

## Importance of Oral Language Vocabulary Development in Improving Academic Outcomes for English Language Learners

By Elena Zaretsky, PhD

### Research on Vocabulary Acquisition through Oral Dialogic Teaching

The challenge of increasing literacy skills for English Language Learners (ELLs) from low Socioeconomic Status (SES) is well documented. The research demonstrates that academic vocabulary knowledge is critical to all aspects of literacy: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Yet accelerating academic vocabulary remains a challenge. This researcher has chosen to test a program, *Discussions4Learning* (D4L), that held a special promise for these students as it is based on dialogic teaching using accountable talk (Michaels et al, 2008) and promotes high-level academic vocabulary acquisition. ELLs attending urban Title I schools present a challenge to educators across the country. As children from different linguistic backgrounds, they come to school with little exposure to English (Byalystok, et al, 2010, Hoff, 2013). Even when controlled for SES, ELLs continuously underachieve in all areas of academics compared to their monolingual peers, with ever-widening achievement gaps (Hoff et al., 2013). Numerous authors suggest that low English language proficiency among ELLs leads to difficulties in reading comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2010). Although early literacy development of ELLs may be similar to monolingual peers despite significant deficits in oral language complexity (Uchikishi, 2005; Geva & Massey-Garrison, 2013), deficits in vocabulary knowledge and language complexity (part of reading comprehension) (Hoff, et al., 2014; Rojas & Iglesias, 2013) continue to lag behind.

**“One of the most enduring findings in reading research is the extent to which students’ vocabulary knowledge is related to reading comprehension.”  
(Osborn & Hiebert, 2004).**

Previous research focused on explicit teaching of academic vocabulary to promote language proficiency among ELLs (Kelley, et al., 2010) in order to acquire cognitive academic language skills (CALs) necessary for decreasing academic disparity between ELLs and their monolingual peers. Success in strong oral language skills depends on immersion in an academic setting with: focused environment; visual aids; use of vocabulary words in context; use of meaningful sentences with multiple repetition of key words; and giving students opportunities to express themselves.

“...One of the most enduring findings in reading research is the extent to which students’ vocabulary knowledge is related to reading comprehension” (Osborn & Hiebert, 2004). Knowing the meanings of the words in text is necessary to understand the message being conveyed.

Strategies that work in improving oral language and vocabulary learning are identified as classroom discourse and dialogic teaching. Discourse is one of the most natural and advantageous methods to involve students in active vocabulary learning, as it exercises necessary language skills, such as vocabulary retention, topic maintenance, and argument.

“Dialogic Teaching” uses talk most effectively for carrying out teaching and learning” (Alexander, 2017). It requires interaction, questions, answers, feedback, contributions, discussion, and argumentation. By engaging students in dialogue, teachers can: explain ideas, clarify the point and purpose of activities, model scientific ways of using language, and help students grasp new scientific ways of describing phenomena.

## A scientific study using *Discussions4Learning* to increase academic oral language vocabulary

By its interactive nature, *Discussions4Learning* (*D4L*) provides an ideal setting to develop oral language skills through discussion of world famous art and photography, encouraging students to use their own background knowledge in the learning process. The program also allows for multiple repetitions of new vocabulary words and challenges students to be active participants in classroom discourse.

It is not a secret that vocabulary retention is one of the most difficult aspects of any vocabulary instruction curriculum. We conducted a study that examined retention of the Tier II vocabulary by ELLs from low SES students attending 1st grade in an urban Title I school.

48 children participated in this study: 22 children (age=6; 5, SD=.59) were exposed to 25 weeks of *D4L* lessons (Experimental group); and 26 children (age=6; 3, SD=.43) who used a different supplemental program to increase vocabulary knowledge formed the Control group. All children were assessed on their receptive vocabulary using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4) prior to experimental testing on high-level vocabulary words, to assess current level of vocabulary knowledge.

To test the retention of vocabulary introduced by *D4L*, we chose a total of 20 words introduced in the first three weeks of *D4L* instruction to be used in experimental testing. The words were classified as either: 1) Label words (e.g., 'artwork,' n=15); 2) Concept words (e.g., 'emphasis,' n=4); and 3) Words representing both label and concept (e.g., 'voluminous,' n=1).

