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## The Expanding Expression Tool's Impact on Expressive Language in Preschool

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**The Expanding Expression Tool's Impact on Expressive Language in Preschool**

Jill Owens

Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Education

### **Abstract**

Action research for this project was selected to meet a need for more effective vocabulary instruction in the researcher's classroom and teaching site. Current literature supports the need for more effective vocabulary instruction in early childhood. The intervention used the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) as an instructional strategy to support expressive language development in the researcher's preschool classroom. Eighteen students in a four-year-old classroom participated in an intervention using explicit instruction during large group, small group, and sharing (show and tell). Standardized and researcher created measures were used to determine significance of the outcomes. Findings showed an increase in expressive language with the descriptive units taught with the EET having the most significant growth. Results of the study will impact future instruction in the researcher's classroom as well as four-year-old classrooms at the researcher's teaching site.

*Keywords: Expanding Expression Tool (EET), vocabulary, word knowledge*

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### **The Expanding Expression Tool's Impact on Expressive Language in Preschool**

Language development is a critical skill area for preschoolers. Expressive language allows children to communicate their wants and needs in the classroom and is part of early literacy development. The Iowa Early Learning Standards state in standard 6.1.PS, “Children understand and use communication and language for a variety of purposes” (Iowa DOE, 2018, p. 184). Benchmarks for this standard include increasing receptive and expressive vocabulary, engaging in conversations, and asking and answering a variety of questions (Iowa DOE, 2018, p. 184). Despite support for vocabulary instruction in the preschool standards, the problem that remains is developing instructional strategies for explicit vocabulary instruction that early childhood professionals can implement with fidelity (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016; Seven et al., 2020; Wasik & Hindman, 2014). There is also a lack of available literature describing what features of instruction support the building of semantic networks for depth of word knowledge learning in young children (Hadley & Dickinson, 2019). Inadequate instructional strategies for teaching word knowledge at a young age have long term impacts on learning. Children’s vocabulary and early language skills at ages three to six are predictive of the same abilities in Grades 3 and 4 and of reading comprehension in middle school and Grade 11 (Barnes et al., 2017).

The purpose of this action research project is to determine how preschoolers’ expressive language development is affected after receiving instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET). A collaborating speech pathologist introduced the EET to the researcher and it has been used in the classroom for three years. There are seven spheres on the EET representing a caterpillar. Each sphere symbolizes a language descriptor: green- what group, blue what do you do, white eye what does it look like, wood- what is it made of, pink- what are the parts, white-

where does it come from, and orange- what else do you know (Expanding Expression, 2021). Research by Hadley et al. (2016) supports the use of language descriptors for developing semantic networks and the vocabulary of young children. However, there is a lack of literature describing what language descriptors most benefit preschool-aged children. This project intends to improve teaching and learning by studying instruction using specific language descriptors in the researcher's preschool classroom. There is also a potential for collaboration within the researcher's teaching site to implement a building wide approach for vocabulary instruction.

Reviewing existing literature on vocabulary development in preschool established several themes of interest and importance. It is important to understand the current reality of vocabulary instruction in preschool, the different types of word learning, and the instructional methods being studied. The ERIC database was used to find peer-reviewed journal articles, through the Northwestern College DeWitt Library Online catalog. Articles included for review were published within the last ten years. Two articles included were published earlier than ten years ago but were considered primary sources for this research project. Criteria for inclusion were articles pertaining to early childhood settings, including preschool and kindergarten. Studies including children with and without disabilities, and studies representing all socioeconomic levels were included. These settings and demographics are representative of the researcher's classroom. Studies focusing on the vocabulary development of bilingual children were considered outside the scope of this project and were not included in the review.

Findings from this action research project are expected to show instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) results in gains in preschoolers' vocabulary and expressive language. It is hypothesized the greatest gains will be in using language descriptors due to the EET's specific focus on seven of these descriptors. Neuman et al. (2011) found vocabulary

knowledge influences the development of conceptual knowledge and comprehension, suggesting a causal relationship among these fundamental language skills. Outcomes of this action research are important because effective instructional strategies are needed to support young children's vocabulary development. Adequate word knowledge allows children to express their wants and needs and supports foundational skills for later literacy learning.

Currently, research is limited in studies including use of the Expanding Expression Tool (EET). A literature review will explain the current reality of vocabulary instruction in early childhood and will establish the importance of expressive language development in preschool. This includes the connection between language and literacy as well as disparities in vocabulary development for different populations of students. Instructional methods for vocabulary development will be detailed to determine best practices and consider opposing viewpoints. These methods include storybook reading, explicit instruction, and teacher-child interactions. Assessments used to measure vocabulary and expressive language development will be presented and evaluated. Types of word knowledge, including how children build conceptual frameworks to understand words, will be included to bring a focus on what aspects of words should be focused on in early childhood. Reviewing the literature about vocabulary development in early childhood provides an understanding of the established themes and provides direction for this action research project.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Importance of Preschool Vocabulary Development**

Children in preschool are at a prime age to develop foundational vocabulary skills important for current and future learning. To understand themes for vocabulary instruction in current research, the importance of vocabulary development for young children must be established. Vocabulary instruction's importance in preschool is accepted in all current research and no opposing views were found. Beck and McKeown (2007) cite studies by Davis (1944, 1968), Singer (1965), and Thurstone (1946). These correlational and factor-analytic studies found a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading competence. Early childhood years are a time of rapid word learning with the average child possessing a vocabulary of 10,000 words (Myers & Ankrum, 2018). Children entering preschool are challenged to refine their knowledge of words used in everyday conversation and must begin to build academic vocabulary for school success (Hadley & Dickinson, 2019). Features of academic language including decontextualized talk, complex syntax, and academic vocabulary have gained importance through the implementation of the Common Core Standards. (Barnes et al., 2017). A strong vocabulary from the start equips students to understand content area instruction including texts they hear or read, and allows them to engage in positive social interactions by understanding expectations and being able to express themselves (Rimbey et al., 2016; Wasik & Hindman, 2014). Preschool is often the first-time children have experienced a more structured, group learning environment. Being able to effectively express themselves is necessary for positive interactions and experiences in this setting. Long-standing and current research clearly shows vocabulary development plays a role in students' personal and academic success.

### ***Vocabulary and Literacy***

Vocabulary instruction's importance is often connected to later literacy success for students. This idea is also accepted across the literature. Oral language has been found to be a reliable predictor with a clear relation between early vocabulary and later reading comprehension (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016; Peters-Sanders et al., 2020; Seven et al., 2020; Spencer & Schuele, 2012). However, no current studies were found to include following students beyond the vocabulary intervention provided in preschool to determine the long-term outcomes for literacy skills and comprehension. Multiple studies cited work from the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) as the primary source for examining research connecting early vocabulary development with literacy skills beyond preschool.

In 2008, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) published its findings from a meta-analysis of studies for early literacy development. In this publication, a moderate correlation was found between oral language and later literacy skills. Moderate correlations were defined as being between .30 and .49. Studies analyzed included 63 related to oral vocabulary and decoding ( $r = .33$ ), 30 studies related to oral vocabulary and comprehension ( $r = .33$ ), and 18 studies related to oral vocabulary and spelling ( $r = .36$ ). A higher correlation was expected between oral vocabulary and comprehension, so the panel categorized the 30 studies into different aspects of oral language development. Measures of grammar, definitional vocabulary, and listening comprehension were more significant predictors of later reading comprehension than measures of global vocabulary. NELP concluded vocabulary supports development of more complex oral language skills, which then contribute to later literacy learning. Vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are connected in this conclusion, but attention must also be placed on the development of complex oral language skills. Studies detailed later, and the focus of this research project place emphasis on this part of language development in early childhood.

