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Journal of Early Childhood Research 2006; 4; 153

DOI: 10.1177/1476718X06063534

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technical vocabulary in the talk of adults and preschoolers during shared reading

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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that there is a relationship between vocabulary development and children's reading ability. This article will focus on the strategies employed by 24 adults (12 mothers and 12 qualified preschool teachers) when introducing new and unusual vocabulary to four-year-old children during shared reading. The mothers differed in terms of educational achievement; half the mothers had left school by the age of 16, and half the mothers were tertiary educated. All the adult-child dyads read the same two picture books (one narrative and one informational) and the surrounding talk was analysed to determine what kinds of supportive strategies were used by the adults to introduce and explain unfamiliar vocabulary items. There were differences between the two groups of mothers in terms of the frequency and manner in which technical vocabulary was introduced and defined. The preschool teachers differed from both types of mothers. The implications of these findings for young children's emergent literacy are discussed.

KEYWORDS *literacy, picture books, systemic functional linguistics, vocabulary*

introduction

It is widely recognized that there is a close relationship between children's vocabulary development and their subsequent ability to read successfully in school. Children with relatively large vocabularies prior to school are more likely to read with comprehension later in their schooling (Snow, 1993; Weizman and Snow, 2001; Biemiller, 2003). It is not just size of vocabulary which is relevant, however, as many researchers have highlighted the

journal of **early childhood research**

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Vol 4(2) 153-167 [ISSN 1476-718X DOI: 10.1177/1476718X06063534]

importance of rare and sophisticated vocabulary in children's lexical repertoires. As Beals and Tabors (1995) point out, 'children who heard and used rare vocabulary items (at least in some settings) scored higher on a standard vocabulary measure, the PPVT, which has been linked to later reading and other forms of school achievement' (p. 74). Vocabulary knowledge is inextricably bound with knowledge about the world and a rich vocabulary provides a resource for developing the types of abstract understandings which allow children to access the meanings in a range of written texts. Yet there has been relatively little research on how some adults foster and support children's vocabulary development in early childhood settings.

In this study we have focused on the manner in which some preschool children, who have not yet learnt to read and write in a conventional way, are exposed to technical and specialized words, such as *metamorphosis*, *hibernation* and *nocturnal*. In the later grades of school, it is typically teachers who are responsible for teaching their students the specialized terminology that is an essential element of precision in disciplines such as mathematics, science and history. Prior to school, however, unusual technical vocabulary is generally acquired informally through everyday spontaneous interactions in the home with close family members (Elley, 1989; Beals and Tabor, 1995; Beals, 1997; Weizman and Snow, 2001). As Biemiller (2003) points out, 'it appears that vocabulary growth is largely determined by parental practices, particularly before third grade' (p. 323). Relevant parental practices include not only the frequency with which they use rare and technical vocabulary with their children but also the manner in which they support children's understanding of the meaning of the vocabulary items.

The language spoken in any situation is influenced by the topic being discussed and the relationship between the participants. In the daily lives of young children and caregivers, picture book reading appears to have the potential to offer rich opportunities for learning technical vocabulary, as picture books bring into the immediate context of the adult-child conversation many concepts and phenomena not encountered in everyday life (Beals and Tabors; 1995; Beals, 1997; Senechal, 1997; Torr and Clugston, 1999). For this reason, the present study has focused on the context of picture book sharing (Wells, 1985; Sorsby and Martlew, 1991; Yaden, 1993; Bus et al., 1995).

One of the fundamental principles of early childhood pedagogy is that, to be effective, learning experiences must build upon children's familiar home experiences (Arthur, 1993; Purcell-Gates, 1996, 2001; Hendrick, 2001). In order for educators to do this in the context of literacy learning, however, it is necessary for them to understand how the conversations surrounding written texts in the home may vary according to the social and cultural environment of the child and family (Gee, 1989; Bernstein, 1996). Brice Heath (1983), for example, has documented in great detail how different communities orient

their children to 'ways with words' that may or may not resonate with the patterns valued in formal schooling. Hasan's (1991, 1992) study of Australian mother-preschooler conversations demonstrated how everyday talk in the home has powerful effects on children's ability to access the language required for school success.

