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Vocabulary building

English has a very rich vocabulary and is the only language that has, or needs, a book of synonyms or a thesaurus (Bryson, 1990).

Building vocabulary means both understanding the meanings of words and learning to decode those words. Acquisition of vocabulary improves reading comprehension. In the early years, vocabulary acquisition is largely an oral process.

Amanda is in Grade 3 and is performing poorly in all of her classes. She is still struggling in reading grade level texts; consequently she does not read outside school. Amanda is unable to answer many questions on vocabulary knowledge. She has started misbehaving in class in the hopes of being sent out, so she will not be called on to answer any questions. Amanda's teacher has noticed this, and has given her book after book to read, hoping that if Amanda simply immerses herself in words, her reading and vocabulary will improve. This does not seem to be working and Amanda is becoming increasingly frustrated.

How would you help Amanda become an avid reader and develop her vocabulary?

Read the following section and discover ways to help students such as Amanda.



Bring words to life!

Through direct instruction, foster word consciousness and engage students in word-play activities to motivate and enhance learning. Raise an awareness of and an interest in words, their meanings, and their power. Students will enjoy words, become actively involved in learning them, and be able to acquire vocabulary independently (Graves, 2000).

The evidence

- Students enter school with large differences in exposure to vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003).
- Many children who successfully learn to read in Grade 1 or 2 are unable to understand books they need to read by Grade 3 or 4. The main reason for this is a lack of adequate vocabulary (Scarborough, 2001; Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Rupley & Nichols, 2005).
- Much vocabulary is learned indirectly; in oral language from parents, friends and through stories read either by adults or individually. Typically, students from “advantaged” homes learn two to three times as many words as children from “disadvantaged” homes (Hart & Risley, 1995; White, Graves, & Slater, 1990).
- Over time, students who read less acquire smaller vocabularies, and comprehend less in later years (Stanovich, 1986).
- Teaching vocabulary within a context facilitates better reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).
- Research suggests that a rich and varied vocabulary is needed to excel in all school subjects because it relates to successful reading comprehension (Chiappone, 2006).
- Compared to adult prime-time television and typical conversation by college educated adults, children’s books contain up to 50 percent more rarely used words (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).



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Go to our accompanying DVD-ROM or website to view a video clip on research-based recommendations of what vocabulary to teach.

[Video 10]
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Implications for teaching vocabulary: indirect learning

- Read aloud to students, with discussion before, during, and after the reading of new vocabulary and concepts (Biemiller & Boote, 2006).
- Encourage students to read extensively on their own (e.g., outside of school or during independent work time; Armbruster et al., 2003).



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Read about what vocabulary does to enhance learning:
“What reading does for the mind.”

(Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998)

Go to our website or DVD-ROM for the link.
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Implications for teaching vocabulary: explicit, direct instruction

- Teach a core vocabulary in a developmental sequence (Biemiller, in press), scaffold and build on words that a child already knows.
- Teach written core vocabulary that the child already knows orally.
- Start early and teach many words; children will remember only 20-25 percent of the words learned indirectly, but up to 40 percent of those explicitly explained (Biemiller & Boote, 2006).
- Teach at least 10 words a week. These words should include useful words as well as those that are not part of the students' everyday experiences. Students retain new vocabulary better if they see it in writing, are asked to pronounce it, and are asked to determine the meaning of the word (Rupley & Ehri, 2008).
- Teach oral vocabulary in Kindergarten and Grade 1, and both oral and written vocabulary in Grades 2 and 3 (Beck et al., 2002).
- Begin direct instruction of specific vocabulary very early in Kindergarten. This means explicit teaching of word meanings through contexts, definitions, multiple exposures, and meaningful experiences. Seeing vocabulary in rich contexts provided by authentic texts produces better understanding and retention of vocabulary meanings (Coyne, McCoach, & Knapp, 2007; National Reading Panel, 2000).
- Engage students in developing categories, word families, and in word-play activities to motivate and enhance learning (Graves, 2000) and to aid in later retrieval.
- Explicitly teach word-learning strategies to deepen students' knowledge of word meanings. For example, work with new vocabulary to develop students' understanding of how the word relates to similar forms and how the word can be used grammatically (National Reading Panel, 2000).



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Go to our accompanying DVD-ROM or website to view
a group of video clips on vocabulary instruction.

[Video 11]
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These techniques actively engage students in using and thinking about word meanings as well as creating relationships among words; the students learn strategies for independently determining the meanings of unfamiliar words that have not been explicitly introduced.

Sample vocabulary-enriching activities

- 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 “ugly” as a picture of an insect (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007).
- 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.) (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007).
- Teach words around contexts and themes (e.g., teach “kitchen” with various kitchen items).
- Directly assist students when they use a dictionary, glossary, or thesaurus because many words have the same spelling or multiple meanings.
- For older grades, teach how the words of Latin and Greek origin are formed (i.e., 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.