### *Socioeconomic Disparities*

The importance of vocabulary instruction and its connection to later literacy learning means that all children need to have confidence in expressing themselves and need to be able to leverage their vocabulary knowledge. However, children from lower socioeconomic (SES) circumstances are likely to be exposed to fewer words early on, creating a gap persisting into school. Wasik and Hindman (2014) found children with college-educated parents hear three times as many words as children in homes receiving public assistance. As children enter Kindergarten, children living in poverty score one standard deviation below middle- and high-income peers on measures of vocabulary knowledge (Wasik & Hindman, 2014). Disparities in word knowledge continue throughout school. First-graders from higher SES backgrounds know twice as many words as lower-SES students, and by high school this number reaches four times as many words (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Differences in language learning for students from different SES backgrounds warrant attention to how children gain word knowledge so instruction can be tailored to address these specific needs.

To address differences in language learning, Wright and Neuman (2014), conducted a study comparing how teachers in different SES settings included vocabulary instruction in the classroom. Teachers provided 8.14 vocabulary episodes a day, with data varying considerably from 0-20 episodes. In schools with 25% or less of the students receiving free/reduced lunch (FRL) teachers provided 10.32 vocabulary episodes per day and explained 9.24 words. In schools with 26-50% FRL teachers provided 7.48 vocabulary episodes per day and explained 7.01 words. In schools with over 51% FRL teachers provided 6.88 vocabulary episodes per day and explained 6.32 words. Not only were students from lower SES backgrounds receiving less vocabulary instruction, but fewer novel vocabulary words were being used. In their work, Kelley

(2017) and Spencer and Schuele (2012) state students from lower-SES backgrounds are viewed as having limited language abilities and are labeled as poor word learners. This could explain teachers working with students from lower SES backgrounds using a slower instructional pace or choosing fewer words to include in instruction. However, other studies have shown students from low-SES backgrounds can acquire word knowledge skills at comparable rates as peers from middle or high-SES backgrounds.

Establishing how students from different SES backgrounds learn words is important for eliminating disparities in student learning. Spencer & Schuele (2012) looked at how students from low-SES backgrounds learn labels for the whole object, parts of the object, and whole-part juxtaposition (presenting the term for the whole and the part in one cue). Children provided more part-term responses in the possessive syntax (using the phrase *it has a*) and whole-part juxtaposition than in the baseline condition when no prompts were given. An assessment of general vocabulary knowledge was also used, and scores on this assessment did not relate to scores on the intervention tasks. These findings show students from low-SES backgrounds can demonstrate adequate word knowledge when background knowledge is not a factor in performance. Beck and McKeown (2007) conducted another study focusing on the language development of students from low-SES backgrounds. Students were explicitly taught a set of words from stories read in class, and a second part of the intervention provided additional instruction, referred to as more rich instruction, for a subset of words. Beck and McKeown (2007) found Kindergartners in the first intervention gained 5.58 words compared to 1.04 words in the comparison group. Words targeted for “more rich instruction” resulted in gains of 8.17 words compared to 2.50 words given explicit instruction. Both intervention formats had high standards for demonstration of knowledge and assert children are not limited in their ability to

learn sophisticated words. Both studies negate the idea for providing students from lower SES backgrounds a different instructional pace or choice of words when planning vocabulary instruction.

In addition to instructional differences, Kelley (2017) considered assessment as a factor in the discrepancies between students from different SES backgrounds. Measures of general vocabulary assess existing knowledge which could result in biases for students with limited background experiences. A measure of learning processes for word knowledge could eliminate this bias. Kelley (2017) chose to use a dynamic assessment which combined instruction and assessment. This assessment used incremental and hierarchical scoring which provided more sensitivity in measuring word knowledge. Using dynamic assessment, students demonstrated an increase in scores for both definitional and word production skills. Definitional scores increased from 3.30 to 6.83 out of 9 from session one to session three. Production scores increased from 3.17 to 9 out of 12 from session one to session three. Results show measures of word knowledge must move from assessing prior experiences of children to measuring outcomes of word-learning opportunities. Findings substantiate the need for this research project to include a dynamic assessment connected to the instructional strategy being implemented.

### **Current Reality**

Implementing effective vocabulary practices in preschool requires understanding the current state of curriculum and instruction. Findings do not paint a positive light on what is currently happening in classrooms. Early childhood standards and curriculum do not give adequate guidance on providing vocabulary instruction, and observational studies show preschool teachers often fail to provide high-quality language instruction (Barnes et al., 2016; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016; Seven et al., 2020). In a study of 55 Kindergarten classrooms, Wright

(2012) found teachers discussed an average of 8.14 vocabulary words per day, but instances ranged from 0-20 across classrooms. Vocabulary instances were brief, with an average of 2.5 utterances per episode. Wright and Neuman (2014) expanded on these findings. In the 8 episodes of vocabulary instruction, teachers discussed 7.5 words, meaning words were rarely instructed on more than once. Of these words, 4.53 were rated as basic words and 3.03 were rated as easy on the Words Worth Teaching list. Observations showed vocabulary was not listed as an objective in lesson plans or as part of the daily schedule. Observations also revealed the densest vocabulary instruction took place during social studies or science and not during the language arts block as expected. The concern with this finding is calculations found little or no social studies or science instruction in many of the classrooms observed. These intermittent exposures to words result in partial word knowledge and do not provide opportunities for children to engage deeply with new words.

With the sparse amount of vocabulary instruction happening in classrooms, it becomes relevant to determine which content areas or times of day could provide more instruction. Wright (2012) calculated how much time Kindergarten classrooms incorporated content area instruction. Read-alouds, science, and social studies had the greatest number of vocabulary episodes per minutes. When looking at how much instruction was provided, it was found an average of 11 minutes per day were spent on read-alouds, 2 minutes per day to science, and 1 minute to social studies. Many classrooms did not include any science or social studies instruction which resulted in low median scores. Dwyer and Harbaugh (2020) looked at the activity settings, content, and support for vocabulary development in eight preschool classrooms while considering many preschool classrooms embed content in other routines of the day. Outcomes showed large parts of the preschool day are not used for language interactions that lead to the learning and skills

needed for school readiness. Students had no contact with an adult during 76% of free play and 51% of academic learning times. Density of vocabulary support (instances per minute) during classroom routines was found to be read-aloud- 0.85, whole group- 0.56, small group- 0.21, centers- 0.08, snack- 0.08, and transitions- 0.03. Within these routines, 42.39% of instruction was spent on a content focus. Observations showed a large range of vocabulary instruction between classrooms. Teachers provided the most vocabulary support during more formal times of the day, no teachers were leveraging centers, transitions, or mealtimes to support language learning, and most teachers provided almost no support for vocabulary development in any context, including read-alouds. Dwyer and Harbaugh (2020) assert informal activity settings require teachers to think quickly about how to support language development since these interactions cannot be planned beforehand. To be able to do this, teachers must know how children learn words, how to support learning in the classroom, and how to adjust in response to student need. Confidence in these skills is needed to support interactions for vocabulary development in all routines and content areas of the classroom.

