

Learning new words through play

Research suggests that children learn vocabulary just as effectively through play as through shared book reading

by [Aisha Schnellmann](#)
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Children who enter first grade equipped with a stronger vocabulary often go on to become better readers than their peers. To prepare children for school, more and more preschools are cutting back on play-based learning in favor of teacher-led academic activities designed to teach vocabulary. In other words, there is more shared book reading and less guided play. But research suggests that learning in a playful context is also an effective tool for vocabulary acquisition.

According to research by a team from Temple University, the University of Delaware, and Vanderbilt University, children can learn words just as effectively through playful activities as through shared book reading. In the “Language for Reading” project, the research team spent a year working with ten Head Start teachers in two preschools in Philadelphia and Nashville. Together, they compared how well 3- and 4-year-olds learned new words through shared book reading and through guided play activities.

“The ultimate goal of the project was to collaborate with the preschool teachers in designing a classroom intervention that would help teach vocabulary. Most prior research on teaching vocabulary has focused on shared book reading, which is still the most common approach. We wanted to see how well learning through play would match up,” explained [Emily Hopkins](#), lead author of the research.

All learners participated in four shared book reading sessions and four guided play sessions per 4-week curriculum unit, with each curriculum unit teaching a set of 20 difficult words. In total, four curriculum units were taught over the course of one year. A different set of target vocabulary words was assigned to each session so that the children learned some words entirely through shared book readings and others entirely through play.

“New research suggests that there are no significant differences between the vocabulary gains achieved through shared book reading and those achieved through play.”

In the reading sessions, the texts of selected commercially available children’s books were modified to include the target vocabulary words. Teachers were instructed to read these books to their classes, pausing to review the definition of target words as they came across them in the text. They might also ask questions about these words or use gestures to illustrate their meaning.

The guided play sessions introduced new target vocabulary words through a variety of play

activities. The project used five such activities, which were designed to provide opportunities for teachers to review the target vocabulary words during the sessions:

- Games played with the entire class, modelled on classic children's games such as "Hot Potato"
- Games, such as board games, played by 3 to 5 children at a time
- Children acting out stories with the help of puppets
- Sing-alongs
- A digital storybook game

The team of researchers made sure that the level of exposure to words was consistent in the shared book reading sessions and the playful activities. "Whether they were reading or engaging in a playful activity, the children would be given a definition of the target word, and then gain a better understanding of its meaning by hearing it in context or seeing it illustrated," elaborated Hopkins.

After each four-week curriculum unit, the children were tested on their receptive and expressive vocabulary. For one unit, about five months after the immediate test was taken, their knowledge was tested again. The results showed that while the children benefited from both approaches, there were no significant differences between the vocabulary gains achieved through shared book reading and those achieved through play.

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"Since both approaches are equally effective at teaching vocabulary, teachers can choose the approach and activities that work best for them – for their classroom and teaching style – and adapt them to achieve the relevant learning goals. What is most important is that children are active and engaged in the activity," explained Hopkins.

Consequently, an emphasis on school readiness in preschools does not necessarily mean that preschools have to choose between play and teacher-led academic activities. Instead, when used effectively, playful learning can be one more tool that teachers can use to nurture early vocabulary development in preschoolers, thereby helping them develop into better readers.

Editor's note: At the time of this blog post's publication, the described research is in preparation. It was presented at the [Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development](#) in March 2019.

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