
Emergent Literacy, Language, and African American Preschoolers at Risk

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Basic Assumption of Emergent Literacy

Literacy development begins long before a child ever enters a formal preschool or elementary classroom setting, or receives conventional reading instruction!!!

Emergent literacy proceeds along a developmental continuum:

Birth to 2 years of age:

Infants are learning the sound structure, rhythms and tones of the language in their environment. They are also learning to associate these sounds with words and meaning.

In the first year of life:

Babies (approximately 6 months to 1 year) are being read to by the adults in their lives. Children who are read to will begin progression from books as “food,” to playing with the cover, to trying to turn pages. These actions are often accompanied by babbling (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998).

2 to 3 years of age: Very rapid growth of language skills

- Children pretend to read while pointing to and labelling pictures or naming actions in their storybooks. **Environmental print** also becomes more salient to children at this age;
 - **Scribbling** advances from drawing circles to producing “text” that young children identify verbally as writing.
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3 to 4 years of age: Very rapid growth of literacy and language skills

- By this age, children who have been read to in the earlier years are beginning to “read” books independently;
 - No longer labeling pictures, but attempting to tell the story represented by the pictures in the book.
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- 5 years of age: Very rapid growth in literacy skills

Considered *emergent readers*, these children are entering kindergarten and encountering conventional reading instruction. “Reading” begins to sound different from oral language as intonation patterns mimic written language patterns. Pictures are used to support reading.

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- When low income African American children enter preschool, they are motivated, bright, and eager to learn...
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- Children who are poor, African American or Hispanic and educated in urban schools are at high risk for reading difficulties (National Research Council, 1998) ;
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- Even during their most successful year (1988) the performance of 17 year old African American on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was 1 SD below the mean for White Children (NCES, 2000)
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- These below grade level performances of African American children in academic settings compared to White children has been called the “achievement gap”
 - A study initiated by the US Dept of Education indicates that this gap in achievement is apparent as young as kindergarten (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten, 2000)
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- Level of education of the primary caregiver significantly impacts the young child's performance. However, middle income African American children from well-educated households are also performing poorer than expected. Suggesting that these reading difficulties are not simply an artifact of poverty (Washington & Craig, 2001).
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- The impact of oral language on literacy development is different at different ages:
 - At the time of school entry, prekindergarten vocabulary development will be critical for aiding both comprehension and production of early stories;
 - The primary contribution of parent-child storybook reading prior to school entry, is the development of vocabulary skills.
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Vocabulary Development

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Word Knowledge} \\ + & \text{ World Knowledge} \\ = & \\ & \text{VOCABULARY} \end{aligned}$$





Vocabulary Development

Word Knowledge:

“mental dictionary or thesaurus” contains word definitions and is most often expressed verbally

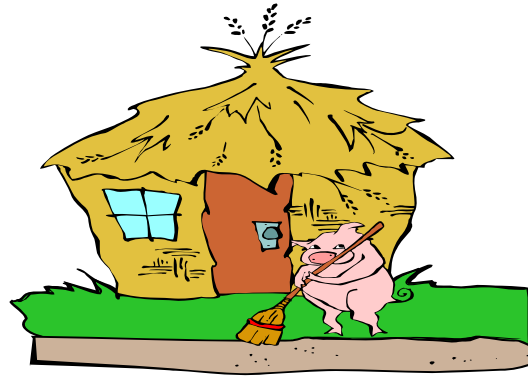
Vocabulary Development

World Knowledge:

Experiential; developed based upon understanding and memory of particular events.

For example, the concept of **dog** is formed after several encounters with different types of dogs.

Vocabulary Development



It's like that straw house: students will not be able to handle these new additions. The first difficult task will blow them right down.

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- ****Children with poor vocabularies will likely be poor readers throughout elementary school; whereas those with strong vocabularies will be able to use those skills to support literacy growth.**
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Vocabulary Development

Students must have a strong vocabulary foundation in order to continue to make progress,

Or they **will fail!!**

ERF: National Program Goal

- To support local efforts to enhance the early language, literacy, and prereading development of preschool-aged children through strategies and professional development based on scientifically based reading research.

