

## Stimulating Early Language Skills and Promoting Literacy in the Preschool Classroom

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### Overview

- Model for comprehension intervention
  - Simple View of Reading
- Scope of instruction
  - Early word recognition
  - Basic and higher-level language skills
- Comprehension intervention: Techniques
- Sample preschool comprehension lesson

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### Simple View of Reading

- Reading is comprised of two primary skills
  - Word recognition
  - Listening Comprehension

Word recognition

- Phonological awareness
- Print awareness
- Letter-sound knowledge
- Early decoding skills

Listening Comprehension

- Vocabulary
- Background Knowledge
- Inference Making
- Text structure knowledge

- Comprehension instruction should stimulate skills underpinning *BOTH* word recognition and listening comprehension

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**Scope of Instruction: Early Word Recognition**

- Facilitating early word recognition
  - Phonological awareness
    - Alliteration, initial sound awareness, blending, and segmentation
  - Early letter-sound correspondence
    - This letter is called b and it says /b/
      - Use animal names and sounds as analogous to letter-sounds
      - “We call this animal a ‘cow’ and it says ‘moo.’ We call this letter a ‘b’ and it says ‘/b/.’”
  - Functional writing activities
    - Grocery lists, name on art, letters to friends
  - Print referencing
    - Drawing attention to text while reading




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Issues around the Alphabetic Principle

- **there are approximately 44 sounds in the English language but only 26 letters**
- **sounds can be spelled in different ways and letters can have more than one sound**

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Alphabetic Principle

**However, approximately 84% of English words are regular for reading if you understand the structure of the language.**

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**Orton-Gillingham**

- Multisensory approach
- Direct instruction
- Sequential curriculum

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**Improving Fluency**

- Repeated reading
- Audio support
- Read, read, read, read

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**Scope of Instruction: Listening Comprehension**

- Basic language skills
  - Vocabulary
    - Depth and breadth
    - Connections
  - Grammar
    - Morphosyntax
- Higher-level language skills
  - Inferencing
    - Filling in the gaps in text
    - Background knowledge
  - Comprehension monitoring
  - Text structure knowledge
    - Narratives
    - Informational text

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### Scope of Instruction: Vocabulary

- Number of words
- Depth of word knowledge
  - Connections
- Don't teach definitions, teach concepts
- Link new words to known words
  - Teach subtle differences in a category
    - Flowers: rose, tulip, daisy
- Multi-sensory exposure



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### Causes of Comprehension Difficulties

- Language problems
- Lack of background knowledge
  - Hirsh (2006) Knowledge Deficit
- Limited reading strategies

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### Language Intervention

- Text as a language lesson
- Comprehensive – cover multiple levels of language in same session
  - *vocabulary*
  - *morphology*
  - *syntax*
  - *discourse*

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Vocabulary

- Building blocks of meaning
- Shows continuous growth across the lifespan
- Never fully acquired

Oxford English Dictionary

~ 1, 000,000 words

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Vocabulary

- The average student knows around 45,000 words by high school graduation
- If a child enters 1<sup>st</sup> grade knowing about 6,000 words then they will typically learn 3,000 new words per year
- That is about 10 words a day

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Vocabulary

- Mathew Effects:
  - Children with reading problems read less than proficient readers
  - Children with reading problems read less challenging texts
  - The result is an ever widening gap between proficient readers and readers who struggle

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### Vocabulary

- Teach more than definitions
- Directly in context
- Together with other related words
- Semantic mapping
- Semantic feature grid
- Teach word parts (morphology)

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### Problems with Formal Definitions

- Most words have multiple definitions
- Formal definitions can have more complex words than word being defined – “scrub” to wash vigorously
- Can be misinterpreted out of context  
“truncate” – to cut off  
“She truncated the lights”

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### Context-based Instruction

Teach in the context of the books that children are reading

May also learn as well from hearing text. Has the advantage of getting linguistically rich and challenging material to children who have problems in word recognition.

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### Stahl, Richek, & Vandevier (1991)

Showed that 6<sup>th</sup> grade children learned word meanings from read alouds at the same rate as they did from reading text themselves. Suggests that listening to stories can be as rich a source of word learning as reading.

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### Context-based instruction

- Does more than help the child learn the definition of the word, but how it relates to other words it is used with.
- Helps develop rich semantic webs

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### Semantic Priming

- Research shows that the speed that a word can be read increases when preceded by a related word

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### Semantic Priming

- Cup - coffee
- Boat - water
- Bank - money  
river
  
- The man got money from the bank

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Foot does not prime "cut"  
Neither do cry or glass

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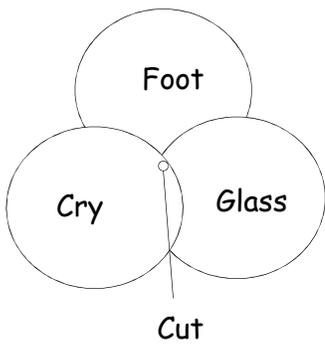
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Beeman, et al (1994)



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### Vocabulary Instruction

- “point of contact” learning is helpful to learning a new word
- But stable acquisition often requires children to process the word deeper to generate rich connections
- A word should be taught in conjunction with other like words

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### Teaching words in semantic groups

- Bad People
  - Villain
  - Malefactor
  - Burglar
  - Embezzler
  - Miscreant
  - Cad
  - Rogue
  - scoundrel
- Red
  - Crimson
  - Scarlet
  - Pink
  - Blush
  - Ruby
  - Carmine
  - Sanguine

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### Making distinctions

- How is a villain like an embezzler? How are they different?
- How in crimson like scarlet? How are they different?

