



VOCABULARY – IT’S MORE THAN JUST WORDS

Some young children learn new words quickly and effortlessly – soaking up words like a sponge. We might be forgiven for thinking that vocabulary learning is natural and easy. Looking closely we will however discover that vocabulary is an extremely complex building block of language. We cannot take its growth for granted and we must both extend the able word users, as well as supporting those who struggle with word use and new word learning.

Vocabulary is important in both spoken and written language.

* One word can **conjure up a myriad of thoughts, ideas, concepts and feelings**. Take the word *restaurant* for example. It can make us think about *the menu, service, company of friends, waiters, chefs, opening times, expense or a break from cooking*.

Depending on what experience we have of eating out at a restaurant the word activates a whole schema of meaning not just a single idea.

* Vocabulary is **crucial to comprehension**. If a child does not understand the key words in an instruction e.g. those indicating time, or position, then he/she will be unable to follow and might appear not to be paying attention or “behaving”. Consider how crucial the underlined words are to understanding the following:

Bring your money to school the day after tomorrow.

Go and stand in between Sally and Mark.

Understanding of cause and effect or how one event leads to another, is also dependent on knowing the meaning of key words. Often such meanings have to be inferred from subtle language use. Again note the role of the underlined words:

All of his luck seemed to have run out so he packed his bag and left home.

Mandy had been ill all week however she was still able to cook her meals.

* Vocabulary knowledge *supports maths and science*. Specific words refer to concepts and processes, the meanings of which are non-negotiable. E.g. *multiply, square root, transpiration, conduction*.

* A rich vocabulary leads to an appreciation of language through the understanding of jokes, puns, idioms, word plays, poetry etc.

* Vocabulary is essential for the development of literate language. As outlined in the article in Newsletter 11, entitled “Step into Literate Language”, this involves specific word choice in the context of complex sentences, used to inform, explain, relate an event or a story to listeners/readers, who may not share the knowledge of the topic.

How many vocabularies are there?

1. **Speaking vocabulary** forms the basis for growth in other vocabularies. It reflects the changing nature of language as new words become fashionable & others die out.
2. **Listening vocabulary** includes some words that are understood but rarely used. This vocabulary expands as we infer word meanings from the context of what is said. This must happen very quickly and we must give conscious attention to the word if it is to be stored and recognized next time.
3. **Reading vocabulary** this grows as students move from learning to read to reading to learn. There is more time available to work out word meanings from context in the written word. Reading therefore leads to growth in both spoken and written vocabularies. Much knowledge of literate vocabulary is gained through reading or being read to.
4. **Written vocabulary** requires confidence and skill in word recall and spelling ability. It is the smallest of the 4 vocabularies. Writing performance may not reflect a student's vocabulary knowledge. He/she may be avoiding using words that are difficult to spell.

A word is a complex concept rather than a discrete unit. Knowledge of a word includes -

1. *its meaning*
2. *what it sounds like*
3. *how to say it*
4. *how it is used in a sentence and*
5. *how to read and write it*

Young children gradually refine their understanding and use of a new word as they encounter it in different contexts and learn to differentiate it from words that are nearly the same.

Take the word **grab**, for example.

1. *grab versus snatch*
2. *grab versus drab or crab*
3. *grab versus gram, grand*
4. *Grab the shopping bag will you please? versus He took a good grab in the second quarter. versus They grabbed all of the money.*
5. *grab versus gab*

The more words we store, the finer the differentiations must be. This is especially seen in the mastery of longer multi-syllabled words. Consider these words, and give thought to how close they are in sound structure, in the way we say them and yet how diverse their meanings are; *constitution, constellation, conversation, conservation, constipation, compensation*

The accurate articulation of a word provides a scaffold for storing, recognizing or recalling the word. We must provide opportunities for young people to learn in depth about a new word or we will find that their vocabulary is left at a basic level, without the enthusiasm for and confidence to use a wider range of words. Vocabulary focus should be in spoken as well as

written language. Students need practice at saying the word correctly, talking about the sound structure of the word, discussing its meanings and using it in a variety of authentic situations.

Establishing a network of associated meanings of a word will assist **specific** word recall. E.g. words such as *dig, garden, hole, plant, handle, metal* are all associated with the word *spade*. Our aim should be to develop vocabulary use that is both **specific** and **flexible**.

Specificity

Some students appear to have an adequate vocabulary for conversational purposes, especially when they are talking about events or topics shared by the listeners. It is only when more literate language is called for that their system is stressed and an underlying weakness in word knowledge is revealed. English is a particularly rich language having many words to represent nearly the same meaning. This is true for verbs, adjectives and adverbs as well as nouns. **Specific word use** adds colour and clarity to expression and more accurately conveys the intended meaning.

You could use the word "get" or "have" or you could be more specific by using one of the following:

clutch grab hold caress lift possess cuddle

Flexibility

Meanings of words change with context and many words have more than one meaning. Students need to be flexible in word knowledge and able to transfer from one meaning to another. This skill often involves the shift from concrete word meanings to more abstract and idiomatic use.

For example: turn: *turn the handle; taking turns in the game; Granny had a turn and went to hospital; He turned the corner. (in the car, or as an improved life situation).*

Such flexibility will facilitate thinking, predicting, making inferences and reasoning, both of spoken and written language.

Build vocabulary through **linking associated words to create networks of meaning**.

What can we do to help?

- * be enthusiastic about words and encourage an interest in words
- * provide fun word game activities focusing on word meanings, opposites, associated words, brainstorm words in a category e.g. fruit, small things, people's jobs
- * talk about words that have more than one meaning
- * explain idioms e.g. fly off the handle
- * discuss jokes and what makes them funny
- * read stories with children and talk about interesting words
- * highlight new words, revisiting them many times children with language difficulty may need to hear a new word even more often than their peers, before they grasp the full meaning
- * encourage children to say new words out loud and praise their efforts
- * **Have fun with words!**

Resources

Language Bites, Language MINI Bites, Alien Talk, Terry Teddy's Language Pack www.pelicanstalk.com
And my FAVOURITE VOCABULARY RESOURCE : Word Bird www.puppetsforlearning.com.au

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