



Text matters: Exploring the lexical reservoirs of books in preschool rooms



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ABSTRACT

Picture book reading is a well-documented mechanism for enhancing the language and vocabulary of preschool-aged children. However, the robust line of research supporting it contains few studies that give attention to books and the degree to which they offer rare words (i.e., lexical reservoirs). This exploratory text analysis had three purposes (a) to examine the lexical reservoirs of books; (b) to compare the lexical pitch of books to other language samples; and (c) to create clustered lists of highly recommended, high-vocabulary books. Text samples were extracted from over 100 books found in 3-year-old rooms in a range of early childhood instructional settings. On average text samples from books possessed at least three words in their lexical reservoirs and only 19% of samples did not contain reservoirs. A modified replication of the Hayes and Ahrens (1988) lexical pitch study revealed that the pitch of language samples from books found in 3-year-old rooms was quite similar to that of adults' speech. Lastly, a cluster analysis showed that while a sizeable group of books were both recommended and contained text samples with lexically rich words, many were neither recommended nor lexically rich. Although there are many purposes for book reading and many excellent books, the materials found available for vocabulary learning can be enhanced. Implications for practice are shared.

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By the time that they are three years old, children show markedly different levels of vocabulary knowledge, differences that are influenced by both the quantity and quality of words to which they are exposed (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005; Weizman & Snow, 2001). For young children, picture book reading, in its many styles and forms, is a well-documented mechanism for enhancing language and vocabulary (Bus, Jzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993; Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009; Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Whitehurst et al., 1999). Yet, there are many lingering questions about the nature of the books available to young children and the potential of these books to fuel vocabulary learning.

Increasingly researchers are focusing on the features of books and, in fact, van Kleeck (2003) declared this to be an ignored dimension in the adult-child-book triad, as have other researchers (DeTemple & Snow, 2003; Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, 2003; Teale, 2003; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). Although researchers frequently target vocabulary as an outcome in studies, they rarely give attention to the nature of the words in books

(Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Swanson et al., 2011; van Kleeck, Vander Woude, & Hammett, 2006; Wasik & Bond, 2001). This is quite interesting considering that the words in books, the creative ways they are put together, and the illustrations are the features that make books different from the toys, food, household items, or people that are the focus of enriching adult-child interactions. The text of books possess *lexical reservoirs*, rare, uncommon words that can advance children's vocabulary (DeTemple & Snow, 2003). At some level the presence of lexical reservoirs and the engagingness of the picture books in which they are found will influence the adult-child-book interaction that can lead to vocabulary development.

The role of the book in the preschool read aloud triad

The study aimed to contribute to a larger body of work examining the many elements of picture book reading. Although this is a study of books, it would be misleading not to acknowledge that the book is only one part of an interactive triad including the adult reading the book, the child participating, and the book itself (Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Martinez & Roser, 1985; van Kleeck, 2003). While adults read the words in books, they also enhance the experience by highlighting new words, asking questions, expanding utterances, explaining vocabulary, or engaging in different types of

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extratextual talk (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Dickinson & Keebler, 1989; Ehri & Robbins, 1994; Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996; Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Price, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009; Reese & Cox, 1999; Sénéchal, 1997; Whitehurst et al., 1988, 1999; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The actions of adults may be limited or enhanced by the nature of the words in books; research shows that different types of talk and rare words are generated by texts of different genres or levels of familiarity to readers (Crain-Thoreson, Dahlin, & Powell, 2001; Sorsby & Martlew, 1991; Weizman & Snow, 2001).

When children participate in picture book readings, both their expressive and receptive vocabulary learning are impacted (Bus et al., 1995; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009; Mol et al., 2009; van Kleeck et al., 2006). However, effect sizes for the impact of picture book reading on expressive and receptive vocabulary range considerably and this range might be attributable to the books read and words in them. Relevant to an analysis of the words in books, is an understanding of the importance of rare words for children at the developmental stage of interest in the study—36–48 months. In order to expand their vocabularies, most normally developing 3–4-year-olds will need language interactions that introduce rare words to them, the kind of which frequently occur in books. Developmentally, 3-year-olds are coming out of the *word explosion* period, a time in which they have rapidly acquired many of the most common words in their language communities (Benedict, 1979; Dromi, 1996; Hart, 1991; Lenneberg, 1967; Lust, 2006). Following the word explosion, they add to their vocabularies by encountering words that diverge from the most common (Carey, 1978; DeTemple & Snow, 2003; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Exposure to rare words in the classroom, either through teacher talk or picture book reading has both immediate effects on children's expressive and receptive language as well as long-term effects on their comprehension and vocabulary (Bus et al., 1995; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009; Mol et al., 2009; van Kleeck et al., 2006).