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Teaching words in semantic groups

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Example of a word line for teaching a cluster of general vocabulary words

- |             |             |          |
|-------------|-------------|----------|
| gruff       | impassive   | elated   |
| disgruntled | stoic       | ecstatic |
| dour        | indifferent | buoyant  |
| glum        | detached    | jubilant |
| somber      | listless    | exultant |

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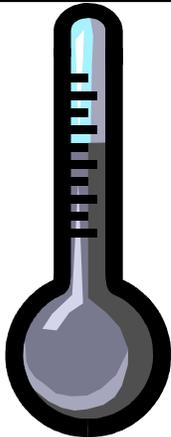
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- Ecstatic
- Thrilled
- Cheerful
- Happy
- Pleased
- So-so
- Unhappy
- Sad
- Down
- Miserable

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### Scope of Instruction: Grammar

- Grammar involves both morphology and syntax
  - Age-appropriate skills
    - Plurals – regular and irregular
    - Past tense
  - Adjectives and adverbs
  - Prepositional phrases

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### Syntax

- Teach in context
- Use storybooks

*Books are for Talking Too* (Gerbers, 2003; Pro-Ed)  
*Language Disorders* (Paul, 2001; Mosby)

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### Subordination

- Time
  - When            Mom cried when I left.
  - Before         Alice walked for miles before she was tired.
  - Since           Since I have stopped worrying, I feel better.
- Location
  - Where           He left it where you could find it.
  - Wherever       The lion was feared wherever it went.
- Concession
  - Although        Although she was tired, Mary could not sleep.
  - Though          Though Amy preferred Pepsi, she drank Coke.

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### Subordination

- Causal
  - Because Bill went home because he was sick.
  - Since They were upset since they lost.
  - So (that) I worked late so that I could finish.
  
- Conditional Cause
  - If (then) We will get home late, if we don't leave soon.  
If our plane is on time, we will be there at 3.  
If you are finished, then you may leave.
  - Unless Unless we go soon, we will never get there.

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### Building Sentences

Jason cut some firewood  
Jason started a fire

It is very cold  
Matt started a fire

Jennifer was late for school again  
She overslept

Keri is always on time  
Sarah is generally late

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### Scope of Instruction: Inferencing

- Filling in the gaps in text
  - Much of what we take from a story is not explicitly stated
- Building background knowledge
  - Activate “schema” before reading story
- Focus on mental state of characters
  - What did Bobby feel when he couldn't find his friend?
- Focus on possible courses of action
  - What do you think Bobby should do now?

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### Scope of Instruction: Comprehension Monitoring

- Strategies to check that one is understanding text
  - Periodic summaries
    - Main points
    - Can monitor breakdowns
  - Think-alouds
    - Teacher models comprehension monitoring
  - Question whether the story is making sense
    - Does my understanding of the story make sense?




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### Comprehension

*“We hear and apprehend only what we already half know”*

Henry David Thoreau

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### Scope of Instruction: Text Structure Knowledge

- Characteristics of written material
  - Key elements in narrative – story grammar
    - Setting
    - Main character
    - His/her problem
    - His/her attempts to solve problem
    - Resolution or ending
  - Point out each component
    - Visuals
      - Story rainbow – each element represented by color
      - Story keychain – each element represented by key
- Informational texts
  - Different structure (lists, cause/effect, problem/solution, etc.)

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**Story Grammar**

Setting  
 Initiating Event  
 Plan  
 Action  
 Consequence  
 Reaction

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**Story Grammar Cue cards**

**Card 1: Setting**  
 Where and when does the story take place? Who are the main characters?

**Card 2: Problem**  
 What happened to get the story started? What is the problem the main character must solve?

**Card 3: Internal Response**  
 What thoughts or feelings does the main character have about the problem? What makes him or her want to do something about it?

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**Story Grammar Cue cards**

**Card 4: Plan**  
 What is the main character's goal? What does he or she plan to do? What are his or her intentions?

**Card 5: Attempt**  
 What does the character do to carry out the plan?

**Card 6: Consequence**  
 What happens when the character tries to carry out the plan? Is it successful or unsuccessful? How and why? What else happens when the character tries to carry out the plans? Did he or she intend for that to happen?

**Card 7: Reaction**  
 How do the characters feel about what happened in the story? What do they think about the problem, the plan, and the result?

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### Story Grammar Questions

- Where did the story happen?
- Who were the important people in it?
- What problem got the story going?
- How did the people try to solve the problem?
- How did it end?