Within each context of the classroom, teacher-child interactions must be leveraged to support language development. These interactions can provide vocabulary exposures going beyond common words used in everyday conversation (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Teachers often provide different types of language experiences during different classroom contexts. Barnes et al. (2016) used videos taken in 52 Head Start classrooms to determine if teacher utterances were concept focused, skills focused, or vocabulary focused. Book reading had the largest number of concept and vocabulary focused utterances, 5 and 2.2 respectively. Whole group instruction compared with book reading with 4.5 concept focused utterances and 1.9 vocabulary focused utterances. Like Wright (2012), this study found content area whole group

instruction provided different types and total amounts of vocabulary instruction. Small group contained only 1.5 vocabulary focused utterances but was heavily focused on skills with 3.1 utterances being skills focused. Barnes et al. (2017) looked further into the types of teacher-child interactions happening during book reading. Teachers used an average of 53.5 comments during a book reading, with 45.88 utterances giving information. Expanding (3.90), explanations (2.35), and responses (1.37) were other comments observed. After an intervention to increase teachers' use of responsive comments, it was found a one unit increase in response comments resulted in a 0.73 increase in a student's general vocabulary scores, and a one unit increase in conceptually focused comments resulted in a 0.76 increase. Wasik and Hindman (2014) agreed with the importance of teacher responsiveness for vocabulary instruction. Their study of 25 teachers in in three Head Start programs found a strong correlation between teachers who used target vocabulary and students talking more about vocabulary. Teachers referencing students' use of vocabulary resulted in higher vocabulary scores. In contrast, student references to target vocabulary did not predict higher scores. These studies validate the need for classrooms where teachers use targeted vocabulary and respond to students' use of vocabulary in all classroom contexts. Findings require the current study to consider interactions used during instruction and to incorporate instruction within multiple contexts.

### **Word Knowledge**

Literature regarding word knowledge reveals three main ideas. These are breadth of word knowledge, depth of word knowledge, and formation of semantic networks. These themes have connections within young children's vocabulary development, but there are differing views on how they should be included in vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary knowledge can be viewed as being along a continuum from not understanding a word's meaning to having a deep

understanding (Toub et al., 2018). Differing views on young children's development along this continuum impacts the interventions and assessments used to target word knowledge in preschool.

Breadth of word knowledge is an estimate of the overall number of items in one's lexicon, without specific attention being paid to how well each item is known and includes "fast mapped" knowledge; an initial representation of a word gained through only a few exposures. (Hadley & Dickinson, 2020). Historically, studies of young children's vocabulary focused on breadth of word knowledge by having children identify pictures. Current studies focus on children's ability to leverage existing vocabulary knowledge and children's ability to fast map new words. Peters-Sanders et al. (2020) found a relationship between preschoolers' pre-intervention language skills and the number of words learned during intervention. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test Version 4 (PPVT-4) was given before and after intervention. Strong correlations were found between PPVT-4 scores and word learning ( $r = .57, p < .05$ ). One child who had a PPVT-4 score of 100 gained an average of 6.2 words per book, compared to another child who scored 77 on the PPVT-4 and had an average gain of 1 point per book. These findings show children who have higher initial vocabularies use their knowledge to learn new words. Spencer and Scheule (2012) looked at the fast-mapping skills of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Children were able to demonstrate fast mapping skills regardless of their initial vocabulary knowledge. Children were presented with pictures of familiar objects with part of the object highlighted. Students learned a new word for the highlighted part by being given prompts relating the part to the whole, or a part-whole prompt with an addition of a repetition of the object's label. Children provided the most part-term responses in the third condition ( $M = 5.83, SD = 2.15$ ) than in the part-whole condition ( $M = 4.46, SD = 2.41$ ) and the

baseline condition ( $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ). Initial scores on the PPVT-III and Expressive Vocabulary Tests (EVT) had no correlation with student's fast mapping scores. Children may understand aspects of a word even if unable to identify a picture in measures of general vocabulary knowledge. In both studies, students did gain breadth of word knowledge, but questions remained on how students with larger vocabularies were able to gain knowledge at higher rates.

Depth of word knowledge expands from vocabulary breadth and is how well the words in one's lexicon are known (Hadley et al., 2016). Researchers began looking at depth of word knowledge to address some students' denser vocabulary knowledge. Word knowledge can be seen as ranging from low to high quality, and high-quality representations are able to be generalized to multiple contexts (Hadley & Dickinson, 2020). Current literature has placed a priority on developing measures for assessing depth of word knowledge to capture the complexities of young children's word learning (Hoffman et al., 2014). Hoffman et al. (2014) completed a qualitative study examining the different vocabulary measures available to determine how they could be used to assess preschoolers' word knowledge. Findings reported the PPVT and EVT measures referenced in the previous paragraph were only applicable to breadth of word knowledge. Depth of word knowledge requires modification of yes/no measures and definitional word measures which are often created by researchers due to the lack of standardized definitional measures. Hoffman et al. (2014) concluded researchers should use both standardized and researcher-created measures to examine vocabulary gains. This addresses the concerns about the insensitivity of general vocabulary measures to detect small amounts of growth and allows for data-based instructional decisions about what children are learning about words. Hadley and Dickinson (2020) also used a qualitative study to examine current vocabulary

measures. They felt assessments only requiring children to select a picture for a target word left open the questions of what the child could really do with the word. Hadley and Dickinson (2020) agreed with Hoffman et al. (2014) for only using the PPVT and EVT to assess breadth of word knowledge and results did not provide information about the quality of a child's lexical representations. Hadley and Dickinson (2020) distinguished between definitional and meaning measures. Definition tasks ask what a child knows about a word and can be scored on a continuum for completeness of a definition. Meaning tasks require children to provide a variety of information such as what something does or is used for or provide information about category membership. Again, a combination of assessments was supported to determine a child's full range of vocabulary knowledge. Kelley (2017) utilized a researcher created assessment to measure gains in children's depth of word knowledge. Kelley (2017) supported dynamic assessment to connect assessments with instruction. Dynamic assessment was found to be sensitive in measuring preschoolers' growth in definitional and production scores. Students increased from a mean score of 3.30 in session one to 6.83 in session three for definitional tasks. Students increased from a mean score of 3.17 in session one to 9.00 in session three for production tasks. Interestingly, Kelley (2017) found if children could produce a word, they were also likely to be able to define the word (81% of productions). However, children who achieved mastery on definitional probes could only sometimes produce the word (59% of definitions). It appears knowledge of a words' definition emerges before the ability to produce the word. Using an instructional strategy related to depth of word knowledge will allow the current action research to focus on adding definitional knowledge of words to children's lexicons. Considering information about current measures and their effectiveness, a combination of standardized and

researcher-created measures will be used to examine the full continuum of children's language growth during the intervention.