The test was administered in auditory modality (as it was with PPVT) and all children had visual support of the actual pictures of artworks or photographs. The administration was done for the whole classroom: Children listened to the target word used in a question, followed by a choice of two answers. As children heard the answer choices, they were shown different signs with either X or O that they had to put in the boxes below the image.



### Sample Vocabulary Retention Test

**Question 1:** What are we looking at today?

Artwork (O) or book (X)?

O is correct

**Question 2:** What are some features in this painting?

Eyes (O) or apples (X)?

O is correct

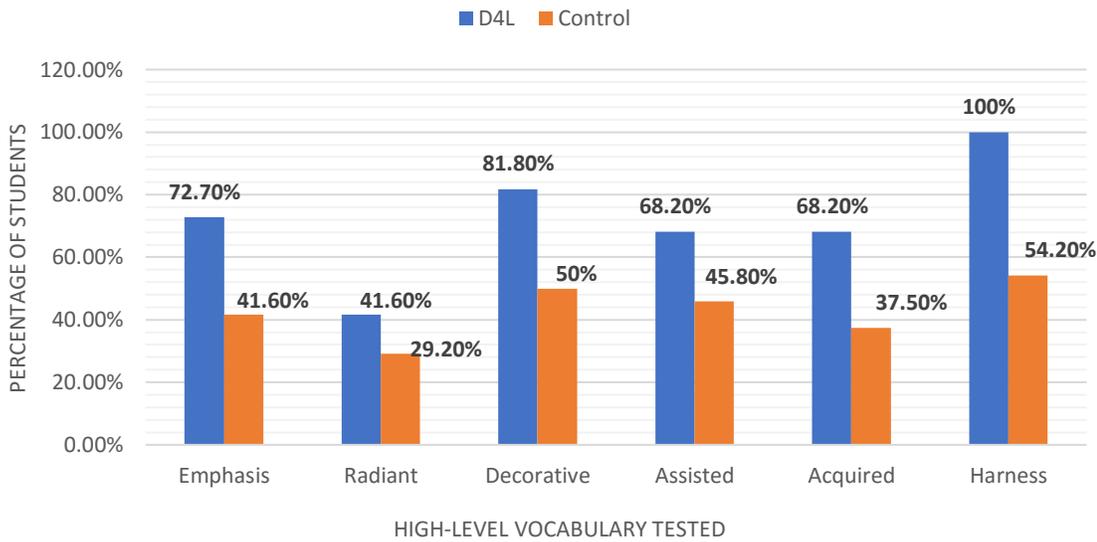
#### Words Tested:

- Artwork
  - Features
- (7th grade Tier Two words)

Our results showed no differences between two classrooms in their assessment on PPVT, showing almost identical scores (experimental=80.9, SD=14.3; control=81, SD=17.81), but standard deviation analysis (SD) indicated that the experimental group was more even in their results. In other words, there were fewer differences among children. However, there were significant differences between groups in students' correct identification of high-level vocabulary words introduced by *D4L*: Total number of words ( $t(46)=3.43$ ,  $p=.002$ ); concepts ( $t(46)=1.73$ ,  $p=.04$ ); and word/concept ( $t(46)=3.63$ ,  $p=.0007$ ).

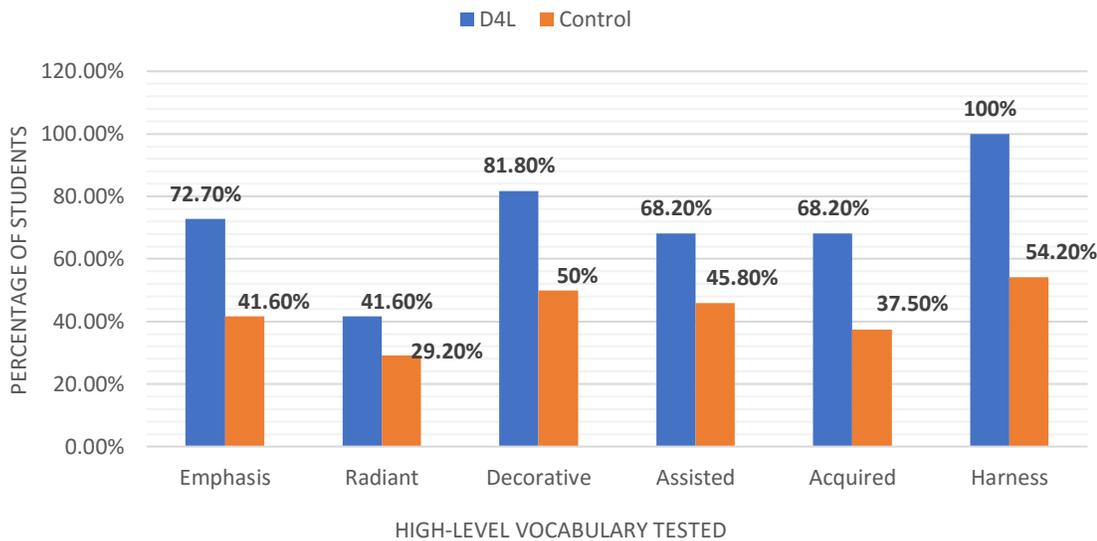
**Discourse is one of the most natural and advantageous methods to involve students in active vocabulary learning, as it exercises necessary language skills, such as vocabulary retention, topic maintenance, and argument."**