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### Expository Text Structure

Problem – Solution

Description

Compare – Contrast

Cause - Effect

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### Techniques for Stimulating Early Literacy

- Print Referencing
  - Increase focus on print to stimulate early word recognition
- Inferential Questioning
  - Strategic questioning to increase awareness of “gaps” in stories
- Dialogic reading
  - Interactive storybook reading
- Self-questioning
  - Creating independent comprehension monitoring



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### Techniques: Print Referencing

- Increase print knowledge (Justice et al., 2009, *LSHSS*, 40, 67-85)
  - Teachers implemented four techniques while reading books
    - Print organization (“This is where I begin reading.”)
    - Print meaning (“This is what he said: *thank you*.”)
    - Letters (“Do you see a letter that is in your name?”)
    - Words (“Let’s point to each word as I read it.”)
  - Medium effects in favor of print knowledge instruction
    - 30 weeks, 30 storybooks
    - Improvements in print concept knowledge, alphabet knowledge, and name-writing ability
    - Resource: [www.myreaditagain.com](http://www.myreaditagain.com)

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### Technique: Dialogic Reading

- Dialogic Reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) PEER
  - Prompt: Prompt a response by asking a question about the story
  - Evaluation: Evaluate the child’s response and provide feedback
  - Expand: Expand on what the child says
  - Repeat: Repeat original prompt, encouraging the child to repeat or expand upon feedback
- Example:
  - Teacher: “How did the bear find food in the forest?”
  - Child: “He was hungry.”
  - Teacher: “Yes, he was hungry so he tried to find food in the forest by sniffing the ground. Bears use their noses to smell new food.”
  - Teacher: “Now that you know that, how did the bear find food in the forest?”
  - Child: “He put his nose on the ground to sniff for new food.”

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### Technique: Inferential Questioning

- Embed inferential questions throughout the story
  - Identify gaps in the story
  - Develop questions ahead of time
  - Ask questions that will highlight gaps and lead to inference generation
    - Example: “Why is Bobby so angry?”
      - Story shows Bobby making a sand castle. Next, Bobby is red-faced and his castle is flattened, presumably by a wave.
        - » Follow with, “What knocked his castle over?”
        - » When correct response given, “How did you know that?”




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### Technique: Self Questioning

- Good readers monitor their comprehension by asking questions of themselves while reading
  - Model this strategy through think-alouds
    - Before reading, note crucial junctures in the story
    - Develop questions to model comprehension monitoring
      - “What has Jane done today?”
      - “Where are her friends now?”
  - Encourage children to ask questions as they read



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### Strategic Reader

- Before reading
  - Identify purpose
  - Activate schema
  - Preview for length and difficulty
- During reading
  - Stay active
  - Take notes
  - Visualize
  - Paraphrase
  - Self-question

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### Strategic Reader

- After reading
  - Review
  - Summarize
  - Evaluate and judge

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### Seven Steps to Teaching Learning Strategies

1. Introduce the strategy
2. Explain why the strategy is relevant
3. Describe the strategy
4. Model the strategy
5. Practice with low-difficulty materials
6. Evaluate student performance
7. Practice using the strategy on curricular material

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### Techniques to Improve Vocabulary and Grammar

- Focused stimulation
  - Targeted exposure to language forms
  - Effective for improving language in young children (Ellis, Weismer, & Robertson, 2006)
  - Increases basic language skills needed for listening comprehension
- Vocabulary
  - Explicit instruction of vocabulary every day
    - Themes in classrooms
    - Subtle differences between words
    - Build connections to known words

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### Sample Lesson

- Book: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Eric Carle)
- Objectives:
  - Use irregular past tense verbs (e.g., “ate”)
  - Provide key components of story grammar
  - Answer inferential questions
  - Identify letters in child’s name
  - Increase background knowledge
- Techniques:
  - Dialogic reading
  - Inferential questioning
  - Focused stimulation




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### Sample Lesson

- Materials needed:
  - Book and narrative rainbow components
- Pre-reading activity:
  - Hold up the book and read the title. Remind children that you read the book yesterday. Ask them to describe the book using story rainbow. Look at rainbow and ask which part of the story is represented by each color. For example, red represents *setting*. Ask, "Where did the story take place?" Ask, "Who is the main character?", which is indicated by the color orange.
  - Ask the children to try to remember what the caterpillar ate. Use focused stimulation to consistently repeat the irregular verb ate. If a child says, "eated," repeat the sentence with the correct verb, "ate."

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### Sample Lesson

- During reading:
  - Periodically stop and ask a specific child if he/she can find a word that has a letter that is in his/her name. Sound out the word when it is chosen.
  - Periodically stop to ask inferential questions, such as, "Why is the caterpillar so big now?"
    - Develop the questions prior to reading the story
    - Use PEER to expand answers to questions
- After reading:
  - Encourage the children to retell the story again. Focus on correct irregular past tense verb use.
  - Increase background knowledge by having the children watch live caterpillars in your classroom first make cocoons and then change into butterflies.

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### Additional Resource

National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.

<http://nifl.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>

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**GOOD LUCK!**  
**CHANGE THE WORLD ONE CHILD AT A TIME...**



Questions/Comments  
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