As researchers studied breadth and depth of word knowledge, there remained a need to determine how children learn words. Understanding word learning processes would explain why children with higher initial vocabularies could leverage this skill to learn new words at a higher rate than peers with lower initial vocabularies. Semantic networks are examined in literature as the underlying process for how words are learned by children (Hadley et al., 2016; Neuman et al., 2011). Neuman et al. (2011) implemented an intervention using taxonomic topics with words representing labels within a category. Students in the treatment condition scored significantly higher than the control group in using categories to define new words, 58% versus 50%. Children learned labels for novel artifacts more readily when paired with additional information about the artifact's function, than when paired with information about the artifact's shape or incidental information about the object. Neuman et al. (2011) related these findings to two early childhood developmental ideas. Regarding fast mapping, there was agreement in students making a connection between a label and object with a few instances, but these connections only provide partial knowledge and become fragile over time. Secondly, when young students undergo a vocabulary spurt, they also begin to display the ability to categorize. Co-occurrence of these skills support a relationship between them in word learning. Hadley et al. (2016) investigated which semantic units preschoolers could use to leverage their language development. Semantic units used were functional information, meaningful context, synonyms, part-whole relations, gestures, perceptual qualities, and basic context. Students gave 4.68 more information units at post-test for targets words, or 0.42 more information units per word. Students showed growth in all semantic units for nouns, with functional information having the

most gains. Students gained in all semantic units for verbs, with synonyms having the most gains. Students only showed growth in synonyms for adjectives. Hadley et al. (2016) concluded high-quality representations in semantic networks tightly connect form and meaning allowing for words to quickly be retrieved, whereas low quality representations slow retrieval speed thus impacting word understanding and comprehension. Hadley et al. (2019) conducted another study regarding semantic networks. This study compared students' learning of taxonomy versus theme words with the same semantic units from the previous study. Assessment measures were given in a pre and post-test design. For taxonomy words, students gave 0.58 semantic units at pre-test and 1.70 units at post-test. For theme words, students gave 0.23 units at pre-test and 0.87 units at post-test. For taxonomy words, students showed the most gains in object function, followed by category and perceptual information. Hadley et al. (2019) viewed semantic units as "hooks" for children to build word knowledge networks on. Using conceptually related categories to teach words takes advantage of these "hooks" because once properties of one category are taught, they can be applied to more exemplars without a lot of additional instruction. Children with rich baseline vocabularies can connect new words within their existing semantic networks, providing an explanation for their faster gains in learning new words compared to peers with lower baseline vocabularies. Semantic units within a specific instructional strategy will be used in this action research to determine language descriptors' impacts on vocabulary development. Units of category, function, and perceptual qualities used by Hadley et al. (2016) and Hadley et al. (2019) are included along with what the item is made of and where the item comes from.

### **Types of Instruction**

Vocabulary instruction's importance, the current state of vocabulary instruction in early childhood, and understanding types of word knowledge all lead to determining what instruction

will provide the best outcomes for young learners. Storybook reading has largely been the focus in interventions for vocabulary instruction with young children. When students enter school, they are likely to need a wider and more sophisticated vocabulary than is heard in everyday conversations and book reading has been regarded as a method to expose children to novel words (Neuman et al., 2011). Despite the focus on storybook reading as a method for teaching vocabulary, there is little clarity about which of the numerous practices or learning opportunities ultimately serve as the primary mechanisms through which vocabulary learning is enhanced (Hadley & Dickinson, 2019; Wasik & Hindman, 2014; Wright & Neuman, 2014). Opposing viewpoints about these learning opportunities have led to additional studies combining storybook reading with other instructional methods to pinpoint what strategies provide the best outcomes for vocabulary learning.

One method for vocabulary instruction agreed upon in literature is the concept of rich instruction. Beck and McKeown (2007) originated this concept as well as the types of words needed for instruction. These words are referred to as Tier 2 words and are described as domain general words with more sophisticated labels for concepts young children were already familiar with. Their concept of rich instruction required explaining words in child friendly language, providing multiple examples and contexts, and asking students to process words by identifying appropriate and inappropriate uses. Rich instruction would lead to students forming connections and flexible knowledge useful for making sense of words in new contexts. Beck and McKeown (2007) completed a two-part study using rich instruction to teach words introduced during storybook reading. Study one provided instruction for a set of words from the book, and study two provided additional instruction for another subset of words. Additional instruction was referred to as “more rich instruction.” In study one, kindergartners had a mean gain of 5.58

words, and the control group had a mean gain of 1.04 words. In study two, students had a mean gain of 8.17 words on a verbal task and 8.03 on a picture task, compared to mean gains of 2.50 on the verbal task and 2.97 on the picture task for words not receiving additional instruction. Findings showed rich instruction is beneficial for vocabulary learning, and young students can demonstrate learning at levels going beyond definitions or synonyms. Providing rich instruction with child-friendly language, multiple examples of the words in a variety of contexts and requiring students to use and review the words in multiple settings has become the accepted foundation for designing vocabulary interventions (Goldstein et al., 2016; Peters-Sanders et al., 2020; Rimbey et al., 2016; Wright & Neuman, 2014).

### ***Implicit and Explicit Instruction***

With rich instruction established as an instructional requirement, delivery methods for instruction can be examined. Learning in preschool happens within all classroom opportunities; some incidental and some intentionally planned. Studies in early childhood vocabulary instruction have explored if implicit or explicit instruction is more beneficial to language development. Implicit instruction refers to unintentional learning in which the learning goal of the task is not directly told to the learning, and explicit instruction refers to learning tasks in which the content is directly clear to the learner (Damhuis et al., 2014). Two studies used storybook reading with implicit and explicit instructional conditions. Damhuis et al. (2014) provided implicit instruction of words in the context of a storybook reading, and explicit instruction on words by giving additional definitions during the reading. A picture task, label task, and semantic interview were used as assessments to measure breadth and depth of word knowledge. After intervention, for implicitly taught words, students had a mean score of 13.08 on the picture task, 9.88 on the label task, and 19.28 on the semantic interview. For explicitly

taught words, students had post-test scores of 14.32 on the picture task, 10.52 on the label task, and 22.56 on the semantic interview. Explicit instruction was more effective than implicit instruction with a moderately strong effect size. Loftus-Rattan et al. (2016) provided extended, embedded, and incidental instruction for word learning during storybook reading. Extended instruction provided an additional 15 minutes of target word activities after reading, embedded instruction provided an additional 2 minutes of instruction during reading, and incidental instruction provided no additional instruction. On an expressive word knowledge measure students scored 1.88 in the extended condition, 0.60 in the embedded condition, and 0.20 in the incidental condition. Students made the most growth in the highest intensity condition, but there was little difference between the two lower-intensity conditions. Both studies conclude deliberate teaching of word meanings through explicit instruction should be a part of instruction from the start of a child's schooling. Literature supports the current study's use of an explicit instructional strategy with young children.

Interactions between teachers and students play a role within explicit instruction for word learning. Myers and Ankrum (2018) explored student interactions after read-aloud as part of explicit instruction. Three students participated in interactive read-alouds combining explicit instruction with opportunities for students to relate the targeted words to text and their own experiences. All three students demonstrated increased skills in applying background knowledge to targeted words, increased confidence by participating without prompting, and using words expressively in conversation. Rimbey et al. (2016) focused on engaging teachers in professional development for effective vocabulary instruction. Professional learning included providing students with multiple exposures to words, providing students with definitional and contextual information, and actively engaging students with words in meaningful ways. After the

professional development and continued coaching, teachers responded positively in the exit interview. Receiving feedback after lessons was found valuable by 67% of teachers, and 92% of teachers reported changing their instruction. Teachers felt students were more engaged with instruction and all teachers increased their proportion of high-level questioning. Teachers expressed concern with the time and intensity required. Studies show explicit instruction for word learning can be extended through teacher-student and student-student interactions. Teachers should encourage children to use book vocabulary by recasting, explaining, and repeating children's comments which reinforces their use of targeted words (Wasik & Hindman, 2014).