## High-Level Vocabulary Knowledge



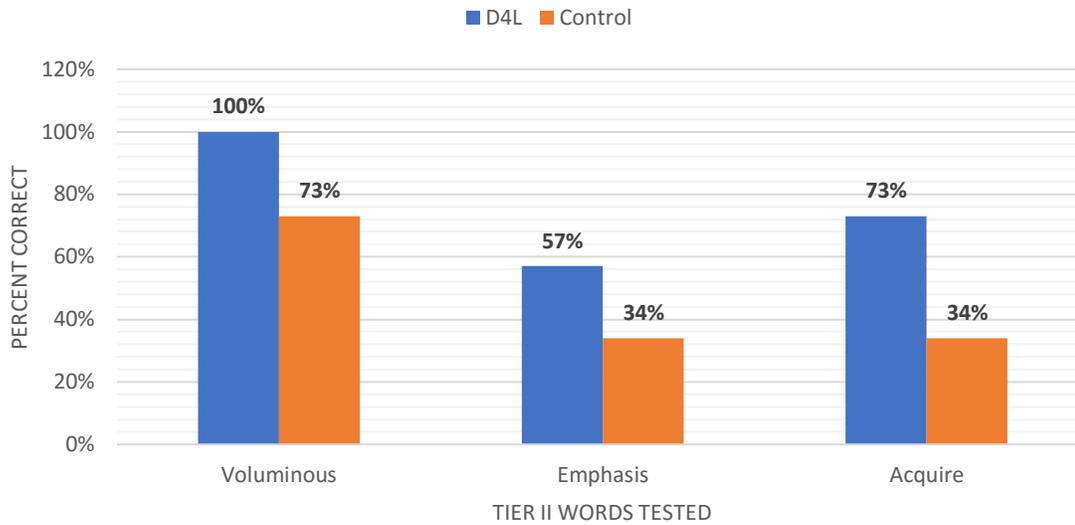
**Figure 1.** Differences in high-level vocabulary knowledge between groups.

## High-Level Academic Words Tested in *D4L* Room vs. Control



**Figure 2.** Differences in knowledge of specific words.

## Tier II Word Knowledge Between *D4L* and Control Group



**Figure 3.** Differences in Tier II word knowledge between D4L and Control group.

*Voluminous* (not in any word list):  $t(46)=3.93$ ,  $p=0.002$ ; *Emphasis* (Grade 6 Tier II word):  $t(46)=2.47$ ,  $p=0.01$ ; *Acquire* (Grade 8 Tier II word):  $t(46)=2.79$ ,  $p=0.007$ .

As seen from the results, children exposed to *D4L* were able to retain vocabulary words learned at the onset of the program when tested at the end of the school year. Children exposed to *D4L* knew significantly more high-level academic vocabulary words, like *voluminous* and *emphasis*, than their peers. All of the high-level academic vocabulary words that were presented through *D4L* to 1st grade students were part of Tier Two word lists for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The fact that children in the control room were showing equal knowledge of regular vocabulary words suggests the unique nature of the words introduced through *D4L*. The fact that some children in the control room showed some knowledge of the words in Tier II suggests the possibility that these words were used in the program they were exposed to, as well as the fact that certain words, such as *assisted*, may have higher frequency of use in the classroom.

