Interactive Read-Alouds:
A Vehicle for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

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Knowledge and understanding of vocabulary is an essential component of critical thinking, reading comprehension and literacy development (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Vocabulary can be defined as a student's knowledge of word meanings in either their receptive language (words students hear or read) or their expressive language (words students use in their speaking and writing). Research indicates that by the age of three, children living in poverty are exposed to 30 million fewer spoken words thank children in higher socio-economic homes (Hart & Risley, 2003). If children do not have access to rich spoken vocabulary, chances of developing sophisticated expressive vocabulary or a well-developed reading vocabulary are limited.

It is noted that people with more sophisticated vocabulary are often perceived as more intellectually capable by others; this may further influence socio-economic opportunities (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, & Gee, 1996; Duke, 2000). Therefore, one's cultural capital, power, and wealth may be influenced by language and vocabulary use (Cazden et al., 1996; Ream & Palardy, 2008). One way to enhance students' vocabulary use is through carefully planned explicit teaching opportunities.

Literature Review
Vocabulary Development

Understanding word meanings is a powerful indicator of reading comprehension and literacy development (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). In fact, the amount of vocabulary learned in first grade is a strong predictor of reading comprehension in eleventh grade (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). However, students enter school with a varied amount of background knowledge. By age six, average children may have approximately 10,000 words acquired in their vocabulary repertoire (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009). Still, as Hart and Risley (2003)

demonstrated, many students who begin school may not have developed such a large vocabulary. It is essential for teachers to provide explicit vocabulary instruction for all children in order to bridge this gap and to deepen all students' vocabulary knowledge.

Penno, Wilkinson, and Moore (2002) demonstrated that students who entered school with a large cadre of known words increased their vocabularies through reading (without instruction) more easily than children who did not possess extensive vocabulary knowledge. It seems that increased vocabulary knowledge through explicit teaching may lead to continued self-learning. This supports the importance of building knowledge of how to learn new words independently through effective vocabulary instruction (Scott & Nagy, 2009).

Research also demonstrates a strong correlation between vocabulary and comprehension. Students who have a large repertoire of vocabulary words generally comprehend text more effectively, and this, in turn, builds more vocabulary knowledge (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). The understanding of vocabulary has strong implications for all children's literacy success. Therefore, it is essential for children who enter early childhood classrooms to engage in rich and varied experiences designed to enhance robust vocabulary.

Interactive Read-Alouds

A growing body of research suggests that daily interactive read-alouds (IRAs) may positively affect literacy development (Beck & McKeown, 2001; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Interactive read-alouds can be defined as an instructional context in which teachers read aloud to students, strategically pausing at planned locations to encourage students to engage in peer conversations (Meller, Richardson, & Hatch, 2009; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008). Increased vocabulary (Kindle, 2009; Roberts, 2008), improved comprehension (Hoffman, 2011; Smolkin & Donovan, 2003), and enhanced oral language (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Pantaleo, 2007) are all demonstrated benefits of IRAs.

Fisher et al. (2004) identified behaviors that teachers engage in when planning and conducting effective IRAs. These behaviors include careful and intentional text selection, previewing and practicing the reading, establishing a clear purpose for the lesson, providing a model of fluent reading with animation and expression, embedded text discussion, and opportunities for independent reading and writing. These components are important for teachers to consider when planning for an effective interactive read-aloud.

Teaching Vocabulary through the IRA

A comprehensive approach to vocabulary instruction requires teachers to select appropriate words for instruction, pre-assess students' knowledge of the selected words, provide child-friendly explanations for each word, and engage students in multiple, repeated experiences in both reading and writing (Blachowicz et al., 2006). This can all be accomplished in conjunction with daily IRAs. Figure 1 offers a model of effective vocabulary instruction.

Figure 1. *Comprehensive Approach to Vocabulary Instruction*
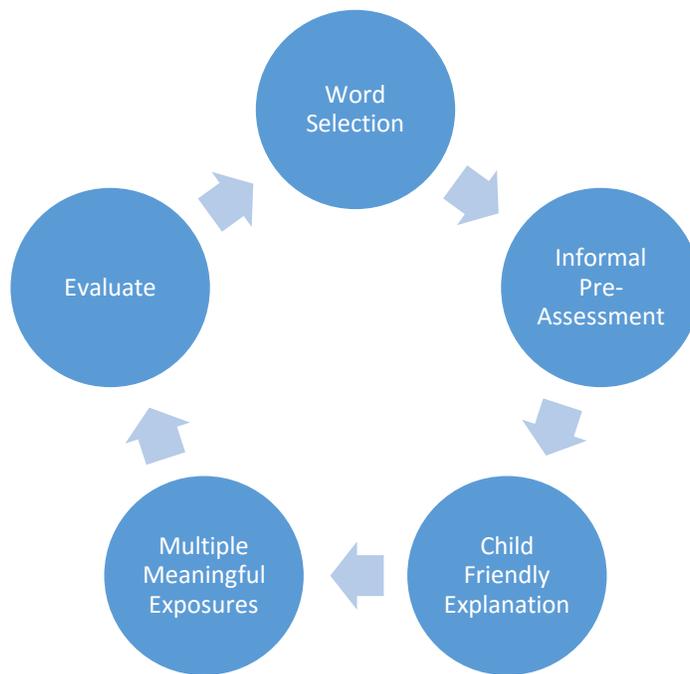
Word Selection

