

RESEARCH FOUNDATION PAPER



Developing Strong Language Skills in the Early Childhood Classroom

Written by Tricia Zucker, Ph.D.

Co-Director of the Children's Learning Institute at the
University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston

“A curriculum that helps teachers establish daily routines for supporting language with purposeful questions and systematic vocabulary sets the stage for teachers to have multiple-turn conversations with all children, even those with limited initial language skills.” —Dr. Tricia Zucker.

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DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF PREK ON MY WAY: LANGUAGE MODULE

This paper discusses how to ensure that early childhood classroom activities develop strong language skills for all learners. Classroom observations show that it is hard to have a meaningful conversation with every child every day. For example, it is easy to ask too many simple questions that require only a one-word response (Deshmukh et al. 2019). It also takes considerable time to prepare child-friendly definitions for intentional vocabulary instruction. Too often vocabulary instruction becomes incidental rather than systematic (Wright and Neuman 2014). But a curriculum that helps teachers establish daily routines for supporting language with purposeful questions and systematic vocabulary sets the stage for teachers to have multiple-turn conversations with all children, even those with limited initial language skills.

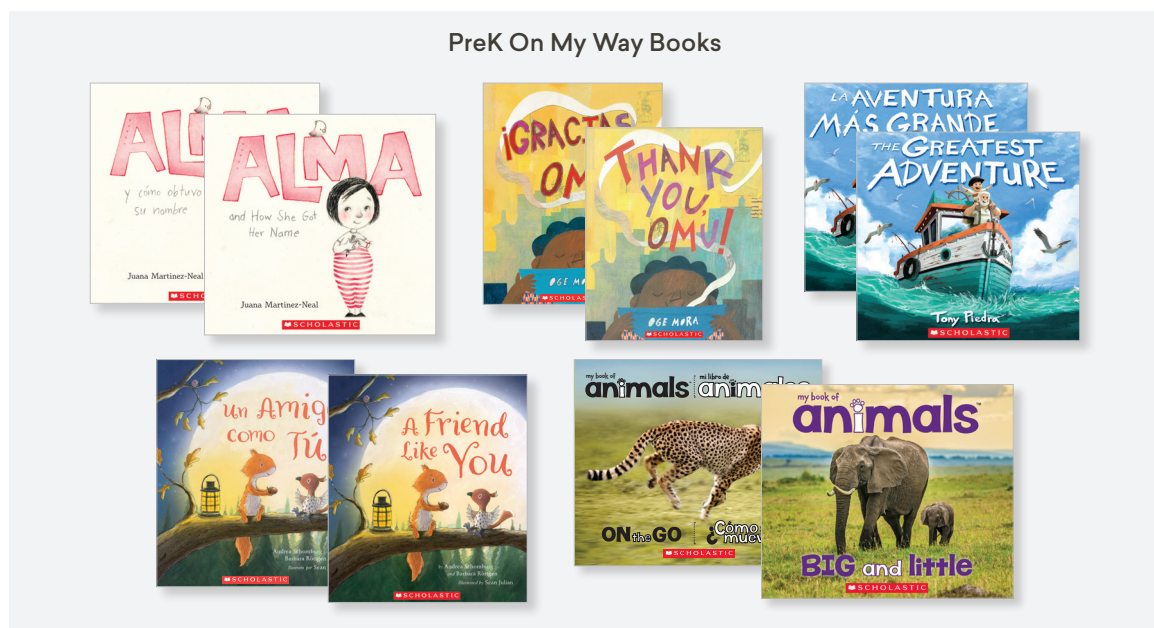
The **PreK On My Way Language Module** (the Language Module hereafter) uses narrative and informational texts as a springboard for developing a language-rich classroom that includes whole-group and small-group opportunities for children to develop language skills. The Language Module supports these goals with an integrated set of instructional resources designed to support early childhood teachers as they facilitate multiple-turn conversations, provide intentional vocabulary instruction, and use strategies that scaffold children's language skills. Key features of the Language Module allow educators to:

1. Build knowledge through exposure to a diverse collection of narrative and informational books
2. Provide explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction
3. Use an evidence-based approach to directly teach important academic vocabulary
4. Use an evidence-based interactive read-aloud model to build language skills/proficiency
5. Attend to a range of language levels through scaffolds that support or challenge
6. Expose children to extended conversations in small-group activities
7. Integrate multiple response formats to comprehend books read aloud
8. Build home and school partnerships with meaningful conversation starters