Clearly a factor in any child's emergent literacy development will be his or her parents' own literacy experiences, and several studies have demonstrated that parental education is a factor in shaping the home literacy environments of preschool children (Snow, 1993; Hart and Risley, 1995; Storch and Whitehurst, 2001). Taylor (1995) found a correlation between maternal education and home activities such as television viewing, frequency of reading and family interaction patterns. Fitzgerald et al. (1991) discovered that there were differences in the attitudes and beliefs of high- and low-level literacy parents about literacy learning. Parental education intersects with socio-economic status in factors such as income and employment, which affect the time parents have to read to children and the number of books in the home. Snow (1993) notes 'The variables maternal education, mother's educational expectations, and literacy environment of the home showed particularly high correlations with vocabulary' (p. 21). While these large scale studies provide information about trends, what does this actually mean in everyday interactions which can be useful for educators?

The naturalistic study reported in this article has been designed to explore how mothers from different educational backgrounds introduced unfamiliar, technical vocabulary and supported their children's understanding of the meanings while sharing two pictures books with their preschool children. The supportive strategies they employed were then compared with those of preschool teachers reading the same picture books one-to-one with a child in their preschool centres. The study provides a 'snapshot' of different reading strategies, thus contributing to our understanding of how different home reading experiences of children from diverse backgrounds are sensitive to vocabulary development. Such information may then inform the development of culturally and socially grounded early childhood literacy programs.

Specifically, this study had the following aims:

- 1) To describe the manner in which preschool teachers and mothers use language to introduce and support the learning of technical vocabulary during shared reading with four-year-old children; and
- 2) To compare the supportive strategies used by two groups of mothers from different educational backgrounds, both with each other and with preschool teachers.

technicality in language

While some studies have focused on adults' use of 'rare' vocabulary, using frequency data to determine what constitutes a rare word (Elley, 1989; Beals and Tabors, 1995; Beals, 1997; Biemiller, 2003), this study has focused specifically on technical lexis. For the purposes of this study, technical vocabulary is defined as those vocabulary items (which may be nouns, verbs or adjectives) that have specialized meanings, and that are unlikely to occur in the everyday casual language encounters of young children, for example, *camouflage*, *moisture* and *reflection*. Technical terms sometimes have a more common variant, for example *moisture* and *wetness*, or *camouflage* and *hiding*, although the technical term offers a degree of precision and specificity of meaning that is not encompassed by the everyday term. Another feature of technical language is that it is often highly nominalized, such that an expression that is typically realized as a verb or adjective is instead expressed as a noun, for example, *protect* becomes *protection*, and *warm* becomes *warmth*.

Learning technical vocabulary encompasses much more than simply learning a new label. It means learning new concepts, learning the language patterns of different genres, and learning what types of knowledge are valued within a culture. Such language is crucial to certain discipline areas, such as science, history and mathematics, where technical terms and nominalized language are typically employed for the purposes of classification, for example, in the construction of taxonomies, allowing fine distinctions to be made between phenomena (Martin, 1990; Halliday and Martin, 1993). In other words, a superordinate term (such as *animal*) may be further classified into sub-ordinate terms according to various criteria (e.g. *mammal*, *reptile*, *bird*).

In order to succeed in formal schooling, children need to develop the ability to produce and comprehend written texts containing technical vocabulary. Such texts position the reader as one who shares some specialist background knowledge with the writer, as opposed to the everyday common knowledge of the layperson. Several of the adults in this study explicitly recognized the difference between technical vocabulary and everyday non-specialist terms, referring to such lexical items as 'special' words, for example:

Teacher (with Aiden): Can you remember that special word I used before? He was singing a **lullaby**, wasn't he?

Mother (with Sophie): *There's a special thing that some animals do called **hibernating** where they sleep all winter long.*

methodology

The participants in this study were 24 four-year-old children, 12 of whom were recorded sharing two picture books one-to-one with their teacher in the

preschool, and 12 of whom were recorded sharing the same two picture books with their mother in their home. The children differed according to parental education: 12 of the children's mothers were tertiary educated, and 12 of the children's mothers left school at or before reaching 16 years of age. The preschool teachers were all tertiary qualified. All participants spoke English as their first language. Specifically, there were the following four groups of participants:

- Group 1:* Six early-school-leaving mothers reading with their children in the home.
- Group 2:* Six teachers reading with children of early-school-leaving mothers in the preschool.
- Group 3:* Six teachers reading with children of tertiary-educated mothers in the preschool.
- Group 4:* Six tertiary-educated mothers reading with their children in the home.