### ***Story Friends Curriculum***

Goldstein et al. (2016) developed the Story Friends curriculum for vocabulary instruction to provide students with experiences using Tier 2 words. Prerecorded storybooks were presented in units and instruction was embedded for vocabulary and comprehension. During instruction, students had opportunities to say the word and the definition. After intervention, the experimental group grew from a mean of 0.6 word points to a mean of 4 word points. A comparison group grew from 0.5 word points to 0.8 word points. Teachers agreed students benefitted from participating and enjoyed the listening centers. Teachers agreed somewhat it was feasible to fit the intervention into the daily schedule and disagreed with students enjoyed listening to the stories three times. Positive outcomes for vocabulary instruction were shown, but concerns were expressed over this intervention's ability to develop depth of word knowledge. Hadley et al. (2019) and Peters-Sanders et al. (2020) argued simply reading stories does not significantly impact the learning of sophisticated words and additional explanation and explicit instruction are needed for a read-aloud to impact word learning. Beck and McKeown (2007)

found students grew bored with repeated readings and those repetitions did not expose children to additional contexts for the words. They felt read-alouds should be followed by review or additional activities to introduce using words in different contexts.

Additional studies using the Story Friends curriculum added elements to address the above arguments. Peters-Sanders et al. (2020) added an explicit instruction component to the Story Friends curriculum. Two words with researcher designed lessons were added to each story book. Treatment effects were defined as an increase of two points from pre-test to post-test. Treatment effects were replicated across all children in 75% of the possible replications. Treatment effects were observed for a mean of 6.7 books out of 9. Children learned, on average, 17 words. Previous studies using only two words per book showed gains of 10 words overall. Seven et al. (2020) implemented a study using the Story Friends curriculum to address another concern with its use in schools. Previous interventions implemented by researchers were found to be moderately effective, and when implemented by teachers were far less effective. This study added a Classroom Vocabulary Review Strategy (CVRS) used by teachers after the Story Friends lessons. Teachers received message prompts on how provide opportunities to use the words and visual word cards were displayed in the classroom. On post-test results students in the CVRS condition demonstrated knowledge of 62.3% of the word taught whereas students in the Story Friends only condition demonstrated knowledge of 41.9% of the words. Ten students who did not participate in the Story Friends instruction but were exposed to the words in the CVRS condition had vocabulary scores of 5.8 on the Story Friends only words and 19.8 on the CVRS words. Findings in Peters-Sanders et al. (2020) and Seven et al. (2020) verify the importance of classroom teachers being able to implement explicit vocabulary instruction. Action research in

this project will be implemented in the researcher's classroom to address the importance of instruction being implemented by a teacher during regular classroom routines.

### *Instruction Combined with Play*

Much of the research focuses on explicit instruction for vocabulary instruction, but some studies have considered how play could be incorporated into learning opportunities. Play is the heart of a developmentally appropriate preschool classroom, and literature has considered how to include student interest as a part of vocabulary instruction. These studies include a storybook reading followed by different play conditions to determine the outcomes on language development of young children. Hadley and Dickinson (2019) followed storybook reading with guided play situations with props related to the targeted words. During play, adults engaged in responsive interactions initiated by the child's interest or need followed by the adult extending the child's offering. Responsive interactions were found to be positively associated with growth in vocabulary breadth ( $d = 0.511$ ) and depth ( $d = 0.446$ ). Hadley and Dickinson (2019) concluded adult-child interactions can provide thoughtful scaffolding of children's emergent word knowledge and guided play complements the teacher-led nature of book reading. Toub et al. (2018) used guided, directed, and free play and measured student growth in receptive and expressive word knowledge. Both guided play and directed play resulted in larger gains than free play. There was no difference between guided and directed play. Toub et al. (2018) went on to determine if storybook reading with play or storybook reading with picture cards resulted in greater word knowledge. In the read and play condition students had a mean post-test score of 0.70 for receptive and 0.85 for expressive. In the read and picture card condition students had a post-test score of 0.70 for receptive and 0.64 for expressive. Toub et al. (2018) accounted for the same scores in the receptive category by explaining words are more easily fast-mapped and

therefore could be learned easily in either condition. The requirement of defining words in the expressive condition required depth of word knowledge which is a higher level of learning more supported by the play condition. Guided play provided for frequent exposures of words, included the child's interests, and provided an interactive and responsive environment with meaningful contexts. Guided play preserves the child-directedness of free play while incorporating the goal-directedness of formal instruction (Toub et al., 2018). Although the current study focuses on explicit instruction and does not include a play condition, the methods are mindful of the teacher-child and child-child interactions needed to adequately scaffold new word learning.

### **Summary**

Examining literature shows a consensus in the importance of teaching word knowledge in the early childhood years, and a growing agreement for including depth of word knowledge in instruction. However, current instructional materials give little guidance to teachers who want to do a better job of teaching vocabulary to young students (Neuman et al., 2011). Existing literature focuses on storybook reading as the accepted intervention for teaching vocabulary. Research shows young children do learn words through listening to storybooks, but studies question whether incidental vocabulary exposure is substantial enough to support depth of word learning (Wright & Neuman, 2014). These studies are finding increased vocabulary development when instruction occurs in other classroom contexts such as social studies and science instruction (Wright & Neuman, 2014).

Action research in this project applies findings from literature to implement explicit instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) for vocabulary learning in preschool. Components of instruction will include depth of word knowledge and building of semantic networks through use of the EET descriptors. Young children are capable of significant

improvements in the depth of their word knowledge in a relatively short amount of time, making depth a reasonable instructional goal for preschool classrooms (Hadley & Dickinson, 2019). Storybook reading is not required as part of EET instruction, which addresses a gap in literature by implementing a different approach for instruction. Instruction with the EET can be used in multiple contexts of the classroom while remaining in the scope of explicit instruction. These contexts include whole group, small group, and sharing (show and tell). There was no research found regarding sharing and vocabulary development, although sharing time promotes using decontextualized language, precise terminology, and language adjustments based on the audience (Barnes et al., 2016). Outcomes of this action research will provide a conclusion about the effects of vocabulary instruction using the EET in a preschool classroom setting.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Research in this project aims to answer the question: How does instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) affect preschoolers' expressive language development? All intervention took place in the researcher's inclusive four-year-old classroom in Southeast Iowa. The classroom is part of a district preschool program, and all district classrooms are in one early childhood learning center. There are 18 students in the classroom. Two students receive special education services, and two additional students receive speech only services. Four students are dual language learners. Programs are full day serving students for six hours a day, five days a week. This classroom is funded by the state's Shared Visions grant which requires 80% of the students be identified as at risk due to socioeconomic factors. The classroom teacher is dually certified in early childhood and special education. There are two program paraprofessionals and one child specific paraprofessional in the classroom. All district classrooms are accredited through the Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards and follow the Iowa Early Learning Standards.

All students in the classroom had the opportunity to participate in this research project. One student was excluded from data due to attendance. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning students a numerical identifier for data collection. This project was found to be exempt for IRB approval as it is being conducted in a common educational setting and involves normal educational practices. Students continued to receive all core instruction during the intervention and were not negatively impacted by the implementation of the EET instructional strategy. Parents were informed of the research project and consented to their child participating.

### **Measures**

This study's independent variable is instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) and the dependent variable is students' expressive language development. Students' expressive language development was measured using three instruments; Teaching Strategies GOLD, myIGDIs, and a teacher created EET descriptors assessment. Teaching Strategies GOLD is the primary assessment in the researcher's classroom and is administered three times a year. MyIGDIs is also administered three times a year as a literacy screener. The EET descriptors assessment was only used for the purposes of action research.

Teaching Strategies GOLD was the first measure and used objective 9a: Children use an expanding expressive vocabulary. To complete GOLD checkpoints, teachers record observations during natural classroom activities and score children along developmental bands. Teaching Strategies (2011) reports GOLD is an assessment system found to yield highly valid and reliable results. Teachers can use this observation-based assessment to make valid ratings of the developmental progress of children. GOLD has also established validity for students with special needs and students whose home language is not English.