The picture book is a mechanism for introducing rare, uncommon words, a fact that justifies further analysis of it. In this study, the term “book” refers to picture books that contain illustrations or photographs to compliment the text. In many studies, book reading has, in fact, promoted adult language that is more enriching than language used during play and mealtimes. For example researchers recorded book readings and found the mean length of utterance and levels of abstraction higher during book reading than other events (Crain-Thoreson et al., 2001; Sorsby & Martlew, 1991). Weizman and Snow (2001) contrasted the talk between low-income mothers and their children in different scenarios: toy play, magnet play, mealtime, information book reading, and storybook reading, and found that both books and accompanying conversations generated the highest density of new word learning opportunities (rare word types) when compared to toy play, magnet play or mealtime events.

Both books and other objects of joint attention (e.g., toys, events, and field trips) serve as language catalysts that can influence young children (Beals & Tabors, 1995; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Snow, 1993). However, research has rarely given attention to the driving force in any vocabulary interaction—the words. It is the exact words used and the nature of the language itself in either books or conversations that is influencing children. Further analyzing the text of books available is important because books serve as an accessible language catalyst and some books may be better suited to a vocabulary purpose than others.

The current literature on the topic is indeed lacking but literature in the following areas was reviewed: (a) the nature of lexical reservoirs in picture books (i.e., rare words); (b) lexical pitch: how the language of books compares to other sources of language enrichment; and (c) book quality. Although the focus of the study was analyzing the books for rare words, access to those words is enhanced and facilitated by high-quality, appropriate books that

engage children and so methods for estimating book quality were reviewed.

The nature of lexical reservoirs in picture books

One reason that picture book reading has the potential to impact vocabulary knowledge is that, in general, the text of books is found to be denser with uncommon words than other language sources (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988; Neuman, 1996; Snow, 1991; Weizman & Snow, 2001). DeTemple and Snow (2003) called uncommon words in books *lexical reservoirs*. They are collections of words representing a small fraction of the text that if extracted, discussed, and described, could vertically advance a child's word learning. Lexical reservoirs introduce an array of objects, actors, and ideas that might not naturally occur in a child's daily life, things like exotic animals, different foods, or diverse cultures.

Studies show that not all books are equivalent with respect to lexical reservoirs. Beals and Tabors (1995) contrasted the reservoirs in five adult-child interactions: (a) reading a book of choice; (b) reading the *Very Hungry Caterpillar*; (c) mealtimes; (d) toy play; and (e) a report of a recent event. As a total percentage of words used, the adult language generated during book readings accounted for both the highest and the lowest proportions of rare words (25.8% for the book of choice and 10.0% for the *Very Hungry Caterpillar*). Weizman and Snow (2001) separated word types that were strictly generated by the mother from word types supplied by the book and in so doing verified that the expository book was contributing more word learning opportunities than the narrative text, a finding that suggests that books can and do differ with respect to the lexical reservoirs offered. Although these studies have captured the sizes of the lexical reservoirs, deeper analysis of the words is not available. We know little about how difficult these words are or exactly how rare they may be. There appear to be several variables that may influence the learning of these words including their difficulty, the parts of speech, and their rareness comparatively.

The first variable, size of lexical reservoir, is important because books with larger lexical reservoirs introduce children to more uncommon words than books with smaller lexical reservoirs. In addition to the lexical reservoir size is the difficulty of a particular word. It is possible that the words in a reservoir may differ in terms of the ease with which children may acquire them. Two frameworks for estimating difficulty were used Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002, 2008) Word Tiers and Biemiller and Slonim's (2001) Living Word Vocabulary (LWV) ratings. The Word Tiers framework is a conceptual approach to difficulty that identifies words as belonging to one of the following three tiers: (a) Tier 1—common, frequently-used words that do not require vocabulary instruction; (b) Tier 2—words common for mature language users found across domains (e.g., splendid, muttered); and (c) Tier 3—domain-specific words that do not appear in multiple contexts (e.g., horseshoe and intestine) (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Beck et al., 2002, 2008). Tier-2 words are words for which the learner has a ready synonym and thus are easier to teach. When adult readers recognize a Tier-2 word, they might say something like, “Sob—sob means to cry but to cry a lot, really loudly, often for a long time.” Tier-3 words require the construction of a new schemata and teaching them usually requires examples, extended descriptions, illustrations, or drawings. Planned attention to the development of Tier-3 words is needed across days or weeks (Beck & McKeown, 2001). The LWV is an inventory of 17,570-words which provides the grade level at which the meaning of a word was known by 65–80% of children (i.e., 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, or 12) (Biemiller, 2005; Biemiller & Slonim, 2001). For example, a level-4 word was known about 65–80% of fourth graders. The LWV rating is particularly useful for comparing words

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