It is important to choose robust, high-utility words for vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Beck and her colleagues (2002) identified three levels, or tiers, of vocabulary words. Tier One words are those that are generally picked up in conversation and are of less mature language such as *dog, cat,* and *door.* Tier Two words are high utility, interesting words that exemplify more mature language such as *strewn, colossal,* and *scowl.* Tier Three words, such as *crater, polygon,* and *community*, are related to content areas and are generally not used outside of those areas. While these content words are important for comprehending informational text, they are not words that are commonly used in conversations.

Tier Two words expand a child's robust vocabulary knowledge, and therefore should be targeted for literacy instruction (Beck et al., 2002; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008).

In addition to selecting specific words to teach, it is important to limit the number of new words presented to children at one time. It is better to teach fewer words well than to require children to memorize a list of words for a test, leaving little expectation for the transfer of the learning to speaking, listening, reading and writing. Jenkins (2005) describes the short term memorization of word lists as giving students permission to forget, since the result is a low net gain of vocabulary words. Children must be able to apply the word in their speaking and writing to demonstrate the understanding of deep knowledge of the word (Cunningham, 2009). Researchers agree that explicit instruction of 5-8 words per week facilitates deep word learning and transfer (Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Neuman & Roskos, 2012). Therefore, explicitly teaching children three to five words in one week may be sufficient for early readers or students who are considered to be academically at-risk (Bromley, 2010).

Once the words are selected, they can become the primary teaching focus of the IRA. For example, the teacher may pause the reading to discuss each vocabulary word as it appears in the text. At this point, the teacher may ask students to discuss the word with a peer. This is designed to help children understand what they heard during the reading—in this case, the new vocabulary—and relate it to their experiences. Picture books are often used during IRAs because they offer ample opportunities to engage with high level vocabulary in an accessible context.

Assessment

As noted earlier, the choice of appropriate high utility words is the initial step to effective vocabulary instruction. Once the teacher selects the words, s/he may conduct a brief informal assessment, often through a whole class discussion, to determine whether or not students are familiar with any of the words. For example, the teacher might write each selected vocabulary word on a sentence strip and include a picture to help build background knowledge of the word. The addition of the picture may help English language learners or beginning readers. As s/he displays the word card, the teacher asks students to define and discuss the word with a partner or small group. While students talk, the teacher can listen in on the conversations and record anecdotal notes to informally assess depth of word knowledge; alternatively s/he may ask volunteers to share definitions or examples of how the word might be used.

If it appears that the majority of the students are familiar with a word, and can use the word appropriately in conversation, the teacher may choose not to explicitly teach that word throughout the week. However, opportunities may exist for incidental word learning (i.e., students "picking up" the word in their vocabulary repertoire) throughout the IRA. However, since the teacher will select Tier Two words, it is unlikely that children will know many of these words well enough to apply them without explicit instruction.

Child-Friendly Explanations

When most students in the class only possess limited or partial knowledge of specific words, or a complete lack of understanding of the words, whole-class explicit instruction is necessary. To begin, the teacher should provide a child-friendly explanation of each word. This means that the teacher explains the word meaning using simple language so students can understand the terminology (Beck et al., 2002). The explanation is presented in connected language, not short phrases; in addition, adding the words "you" or "someone" adds context to the explanation, making it easier for the learner to understand. Oftentimes, this explanation will contain a synonym (Kindle, 2009). For example, a teacher may introduce the term *colossal* by explaining that *something that is colossal is very large or huge, like an elephant or a mansion.* Here the teacher provides a description, the synonym *big,* and a real-life example. One resource that may help teachers provide child-friendly explanations is the English Cobuild Dictionary, which can be accessed at http://dictionary.reverso.net/english-cobuild/.

