer. Then, touch your nose when you are ready." The phrase "think big" reinforces the positive aspect of wait time and encourages children to take some time and think before responding.

Giving children permission to think about their answers first and then respond can be very helpful in scaffolding language development through purposeful, strategic conversations. Providing a child with a 15-second wait time allows the child time to respond and also allows the teacher time to think of a scaffolding question to encourage the child's response without the silence of waiting becoming overwhelming.

Developing Active Listeners

For young children to benefit from the rich language opportunities presented in purposeful, strategic conversations, children must be actively listening to what others are saying. Unfortunately, young children live in a world surrounded by a considerable amount of adult talk, and it is challenging for them to actively listen and process what the adults are saying. An important part in developing purposeful, strategic conversations is teaching young children how to actively listen to what the speaker is saying.

As a teacher talks with and engages children in conversation, children need to learn to attend to what is being asked. Some strategies that support teaching children to become active listeners include asking them to (a) keep their eyes on the speaker—even if it means they must turn around, and (b) do not talk while the speaker is talking. To help students keep their eyes and attention on the speaker, teachers can cue them by gesturing with their hands in the direction of the speaker.

These simple suggestions help increase children's focus on the speaker and what the speaker is communicating. The goal of purposeful, strategic conversations is to engage children in conversations that build vocabulary and content knowledge. Children cannot be effectively engaged in a purposeful, strategic conversation if they are neither actively listening to the teacher's questions nor attending to the follow-up their teachers are providing (as they scaffold their students' language). From what we know, vocabulary and language learning play a critical role in young children's development, yet they are the most difficult skills to teach (Dickinson et al., 2011). Research on vocabulary development has helped us understand that teachers can support children's vocabulary growth in the following ways:

"Encourage children to say the vocabulary words and talk about the meaning of the word."

- Providing multiple opportunities to use words
- Relating unfamiliar words to familiar words
- Presenting words within a meaningful context or theme
- Providing explicit definitions of words
- Scaffolding children's language through meaningful feedback

The goal of this article is to suggest that through purposeful, strategic conversations that incorporate these word-learning strategies, children have greater opportunities to develop their vocabulary and language skills.

Purposeful, strategic conversations create unique opportunities for young children to learn vocabulary and build language skills by engaging them in dialogue that scaffolds these skills. The goal of purposeful, strategic conversations is to have teachers engage in a dialogue that provides opportunities for children to use and hear vocabulary multiple times in meaningful context for them to learn the words and concepts. Although purposeful, strategic conversations can occur at any time throughout the day, three activities are discussed as optimum times for purposeful, strategic conversation, and suggestions are provided.

Read-alouds are presented as playing an important role in supporting purposeful, strategic conversations because words identified in this meaningful context can be used in conversations across multiple activities. Center time and morning message activities are also highlighted as times during which purposeful, strategic conversations can occur, promoting rich vocabulary development in meaningful context. Classrooms that promote high-quality language experiences and

increase children's vocabulary knowledge help decrease the achievement gap for our most vulnerable children.

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TAKE ACTION!

1. Choose a read-aloud based on your unit theme.

2. Decide on a purpose for the read-aloud and choose five vocabulary words.

3. Develop open-ended prompts on a sticky note and place inside the book.

4. Remember to help children use the new vocabulary words in various daily activities.

5. Scaffold the conversation to expand children's responses.

6. Allow children to "think big," which gives them time to respond.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- "Getting the *ig* in Pig: Helping Children Discover Onset and Rime" by Michelle Rosen
- "Word Wizards: Students Making Words" by Rebecca L. Olness

IRA Books

- *The Vocabulary Book: Learning & Instruction* by Michael F. Graves
- *What Research Has to Say About Vocabulary Instruction* edited by Alan E. Farstrup and S. Jay Samuels

IRA Journal Articles

- "Using Knowledge Networks to Develop Preschoolers' Content Vocabulary" by Sharolyn D. Pollard-Durodola, Jorge E. Gonzalez, Deborah C. Simmons, Matthew J. Davis, Leslie Simmons, and Miranda Nava-Walichowski, *The Reading Teacher*, December 2011
- "The Vocabulary-Rich Classroom: Modeling Sophisticated Word Use to Promote Word Consciousness and Vocabulary Growth" by Holly B. Lane and Stephanie Arriaza Allen, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2010