

## What is vocabulary and why is it important?

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to being an independent and successful reader and writer and is comprised of the words that are understood when heard or read. Vocabulary development is not a natural outcome of having a birthday or the number of years spent at school and while some words may be incidentally learned, other useful and important words do not necessarily teach themselves. In fact, researchers indicate that while some words may be learned incidentally the effects can be modest (Elley, 1989 & Tobins & Ehri, 1994 in Spencer, Goldstein, & Kaminski, 2012). The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) suggest there is a strong correlation between early vocabulary development and later academic success while Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001, p. 18) identify that "...children who have limited vocabulary in kindergarten are at high risk of later reading difficulty."

Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2013) believe there are three tiers of words that students should come to know. Tier 1 words are basic to the English language and are learned by interacting and speaking with others. Many of these words will likely be learned prior to formal schooling and are not conceptually difficult, for example, car, dog, grass, sad, and big. However, not all students will have a robust Tier 1 vocabulary as they start school and necessary Tier 1 words will need to be taught. Tier 2 words are those used by mature speakers and writers and are ones that embellish or emphasise (for example, adjectives and adverbs). These words are able to be used in a range of contexts and may have multiple meanings. Tier 2 words are important for listening and reading comprehension. Tier 3 words are those related to specific topics such as Science, Mathematics, and History. They are not words that one would generally use in everyday conversation but are essential to comprehend in order to fully engage with specific topics.

## Links with comprehension

Baker, Simmons, and Kame'enui (1998) found that vocabulary knowledge predicts comprehension ability and that it increases in importance as students move through school when there is increased use of textbooks and with the requirement to read and understand increasingly more complex content (Biemiller, 2003). It is having a broad vocabulary that allows students to "...process or discuss what they've read" (Varlas, 2012, p. 1).

Stanovich (1986) maintains there is an exponential increase in reading competence (in this case an expanding vocabulary) when students read more texts and cites an excerpt from the Bible where (in relation to reading) he suggests that the rich (good readers) get richer and the poor (poor readers) get poorer because of the number of words read (The Matthew Effect). It is the extensiveness of a robust vocabulary that enables more words and information to be learned (Hirsch, 2003).

The link between vocabulary and comprehension is strong and significantly influences academic success. This link can be especially crucial for students where English is not their first language as they may know one meaning of a word but not the range of meanings and neither might they know, or be able to work out, which meaning is intended by the author.

## Factors that influence vocabulary development

1. Opportunities to listen to, and speak with, a range of people about experiences, feelings, visuals, print and digital texts. *Please note that teachers' instructional language is most often procedural with simple words used for explanations and requests so these everyday interactions may not build students' vocabularies.*
2. Listening to read-alouds of fiction and non-fiction texts especially when teachers clarify meanings of important words.
3. Reading many fiction and non-fiction texts. As students read more words they are better able to make connections between them. Teachers cannot compensate for lack of reading practice.
4. An increasing general knowledge about the world supports students in extending their vocabulary. Access to a full and diverse curriculum is essential.
5. Understanding a word's multiple meanings. For example, when reading the word 'back' most readers might think about the anatomical *back*. However, it is context that defines some words and *back* can have numerous meanings (for example, *She will back the car. I'll make a back-up. He will always back the underdog. Back of beyond. Redback spider.* However, relying on context may not always be helpful as the way a word is intended to be said may misdirect and confuse. For example, *That's an impressive idea* (said with sarcasm).

6. Reading the same word in a range of texts in order to build understanding and ultimately 'to get it.'
7. Teachers having an interest in words and showing enthusiasm for learning new vocabulary. Pro-active teachers have word-rich classrooms.
8. Teachers allocating instructional time for vocabulary development: 10ish minutes on most school days and not just in English or literacy blocks.
9. Systematic and explicit instruction that strengthens the likelihood that students will learn and take-up new words.
10. Teaching vocabulary in word families/semantic clusters so that connections between words can be made. This approach reduces cognitive overload (Marzano, 2010).
11. Teachers modelling when and how to use reference support when words are not immediately known, for example, how to use glossaries.
12. Multiple scaffolded interactions so new words become part of students' personal vocabularies- students need to make words their own (Fisher & Frey, 2010).
13. Instruction about the effect of affixes on word meanings (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2008).
14. Students being taught how to learn new words so they can become their own best resource (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2010).

## How and when do students really 'know' a word?

Dictionary meanings do not guarantee understanding and neither does teachers just telling students the meaning. To really understand a word, students should be able to independently explain its meaning/s, give examples of non-meanings (this is often interesting to do using humour), talk about connections with other words or, as is possible, to work it out using context, and to confidently use it orally across learning areas. Teachers may then anticipate and expect, or require, that students will use the new word in their writing.