The adults in each dyad read two picture books to the child: a narrative text and an informational text. The narrative text was *The Baby who Wouldn't Go to Bed* (1996), written and illustrated by Helen Cooper, and the informational text was *Sleepy Book* (Zolotow and Bobri, 1958) by Charlotte Zolotow, illustrated by Vladimir Bobri. The two genres were included because, apart from the grammatical and semantic differences expected from the different generic structures of the texts, it was also expected that they would elicit different responses from the adult and child readers (Pappas, 1993). Each reading session was audio-recorded by the teachers and mothers, at the location where the reading took place (in the child's home or in the preschool, according to whether the mother or teacher was reading) at a time convenient to the participants. In order to enhance the naturalness and spontaneity of the interactions, no researchers were present during the readings. The audiotapes were transcribed by an experienced linguist and the exchanges were divided into messages (similar to clauses), following the practice of several large scale studies by educational linguists (Hasan, 1992; Williams, 1995). Following this, instances where technical vocabulary was introduced were located in the transcripts and catalogued, and their linguistic features noted.

the analytical framework

In this study, the focus is on the role played by language in socializing very young children into an emergent understanding of some of the features of the discourse patterns of technical disciplines. The informing theoretical framework is provided by systemic functional grammar, developed primarily by Halliday (1994). This approach has been employed widely by educators, and indeed forms the basis of the *English K-6 Syllabus* for New South Wales public

schools. According to this approach, language is seen as a functional and creative resource, a system of choices rather than a system of rules. Language enables speakers to make sense of their environment (the *experiential* function of language), to establish and maintain relationships with others (the *interpersonal* function of language), and to combine these meanings into cohesive text (the *textual* function of language). The choices speakers make are systematic and motivated by contextual factors, thus the theory allows researchers to analyse language patterns in terms of the specific contexts in which the language is used. The system is recognized as being tri-stratal, consisting of systems of sounds (phonology), wording (lexicogrammar), and meaning (semantics). The overall system of language is then anchored in the contexts of immediate situation and wider culture.

the findings

1. amount of talk during shared reading

In order to contextualize the findings which are reported below, it is necessary to point out how different the four groups of participants were, in terms of the extent to which they interacted during the reading of the picture books. Table 1 sets out the total number of messages produced (excluding the object texts) by the four groups of dyads.

It is clear from Table 1 that Group 4 dyads, comprising the tertiary-educated mothers reading with their children in their homes, engaged in far more talk during shared reading (2102 messages), than did the Group 1 dyads of early-school-leaving mothers reading with their children (416 messages). In other words, the early-school-leaving mothers read the text through, usually without pausing for discussion about the meanings conveyed by the pictures and written text. This contrasted greatly with the tertiary-educated mothers and children, who frequently engaged in extended conversations around the text.

table 1 total number and average messages produced during shared reading with adults and children

	Total messages	Average per dyad
Group 1: Early-school-leaving mothers reading with their children	416	69
Group 2: Teachers reading with children of early-school-leaving mothers	1312	218
Group 3: Teachers reading with children of tertiary-educated mothers	1569	261
Group 4: Tertiary-educated mothers reading with their children	2102	350

Several large quantitative studies have also found differences in the amount of speech addressed to children in different socioeconomic groups (Hart and Risley, 1995; Weizman and Snow, 2001).

This finding is an important starting point for the following discussion of technical terminology because there is a relationship between the amount of conversation which adults and children engage in, the development of vocabulary, and children's later literacy achievement (Snow et al., 1998).

2. number of technical vocabulary items introduced during shared reading

Not surprisingly, in the light of the differences in amount of talk described above, there were great differences in the extent to which the participants introduced and discussed technical vocabulary during their shared readings. Table 2 details the approximate number of times a technical term was used in the conversations of each of the four groups.

