



# Teaching effective vocabulary

What can teachers do to increase the vocabulary of children who start education with a limited vocabulary?



department for  
**children, schools and families**



## Foreword

Vocabulary is more than a list of words, and although the size of one's vocabulary matters, it's knowing how to use it which matters most. The best comparison is to an artist's palette of colours which can be mixed and applied to create powerful effects.

When the English Board at the DCSF enquired into research about vocabulary, it was thinking mainly about children who are constrained by a lack of vocabulary: those who suffer language delay, those who arrive new to English from another country, and those who are simply stuck for words. But of course, the development of vocabulary is an important experience for everyone and continues as one grows older.

Of course, everyday life provides most of the vocabulary we need – words are all around us – but taking them in takes time as we become acquainted with their many uses and the contexts in which they are appropriate. A mix of rich language experiences helps to expose us to words and appreciate their meanings, but not all pupils get this in their lives. The question was, what can we do to hasten and enhance that process?

It was refreshing when DCSF researcher Jenny Buckland trawled the literature and fetched up excellent research about classroom practice with clear findings and ready-to-go recommendations. To this we have added a list of useful ideas developed for us by practitioners.

We hope you find the combination of research and practical classroom strategies useful. It is the first time we have published a literature review in this form, and if you want more, please let us know on [research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)

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## Background: the impact of having a limited vocabulary



Children start school with a vocabulary which has been learned mainly from their contact with parents and the literacy environment at home, as well as their experiences with the wider world. A child's vocabulary at this age will largely be oral (i.e. words which they can understand when heard and use themselves), with some elements of a reading or writing vocabulary (i.e. words which they can understand when read, and words which they can write).

Recent research shows that vocabulary growth is largely determined by parental practices, particularly before the age of 7 (Biemiller 2003). Children mainly use words their parents and other adults use with them in conversation, and acquire larger vocabularies when their parents use more words (Hant and Risley, 1995).

However, considerable differences in vocabulary size amongst children aged seven were reported by Biemiller (2003). In terms of the numbers of words known, when starting school, relatively high performing children (the upper quartile i.e. a pupil at the 75th point in a distribution of 100 pupils) know an average estimated vocabulary of 7100 root words. In contrast, relatively poor performing pupils (the lower quartile i.e. a pupil at the 25th point in a distribution of 100 pupils) know 3000 words, acquiring only one word per day compared to the three words per day

acquired by children with the largest vocabularies. Although White et al. (1989) demonstrated that children from a disadvantaged background typically have a smaller vocabulary than children from a more advantaged background, and that the gap widens as children get older, Beals (1997) and Weizman and Snow (2001) reported that the parents using and explaining high-level words was strongly associated with the gaining of a larger vocabulary, even among children from disadvantaged families.

Vocabulary is a strong indicator of reading success (Biemiller, 2003). It was established in the 1970s that children's declining reading comprehension compared to more able peers from age 8 onwards largely resulted from a lack of vocabulary knowledge (Becker, 1977), and that this was primarily caused by a lack of learning opportunities, not a lack of natural ability. Chall et al. (1990) also found that disadvantaged students showed declining reading comprehension as their narrow vocabulary limited what they could understand from texts.

Having a low vocabulary can trap children in a vicious circle, since children who cannot read more advanced texts miss out on opportunities to extend their vocabulary (Fisher and Blachnowicz, 2005) and are also less successful in using strategies for word learning (Blachnowicz and Fisher, 2000). Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) reported that spoken assessment of vocabulary levels in pupils aged 6 accounted for 30% of reading comprehension variance at age 16, whilst Becker (1977) identified poor vocabulary knowledge as the primary cause of academic failure of disadvantaged students. This means that children with low vocabularies need to be targeted early, since catching up is very difficult.

**Children with low vocabularies would have to learn words much faster than their peers, at a rate of three to four root words per day, if they were to catch up within five or six years. Biemiller (2003)**

# Supporting vocabulary development in school

Research suggests that although many children acquire vocabulary naturally through activities at school, this cannot be left to chance in the case of children with low vocabularies.

