

USING READING BUDDIES TO DEVELOP AND ENHANCE CHILDREN'S VOCABULARY

by Joseph Cooke and Weddy Youn

Research shows that oral vocabulary plays a powerful role in determining a child's academic success. In fact, the size of a first grader's oral vocabulary is a reliable predictor of that student's eleventh-grade reading comprehension (Cunningham and Stanovich 1998). The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development agrees that vocabulary knowledge is important for decoding and comprehending texts that children read and learn from in school, and is a foundational skill for reading (2000). Unfortunately, many children, especially English language learners and/or those from low-income households, have a much smaller vocabulary than their peers from higher-income families (Hart and Risley 1995; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). This lack of vocabulary development pushes the achievement and literacy gap farther and farther apart. Robert T. Jiménez states that vocabulary is the "single most encountered obstacle" many students face in learning to read in school, and these children need additional support (1994). Even older students who claim they don't like to read are often actually struggling with fluency and related issues. According to Jeanne S. Chall and Vicki A. Jacobs, one cause for reading deficiencies is the lack of fluency and automaticity (2003).

Reading buddies programs are an excellent way to address the learning needs of both younger and older children. Through cross-age tutoring and partnerships, students improve their reading and fluency skills and gain broader literacy and social benefits. Several research studies have found that augmenting traditional classroom instruction with one-on-one interventions, such as a reading buddies program, is a powerful combination that can accelerate students' oral vocabulary gains (Kalkowski 1995). Others suggest that cross-age tutoring is effective at supporting children's reading (Morrison et al. 2000; Topping and Bryce 2004).

The MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program

www.pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/readingbuddies

What if your dog could not only speak, but also help build children's vocabulary and their love of words and reading? MARTHA SPEAKS, an educational children's television series—from the same team at WGBH Boston who brought ARTHUR and CURIOUS GEORGE to public television—does just that. The series airs daily on PBSKIDS. Aimed at children ages 4–7, it features Martha, a beloved family dog, whose appetite for alphabet soup gives her the power of human speech, and whose charm and curiosity make her a unique and compelling vocabulary teacher.

The MARTHA SPEAKS, Reading Buddies Program grew out of a focus group of teachers and librarians convened by WGBH Boston. Brought together to discuss the most effective way for teachers to use the show, this group developed the idea of a Reading Buddies Program.

The MARTHA SPEAKS, Reading Buddies Program specifically addresses the educational needs of children with limited vocabulary knowledge. Students gain rich and varied instructional experiences with words, greater word awareness and interest in words, and exposure to the multiple dimensions of words: all essential tools for developing and improving vocabulary. Piloted in more than 40 Title I schools in fall 2008, the Reading Buddies Program supports and extends the learning from the MARTHA SPEAKS, television show by providing opportunities for older and younger students to hear and use new words in a variety of contexts.

The program pairs kindergarten students with fourth- or fifth-grade students to meet one-on-one for eight sessions. Each session follows these four steps:

1. Together, the Big Buddy and Little Buddy classes watch an episode of *MARTHA SPEAKS* that highlights four new vocabulary words.
2. Each buddy pair plays a word game or activity that promotes better understanding, use, and repetition of the four new vocabulary words.
3. Big Buddies read a selected children's picture book aloud to the Little Buddies. The book has the same four words embedded within the story or highlighted in the discussion questions.
4. The buddy pairs finish the session by writing in a journal that, once again, highlights and uses the four vocabulary words.

The Little Buddy teacher ends each session with a wrap-up activity. A special celebration marks the conclusion of all eight sessions.

The complete *MARTHA SPEAKS* Reading Buddies Program is available online at pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/readingbuddies. You can stream episodes online or download them from iTunes. Free resources, including instructions for teachers, a Big Buddy Guide, Games & Activities, a Journal, Certificates of Achievement, Home-School Connection materials, and more are available to download and print out. You can also purchase the “*MARTHA SPEAKS* Reading Buddies Tool Kit” DVD, containing all the episodes and materials, from <http://teacher.shop.pbs.org>.