This finding again reflects the pattern identified in Table 1, with striking differences in the number of times technical vocabulary was used by the tertiary-educated mothers and their children (33 instances) and the early-school-leaving mothers and their children (two instances). The two groups of teacher-child dyads were very similar to each other (20 and 21 instances, respectively) and were unlike both groups of mothers in this respect.

table 2 total number of technical vocabulary items used by each group of dyads

	Total technical terms used
Group 1: Early-school-leaving mothers reading with their children	2
Group 2: Teachers reading with children of early-school-leaving mothers	20
Group 3: Teachers reading with children of tertiary-educated mothers	21
Group 4: Tertiary-educated mothers reading with their children	33

3. pedagogical strategies used by the adults to support children's learning of technical vocabulary

During the course of each reading session, some readers (tertiary-educated mothers or teachers) took opportunities afforded by the visual and verbal texts to introduce new words or concepts or to reinforce the child's existing knowledge. In this section, we describe the different strategies employed by the adult readers to introduce and scaffold the children's learning of technical vocabulary.

The use of the word 'strategy' is in some respects problematic, however, as it implies a conscious didactic intention on the part of the speakers. This was not

the case. Our goal was to capture the natural, unselfconscious patterns of talk between the adults and children, to explore how they alerted the children to the layers of meaning encompassed in the 'special' words they encountered and explicitly drew attention to. We identified six different strategies which were used to foreground technical lexis. These strategies differed from each other in terms of the extent to which explicit explanation and comment accompanied the use of the technical term. As will be seen in the following examples, some strategies are heavily dependent on language which is relatively complex and abstract, while other strategies are more anchored in the here-and-now experiences of the young child. The strategies differ in the extent to which they provide supportive information about the meaning and use of the technical word.

strategy 1: Introduce a technical term while discussing what can be observed in the picture, without offering a defining comment or explicitly drawing attention to the technical term.

Here the child must construe the meaning of the word from the context, without any explicit verbal explanation or comment. The implication appears to be that technical language is within the grasp of the child and that its use does not require explicit explanation. Alternatively, the adult may know that the child is already familiar with the term receptively, and simply wishes to reinforce its meaning and contexts of appropriate use. Or it may be a reflection of the adult's own unconscious knowledge of vocabulary and wish to use words precisely and meaningfully.

Please note that in the following examples, the actual read text is in capital letters, the spoken text is in italics, and the technical term is in bold font.

- Byron: *That's his mummy.*
Mother: *Was it?*
Byron: *Mm.*
Mother: (reading) GETTING NEARER AND NEARER AND NEARER ALL THE TIME.
Byron: *See, his mummy.*
Mother: *I can only see her **silhouette**. Let's see what's on the next page.*
- Teacher: *Do you think it's hot on the ice? I think it might be cold.
But I think his body's specially made so it's got **blubber** inside to keep him warm.*
- Tom: *Think . . . I think that's ice.*
Teacher: *Mm this is ice too. There's lots and lots of ice where the seal lives there.*

It is important to note here that this was the *only* strategy identified in the corpus of early-school-leaving mothers and children (Group 1), and that there were only two occurrences in the total corpus. For this reason, we have provided both examples below. It can be seen that the speakers have not

provided any clues or other supportive strategies to foster their children's understanding of the technical term. In the second example below, the talk about a cocoon is descriptive and relates to the picture, rather than constituting a more general exploration of cocoons and their characteristics and function.

- Mother: (reading) BUT IT'S STILL LIGHT. BUT IT'S SUMMER SAID THE MOTHER.
 Mother: *That sounds like you, doesn't it? Remember the other day I told you about **daylight saving**?*
 Peter: (no response)
 Mother: continues reading.
- Mother: (reading) CATERPILLARS SLEEP IN THEIR SILKY COCOONS.
 Mother: *See his **cocoon**?*
 Rory: *Yeah. Oh they're not . . . oh that was the **cocoon**.*
 Mother: *Yeah. It's a **cocoon**. Oh see and it's all attached to the stems of the trees.*
 Rory: *Oh yeah.*
 Mother: continues reading.

strategy 2: Relate the word to the child's personal situation and use it in context.