The second measure used two subtests from myIGDIs, Picture Naming and Which One Doesn't Belong. Each subtest contains 15 items and students are scored in each subtest. Renaissance Learning (2021), the parent company of myIGDIs, reports myIGDIs are based on two decades of research into effective measurement practices for describing children's trajectories of development. MyIGDIs have been evaluated empirically in multiple studies focusing on its use in preschool programs. MyIGDIs has not established reliability or validity for its use with students receiving special education services or dual language learners.

Instruction and assessment were connected in the third measure by using the EET descriptors assessment created by the researcher. This measure used pictures of objects and a

checklist with the seven descriptors from the EET. Student answers were recorded on the checklist. These descriptors are which group is the item in, what do you do with the item, what does it look like, what is it made of, what are its parts, where does it come from, and what else do you know. Due to the design of this measure, validity and reliability could not be established.

Data collected from all measures was represented quantitatively in a pre and post-test design. Baseline assessments of GOLD, myIGDIs, and the EET descriptors checklist were administered by the end of November of 2021. Post-test administration occurred six weeks after the intervention began in January 2022. Mean scores and standard deviations were determined using the pre and post-test scores of GOLD Objective 9a, myIGDIS Picture Naming and Which One Doesn't Belong, and the EET descriptors assessment. A dependent samples t-test was used for each assessment to determine significance of the findings. Statistical analysis was completed using data analysis tools within Excel.

### **Procedures**

Intervention took place over 6 weeks from January to February 2022. Students had received previous instruction with the EET during large group in the Fall of 2021. Instruction focused on introducing the descriptors for each sphere on the EET. Seven spheres make up the EET and are designed to represent a caterpillar. The green sphere means what group is the item in, blue means what do you do with it, white with an eye means what does it look like, wood means what is it made of, pink means what are its parts, white means where does it come from, and orange is what else do you know. Instruction took place once a week and was teacher directed.

In January 2022, instruction was expanded to incorporate additional explicit instructional opportunities using the EET. Instruction was given during large group, small group, and sharing

(show and tell) to include more classroom contexts. Large group instruction was modified to focus on student directed use of the EET. Students worked in partners with their own EET's to describe pictures or objects. Students became leaders of instruction by giving EET descriptor clues for other students to guess a picture or item. Small group instruction using the EET also occurred once a week. Small group instruction was intentionally planned based on observations of students during large group which revealed parts of the EET needing more attention. During small groups students used dice, and whichever color was rolled indicated what part of the EET would be targeted for describing an object. Journal prompts were used to elicit more opportunities for describing groups, what objects look like, and what objects are made of. Sharing (show and tell) was incorporated as an instructional opportunity for using the EET. During sharing, students used the EET to talk about a toy, picture, book, or game from home. Teacher support was available as students needed. Students also began asking each other when they forgot what a sphere of the EET represented. Anecdotal observations of student use of the EET were taken during sharing. These three instructional contexts provided students opportunities to expand their use of the EET while maintaining the focus of using explicit vocabulary instruction for expressive language development.

### **Data Collection**

Quantitative data was collected for this research project. Assessments used were Teaching Strategies GOLD Objective 9a: Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary, myIGDIS Picture Naming and Which One Doesn't Belong subtests, and the EET descriptors assessment created by the researcher. Baseline data was collected in the Fall of 2021. Instruction for the study began in January 2022 and data was collected after six weeks of instruction in February 2022. Data for GOLD and myIGDIS are stored within each assessment's online system and

scores specific to this study were recorded in an Excel file. Scores for the EET descriptors assessment were taken on a paper copy and recorded in the Excel file. Students were given numerical identifiers in the Excel file to maintain confidentiality.

Teaching Strategies GOLD uses anecdotal assessment to score students along a developmental continuum. Observations of students' language use were taken from September through November and finalized ratings were assigned for students during November for the Fall checkpoint. Students are expected to score between 5-7 on objective 9a. Level 4 is described as naming familiar people, animals, and objects, and Level 6 is described as telling the use of many familiar items. An odd number score denotes the skill is emerging. Intervention scores for this study were included in the Winter checkpoint starting in December 2021 and finalized in February 2022.

Baseline data for the myIGDIs literacy screener was taken in September 2021 using the iPad administration format. Picture Naming contains 15 pictures and students are asked to verbally label the picture. Responses are scored as correct, incorrect, or no response. Which One Doesn't Belong has 15 items showing three pictures and students are asked to select the differing picture. An example is cat, key, dog. Students select the key as not belonging. Students are scored as correct or incorrect. Both subtests use scaled scores, and student progress is shown as green (strong progress), orange (more information needed), and red (at-risk progress). Re-administration of this assessment took place in February 2022.

The EET descriptors assessment was first administered in November 2021. Students were presented with a picture (hamburger) and asked to use the EET to tell about the item. Students were scored from 0-7 based on how many descriptors from the EET were included in their sample. This assessment was readministered in February 2022 using the same administration

procedure with a different pictured item (pizza). During both administrations students were allowed to answer in their home language or use assistive communication devices.

## Findings

### Data Analysis

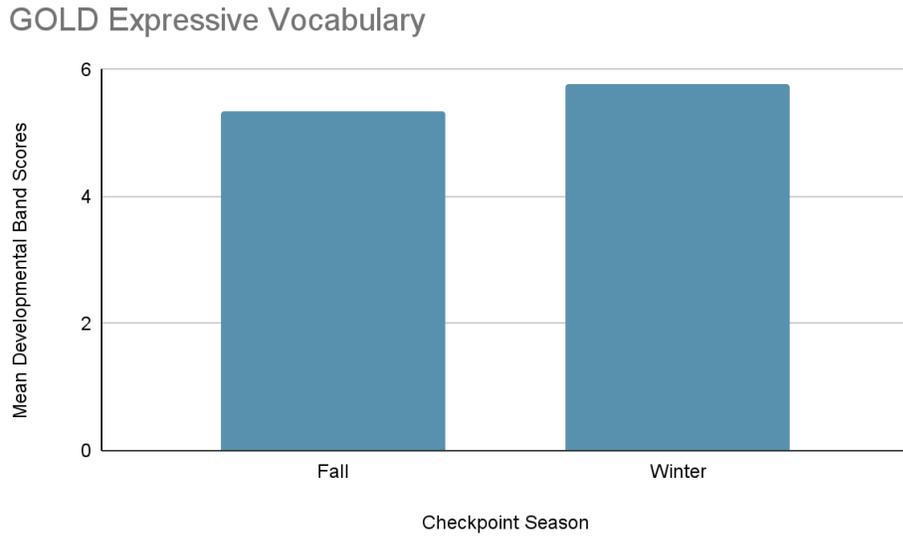
All students in the class received instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) during the study. One student's scores were excluded due to attendance, resulting in 17 out of 18 student scores being reported. GOLD anecdotal observations were collected throughout the six weeks to determine a final checkpoint rating. MyIGDI's subtests were given to students on different days and were completed within the same week for all students. The EET assessment was completed within two days for all students. This study seeks to answer the question: How does instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) affect preschoolers' expressive language development? All scores from the three measures were analyzed to determine outcomes for this question.

GOLD objective 9a: Uses an expanding and expressive vocabulary showed all students maintained or improved their checkpoint score from Fall to Winter administration. Students were rated on developmental bands, with an expected score of 5-7. Level 6 requires students to tell the use of familiar objects. Student scores ranged from 2-6 in the Fall and 3-7 in the Winter. The mean score in Fall was 5.35 and the Winter mean score was 5.76. Figure 1 shows the mean scores for GOLD objective 9a before and after instruction. A dependent groups *t* test showed there was a statistically significant difference between Fall ( $M = 5.35, SD = 1.11$ ) and Winter ( $M = 5.76, SD = .97$ ),  $t(16) = -3.35, p < .05$ .

