



MARTHA SPEAKS™

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

Children learn their first words from parents and caregivers. The more new words they hear, the more new words they learn. By age three, many children know as many as 1200 words while others know as few as 600 (Hart & Risley, 1995). Often, children with limited vocabulary knowledge are of low socioeconomic status or English language learning background. Limited word knowledge is of concern because vocabulary provides a substantial foundation for academic success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The more words children know, the more content they will be able access in school. In fact, research shows that first grade vocabulary predicts eleventh grade reading comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Clearly, vocabulary is an important building block in children's language and literacy development. The goal of MARTHA SPEAKS is to promote the vocabulary development of young children, especially young children with limited early vocabulary knowledge.

The approach to building vocabulary knowledge in MARTHA SPEAKS embodies research-based characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction (Biemiller & Boote, 2003; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Graves, 2006). Research suggests that vocabulary knowledge is best fostered by exposing children to interesting words, generating their excitement and enthusiasm for new words, and encouraging their active participation and engagement in word learning. Therefore, the MARTHA SPEAKS project incorporates these characteristics. It also focuses on the multidimensionality of words. That is, it highlights many facets of word knowledge including, but not limited to, what words mean conceptually, how they can be used in various contexts, and how they are related to other words. For example, the word "unusual" means, conceptually, "different from normal." It could be used as an adjective as in "Martha is an unusual dog" or as an adverb as in "Martha is unusually quiet today." And, it could be compared and contrasted with synonyms such as "strange, surprising, and bizarre" or antonyms such as "usual, common, and typical."

The MARTHA SPEAKS curriculum has three main objectives:

1. Nurture word awareness and interest in words.
2. Provide rich and various instructional experiences with words.
3. Focus attention on the multiple dimensions of words such as their multiple meanings, their use in various contexts, and their associations to other words.

To meet these objectives, MARTHA SPEAKS:

1. Encourages development of children's communication skills.

Children need to become adept at communicating. Speaking and listening are important skills in their own right, and they are fundamental to reading and writing. The MARTHA SPEAKS series encourages development of children's communication skills by introducing new words and varied communicative contexts to children.

2. Encourages development of children's socio-linguistic skills.

An important part of children's development, related to their communication skills, is development of their socio-linguistic skills. Children need to know how to talk to other children and adults in varied situations. While socio-linguistic skills are important in their own right as well, they are important for literacy development because it is through development of these socio-linguistic skills that children learn perspective-taking, the importance of context in making and interpreting meaning, and language usage in varied social settings. The *MARTHA SPEAKS* series encourages development of children's socio-linguistic skills by introducing new words in varied social contexts to children.

3. Introduces words that are interesting to children and important for them to learn.

Children will be expected to have rich vocabulary knowledge in order to understand texts they read later in school. To build this rich vocabulary, approximately 20 words are targeted for instruction through the narratives and interstitials in each episode of *MARTHA SPEAKS*. These words range from basic to advanced. We consulted a range of resources to choose the words to target. These resources include word lists such as the one by Andrew Biemiller and word classification systems such as the Tier system of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (i.e., words to be taught should be Tier 2 words, which are words that are not too technical (Tier 3) and words that are not too basic (Tier 1) but words that are used by mature language users). Additionally, books read to and by children in the early childhood and primary years were analyzed to determine the kinds of words children encounter in school. Ultimately, words to be targeted in the show are words that are (a) useful for children to know, (b) developmentally appropriate, (c) are related to the theme of the episode and important for children to know to comprehend the story, and (d) are unknown by many children in the target population but are known by many children with advanced vocabularies in elementary school. Words featured in the series are categorized as more advanced or more basic. Words that are more advanced are taught through rich instruction and words that are more basic are repeated in rich contexts throughout the episode.

4. Provides rich instruction for more advanced words.

Children learn words advanced in meaning when these words are the focus of rich instruction. Rich instruction is explicit and intentional. Therefore, advanced words are presented with rich instruction in *MARTHA SPEAKS*. Advanced words targeted in a given episode are related thematically. The thematic nature of the words per episode is discussed below. The theme of the words and the words themselves are introduced at the beginning of each show in the first interstitial. The words are also explicitly defined in the cartoon narrative. For example, in some instances a character may explain the meaning of a word to another character that has a limited vocabulary and is constantly confused by what words mean. In other instances, a snooty, know-it-all character who, acting superior, always uses big words and defines them for other characters to show-off how smart she is. Advanced words are targeted, reviewed, and reinforced in interstitials through formats such as game shows, music videos, and lectures and experiments with a professor character. Advanced words also are the focus of review in the concluding interstitial. These devices raise children's awareness of the target words (and other words) in their environment. There are approximately 10 words per episode that receive rich instruction.

