

Promoting Vocabulary Growth for English Language Learners

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A disproportionate percentage of Latino children, the largest and fastest increasing minority group in the U.S. (Garcia & Miller, 2008), are growing up in low-income families where English is not the primary language (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2015; Mancilla-Martinez & Vagh, 2013). Despite many national initiatives, children from low-income, non-English speaking households continue to be at risk for academic difficulties (Hindman, Skibbe, Miller, & Zimmerman, 2010; Hoff, 2013). An initial delay in English language development places many children on a trajectory for poor performance in school, as proficiency in the language of instruction correlates strongly with academic achievement (Scheffner-Hammer et al., 2014; Townsend, Filippini, Collins, & Biancarosa, 2012). In addition, children's vocabulary skills are highly correlated with their reading skills (Cain & Oakhill, 2014; Li & Kirby). The current study examined a potential means of addressing early gaps in language development by considering the differential impact of the instructional quality and emotional climate of Head Start classrooms in promoting language gains for English language learners and their English-speaking peers.

Many studies suggest that explicit instruction and exposure to sophisticated language in the classroom play a key role in shaping language development (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Snow, 2014). However, the emotional quality of teacher-child interactions is also influential. Hamre and Pianta (2005) observed that children categorized as high-risk for academic failure placed in highly emotionally supportive classrooms performed com-

mensurate to their low risk peers. Furthermore, Lopez (2012), in a study of high school students, reported that the largest gains in reading scores for low-income English language learners came in classes rated high in both emotional support and instructional support. Interestingly, in the classroom with the most linguistic diversity, emotional support predicted performance more than any specific instructional measure. The present study examined the complex associations between instructional quality and emotional support in predicting vocabulary development for a sample of Latino English language learners and classrooms. Regard for student perspective captures teachers' respect for child autonomy and consideration for children's thoughts and opinions. We assessed children's receptive (understanding) and expressive (spoken) vocabulary as our outcome measures.

There are two particularly noteworthy findings from the current study. First, both English language learners and native English speakers benefitted similarly from instructional quality in the classroom. Regardless of whether children were second language learners or native speakers, we did not observe a differential association between instructional quality and vocabulary outcomes. These findings suggest that educators should continue to employ strategies of language modeling, concept development, and quality feedback to all children. Second, emotional support played an important role in the associations between instructional quality and vocabulary outcomes for all children. Specifically, in classrooms with high emotional support, children's expressive vocabulary development benefited most from teachers' provision of concept development and language modeling.

The findings from this study suggest a balance must be struck between provision of emotional support and instruction in the preschool classroom to best promote the language development of English language learners and native English speakers. All children, regardless of whether English is their native language, can benefit from interactions with adult speakers. In conversation, teachers and parents can expose children to new words and ideas. Use the words children already know to scaffold their knowledge of new words. Take advantage of daily living opportunities. For example, if a child mentions that it is raining. A parent could say, "Did you know another word for rain is precipitation?" Retention of new words can be bolstered by drawing explicit connections to the real world and children's past experiences. After exposing a child to the word 'precipitation,' parents could ask, "Do you think you'll need a raincoat today? Let's check to see if there will be any precipitation today." Then, parents can use a weather app or turn on the weather channel and show children how meteorologists talk about and predict precipitation. In these interactions, parents should seek to engage in responsive and sensitive conversational exchanges. Encourage parents to answer children's questions and avoid minimizing children's thoughts and queries.

Overall, all children benefit from exposure to language in the context of sensitive and responsive exchanges. Educators and parents should seek to engage in responsive, warm and conversationally oriented interactions with children to best promote vocabulary acquisition.

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