Session 5

Teaching Vocabulary with the Reducing Choices Strategy

Rumor has it that Dr. Seuss' publisher bet $50 that Seuss could not write a book using only 50 different words. Seuss met that bet with Green Eggs and Ham, one of Seuss' Beginning Books.

Learning Objectives

◊ **Review** the terms receptive vocabulary and expressive vocabulary, and **define** the terms high-support strategy and reducing choices strategy.

◊ **Demonstrate** use of the reducing choices strategy when teaching vocabulary.

◊ **Analyze** children's responses to the reducing choices strategy in a vocabulary activity.

◊ **Reflect** on how the reducing choices strategy can be used in your classroom to improve children's vocabulary.

◊ **Describe** how the reducing choices strategy can be used to address all four *Read It Again–PreK!* domains.

Overview

Vocabulary development is an important aspect of children's language and literacy learning during the preschool years. We discussed in Session 3 the following points about vocabulary development:

• Vocabulary describes children's receptive and expressive lexicon of words. The word *lexicon* refers to the mental dictionary of all known words that reside in the child's brain. (Of course, adults have a mental dictionary too, but in this lesson we are focused on children's lexicons.)

• One's mental dictionary includes not only the words we express when talking (our expressive vocabulary) but also all the words we understand (our receptive vocabulary).

• Children's vocabulary development begins very early in life. Early vocabulary development happens fast and can be considered one of the most remarkable achievements of early childhood.

• Early childhood educators need to ensure that they expose the children in their classrooms to a large quantity and quality of words.

Children enter our classrooms with a wide range of vocabulary abilities. Some children have remarkably large vocabularies, whereas other children have quite limited vocabularies. There are many possible explanations for these differences among children. In this session we focus our attention on supporting children with limited vocabularies who are having a difficult time learning new words. Some reasons why children might have a difficult time learning new words include the presence of a language disorder, limited English proficiency, chronic hearing problems, and problems processing information.

Regardless as to why a child is experiencing difficulty learning new words, early childhood educators can make a difference by intentionally supporting the child's developing vocabulary knowledge in the classroom. The educator must provide extra support that will help the struggling child to learn and use new words. We can think of this support as gentle nudges we might provide a child who is climbing up a ladder. Children who are at the bottom of the ladder may need special types of nudges compared to children who are near the top of the ladder. These nudges, or supports, must take into account ways in which children build a base of knowledge step-by-step or rung-by-rung.

In this session, we focus on children who are taking their first steps up a learning ladder. They need high-support strategies, which are designed to give a lot of support to children who find learning new words difficult. **High-support strategies** help children to successfully participate in lessons that may be difficult for them. Over time, children will improve their vocabulary skills and move towards the top of the ladder.

Throughout the remainder of the sessions in this workbook we will be addressing six types of support strategies that have been adapted from the *Ladders to Literacy* framework (O'Connor, Notar-Syverson, & Vadasy, 2005). In the *Read It Again–PreK!* manual we refer to high-support strategies as *Too Hard Strategie*s, as these are used when children find an activity too hard at the moment. In this chapter we discuss the reducing choices strategy. Other high-support strategies we will address in subsequent sessions include co-participation and eliciting. In later sessions we also describe three types of low-support strategies (also called *Too Easy Strategies*, as they are used when children find an activity too easy at the moment). The low-support strategies we will address in later chapters include reasoning, generalizing, and predicting.

The Reducing Choices Strategy

The high-support strategy we address in this session is **reducing choices**. We use this strategy to teach new words to children who have limited vocabularies and are experiencing difficulties participating in vocabulary lessons.

With the reducing choices strategy, the teacher asks a child to answer a question and gives the child two or three choices to select from.
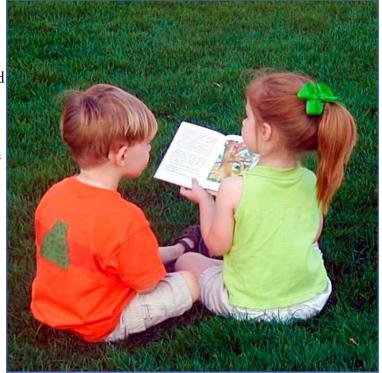
By limiting the number of options the child has to choose from, the teacher helps to focus the child's attention on the correct answer and increases the likelihood that the child can successfully participate in the activity. Therefore, the child is able to participate in an activity that may otherwise be too challenging. In this way, the child is provided the support he or she needs to move up the ladder of learning. This strategy helps the child move from the first to the second rung on the ladder toward success. Let's look at an example:

> *Teacher*: I'm looking for the picture on this page of a **racket**. Is this a **racket** (points to a picture of a tennis racket) or is this a **racket** (points to the picture of a tennis ball)?
>
> *Child*: That one (points to the picture of a racket).
>
> *Teacher*: You are right, that's the **racket**. Let's say it together…**racket**.