Examples of vocabulary assessment

Oral vocabulary testing focuses on the understanding of word meaning; written tests involve many other processes outside of vocabulary knowledge. For example, the teacher can present a definition and ask the student (orally) to provide a word that best matches that definition. Alternatively, the teacher can provide a word and ask the student to provide a definition for that word.

The teacher can test multiple words at once. For example, the students can be presented with a group of words (e.g., “thread, string, rope, knot”) and asked about which word does not belong in the group. Students can also be asked to provide synonyms or antonyms for given words (Wren, 2002b).

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Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension involves the construction of meaning from text using a wide variety of skills and knowledge (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Comprehension begins in the earliest grades by actively developing listening comprehension skills, vocabulary and the understanding of concepts (Snow et al., 1998).

The goal of reading is to obtain meaning from written text. The student reaches the stage of reading comprehension by drawing upon oral language, background (i.e., prior experience) and text decoding knowledge. Integrating this knowledge is difficult for early readers; however, once it becomes automatic, the student can appreciate, evaluate, interpret, and enjoy written texts

Cody has trouble understanding everything he reads. Although he is in Grade 4, he still has trouble reading fluently, and always gets stuck on challenging words. Because he focuses so much on reading fluently, he ignores the meaning of what is being read, and often has to go back and re-read pages two or three times. He does poorly on most comprehension activities and has become frustrated.

What are some ways in which comprehension can be improved?

Read the following section and decide how you would help your students with these kinds of reading challenges.

The evidence

- For students learning to read, constructing meaning from text is a conscious operation of applying comprehension strategies. The short-term memory (“working memory”) has a restricted space. If too much conscious awareness has to be devoted to sounding out and recognizing words, it is difficult to read above the phrase level (Kirby, 2006).
- As language and vocabulary knowledge increases and decoding becomes more efficient and automatic, comprehension can improve (Kirby, 2006).
- For independent reading, the book should be at the child’s level and there should be discussion afterward to monitor comprehension (Barone, Taylor, & Hardman, 2006).
- More research is needed into how to teach comprehension (Pressley, 2000).

Enabling comprehension through instruction

- Scaffold to a new text using other children’s books to activate prior knowledge.
- Scaffold from lower to higher level questions to promote higher order thinking skills (e.g., “What is the dog’s name?” versus “How do you think the boy felt?”).
- Promote dialogue with critical thinking skills. Ask open-ended questions (e.g., “What would you do?”) and questions that require text-supported answers.
- Promote reading of a wide variety of texts for many purposes (e.g., recipe books, instruction manuals, maps, informational texts, literature).
- Have students make connections between the given text and other books, knowledge, or their own experience: “text to text,” “text to world,” or “text to self”.
- Have students predict what will happen.
- Have students “sketch to stretch” (i.e., draw what they have pictured in their minds as they read the book in order to stretch their imagination beyond the book).
- For independent reading, ensure text is at the child’s reading level.
- Read aloud to students every day.

(Adapted from FCRR, 2008; Rasinski & Padak, 2008)

Reading comprehension instruction

Researchers have developed strategies that students need to use consciously for reading comprehension. The teaching of comprehension strategies is a long-term developmental process, as the student moves from consciously using strategies to gradually internalizing and automatizing those strategies (Pressley, 2000).

Effective reading comprehension strategies for students to practice are:

- comprehension self-monitoring (i.e., checking understanding while reading)
- cooperative learning or reciprocal learning
- use of graphic and semantic organizers (e.g., word maps)
- study of story structure
- predicting
- answering and generating questions; seeking clarification
- summarizing
- meta-cognitive strategies such as re-reading, reading ahead, asking for help, adjusting reading speed, asking a question, paraphrasing, and retelling

(Adapted from National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley, 2000)

Assessment of reading and listening comprehension

When children are in the early stages of reading, their listening comprehension is better than their reading comprehension as they are just learning how to read. In order to assess a young child's general understanding of a text, teachers can use listening comprehension. The following strategies can be used to assess either listening or reading comprehension.

- Have the child listen to or read a story and then retell it orally or in writing.
- Have the child predict or infer what may happen based on what has happened in the story.
- Students can be asked to construct responses, select multiple-choice answers, or fill in missing words.

Reading comprehension tasks should not be confused with reading accuracy, where mistakes are analyzed to understand the child's decoding strategies and not their comprehension strategies (Wren, 2002b). When children read text orally, they are usually more concerned with being accurate, and do not pay much attention to understanding the content. For this reason, reading comprehension tests are most effective when the child reads the text to themselves and not aloud (Wren, 2002b).