## What words and how many words to teach?

Words read in phonically controlled texts, levelled texts, and textbooks, will not necessarily expose students to the range of Tier 2 words they need for extending their vocabulary. Further, all the words that students require for their lives at school and beyond school cannot be directly taught: priorities need to be made. There are collections of important words to learn (Marzano, 2010) but teachers may also choose to select useful and interesting words from read-aloud texts and other sources. It is recommended that five to seven words a week are enough to learn at any one time (perhaps less for some students) and if these words are engaged with in a range of meaningful activities embedded across a week, they are more likely to be remembered and put into service (Lawrence, White, & Snow, 2010, p. 24). Opportunities to use these words beyond the instructional week would also need to be put in place.

## Instructional approaches

1. *Six-step process.* Marzano (2010, p. 23) stresses the importance of providing associative learning experiences.
  1. "The teacher provides a description, explanation, or example of the new term.
  2. Students restate the explanation of the new term in their own words.
  3. Students create a nonlinguistic representation of the term.
  4. Students periodically engage in activities that help them add to their knowledge of the vocabulary term.
  5. Periodically, students are asked to discuss terms with one another.
  6. Periodically, students are involved in games that allow them to play with the terms."
2. *Vocabulary notebooks.* Have students write designated and self-selected words in their personal vocabulary notebook so they can be used for activities and as a reference point. Teachers may ask students to select one of their useful and interesting words and teach it to others or use it for *Word of the Day* (see point 6).
3. *Focus words for the week.* Choose a read-aloud text (fiction or non-fiction) and select five to seven useful Tier 2 words for instruction that can be explained using student-friendly language.

## Anne Bayetto, Flinders University

4. *Word parts.* Each week introduce a new word part and show the connections across learning areas. Invite students to record words that include the word part (for example, graph- graph, graphic, autograph, photography, graphite). Put the word part on display near child collection points or on the school digital display board for families and community to join in.



5. *Word sorts.* Give students a range of word cards to sort into self-selected or nominated like-groups. Students are then invited to justify why words were clustered together. Have students orally, or in writing, use the word as they relate to their world.



6. *Word of the day.* Introduce vocabulary words and select one word a day. When students hear it spoken by the teacher in a nominated lesson they put a tick in a checkbox. If the teacher forgets to say the word students can remind them by giving a definition or an example of how the word may be used. Alternatively, a student may be assigned the task of reminding the teacher to use the word (Vesely & Gryder, 2009).
7. *Graffiti wall.* Write a selected word in the middle and have students add to the word, for example, affixes, words with similar and opposite meaning, homonyms, or how the word can be written using different tense.
8. *Teachers model* (by relating it to their own personal knowledge and background) how to look at a word for structural clues, around the word for

context clues, and how to refer to a glossary if needed (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

9. *Games.* Use the format of familiar television programs and published games for confirming understanding of vocabulary, for example, Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?©, Jeopardy©, Concentration (match word with meaning), Fish, and Memory.
10. *Shades and strengths of meaning.* Write words on paint sample cards to show the relative strength of words.



*Vocabulary paint chips.*

<https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/build-student-vocabulary>

*Semantic gradients.*

[http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/semantic\\_gradients/](http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/semantic_gradients/)

11. *Word map.* Have students complete a template to show they understand a word.



12. *Concept clusters.* Give students a selection of words and ask them to nominate a unifying word that connects them all. For example, square, rectangle, rhombus, parallelogram, (polygons). This can also be done in reverse.
13. *Word thoughts.* List a few key words from the text that is about to be read. Invite students to confirm their understanding of the word and, based on the title and illustrations, to predict how the word may be used by the author.
14. *Generative lists.* Nominate an alphabet letter and its placement in a word. Now have pairs, across a few days or the week, compile a minimum

## Anne Bayetto, Flinders University

number of words that meet the requirement. For example, words that have 'p' as the fifth letter. Students will be invited to explain the meaning/s and their usage.

15. *Stem sentences.* Have students complete sentences to show they know the meaning of key words.
  - My friend said it would be *ridiculous* if...
  - The dog owner was *devoted* because...
16. *Possible sentences.* Write selected words in sentences and ask students to decide whether they make sense. For those that do not make sense, ask students to correctly use them in sentences.
  - The thunder was *audacious*.
  - It was a *comprehensive* collection of books.
17. *Have you ever?* Ask students to respond to sentences using their own experiences.
  - When is a time you felt *gloomy*?
  - Why would you feel *fortunate*?
18. *Making choices.* Say the word *appreciation* if any of these statements would make you feel appreciation.
  - Your friend makes you feel good.
  - The car will not start.
19. *Card compositions.* Write vocabulary words on separate cards and place face down. Select two cards and use them in a sentence. This can be made more challenging if students are asked to relate their sentence to a known text.
20. *Visuword Online Graphical Dictionary.* Provides words that have connections with the nominated word. <http://www.visuwords.com/search>

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