Notice that, in this example, the teacher provides two choices: the correct answer and an incorrect answer. The teacher then repeats and expands the child's correct response. It is important that the correct answer is always provided for the child, whether it is in the form of an adult correction, or a repetition of the child's correct response.

Let's look at another example.

> *Teacher*: Let's think of something you have seen that is **huge**. I bet we all have seen lots of different sizes of cars and trucks. Emory, which is **huge** – an 18-wheeler truck or a motorcycle?

In the above example, the teacher is trying to teach the child the new word *huge*. She realizes that Emory is not going to be able to complete the task – which is to name something that is huge. To help Emory, she reduces the range of response options to two – an 18-wheeler truck or a motorcycle – so that Emory can complete the task successfully on her own.

Session 5

Terms and Background Knowledge

Vocabulary

Lexicon – The total number of words one understands, also called one's mental dictionary.

Receptive vocabulary – The vocabulary words one understands or comprehends.

Expressive vocabulary – The vocabulary words one uses or expresses.

High-support strategy – A strategy that is required for tasks that are very difficult for the child and that he or she is far from being able to do on his or her own.

Reducing choices – A supportive strategy that helps children to complete a task by reducing the number of possible answers to a choice of one out of two or three.

Activity 1. Teacher Implementation of the Reducing Choices Strategy

As we think about using the reducing choices strategy, let's consider the way a teacher reduces choices for the children in her classroom during a vocabulary activity. Read this transcript of a classroom conversation.

Teacher: The book says that the bear **bellowed**, "Hooray!" What does it mean to bellow?

Rashaun: To say something.

Teacher: **Bellow** means to say something in a special way. When you **bellow**, you say something in a very loud voice. So when you **bellow**, would your voice be loud or soft?

Rashaun: Loud!

Teacher: That's right – loud. I'm sure we've all **bellowed** and used very loud voices sometimes. Would you **bellow** when you were on the playground or in the library?

Rashaun: The playground – it's loud out there.

Teacher: Yes, it is loud on the playground, that's the perfect place to **bellow**. When you are in the library, it is very quiet and **bellowing** would make too much noise!

Now, answer these questions about the preceding exchange.

How did the teacher know when it was necessary to use the reducing choices strategy?

Give an example of an instance when the teacher could have used the reducing choices strategy, but did not.

Give a specific example of an instance when the teacher did use the reducing choices strategy.

Describe the child's response to the teacher's use of the reducing choices strategy. Was the child able to successfully complete the task?

Compare the child's responses when the teacher did and did not use the reducing choices strategy. How did the child's responses differ?

Activity 2. Learners' Ladders

Review the strategy of reducing choices addressed in four *Read It Again–PreK!* Learners' Ladder Vocabulary Lessons. These lessons are:

- Learners' Ladder Lesson 9
- Learners' Ladder Lesson 21
- Learners' Ladder Lesson 25
- Learners' Ladder Lesson 41

Of these examples, which ones do you feel you use often in your daily instruction?

Next, review these two examples taken from Learners' Ladder Lesson 25.

Example 1:

Teacher: Think about when Katie Sue was **howling** at the other children. Did she **howl** at them when she was angry or happy?

Example 2:

Teacher: **Romping** means to run around and play. Would the children be **romping** around in the classroom or on the playground?

Reflect on these questions:

How should the teacher respond if the child provides an incorrect answer to her question?

Rewrite each of these examples so the teacher <u>does not</u> use the reducing choices strategy. Predict how a child with limited vocabulary knowledge would perform given these revised examples.

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Listen and Learn

Activity 3.

Turn on your DVD player and select **Session 5, Activity 3** from the RIA DVD menu. You will see a teacher reading a book to a group of children. Complete the activity as described below.

Watch this teacher use the reducing choices strategy to discuss new vocabulary with her students while reading *Rumble in the Jungle* by Giles Andreae and David Wojtowycz.

Answer these questions:

Which word was the teacher targeting?

_____

Describe the teacher's use of the reducing choices strategy.