**Figure 1**

*GOLD Objective 9a at Fall and Winter Checkpoint Bar Graph*

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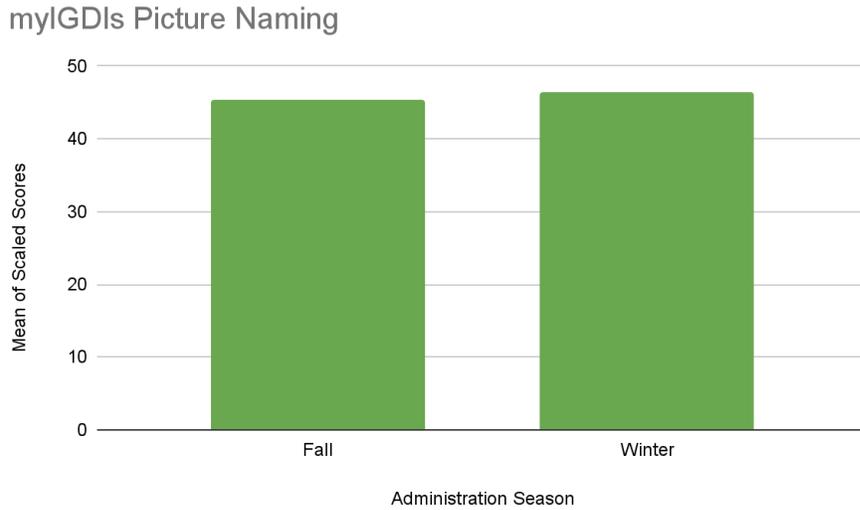


Two subtests of myIGDIs, Picture Naming and Which One Doesn't Belong, showed varying results for students. Fourteen out of seventeen students maintained or improved their scores on the picture naming subtest from Fall to Winter, two students' scores decreased from Fall to Winter, and one student discontinued during both administrations due to not correctly answering the sample questions. This was represented as a 0 in data. Figure 2 shows the mean scores on the picture naming subtest for the Fall and Winter administrations. Students had a mean score of 45.29 in the Fall and 46.35 in the Winter. A dependent groups *t* test showed a statistically significant difference between Fall ( $M = 45.29$ ,  $SD = 11.96$ ) and Winter ( $M = 46.35$ ,  $SD = 12.21$ ),  $t(16) = -3.36$ ,  $p < .05$ . Student mean scores on the Which One Doesn't Belong Subtest are represented on Figure 3. Eleven out of seventeen students maintained or improved their scores from Fall to Winter and four students had decreasing scores. Five students discontinued during the Fall due to not correctly answering sample questions, and two of these five students also discontinued in the Winter. These scores were represented as a 0 in data. The mean student score in the Fall was 36.47 and the Winter mean score was 46.18. A dependent groups *t* test showed there was not a statistically significant difference between Fall ( $M = 36.47$ ,  $SD = 24.60$ ) and Winter ( $M = 46.18$ ,  $SD = 17.90$ ),  $t(16) = -2.06$ ,  $p > .05$ . It is worth noting the actual *p* score was .056 which puts it on the margin of being considered statistically significant. Future considerations should look at how this subtest can be used to effectively assess preschoolers' vocabulary development.

**Figure 2**

*Picture Naming at Fall and Winter Administration Bar Graph*

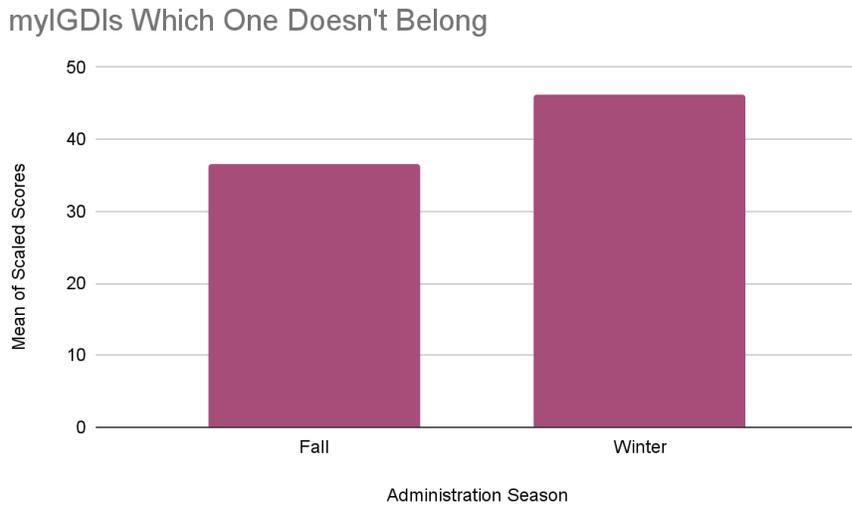
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**Figure 3**

*Which One Doesn't Belong at Fall and Winter Administration Bar Graph*

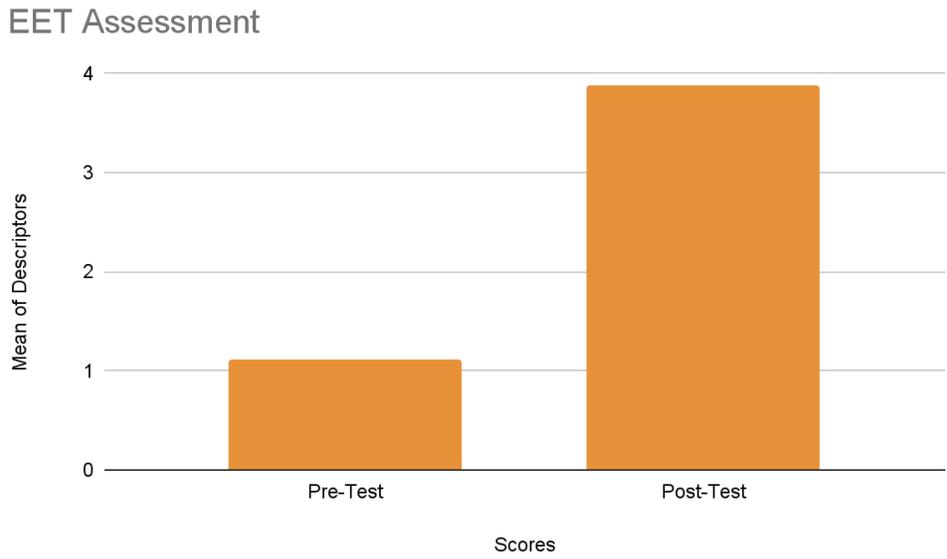
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The EET descriptors assessment showed an improvement in scores for sixteen out of seventeen students. A student who uses an alternative communication device did not increase in scores. Communication boards related to the EET were created for the device, but the student is still exploring all boards and uses adult modeling and prompting to use the device functionally. On the pre-test administration students had a mean score of 1.12. On the post-test administration students had a mean score of 3.88. These scores are represented in Figure 4. On the pre-test, using a picture of a hamburger, students were most able to identify parts of the picture object (12 students). On the post-test, using a picture of a pizza, students were most able to identify the group (9 students), what you do with it (12 students), the parts (15 students), and where you get the item (11 students). Students were less able to identify what an item looks like (6 students), what it is made of (4 students), or other information about the item (8 students). See Figure 5 for pre and post-test comparisons for each descriptor of the EET. A dependent groups *t* test showed there was a statistically significant difference between Pre-Test ( $M = 1.12, SD = 0.78$ ) and Post-Test ( $M = 3.88, SD = 1.87$ ),  $t(16) = -6.26, p < .05$ .