1. BUILD KNOWLEDGE THROUGH A DIVERSE COLLECTION OF NARRATIVE AND INFORMATIONAL BOOKS

A unique feature of PreK On My Way is that high-quality, culturally diverse books are a core component of all modules. Abundant research demonstrates the value of interactive reading for building young children’s language skills (Mol et al. 2009; Noble et al. 2019). The PreK On My Way and PreK On My Way en español curricula contains more than 350 books that were carefully curated to build knowledge across important topics for young children to understand their community, how we care for others, as well as important content areas (e.g., understanding weather, investigating animals). Most early childhood teachers want to bring more informational texts into their classroom (Pentimonti et al., 2010) and this curriculum ensures that engaging informational texts are routinely shared with children. Informational genres of texts provide accurate, factual information about the natural or social world; some may include a narrative to deliver information. Narrative genres are designed primarily to entertain and tell stories. Importantly, PreK On My Way features the authentic experiences of culturally diverse characters and topics in their catalog of narrative texts. Through exposure to multicultural literature children can see themselves reflected in books and understand the lives and experiences of others (Bennett et al. 2018). Also, the same concepts and skills are addressed in both English and Spanish language books. These books are not a literal translation but ensure that the wording is appropriate for each language.

Note that the Language Module books were intentionally selected because they include rich vocabulary and knowledge-building concepts. These titles also integrate with larger PreK On My Way themes such as “Our Community,” “Our Earth,” and “Let’s Investigate.” You will find that titles in the Literacy Module include salient print, rhyming structures, and alphabet books that elicit meaningful literacy-related conversations (Zucker et al. 2009). Also, the Math Module titles introduce math concepts in effective contexts for bringing math problems to life (Purpura et al. 2017).



2. PROVIDE EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Building a strong vocabulary at the earliest ages lays the foundation for academic success. Children learn much vocabulary incidentally by listening to books read aloud and by engaging in conversations with adults. Research shows that children’s vocabulary increases most when they are exposed to a combination of these implicit opportunities to learn words alongside explicit instruction around important vocabulary (Marulis and Neuman 2010). Approaches that effectively build children’s vocabulary directly introduce new words in whole-group lessons and dig deeper into these words with extension activities in small-group settings and independent centers (Coyne et al. 2009, Wasik and Hindman, 2020). Because word learning is incremental, approaches that distribute hearing practice and using words over time can build deeper understanding of words (Beck et al. 2013). Opportunities to engage with teachers and peers in hearing and using new vocabulary are important to language development. Preschoolers demonstrate increasing capacity to learn that words have multiple meanings and to use new words for a variety of purposes that range from telling stories and singing songs to scientific explorations (Deák 2000, Pentimonti et al. 2020). Teaching a set of conceptually related words within a thematic unit of study also helps build children’s semantic networks (Hadley et al. 2019). The Language Module includes multiple resources that implicitly support word learning including abundant exposure to interactive reading, songs, interactive writing about children’s personal experiences, and networks of ideas and words within thematic units. The Language Module mascot, Scout the Squirrel, is particularly excited about opportunities to learn new words from books.



3. USE AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO DIRECTLY TEACH IMPORTANT, ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Traditional curricula emphasize basic vocabulary for preschoolers such as color words or naming objects. Yet recommended practice moves away from teaching basic words—which most children learn without direct instruction—to a focus on directly teaching academic vocabulary or sophisticated words of mature language users because these are the words required to succeed in reading and school (Beck et al. 2013, Foorman et al. 2016). Even young children and English learners can learn academic words with direct instruction; preschoolers don't need adults to “dumb down” language for them but need to be directly taught what sophisticated words mean (Lane and Allen 2010). Academic vocabulary that warrants direct instruction during preschool encompasses various concepts such as emotion vocabulary, words to express opinions and thinking, as well as domain-specific vocabulary related to science or social studies themes.

The Language Module uses an evidence-based approach to direct vocabulary that has been shown to improve preschoolers' academic word learning in multiple causal impact studies (Zucker et al. 2013, Zucker et al. 2019, Zucker et al. 2021). This includes opportunities to focus on important vocabulary before each interactive reading of texts in the Language Module. Before reading, a brisk routine uses picture vocabulary cards to ask children to say the new word, hear a child-friendly definition, and then playfully act out and use the word in a meaningful way. It is easier for children to understand new words, particularly academic vocabulary, when they are taught using a child-friendly definition that does not use other complex words or syntax (Gardner 2007). Traditional dictionary definitions are often overly complex, and it requires considerable time and practice for teachers to prepare child-friendly definitions in advance. Therefore PreK On My Way and PreK On My Way en español include more than 1,900 picture vocabulary cards (in English and Spanish) across Language, *Literacy*, and Math modules. These cards include child-friendly definitions designed to directly teach children new vocabulary words, and the words were selected using a systematic process. For example, in the Language Module, a multistep process was used to select focal vocabulary for direct instruction:

- **Step 1:** Identify all possible unknown or important words in a narrative or informational text. With quality literature, this typically includes a long list of potential words—more words than there is time to directly teach.
- **Step 2:** Remove basic words that typically do not require direct instruction as well as overly complex words that are not typically mastered until later grades.
- **Step 3:** Prioritize words that are highly transportable across contexts, which children are likely to encounter across various content areas or texts.
- **Step 4:** Narrow down the list to those words that are most essential for text comprehension.
- **Step 5:** Review the potential word list to ensure that a variety of word types are taught (nouns, verbs, modifiers) and to prioritize multiple-meaning words that have different meanings across contexts.
- **Step 6:** Prepare a child-friendly definition and select a clear, relatable image that can be used to teach the word.

Thus, teachers can feel confident that the words they are directly teaching are worth this instructional time. Moreover, they can encourage children to use these “amazing words” to impress adults with the sophisticated words they know.

Note that this intentional, direct vocabulary instruction approach is integrated across the PreK On My Way curriculum. For example, the Math Module vocabulary cards introduce key math vocabulary, such as *sort*, *add*, and *between*. Thus, by the end of the year, children will have been introduced to a broad array of important vocabulary.

Language Vocabulary Card



Language

Our Community | 2.3.5

VOCABULARY

INTRODUCE

celebrated

Repeat

Say this word after me: celebrated.

Define

When you celebrate, you do a fun activity because something special happened.

Describe

These children are celebrating a birthday.

Act It Out

Let's pretend that we're celebrating together. What can we do to celebrate? Let's act out dancing together to celebrate. Let's act out celebrating by cheering.

RETEACH

celebrated

Repeat

Say this word after me: celebrated.

Define

When you celebrate, you do a fun activity because something special happened.

Discuss

What are the children in the picture doing? What kinds of things do you like to do to celebrate a special day?

Repeat, rephrase, or expand.

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4. USE AN EVIDENCE-BASED INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUD MODEL TO BUILD LANGUAGE

Conversations about books are an important tool for supporting children’s language development. Teacher questions are key to facilitating meaningful conversations about narrative and informational texts. There is accumulating evidence that preschool children benefit when teachers ask a combination of concrete and abstract questions (Blewitt et al. 2009, van den Broek et al. 2011, van Kleeck et al. 2006). Abstract questions address inferential topics such as characters’ emotions/ motives, inferences, causal reasoning, and other topics that go beyond the information explicitly stated in the text. In contrast, concrete questions can be answered using the author’s words or information readily perceived in illustrations. The Language Module uses a variety of abstract and concrete questions that address increasingly challenging topics across multiple readings of quality texts. This evidence-based questioning approach during interactive reading has been evaluated in multiple studies and features an important guiding question that is previewed before reading and answered after reading along with suggested questions to ensure children’s understanding during reading (Zucker et al., 2013; Zucker et al. 2019, Zucker et al. 2021).

As shown this image of the Large Group Card, teachers can quickly reference these prepared questions before, during, and after reading. Most questions are designed to use open-ended forms that elicit a multiple-word response from children, rather than closed questions that result in a one-word or yes/no response (Deshmukh et al. 2019). Most preschoolers are capable of producing accurate, multiple-word responses when they are given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question. Thus, the Language Module facilitates this type of rich conversation between teachers and students as well as among peers because there are routine opportunities for children to turn and talk to a peer about an interesting Guiding question after reading. In past studies of this interactive read aloud approach, teachers reported high satisfaction with these scripted questions because it makes it easy to focus on responding to children.

Large Group Card

Share the Guiding Question

There is a question I want you to think about as we read. We will talk about it after we read. Ready?

Who are some of the people in Omu’s community?

pages 18–19

“Mr. Hot Dog Vendor!” Omu exclaimed when she saw the hot dog vendor standing at her door.

Revisit exclaimed Vocabulary Card.

Why do you think Omu exclaims when she opens her door? Do you think she knew the hot dog vendor was coming? Who can tell me what a hot dog vendor does?