Multiple Meaningful Exposures through Engaging Activities

Vocabulary instruction should provide children with the knowledge to understand word meanings, connect concepts, and build the skills needed for comprehending different texts (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). Once the words and explanations have been presented to the students, it is important for the teacher to provide multiple opportunities for students to interact with the words in text and oral language (Maynard, Pullen, & Coyne, 2010). It is equally essential to require students to transfer the newly learned words to their independent reading and writing. This will deepen children's understanding of word meanings (Kindle, 2009) and provide students the opportunity to read, hear, use, and talk about the newly learned words (Blachowicz et al., 2006) both in and out of school.

Planning and implementing daily engaging vocabulary activities will increase students' robust vocabulary knowledge. One method is to model the use of context clues in order for readers to understand novel words. For example, the teacher could

project a sentence (taken from a picture book used during the IRA) for all students to see; the vocabulary word should be highlighted in the text. By thinking aloud, the teacher can demonstrate how the text or pictures provides clues for word meanings. To illustrate, if the word in the read aloud is *strewn,* the sentence from the text along with the corresponding picture may show toys arranged randomly on a bedroom floor. This could be projected on a classroom screen. The teacher would lead a discussion explaining how the toys are *strewn* across the floor.

Beck et al. (2002) suggest several engaging activities that require students to apply knowledge of new vocabulary; this application deepens understanding. One activity, called "Have You Ever?" requires students to put themselves into a context with the words. For example, the teacher might ask the class, "Have you ever seen a *colossal* animal? Turn and tell a friend what kind of animal it was, where you saw it, and what it looked like." Another idea is to ask students to act out key vocabulary words. For example, the teacher might say, "Show me how you might take a *colossal* step toward the door."

Another opportunity for applying vocabulary knowledge exists during literacy center time. As students write vocabulary words displayed around the room, they record objects they find that exemplify the words. In the previous example of *colossal,* students may find a large object in the room, draw it on their paper, and explain why this item could be described as *colossal*.

Students in literacy centers may also engage in a vocabulary scavenger hunt. Students work with a partner or small group to find pictures that represent teacher selected vocabulary words. Pictures may be found in magazines, on the internet, or any other available resources. The pictures could be displayed on poster board and used as an anchor chart to reference during an interactive read aloud. Figure Two provides an example of the vocabulary scavenger hunt.

Each engaging activity is designed to be short in duration, yet require students to apply their understandings of each words meaning. The short duration ensures sustained engagement, and also makes it easy for busy teachers to provide time for multiple exposures to words throughout the week. Further, since the students are required to apply their knowledge of words, and not simply define them, deeper learning is likely to result.

Figure 2. *Vocabulary Scavenger Hunt*

Evaluation

After several days of engagement with the new vocabulary words, it is important to evaluate student learning in a meaningful way. Multiple choice tests and fill-in-the-blank quizzes will not accomplish this goal. Instead, students should be asked to apply their knowledge of the vocabulary words. The challenge with evaluation is to provide opportunities for application that can be completed by individual students in a relatively short period of time.

One popular activity, known as Examples and Non-Examples (Stahl, 1999) may serve as evaluative quiz after words have been taught and practiced. The activity requires students to determine which of two descriptors adequately explains a word. The descriptors are close in wording and meaning, so the student must know the word deeply enough to select the accurate explanation. Figure 3 provides an example of an Examples and Non-Examples quiz.

Figure 3. *Examples and Non-Examples Quiz*

Circle the best description for each word.		
A sad face is a scowl.	scowl	A scowl is an angry expression on somebody's face.

When things are strewn it means they are lying on the floor.	*strewn*	*When things are strewn around, it means they are scattered all over the place.*
If something is colossal it is very large or huge.	*colossal*	*When something is colossal it is big.*

Conclusion

Early childhood educators are charged with the responsibility of increasing students' vocabulary acquisition. Developing students' vocabulary instruction in all subject areas is critical for comprehension (Cunningham, 2009) and reading proficiencies. It is also noted that vocabulary knowledge may also affect perceptions of intelligence and potentially impact socioeconomic opportunities. It is clear that depth and breadth of word learning is more important than quantity in vocabulary instruction. Therefore, educators must carefully choose high-utility words for instruction. Through explicit vocabulary instruction provided during the IRA, children can gain deep understanding of sophisticated vocabulary words. Thus, it is important for teachers to implement daily IRAs as part of their literacy routine.

You Try It

1. Choose your favorite picture book.
2. Select five Tier Two vocabulary words to teach from the book.
3. Write child-friendly explanations for each word.
4. Explain the child-friendly definition to the students.
5. Provide students with opportunities to practice using the words with engaging activities.
6. Evaluate student learning though a meaningful activity, such as Examples and Non-Examples.

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