<http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/2005plan/edlite-esea-earlyread.html>

ERF

- Preschool-aged children will attain the necessary language, cognitive and pre-reading skills to enter kindergarten prepared for continued learning, including the age appropriate development of oral language and alphabet knowledge.
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Target Vocabulary Categories

1. Family Words
 2. Months of the year
 3. Animals
 4. School Words
 5. Occupations
 6. Shapes
 7. Body Parts
 8. Colors
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Target Vocabulary Categories

9. Feelings
 10. Action words
 11. Food
 12. The five senses
 13. Sports and Games
 14. Vehicles
 15. Weather/Seasons
 16. Household Objects
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Building Vocabulary Through Books

- **Dialogic Book Reading**
 - An interactive book reading intervention which encourages children to talk about books through language feedback and modeling
 - It results in improved language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, sentence length and grammatical complexity
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Dialogic Book Reading

- The linguistic demands increase with the child's skills.
 - For 2-3 year olds, adult questions focus on individual pages and ask for descriptions of objects, actions and events
 - For 4-5 year olds, adult questions focus on the narrative as a whole
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Techniques for 2 – 3 year olds

- **Ask What Questions** - What is this?, What is he doing? What did the pig do next?
 - **Follow answers with questions** – That is a dog, what color is the dog?
 - **Repeat what the child says** – Yes that is a dog.
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Techniques Part 2

- **Help the child as needed** – Provide the answer and ask for repetition. That's called an octopus. Can you say octopus?
 - **Praise and Encourage**
 - **Follow the child's interests** – it is not important to read every word on the page
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Techniques Part 3

- **Ask Open-ended questions** – What is going on here?
 - **Expand what the child says** – child: throw ball; Adult: Yes, the boys throw the ball.
 - **Have Fun!**
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Introducing Books

- Similar to Sulzby and Rockafellow (2001)
 - Carefully selected (by teachers), popular storybooks books were introduced in a systematic way into the classroom context;
 - Each book was read by the classroom teacher 4 times in a two-week time frame before being introduced into the school library.
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Introducing Books

- **First reading:** children are encouraged to listen quietly as the teacher reads the book and highlights salient concepts and words.
 - **Second and third readings:** an interactive process is used in which the teacher asks questions to ensure comprehension, answers questions posed by the children, makes connections between the story and the children's existing knowledge, and tests learning of the vocabulary that children have now heard at least 2 or 3 times.
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Introducing Books

- **Final reading:** use of inferencing, predicting, and open-ended questioning strategies are possible.
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Introducing Books

- Following the final reading, 4 copies of each book were placed into the classroom library and were available for children to read themselves or to each other during daily, 20-minute reading times;
 - After one more week in the classroom, each child was given a copy of the book to take home to build home libraries
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Participants and Outcomes

- 331 low income preschool children
 - 3 and 4 year olds
 - Various race and ethnic backgrounds
 - 75% African American
 - 12% Chaldean
 - 6% Arabic speaking
 - 7% Other (Hispanic, Asian, Romanian, etc...)
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Participants and Outcomes

Time 1

N = 206	Mean	SD	Min/Max (<u>M</u>)
PPVT-III	90.6	11.9	63/132
EVT	95.0	10.6	55/124

Participants and Outcomes

Time 2

N = 206	Mean	SD
PPVT-III	96.0 (90.6)	10.4 (11.9)
EVT	100.8 (95.0)	10.4 (10.6)
Paired t = 8.29, p=.000 : PPVT		
Paired t = 10.32, p=.000: EVT		

Participants and Outcomes

- 123 (62%) had PPVT and EVT scores in the normal range: ≥ 85 Standard score
- 76 (38% had PPVT and/or EVT scores ≤ 84)



Participants and Outcomes

≥ 85 Standard score

N = 206	Mean	SD
PPVT-III	101.5 (97.8)	7.9 (6.2)
EVT	105.7 (100.1)	10.4 (10.6)
Paired t = 5.54, p=.000 : PPVT		
Paired t = 7.82, p=.000: EVT		

Participants and Outcomes

≤ 84 Standard score

N = 76	Mean	SD
PPVT-III	87.9 (78.4)	9.6 (8.2)
EVT	93.4 (87.3)	8.6 (9.8)
Paired t = 7.46, p=.000 : PPVT		
Paired t = 6.46, p=.000: EVT		

Participants and Outcomes

- Participants with Standard Scores of ≤ 84 can be further subdivided based upon the change that they made over the course of the year.
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Participants and Outcomes