5. ATTEND TO A RANGE OF LANGUAGE LEVELS THROUGH SCAFFOLDS THAT SUPPORT OR CHALLENGE

Groundbreaking new research shows that multiple-turn conversations between adults and preschool children from diverse backgrounds are key to building strong neural pathways for learning language (Romeo et al. 2018). Yet it can be a challenge to ensure that teachers have a meaningful back-and-forth conversation with every child every day, in part because preschool children's language skills vary considerably, such that some children are using relatively simple sentences while others are producing complex narratives. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to facilitating meaningful conversations, so PreK On My Way includes a systematic approach to fine-tune conversations and other activities to children's individual level of need with a color-coded set of scaffolding strategies that teachers can readily reference during instruction. As shown in the sample activity card, teachers are provided with yellow scaffolding strategies throughout the Language Module to support children who demonstrate limited understanding of a question and blue scaffolding strategies to challenge children who demonstrate ease in responding to a task.

Small-Group Activity Card

Language Our Community | 2.3.1 WE SHARE
ACTIVITY CARD

Ask

Look at the picture. What is the girl sharing?

Support

*The girl is sharing one of her
ap_____ (apples).*


OR

Challenge

How can you tell that the girl is sharing?

Extend

*What color apples do you see? Which one is
your favorite? Why?*



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5. ATTEND TO A RANGE OF LANGUAGE LEVELS THROUGH SCAFFOLDS THAT SUPPORT OR CHALLENGE, *continued*

A key feature of quality instruction is the use of scaffolding strategies that provides hints or challenges to match student's level of understanding and to guide learning of mature language and syntax (Hamre et al. 2013; Vygotsky 1978). As shown in the pictured Language Module activity card, the challenge scaffolds (blue) or support scaffolds (yellow) are followed by an Extend prompt that helps teachers facilitate multiple-turn conversations. Using this model helps teachers “Strive for Five” turns in conversations and reach the goal of having a multiple-turn brain-building conversation with each child (Romeo et al. 2018, Zucker et al., 2020).

Multiple scaffolding strategies are embedded in other Language Module materials such as Large Group Cards. This design ensures that when children need support, teachers have a series of potential scaffolds available to promote learning for all students, including English learners and those with limited initial language skills. For example, when children need support to comprehend a particular idea in a book or activity, they can be supported with a dynamic set of language support strategies that are drawn from practices commonly used in intervention services (Roth & Worthington 2015). The teacher has scripted scaffolding tips to obtain the desired response that move from: 1) spontaneous response to a simplified teacher question; to 2) a prompted response such as a fill-in-the blank type of prompt; to 3) providing a response for the child to imitate. These scaffolding strategies tailor language supports to be one step beyond a child's current level and facilitate meaningful communication rather than teaching isolated skills. Note that PreK On My Way also includes tools for teachers to use observational assessments to inform instruction and document persistent concerns. If a teacher is concerned about a spoken language disorder, it is essential that they refer the child for a full evaluation of possible language disorders.

6. EXPOSE CHILDREN TO EXTENDED CONVERSATIONS IN SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITIES

Small-group instruction can be more powerful for preschool children’s learning than whole-group activities because it provides opportunities for instruction tailored to children’s needs as well as more opportunities for feedback and extended conversations (Connor et al., 2006). When vocabulary is introduced to the whole group and reinforced with small-group activities, this can be an effective approach for ensuring deep word knowledge (Coyne et al. 2009; Zucker et al. 2021). Small groups also provide opportunities to guide conversations among peers in ways that develop language and social skills. Two barriers that preschool teachers often face to facilitating small-group instruction are time to prepare small-group lessons and to develop children’s skills to work independently in other centers while the teacher is with a small group. The Language Module addresses these issues by providing more than 120 brisk, small-group activity cards (English or Spanish) that reinforce and extend concepts taught during interactive reading. Small-group activities require fewer than 10 minutes yet ensure that children efficiently build knowledge while other children work independently in centers. The PreK On My Way resources include ample center activities that children can learn to use on their own after teachers practice setting expectations and modeling procedures for working at classroom centers.

Small-Group Teacher Card

Language Our Community | 2.3.3
TEACHER CARD ACT IT AND SAY IT

Instructions

BEFORE

Connect to Large Group Today we read Thank You, Omu! again. There are a lot of interesting words and sentences in the story that will be fun to act out.

Explain the Activity In this activity, we will be actors. We will act out sentences from the story that the different people said. We will use our bodies and our voices.

DURING

Using Body and Voice For each quote below, turn to the page in the Big Book, point to the text and illustration, and read the text. Show children how you are using your body gestures and your voice to show Omu tasting her stew and thinking that it is delicious. First, have children show the emotion or feeling without using any words. Then have children add in the words, repeating the sentences after you.