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Describe how the children responded to this strategy.

_____

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Now, listen to what we have to say.

Turn on your DVD player and select **Session 5, Activity 3 Discussion** from the RIA DVD menu.

Activity 4.

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 5, Activity 4* from the RIA DVD menu. You will see a teacher reading a book to a group of children. Complete the activity as described below.

Watch this teacher use the reducing choices strategy to discuss new vocabulary with her students while reading the book *Clifford Goes to Dog School* by Norman Bridwell. After watching the video look at your copy of the book and answer the following questions.

Choose another word from the book that will most likely be new for your students.

Write down the exact language you could use to implement the reducing choices strategy when asking your students to identify the meaning of this new vocabulary word.

Now, listen to what we have to say.

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 5, Activity 4 Discussion* from the RIA DVD menu.

Activity 5.

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 5, Activity 5* from the RIA DVD menu. You will see a teacher reading a book to a group of children. Complete the activity as described below.

Watch this teacher use the strategy of reducing choices to discuss a different domain from that of vocabulary, namely phonological awareness, with her students while she is reading the text *Rumble in the Jungle* by Giles Andreae and David Wojtowycz. Make notes for yourself while considering these questions:

Which phonological awareness skill was the teacher targeting?

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What kind of language did the teacher use to reduce choices?

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How did the children respond to this strategy?

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Now, listen to what we have to say.

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 5, Activity 5 Discussion* from the RIA DVD menu.

Reflect and Apply

Reflect

1.   Think about a child in your classroom who is having difficulty acquiring new vocabulary. Write that child's name here: _____.

How often do you currently use the reducing choices strategy with this child when engaging in vocabulary instruction?

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 Do you think this child would benefit from more exposure to this strategy?

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2.   Look again at the reducing choices strategy as addressed in the *Read It Again–PreK!* Learners' Ladders. Do you use this strategy often in your classroom? Why or why not?

What could you do in your classroom this week to increase your use of this strategy?

3.   Read over this excerpt from the book *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain.

> I'm bouncing like a rubber ball.
> I'm more excited than I can say.
> It's really hard for me to sit.
> When I'd rather jump and play.

Next reflect on these questions:

How could this excerpt be used to teach children the meaning of the word *excited*? Give a specific example of what you might say or do to teach children the meaning of this word.

Are there children in your classroom who may have difficulty following what you say or do when trying to teach this concept?

If there are children who may have difficulty following what you say or do to teach this concept, describe how you could use the strategy of reducing choices to support their learning.

Apply

1.   Find a storybook in your classroom that has some interesting vocabulary words. Select a child to read with and pause while reading to discuss three interesting words in the book. Practice using the strategy of reducing choices to discuss these words with the child. What words did you use to apply this strategy? Did you feel that the vocabulary lesson detracted from your storybook reading session?

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2.   Gather a small group of children in your classroom who have a difficult time with vocabulary activities. Read a storybook to the children and pause, while reading, to ask the children about the meaning of three new vocabulary words within the text. First, deliver the activity without providing the high-support strategy of reducing choices. Note here how the children perform:

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Now read the text again, asking the children about the same three words using the high-support strategy of reducing choices. Note here how the children perform:

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3.   Let's try using the reducing choices strategy to teach phonological awareness. Gather a small group of children to read a book with you. Choose a book that contains several words that begin with the sound /s/. Before you start reading, tell the children to listen very carefully as you read to identify words that start with the /s/ sound. Read the book, keeping track of how many times the children correctly identify these words; do not prompt them in any way. How did the children do?

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Now read the book again, pausing at the end of every page that has a word starting with /s/. Say to the children, "Did you hear a word on this page that started with the /s/ sound? Was it _____ (name a word starting with /s/) or _____ (name a word starting with a different sound)?" How did the children do? Were they able to successfully identify some words that start with the sound /s/?

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Resources

Andreae, G., & Wojtowycz, D. (1996). *Rumble in the jungle.* New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.

Bridwell, N. (2002). *Clifford goes to dog school.* New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.

Cain, J. (2000). *The way I feel. Seattle*. WA: Parenting Press, Inc.

Conradt, S. *10 stories behind Dr. Seuss' stories.* Retrieved March 3, 2009, from http://blogs.static.mentalfloss.com/blogs/archives/20266. html.

O'Connor, R. E., Notari-Syverson, A., & Vadasy, P. F. (2005). *Ladders to Literacy*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.