≤ 84 Standard score

- Percent of participants who made less than 1 SD (15) change on PPVT = 65%;
 - M(SD) Time 1: 78.8(5.7)
 - M(SD) Time 2: 85.2(7.6) paired t= 6.9, p=.000
 - Participants who made more than 1 SD change in vocabulary scores = 35%
 - M(SD) Time 1: 74.6(7.5)
 - M(SD) Time 2: 95.3 (7.3) paired t = 16.8, p=.000
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Participants and Outcomes

≤ 84 Standard score

- Percent of participants who made less than 1 SD (15) change on EVT = 85% (Range = 0 – 14)
- Participants who made more than 1 SD change in vocabulary scores = 15% (Range = 15 – 24)



Summary

- All low income children do not have the same language skills
 - Even among those with the lowest vocabularies there is still heterogeneity and children may respond to vocabulary interventions in different ways
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Summary

- We can make a measurable, remarkable difference in the language development of low income children with sustained, structured attention at the time of school entry;
 - However,.....
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Summary

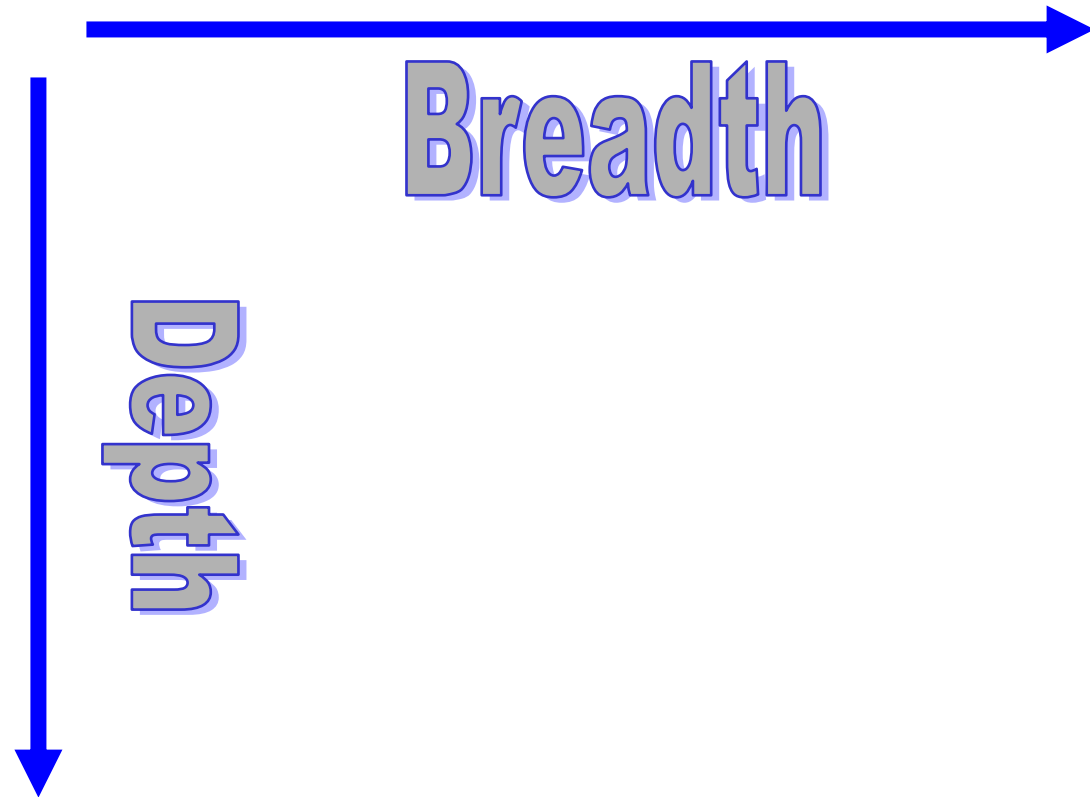
- If this is the end of the attention to these concerns our efforts are not wasted, but not nearly as effective as they could be;
 - We will see these children as 3 and 4 year olds, and then what?
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Summary

Children need to acquire vocabulary along 2 dimensions:

1. Vocabulary Breadth
 2. Vocabulary Depth
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Summary



Summary

- Children with breadth may learn to read, but without depth we are only postponing failure!
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