### ***Discussions4Learning* as an oral language vocabulary program to increase academic language**

This research demonstrates that *Discussions4Learning* teaches low SES ELL grade one students Tier II vocabulary words from middle to high school word lists through oral language discussions. Most significantly, students retain the meaning of these high-level academic words months after learning them at the end of the school year. The dialogic nature of the program enhances students' involvement and promotes active listening and developing of argumentative skills. The long-term retention of these high-level academic vocabulary words among low SES first grade ELLs was highly significant. *D4L* also supports students' reliance on and use of their own experiences.

## A Brief Biography of Dr. Elena Zaretsky

For more than two decades, Dr. Elena Zaretsky has been working with children, focusing on language and early literacy development. As a Board certified and licensed Speech-Language pathologist, she serviced children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as the multicultural and multi-linguistic populations in the Boston Public School system. After graduating from Boston University with a PhD in Human Development and a focus on Developmental Psycholinguistics, Dr. Zaretsky became a faculty member in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and continued in the Department of Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology, Research Scientist and Scholar at Clark University. Dr. Zaretsky has authored numerous articles in the area of language and literacy development among typically developing children, children with language disorders, and bilingual children. In addition, she examined the role of orthography (spelling) in the development of early literacy skills through comparative studies between English- and Croatian-speaking children, while also looking at the cross-linguistic transfer of language skills among bilingual children. She has presented her work at national and international conferences and has been an invited speaker at international symposiums and universities. The collaboration between Clark University and local public schools provides Dr. Zaretsky with ample opportunities for research in language development among English Language Learners of low social economic status.



---

## Bibliography

- Alexander, R. (2017). *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (5th edition), Dialogos.
- Bruner, J. (1983). Play, thought, and language. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 60(3), 60-69.
- Cammins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework*, 349.
- Calvo, A., & Bialystok, E. (2014). Independent effects of bilingualism and socioeconomic status on language ability and executive functioning. *Cognition*, 130(3), 278-288.
- Castro, D. C., Páez, M. M., Dickinson, D. K., & Frede, E. (2011). Promoting language and literacy in young dual language learners: Research, practice, and policy. *Child Development Perspectives*, 5(1), 15-21.
- Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Dahlgreen, M. (2008). Oral language and vocabulary development: Kindergarten & First grade. Presentation at the Reading First National Conference, Nashville, TN
- Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and special education*, 7(1), 6-10.
- Hammer, C. S., Jia, G., & Uchikoshi, Y. (2011). Language and literacy development of dual language learners growing up in the United States: A call for research. *Child development perspectives*, 5(1), 4-9.
- Hoff, E. (2013). Interpreting the early language trajectories of children from low-SES and language minority homes: Implications for closing achievement gaps. *Developmental psychology*, 49(1), 4.
- Hoff, E., Rumiche, R., Burrige, A., Ribot, K. M., & Welsh, S. N. (2014). Expressive vocabulary development in children from bilingual and monolingual homes: A longitudinal study from two to four years. *Early childhood research quarterly*, 29(4), 433-444.
- Michaels, S., O'Connor, C., & Resnick, L. B. (2007). Deliberative discourse idealized and realized: Accountable talk in the classroom and in civic life. *Studies in philosophy and education*, 27(4), 283-297.
- Motel, S., & Patten, E. (2012). Characteristics of the 60 largest metropolitan areas by Hispanic population. *Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center*.
- Paradis, J. (2005). Grammatical Morphology in Children Learning English as a Second Language Implications of Similarities With Specific Language Impairment. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 36(3), 172-187.
- Paradis, J. (2010). The interface between bilingual development and specific language impairment. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 31(02), 227-252.
- Place, B. (2012). *Disussions4Learning: An Oral Vocabulary and Language Program*. Davis Publications: Worcester, MA
- Rojas, R., & Iglesias, A. (2013). The Language Growth of Spanish-Speaking English Language Learners. *Child development*, 84(2), 630-646
- Snipes, J., Horwitz, A., Soga, K., & Casserly, M. (2008). Beating the Odds VIII: An Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments. Results from the 2006-2007 School Year. *Council of the Great City Schools*.
- Teale, W. H. (2009). Students learning English and their literacy instruction in urban schools. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(8), 699-703.