Also online, watch short videos of renowned literacy experts explaining the importance of teaching vocabulary and how *MARTHA SPEAKS* supports the most up-to-date strategies. “The Experts Speak” (pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/experts) includes Catherine Snow, who explains the impact of the vocabulary gap on later learning; Mariela Paéz, who discusses vocabulary-building strategies for English language learners; Linda Kucan, who explores the importance of teaching “robust” vocabulary; and Andrew Biemiller, who discusses how to increase children’s knowledge of word meanings. You can watch us on the *MARTHA SPEAKS* Web site too! In our video, we describe the benefits of using the Reading Buddies program in the classroom at pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/experts.

Getting Started

We—Weddy Youn, a four-year kindergarten teacher, and Joseph Cooke, a ten-year fourth-grade teacher—conducted the *MARTHA SPEAKS* Reading Buddies Program at Howard Road Academy, our public charter school in Washington, D.C. Attendees of a Title I school, our students perfectly represented the target audience of children from low-income households in need of additional vocabulary learning. The socioeconomic status of students at our school is mostly at the poverty level or below, and the majority of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. As a fourth-grade teacher, Joseph hoped that the program would help his students build confidence in their reading abilities, and thought partnership with younger students would help motivate his students who were struggling to stay on task. As a kindergarten teacher, Weddy felt that her students would benefit greatly from the vocabulary instruction, additional reading time, and partnership with fourth graders.

The materials and instructions given to us were very informative and helpful throughout our preparation process and included tips on scheduling, using the materials, planning, and more. Each fourth-grade student received a Big Buddy Guide (www.pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/readingbuddies/student_materials.html) that clearly stepped out each session and essentially served as a lesson plan for Big Buddies to follow. However, the program

required close collaboration by both teachers. We worked together to pair buddies and used the fourth-grade students' reading fluency results to determine whom to pair them with in the kindergarten class. A more skilled fourth-grader was paired with a low-level kindergarten reader, while a less skilled fourth-grader was paired with a better kindergarten reader. We also paired students who had difficulty staying on task with students who were able to work with no redirection.

At first, the kindergarten students were a bit scared when they found out the fourth graders were going to help them read and learn new words. However, the students were able to meet with their Reading Buddies prior to the program to ease their fears, and as a result, the kindergartners were very excited to start the program and work with their Big Buddies. Initially, we had to manage the interaction between the buddies closely: controlling the noise levels and keeping students on task. As the skills of each group increased, however, each session became more efficient and the program allowed the Big Buddies to feel as though they were the ones teaching the kindergarten students. We were able to encourage this sense of leadership and ownership.

How It Worked

Step One: Watching the Show

Beginning each Reading Buddies Session by watching an episode of *MARTHA SPEAKS* was an excellent way to start, since the show captured the students' attention immediately. Both Big Buddies and Little Buddies could relate to the funny characters. Many students take care of a pet just like Helen does. Helen's father drives a city bus and many of our students ride the city bus to school. One of the Little Buddies pointed out that the mom and dad were "not the same color;" and another student explained that his parents were "not the same color" either. At the conclusion of each *MARTHA SPEAKS* episode, there is a brief review of the four vocabulary words. The students enjoyed seeing this part of the episode and would exclaim just before this final segment, "Wait! It's not over yet!" All episodes for the Reading Buddies Program can be found at www.pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/readingbuddies/episodes.html.

Step Two: Word Play Games and Activities

The games and activities that the buddy pairs played allowed them to use and practice the new vocabulary words highlighted in the episode. Making a superhero dog puppet reinforced words like "rescue" and "courageous." A game called "Choose and Chat" helped students make personal connections and use new vocabulary by asking questions such as, "What is something that makes you *unique*?" or "What is the nicest *compliment* that anyone has ever given you?" Students found the games fun, and the Little Buddies liked playing with their Big Buddies.

During one session, students used laptops to visit the *MARTHA SPEAKS* Web site at www.pbskids.org/martha. The Big Buddies seemed to especially enjoy the online games. In fact, many of the fourth graders continued to visit the *MARTHA SPEAKS* Web site, which has many educational games, well after the program ended. Both the Web site and the Reading Buddies activities are conducive to hands-on, interactive white boards. Using the board and the Web site, we were able to create games that exposed students to new vocabulary through a wide variety of contexts.

Step Three: Reading Together

Storybooks expose children to even more sophisticated vocabulary than they might encounter in their immediate environment (Hart and Risley 1995; Ninio 1983; Weizman and Snow 2001). During each session, the Big Buddies read a book that had been chosen because it used the new vocabulary words in it or was related to the theme, so that the discussion would encourage the use of the words.