This strategy draws on the shared background knowledge of the adult and child, and explicitly makes a connection between the word and the child's personal experiences. This strategy was employed by both groups of teachers, and the tertiary-educated mothers. There were no instances of this strategy from the early-school-leaving mothers.

- Mother: (reading) WE'LL PLAY YOU A LULLABY.
 Mother: *What's a **lullaby**? Can you sing a **lullaby**?*
 Rosie: *Yeah.*
 Mother: *Which one? Help you go to sleep? If I sing a **lullaby** will you go to sleep?*
- Teacher: (reading) BUT IT'S STILL LIGHT. BUT IT'S SUMMER SAID THE MOTHER.
 Teacher: *Do you know what happens in summer time? Do you know why it stays light longer in summer time, doesn't it? Because of **daylight saving**. Cause it's still light even after sometimes after we eat our dinner.*
 Daniel: makes no response.

strategy 3: Juxtapose an informal 'commonsense' term with a more technically accurate term, but without any additional explanation of the word meaning.

By using this strategy, the adult is building on the child's contribution and providing a technical term which is more precise and specific in representing the phenomenon under discussion. This strategy occurred almost exclusively in the talk of the tertiary-educated mothers and their children. It was rare in the

teacher-child discourse and there were no examples from the early-school-leaving mothers and children.

Alexandra: *What's that?*

Mother: *I think it's the sun setting maybe.*

Alexandra: *Yeah, cause I think those . . . um . . . things go along the sun.*

Mother: *Yeah, it's a **reflection** isn't it?*

Phoebe: *You can't . . . you can't . . . you can't see them very well, cause they're really hiding.*

Mother: *They are. They hide. They've got good **camouflage**, haven't they?*

strategy 4: Juxtapose an informal 'commonsense' term with a more technically precise term, with some explanation for the phenomenon under discussion.

This strategy was used regularly by both groups of teacher-child dyads and by the tertiary-educated mothers and their children. There were no examples by the early-school-leaving mothers. This strategy suggests an analytical orientation towards language, making children conscious of words and their meanings. As it relies on formal explanations, the language is playing a greater role in the introduction of the technical term compared with the previous strategies.

Mother: *It looks a bit like grass, doesn't it? He lives in grass, he looks like grass. That's called **camouflage**. That's so animals don't eat him.*

Phoebe: (no response).

Teacher: *Sometimes the **dew** that we get that falls at night time. Dew is just like little **droplets** of water. It doesn't . . . it's not raining, it's just the **moisture** in the air.*

Byron: *Mmm.*

Teacher: *Actually owls are one of those funny creatures we call a **nocturnal** animal. He stays awake during the night time. And he's got really really big, very clever eyes. And he can see little animals. Little mice and things he catches at night time. So they tend to do most of their sleeping during the day time, owls. That's why we don't see owls a lot during the day time.*

Byron: (no response).

Mother: *There's a special thing that some animals do called **hibernating**, where they sleep all winter long and then in the spring time they wake up. There's a few animals that **hibernate**.*

Sam: (no response).

Mother: *And that's where bears sleep all winter . . . they don't come out at all. Did you know that?*

Sam: *Never?*

Mother: *Not in the winter time. They . . . that's called **hibernation**.*

Sam: *When do they come out?*

Mother: *Springtime.*

strategy 5: Ask for or provide a synonym that is more technical than the initial term.

This strategy is entirely limited to the verbal exchange of information. The strategy was used quite rarely, with only a few examples from the corpora of the teacher-child dyads and the tertiary-educated mother-child dyads. There were no examples from the early-school-leaving mothers and their children.

Mother: *What's another word for pictures?*

Phoebe: **Illustrator.**

Teacher: *Do you know the name of his cage?*

Kate: *Mm, **hutch?***

Teacher: *Yeah.*

strategy 6: Ask for or provide a formal definition that does not refer specifically to the child's own personal experiences but does draw on shared background knowledge.

