



MARTHA SPEAKS™



BACKGROUND

Oral Vocabulary: Key to Academic Success

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). Unfortunately, young children from low-income families have, in general, a much smaller vocabulary than their peers from higher-income families. Three-year-olds from middle- and upper-class households know as many as 1,200 words, while kids of the same age from lower-income families know as few as 600 (Hart and Risley 1995). This gap continues to widen each year. While many kids from middle- to upper-class backgrounds are learning nine words a day, kids from lower-income households are often learning just three words a day (Lyon 2003). By second grade, kids from lower-income families are close to 60% behind the average in reading ability. (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). Lack of vocabulary development is a major contributor to this literacy gap.

In recent years, elementary school teachers have become aware of the need to include explicit oral vocabulary instruction as part of a balanced literacy program. Research has shown that teaching "robust" or "rich" vocabulary will better help children prepare to read and understand not only literature, but science and social studies texts as well. Techniques such as multiple exposures to vocabulary words, providing child-friendly definitions, and words in context are useful in helping to build that vocabulary knowledge. The MARTHA SPEAKS series and the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program are two tools that can be used to support teachers and students in vocabulary learning.



About the MARTHA SPEAKS Series

The vocabulary research strongly points to the need for frequent encounters with new words if they are to become a permanent part of an individual's vocabulary repertoire. . . . Prompting children to think about situations in their lives that relate to a new word increases the chances that children will recall and use the word when appropriate circumstances occur.

— Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan. "Taking Delight in Words: Using Oral Language to Build Young Children's Vocabularies." *American Educator*, Spring 2003

What if your dog could not only speak, but also help build children's vocabulary and their love of words and reading? MARTHA SPEAKS does just that. The series, which airs daily on PBS KIDS® and is aimed at children ages 4–7, 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, compelling (not to mention cute) vocabulary teacher.

Being a dog with a lot to say, Martha loves words and creates a vocabulary-rich environment in which new words are introduced, defined, and repeated. The educational goal of the series is to significantly bolster and enrich children's oral vocabulary by embodying research-based characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction. Each half-hour episode features two 11-minute stories that reinforce the vocabulary used in the show in engaging, comic ways. The key vocabulary words are repeated multiple times within each story and across the series. Research suggests that children need 15–20 exposures to a word in order to make the word their own. MARTHA SPEAKS provides this repeated exposure while nurturing word awareness and interest and addressing the multiple dimensions of words.

For more about the curriculum behind the series, read the [MARTHA SPEAKS Series Curriculum](#) summary. For more about vocabulary development and how it relates to MARTHA SPEAKS, watch "[The Experts Speak](#)," four short videos from literacy experts Catherine Snow, Linda Kucan, Andrew Biemiller, and Mariela Pérez.

About the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program

The MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program was a tremendous success. . . . The Little Buddies both literally and figuratively looked up to the Big Buddies as their relationship matured during the course of the program. It was amazing to see the children engaged in shared story time [and doing] activities. The teachers saw the program as an enhancement to their classroom. They embraced the program and developed new ideas, too.

— Reading Buddies Coordinator

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). The Reading Buddies Program pairs kindergarten students with 4th or 5th graders to meet one-on-one for ten 45-minute classroom sessions. Each session introduces four "special words" highlighted first in the selected MARTHA SPEAKS episode, and then reinforced as the buddy pairs share books, talk, and do fun activities together.

The five steps of each MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies session—Watch Together, Talk and Play, Read Together, Write Together, and Wrap-Up—support and extend vocabulary learning by providing opportunities for Big Buddies and Little Buddies to hear and use these words in a variety of contexts, including the show, the related picture book, and children’s own life experience. At the end of the last session, Little Buddies take home a Certificate of Achievement that their Big Buddies have helped them complete. Big Buddies also get a Certificate of Achievement from their teacher.

Home-School Connection

There are many ways to extend the benefits and learning from MARTHA SPEAKS and the Reading Buddies Program. The Letter to Families (available in English and Spanish) explains the program and give parents and caregivers suggestions for learning new words at home. A colorful Family Activity Booklet, which can be downloaded and printed out, contains easy ideas for helping students build oral vocabulary. Students can revisit the stories and words as they watch the MARTHA SPEAKS episodes on their local PBS television station, on pbs.org/go/video, or through iTunes. They can also take home one of the reproducible Games & Activities to play with their family. Kids and families can also access lots of fun, vocabulary-building games and activities on the MARTHA SPEAKS Web site at pbskids.org/martha.

Benefits of the Reading Buddies Program

This program was wonderful...I loved seeing my students interact with their Big Buddies... I saw their confidence improve [and] they still remember the word stupendous!

— Little Buddy teacher

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.

— Big Buddy teacher

An evaluation of the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies Program, conducted by Dr. Rebecca Silverman at the University of Maryland (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. Because they get repeated practice in reading aloud, Big Buddies improve their reading fluency and learn some new words, too. The multiple exposures to words, which are clearly and simply defined, help the Little Buddies acquire, understand, and use new vocabulary.

In addition to the vocabulary-building benefits for younger and older students, there are broader literacy and social benefits as well. The fun atmosphere is a plus in the classroom and leads to an increased enjoyment and appreciation of books and reading. The relationship between the Big Buddies and Little Buddies is beneficial not only to each child, but to the entire school community, which gains a sense of a shared mission. As a result of their role as mentors, Big Buddies not only develop more confidence, self-esteem, leadership abilities, and organizational skills, they feel protective of their Little Buddies and invested in their improvement. Little Buddies experience school as a friendlier place and gain new role models to look up to. And finally, in collaborating together, teachers themselves may experience a newfound sense of enthusiasm and accomplishment as they see their students improve and mature.

To see the MARTHA SPEAKS Reading Buddies program in action, watch teachers Joseph Cooke and Wendy Youn talk about their experiences in the classroom.

References

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