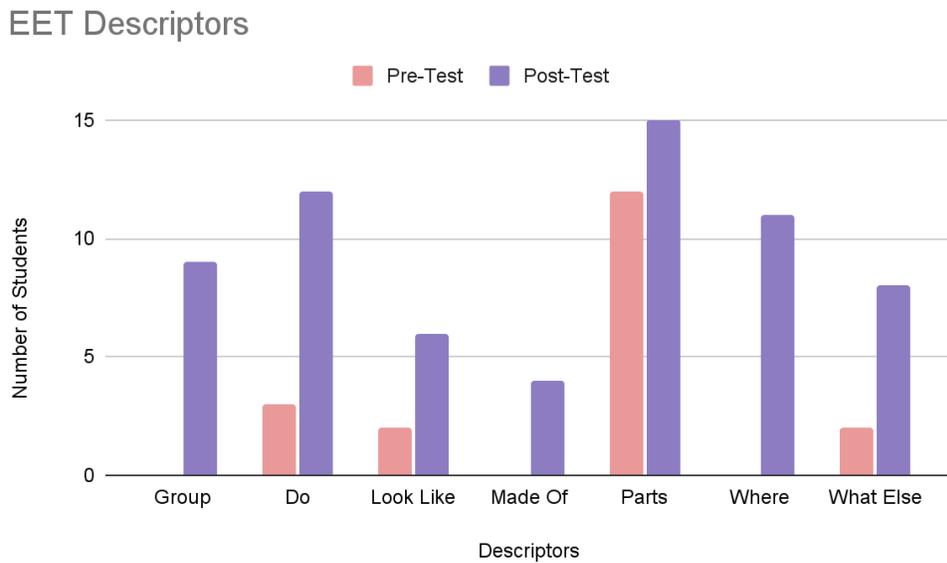
**Figure 4**

*EET Assessment Pre and Post-Test Bar Graph*



**Figure 5**

*EET Assessment by Descriptors Pre and Post-Test Bar Graph*



## Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings

Outcomes of the action research show explicit instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) is successful in improving preschooler's expressive language. The EET assessment showed 94% of students made growth during the study. Students had a mean increase of 2.76 descriptors during the study. Descriptors of group, what do you do with the item, parts, and where does the item come from had the largest growth from pre-test to post-test. These findings align with Hadley et al. (2016) in showing function, perceptual qualities, and categorization are semantic units most readily learned by young children. Hadley et al. (2016) did not use a semantic unit for "where" in their work. Hoffman et al. (2014) and Hadley and Dickinson (2020) advocated for the use of standardized and researcher created assessments to measure vocabulary growth. This study used both types of measures, but like Hadley and Dickinson (2020) found the teacher-researcher created assessment provided more sensitive information about the quality of children's word knowledge.

Outcomes of this study implicate various stakeholders in continued use of the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) as an instructional strategy. Explicit instruction was given using the EET in multiple classroom contexts including large group, small group and sharing (show and tell). Teacher knowledge of the EET and observations were key in adjusting instruction as students made progress or needed more instruction on specific descriptors. Students gained independence in using the EET demonstrating use of the descriptors in paired groups and to describe items from home during sharing. Findings are positive for continued use of the EET in the researcher's own classroom. Outcomes are also positive for considering expanding EET instruction into other

classrooms at the researcher's site. Stakeholders including the building administrator, instructional coach, and other teachers will determine next steps of this expansion.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited by the small sample size of eighteen students. Classroom funding also requires 80% of students be identified as at risk due to socioeconomic factors which could limit the replication of this study in other settings. Eight students in the classroom need additional services or support related to social emotional and/or behavioral needs. Length of instructional lessons and types of instruction that could be used were limited by these needs. Instruction was given weekly in large group, small group, and during sharing. During the time frame of the study, seven students missed between three and ten days due to COVID-19 protocols. This limited their access to instruction and could impact data in the study.

There were limits in the use of the myIGDIs subtests for assessments. Picture Naming and Which One Doesn't Belong both have two sample questions. If students do not answer these questions correctly after prompting the subtest is discontinued. A score of 0 was used to represent those students but it is not an equivocal score to the scaled scores of students who completed the subtests. This limit could be addressed by using the items correct instead of scaled scores or not including students who discontinued in the assessment in the data.

### **Further Study**

Next steps include implementing instruction using the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) in other preschool classrooms at the researcher's teaching site. Results will be shared and plans for implementation will be developed by building leaders. Implementation in other classrooms will allow for outcomes of this study's question to be addressed with differing populations of students and general classroom makeups. Four-year-old classrooms will be the focus of

expanding instruction. A future action research project could focus on how instruction can be adapted for implementation in three-year-old classrooms.

Another future step will be expanding instruction into unstructured classroom contexts. This study focused on the use of explicit instruction in the classroom. Other contexts such as centers, mealtimes, and transitions could offer different opportunities to support use of the EET. Dwyer and Harbaugh (2020) found little support for vocabulary during these times, with 0.08 instances during centers, 0.08 instances during snack, and 0.03 instances during transitions. Teachers would need additional training on how to effectively use the EET during unstructured times when interactions cannot be planned of time. These contexts may require more qualitative observations and data as part of the study to capture the unplanned responsiveness required during these times.

As EET instruction is expanded to other classrooms and contexts, how to appropriately assess students' language progress will need to be determined. The EET descriptors assessment used was able to show gains in descriptors used. However, it did not reflect sensitivity in the quality of descriptors used by students. For example, a student may list one part of an object while another student listed five parts. Both students received one point on the current assessment. A hierarchical assessment could be developed to address the qualities of word knowledge used by students. A future study using a hierarchical assessment could show if smaller amounts of growth are reflected and relate those findings to data-based instructional decisions.

## Conclusion

Use of the Expanding Expression Tool (EET) as an instructional strategy for vocabulary development in preschool is supported by the outcomes of this study. Vocabulary instruction that is explicit, addresses word knowledge depth, and provides opportunities for students to extend word learning to multiple contexts has been found to significantly impact vocabulary learning in young children. These components are evident in instruction using the EET. Learning standards and existing literature describe the importance of teaching vocabulary at a young age and its later impact on literacy learning. However, importance of instruction has not led to curriculums containing vocabulary instruction or teachers effectively implementing instructional strategies. This teacher-researcher has experienced the realities of this problem in her own classroom. There is no adopted curriculum containing vocabulary support, and the entire building has identified vocabulary instruction as an area to focus on due to student scores on literacy screenings.

Six weeks of intervention using the EET in the researcher's classroom resulted in positive gains in students' language development. 94% of students showed growth on the EET descriptors assessment. Student mean scores also showed significant differences on GOLD objective 9a and the myIGDIs Picture Naming subtest. As hypothesized, students showed the most growth in using language descriptors as part of their vocabulary knowledge. The EET will continue to be used in the teacher-researcher's classroom with added instruction during unstructured times such as meals and centers. Other classrooms at the teaching site will also implement the EET to address the building wide need to incorporate vocabulary instruction. Early childhood curriculum needs to include a vocabulary component teachers can implement with fidelity. Findings of this action research support broadened use of the EET to fully investigate its use as an instructional strategy to fulfill this need.

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