This strategy occurred in the talk of both groups of teachers and the tertiary-educated mothers. There were no examples in the readings of early-school-leaving mothers and their children. Like strategy 5 above, this strategy is entirely dependent on the use of language to exchange information, but the grammar is more complex than in the strategy above as it consists of a superordinate term followed by an embedded clause, which contains defining information. Such structures typically emerge in children's language at around five years (Painter, 1999). By using this strategy, the adult is providing a model for producing formal definitions, consisting of a superordinate term with a defining relative clause. According to Snow et al. (1989), 'the ability to give a formal definition of a word, while it may reflect no greater knowledge about the word's meaning than using the word correctly in a variety of sentences, or talking about the real-world referent of the word, nonetheless predicts better to reading skills and to "literacy" in general' (p. 234), as it requires one to reflect on language and meaning.

Karen: **Lullaby?** *What's a lullaby?*

Mother: *Like Rock a Bye Baby. You know, a soft song that makes you fall asleep. They're musicians so they play music, so they play soft sleepy music instead of having dancey party music. So they say it's time for bed.*

Teacher: *What's a **depot?***

Alexandra: *Where the trains sleep.*

Teacher: *Is that where the train goes to after it's finished working for the day?*

Mother: *I don't know what that is.*

Karen: *And they are rocks.*

Mother: *And **coal**.*

Karen: *Where's **coal**?*

Mother: ***Coal** is what trains carry sometimes and they burn **coal** to get **energy** to make the train move.*

discussion

In this study we have explored how, during shared picture book reading, mothers and teachers scaffold new technical vocabulary, making it engaging and meaningful to very young children and potentially fostering in children an interest in words and an awareness of subtle differences in word meaning. The tertiary educated mothers and preschool teachers used a range of strategies to introduce and facilitate children's learning of technical vocabulary, which is important for future literacy achievements in formal schooling.

The findings have highlighted the fact that children whose mothers differ in terms of formal education engage in very different language experiences in their homes, even when they are ostensibly doing the same activity; that is, reading picture books. In the context of this study, where mothers were simply asked to read two picture books to their children, the adult readers were likely to formulate the experience in a particular way, depending on their contextual relationship to the child. For the teachers, the fact that they are at preschool in a formal educational environment and have received explicit training in pedagogy impacts on the way they conduct the reading session. For the mothers, the time of day that the reading takes place, and other situational factors, including their intimate relationship with the child, all have implications for the way they approach the task of reading with their children. It is likely that the mothers who seldom read to their children may have formulated the session as an exercise to be completed. This formulation is clear in some of the early-school-leaving mother-child dyads, through the use of procedural language. For example, some mothers began by saying *OK first one*, they then read the story through virtually without interruption, and then concluded by saying *OK finished, next one*.

It was noted above that there was little quantitative difference between the two groups of teacher-child dyads. This is perhaps not surprising, as the teachers are professionally positioned to treat reading sessions in ways that the mothers do not, regardless of educational background. This finding also points to the benefits of attending preschool, however, particularly for children of early-school-leaving mothers. Essentially, the preschool context is a socializing context for children, apprenticing them into the discourses of early primary school. While it may be true that the children of tertiary-educated mothers can be exposed to such discourses at home, it is also true that the children of early-school-leaving mothers are very unlikely to experience these discourses until

they begin formal schooling, unless they attend preschool. This raises the issue of whether preschool should be a compulsory step in the schooling process.

In this study, we have reported on a specific aspect of the teachers' and mothers' language practices. In a further study, based on the same data, we will be investigating such issues as how the teachers in particular make use of opportunities in the text and in the talk around the text to help develop the children's knowledge and understanding of the world through intertextual reference. We also intend to investigate the mothers' and teachers' attitudes towards literacy and how they compare with the ideology of education that informs the NSW English K-6 Syllabus.

The findings have implications for the differences in reading achievement that have been noted in all western countries, where children from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to experience lack of success in formal schooling. The experiences of the first five years of life are crucial to later developmental outcomes, so the more that preschool teachers understand about the home literacy practices of the children in their care, the more they will be able to tailor their literacy programmes to build on what children already know. It is critically important to provide children of early-school-leaving mothers with the opportunity to develop their lexical repertoires to include unusual, sophisticated, technical vocabulary, and one highly effective way to do this is through frequent relaxed, enjoyable, one-to-one shared reading experiences with a favourite preschool teacher who is sensitive to the strategies for facilitating the learning of new words.

acknowledgements

This research was funded by a Macquarie University Research Grant. The authors gratefully acknowledge the participation of the teachers, mothers and children.

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