5. Uses basic words, related to advanced words, in rich context.

Children are able to learn basic words in meaning through exposure to words in conducive contexts. Words that are categorized as less advanced are introduced in rich contexts in the *MARTHA SPEAKS* series. When target words related to the theme are more basic, these words are not introduced, reviewed, or defined explicitly. Rather, these basic words are used repeatedly and in varied contexts during the course of the show so that children can learn the words through multiple exposures to the words. These more basic words are explicitly depicted in the narrative. They are used in relation to the more advanced words that are targeted through rich instruction. For example, if the theme is “communicate” and the advanced words are “mumble,” “murmur,” “bellow,” and “roar,” such basic words as “talk,” “speak,” “say,” “shout,” “yell,” “whisper,” “quiet,” “loud,” “soft,” “low” and “high” are introduced in relation to different ways people communicate. These are depicted, but not explicitly defined in the narrative.

6. Introduces related words through themes.

Children learn words best when they are taught words that are connected thematically. Therefore, the two narratives in each episode are connected thematically. For example, one theme is “Martha is scared.” The first narrative is about Martha being afraid of the dark and the second narrative is about Martha being afraid to be left home alone. Both narratives include the words “fear,” “afraid,” “scared,” “frightened,” and “worried.” Another episode theme is “transportation.” The first narrative is about Martha taking her first bus ride. The second is about her first train ride. The words “travel,” “transportation,” “visit,” “arrive,” and “depart” are targeted in both episodes.

7. Introduces new vocabulary words to children through rich contexts.

Children learn words best when they are situated in interesting and engaging contexts rather than individually and out of context. Each 30-minute episode includes two 11-minute cartoon narratives. These narratives are relevant to the lives of children. They include developmentally appropriate humor, and they are fun to watch.

8. Provides explicit, child-friendly definitions of advanced words.

Children need to be provided with straight-forward definitions that are phrased in kid-like language. Throughout the narrative and the interstitials, child-friendly definitions of targeted vocabulary words are provided to children. The definitions do not include complex words. They include examples presented through words, video clips, cartoon clips, or pictures. These definitions are evaluated with a sample of children from the target population.

9. Provides examples of words in various contexts.

Children need to hear words in various contexts so that do not think that a word is used in only one particular situation. Therefore, words are used slightly differently in each of the two narratives. And, because children benefit from seeing examples of words in various contexts, interstitials feature words in contexts other than the narratives of the episode. The interstitials also feature non-examples so children can refine their understanding of what a words means. For example, if the target word is “community,” different communities are shown. “A family is a community.” “A town is a community.” “A neighborhood is a community.” Then, a non-example is shown. “A lonely on an island person by herself is not a community.”

10. Provides examples of word relations (i.e., synonyms, antonyms, cognates).

Children need to learn how words are related to each other. Within themes, synonyms and antonyms for words are provided. For example, if the target word in an episode is “enjoy,” a synonym such as “like” is used in the same context and an antonym such as “dislike” is used in an opposite context. Martha might say, “I enjoy walking around the neighborhood. I really like seeing all of the dogs doing their dog thing. I only dislike it when that mean dog down the street barks and barks at me as I pass by. He makes me nervous.”

11. Provides examples of morphological variations on words.

Children need to hear different variations on the same word. As words are used in various contexts, children are presented with morphological variations of words. Words are used in both singular and plural form, in past and present tense, and as root words and affixed words, etc. For example, if the target word is “certain,” Martha might say, “I am certain somebody is going to drop some food on the floor today.” Or, “I am uncertain about when it will happen, but I know it will. And, I’ll be ready when it does.” Or, “I am certainly happy I was here when that morsel fell!”

12. Provides opportunities to learn idiomatic expressions, metaphors, similes, etc.

Children need to learn how expressions are used to mean certain things. For example, children need to understand that if a character says, “A dog will be able to talk when pigs fly” they mean that there is no chance a dog will be able to talk. These expressions are particularly difficult for English language learners to understand. Though Martha is a sophisticated speaker of English, she often takes these expressions literally. She might envision pigs flying in a thought bubble and another character will have to explain what the expression really means.

13. Provides repeated exposure to words.

Words need to be repeated for children to learn them. Each targeted word is mentioned about 4 times per episode over the course of the two narratives and three interstitials. Also, the shows will be aired several times so children can be exposed to the same words over and over.

14. Reviews words.

Words are learned best when children are provided opportunities to review them. Therefore, in *MARTHA SPEAKS*, words that have been introduced and defined in the opening interstitial and in the two narratives are reviewed in the middle and final interstitials.

15. Reinforces word learning over a series of episodes.

Children need to hear words many times to learn them. Words from previous episodes reappear in other episodes to reinforce children’s word learning.

Selected References

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