Act Out and Sniffle (page 3); hold your nose and say, "home?" (page 4); make sounds yum yum (page 5); "OOOOO, so good!" (page 6); children sniff (page 27).

AFTER

Talk About and Sniffle Ask children to act out the new sentences and sniffle the words. Have them act it loudly or softly.

BEFORE

Connect to Large Group Today we read Thank You, Omu! again. There are a lot of interesting words and sentences in the story that will be fun to act out.

Explain the Activity In this activity, we will be actors. We will act out sentences from the story that the different people said. We will use our bodies and our voices.

7. INTEGRATE MULTIPLE-RESPONSE FORMATS TO COMPREHEND BOOKS READ ALOUD

A unique feature of the Language Module is that teachers have the option to go beyond asking questions about books to begin modeling the strategies that good readers utilize to comprehend texts. Recent research suggests that preschoolers can be prepared for later reading comprehension using questioning techniques and by adult modeling of the cognitive processes underlying comprehension (van den Broek et al. 2011). For example, teachers can use the strategy cards pictured below to explain that children made a connection to a text or made a prediction as they answered a question about a book. Young children are not expected to correctly articulate these metalinguistic concepts but are supported by listening to the teacher “think aloud” and name the cognitive processes the group used to comprehend a text read aloud. As the teacher models this think-aloud process, it demonstrates what good listeners and readers do to understand books.

To make these higher-level language skills accessible to children, the teacher pairs it with a physical signal such as holding up your pinky when making an inference—like the American Sign Language for the letter *I*. This provides children multiple response modes, from a simple hand gesture that they are making a connection to a text being read aloud to an oral response that integrates information in the text with the children’s personal experiences. This approach of using multiple response modes is further supported by the Mind Builders component of PreK On My Way. Giving children opportunities across the day to use nonverbal responses can support executive function skills by giving children options as they learn to inhibit their desire to call out a response or by giving children with limited language a way to make their sophisticated thinking known without verbalizations.

Strategy Cards



8. BUILD HOME AND SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS WITH MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION STARTERS

Families are key partners in building strong language for young children. Parents want to support their children's language development and often need guidance on how to facilitate conversations with their children. For example, afterschool many parents try to strike up conversations after school with questions like "How was school today?" that most children answer with a one-word response: "Fine." Teachers can help families start meaningful conversations that link to the Language Module vocabulary and larger thematic concepts with tools like chat bands that children wear home to spark multiple-turn conversations such as "What is it like where we live?" or "What can we learn from using our senses?" The Family engagement tools in PreK On My Way also give families online access to songs that their children are learning at school and other bilingual resources to extend learning at home. These resources help educators partner with families in ways that incorporate parents' individual strengths and position parents as knowledgeable and powerful resources for supporting children's learning (Edwards et al. 2019).

Chat Bands



CONCLUSION

The Language Module features five domains of language and aligns with rigorous preschool learning standards. The provided resources span the continuum of basic language to higher-order language skills to include:

- **Vocabulary**—Both implicit and explicit instruction for the meaning of words to ensure that young children develop a broad vocabulary for both understanding and using words.
- **Syntax**—Multiple-turn conversations about quality literature and within engaging small-group extension activities give young children implicit exposure to the rules of syntax so they can understand and use increasingly complex sentences and language.
- **Pragmatics**—Routines such as equity sticks and learning to turn and talk to a peer ensure that children have clear guidance on the pragmatics of language, allowing even young children to understand the social aspects of language and produce coherent messages in different situations.
- **Higher-order language**—Across repeated readings of texts, children respond to increasingly complex questions that require inferencing, prediction, and causal explanations. Preschool-aged children are capable of understanding and using this higher-level language as well as understanding complex language, such as multiple-meaning words that are directly taught.
- **Metalinguistic awareness**—Understanding that the ability to think and reflect upon language is required for developing higher order language skills, preschool teachers can model strategies such as monitoring comprehension and recognizing inferences or connections.

When instruction in this continuum of language skills is paired with broader instruction in thematic units of study, young children will develop a rich knowledge base that will ignite an interest and learning and propel them into future schooling ready to learn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tricia Zucker, Ph.D.

Dr. Zucker is the Co-Director of the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. She is also the lead researcher behind *Developing Talkers* and *Hablemos Juntos*, groundbreaking oral language development programs proven to significantly expand children’s receptive and expressive vocabulary skills. The research behind these proven intervention programs forms the foundation for language learning throughout the year in the PreK On My Way curriculum.

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