Reading together was especially helpful because it enabled the Big Buddies to take an active role in helping the Little Buddies learn. Big Buddies showed them how to sound out words and to use the pictures in the book as a guide to understanding the text. As a result, Big Buddies showed significant improvements in their reading and fluency, practicing using context clues to better comprehend the text and figure out unfamiliar words. Many of the Little Buddies were very excited to have their Big Buddies read to them and recognized words that they had heard the MARTHA SPEAKS characters use in the television show.

Step Four: Journal Writing

The final step of a session was to have buddy pairs write together in the Reading Buddies Journal. (www.pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/readingbuddies/student_materials.html). A different writing prompt, using key vocabulary, was provided for each session. Big Buddies and Little Buddies were encouraged to use the special words in their responses. The Big Buddies helped their Little Buddies respond to a question verbally, then helped them draw a picture and/or write a response. Little Buddies dictated what they wanted to say to their Big Buddies, or, if the Little Buddies could write, Big Buddies helped them spell the words. Along with oral vocabulary development, writing is a critical skill. All students benefited from practicing writing together. Writing helped the Little Buddies make connections between oral vocabulary and print and we saw many of the Big Buddies improve their own writing skills by prompting or correcting their Little Buddies with their spelling, sentence structure, and grammar.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social development and self-monitoring were crucial components of the program. During one session, a Big Buddy said that his Little Buddy was not focused on reading the book, and wondered what he could do to help. Another Big Buddy complained that it was hard to get the attention of some of the Little Buddies. "They keep talking when I talk," he said. "Welcome to our world," we thought. This was a great opportunity to offer suggestions to the Big Buddies that helped balance students' attention spans, activity levels, and chatter, such as asking their Little Buddies questions about the story or switching to a different part of the session. The Big Buddies developed a greater awareness of how they could be classroom leaders and how important teachers really are. As one fourth-grade student said (to our delight), "Now I know what teachers have to do when teaching a lesson!" Over time, Big Buddies gained skills and strategies for helping their Little Buddies stay on task, resulting in significantly increased leadership qualities and improved self-esteem. Students also absorbed important social lessons from the show itself. For instance, when the Little Buddies would persevere at a task, they would say, "Hey, that's just like Martha!" recalling an episode when Martha did not give up on a goal, despite many obstacles.

The Little Buddies began to look to their Big Buddies as role models and as a source of encouragement. Though they were shy at the beginning of the program, the Little Buddies began to show more confidence. They couldn't wait to share their "cool" new words with their Big Buddies. They would raise their hands without hesitation when a question was asked and would talk easily with their Big Buddies. Once, when one of the kindergarten students received a good grade on a different assignment, he exclaimed, "I can't wait to show my Big Buddy! She is going to be proud of me!"

HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION

The take-home materials (www.pbskids.org/martha/parentsteachers/readingbuddies) extend vocabulary development and fun with words into the home, giving parents and caregivers the opportunity to be more involved in their child's learning. Parents and caregivers were eager to have their children participate in the program once they learned how helpful it could be in improving and increasing reading, vocabulary, and social skills. Students' enthusiasm for the program carried over to home, and many parents contacted us to find out more about the program.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program was a tremendous addition to our reading curriculum. The program kept the students engaged and left them wanting more. It was easy to incorporate into our weekly schedule, and the benefits to both the kindergarten and older students were significant. Students often used the words they learned that day, and we would use the same words in our classrooms so both Little Buddies and Big Buddies could remember them and keep them in their vocabulary. In addition, classroom participation by both Big Buddies and Little Buddies increased, even after the program was completed.

Although social development was a secondary gain, it turned out to be almost as important as the vocabulary improvement. We witnessed the confidence of the Little Buddies and Big Buddies significantly improve, and saw the Big Buddies feel proud of the fact that their Little Buddies looked up to them. We noted the Little Buddies' excitement at seeing their Big Buddies throughout the day, and noticed the Big Buddies checking in on their Little Buddies.

Participating in the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program not only benefited the students, but also opened the eyes of parents and educators as to how vocabulary can be effectively taught in the classroom. We can't wait to do the program again next year!

An evaluation of the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program, conducted by University of Maryland's Dr. Rebecca Silverman (Silverman 2009), revealed that this innovative version of a traditional cross-age reading program was effective at promoting both big buddies' and little buddies' knowledge of target words emphasized in the program.

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