

Vocabulary Development

Understanding the meanings of words and learning to decode those words in text are critical skills for building a child's vocabulary. Research has shown that the role of vocabulary and vocabulary instruction is critical to reading comprehension.



Readers need to know the meaning of the words they are reading in order to comprehend the text. Researchers often refer to four types of vocabulary:

- Listening vocabulary – the words we hear and understand
- Speaking vocabulary – the words we use when we speak
- Reading vocabulary – the words we understand when we read text
- Writing vocabulary – the words we can retrieve when we write to express ourselves

How is vocabulary learned?

Vocabulary is learned both indirectly and directly. Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language in three ways:

- They engage daily in oral language by participating in conversations, hearing words repeated, and hearing adults use new and interesting words.
- They listen to adults read to them, having new words explained, having conversations about the book when finished reading, and relating information to prior knowledge.
- They read extensively on their own, considering new words they encounter when reading independently.

Some vocabulary can be taught directly. Teachers provide students with specific word instruction and with strategies for learning new words. Specific word instruction includes teaching specific words before reading, active engagement with vocabulary, and repeated exposure to words. Word learning strategies include how to use the dictionary and other reference materials, how to use information about word parts to figure out meaning of words, and how to use context clues to determine the meanings of words.



Which words should be taught?

Teachers need to decide what new vocabulary words should be taught since all unknown words cannot be taught. The focus should be on teaching three types of words:

- Important words--Words that are important for understanding the concepts in certain subject areas or locations
- Useful words--Words that students are likely to see and use again and again
- Difficult words--Words with multiple meanings or idiomatic expressions.

What can be done to strengthen a student's vocabulary development in the classroom?

- Explore words that are both spelled and pronounced the same, but have different meanings, such as “lie” (being dishonest, to rest in a horizontal and flat position), and words that are spelled the same but are pronounced differently such as “wind” (blowing air); “wind” (twist); and “tear” (from eye), “tear” (rip).
- Work with idiomatic expressions (e.g., ants in your pants, let sleeping dogs lie). Idiomatic expressions are hard to learn, and need context, but students enjoy learning them when they are discussed.
- Even young students can play with words. They can draw pictures that “show” the meaning of the word, such as an illustration of “bright” as a picture of the sun.
- Encourage students to think about new words in different contexts. For example, explore synonyms, antonyms, teach groupings and classifications, use/show examples of the meaning (e.g., tools and hammer).
- Have students provide vocabulary to complete a context. For example, “When I looked out the window and saw that it was raining, I made sure to get my (umbrella, raincoat, etc.).
- Teach words around contexts and themes (e.g., teach “kitchen” with various kitchen items).
- Using different facial expressions and gestures or changing tone of voice can help in learning the new meaning.
- Directly assist students when they use a dictionary, glossary, or thesaurus because many words have the same spelling or multiple meanings.
- **For older students**, teach how the words of Latin and Greek origin are formed (e.g., structural analysis). Help them learn base words (e.g., “govern”), roots (e.g., “pend”), prefixes and suffixes (e.g., “pre-, post-, anti-, pro-, re-, -able, -ment, -tion”). Create activities on base words, adding prefixes and suffixes to form new words.



Adapted from the sources:

- http://foundationsforliteracy.ca/index.php/Reading_and_writing_development
- Armbruster, B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. Retrieved July 1, 2004 from http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/reading_first1.html