Duke and Moses (2003) concluded that **reading to children** and **getting children to read** themselves are the basis of vocabulary growth, together with engaging children in **rich oral language** and **encouraging reading and talk at home**.

The National Reading Panel's review (2000) identified five basic approaches to vocabulary instruction which should be used together:

- **explicit instruction** (particularly of difficult words and words that are not part of pupils' everyday experience),
- **indirect instruction** (i.e. exposure to a wide range of reading materials),
- **multimedia methods** (going beyond the text to include other medias such as visual stimulus, the use of the computer or sign language),
- **capacity methods** (focusing on making reading an automatic activity), and
- **association methods** (encouraging learners to draw connections between what they do know and unfamiliar words).

Evidence from Apthorp (2006) supports and extends the National Reading Panel's conclusions. She concluded that there was a solid evidence base supporting three key elements of vocabulary instruction:

- **defining and explaining** word meanings;
- arranging **frequent encounters** with new words (at least six exposures to a new word); and
- encouraging pupils' **deep and active processing** of words and meanings in a range of contexts. These kinds of activities are effective for vocabulary development and improved reading comprehension.

Fisher and Blachnowicz (2005) additionally recommended:

- ensuring the learning environment is **word rich**;
- addressing vocabulary learning as a **distinct area** in the curriculum;
- **careful selection** of appropriate words for planned teaching and reinforcement (for example, words that have parts found in many other words, such as medicine/medical/medicate). Duke and Moses (2003) concluded that key factors in deciding which words to teach explicitly include how easily related they are to other words children know, and how much knowing the word will help them with the texts and experiences are likely to encounter in the future.

Duke and Moses (2003) also pointed to the effectiveness of **raising word consciousness** by playing with words through games, songs and humour, and encouraging children to recognise when they have encountered new words and notice special characteristics of words.

All of these studies reiterate the importance of repetition in the learning of vocabulary: children must engage with a word several times in different contexts before it is learnt.

The National Institute for Literacy (2003) concluded that, since it is not possible for teachers to provide specific instruction for all the words children don't know, children need to be able to determine the meaning of words that are new to them by using a range of taught word learning strategies.







# Practical classroom ideas to support vocabulary development

The following suggestions have been generated by teachers from the Foundation Stage and across key stages 1-3 who took part in a vocabulary development workshop.

## **Help pupils to extend vocabulary through whole class and guided group work by:**

- Planning for the introduction of new vocabulary. You could indicate on short term plans where and how new vocabulary will be introduced.
- Encouraging “word of the day”. You and the pupils identify a new word each day and attempt to use it in context as many times as possible.
- Modelling specific reading strategies to develop vocabulary, for example drawing on analogies (rain, snow, sleet) or word families (either linked to spelling patterns or meaning).
- Exploring prediction of story and dialogue through either the use of textless picture books or the masking/covering of a specific piece of dialogue or text.
- Pre-teaching vocabulary before meeting it in a text, for example key words such as technical terms, or words in unfamiliar contexts.
- Developing the role of the class novel to enthuse and engage children in reading and to extend and introduce new vocabulary.
- Checking understanding of vocabulary meaning through targeted questioning particularly in guided reading and writing sessions.
- Providing clear objectives for developing vocabulary, for example giving pupils four words and asking them to use them during the lesson.
- Modelling a piece of writing in front of the class, explaining and verbalising vocabulary choices as you go.
- Using guided writing sessions to support small, targeted groups to review a piece of writing and challenge vocabulary choices made.



**Encourage pupils to develop vocabulary during independent tasks by:**

- Promoting the use of dictionaries, thesauruses and spelling investigations to extend the range of words used.
- Giving pupils a vocabulary notebook in which to record unfamiliar or newly discovered words which can be stored until they need to use them.
- Playing word games to extend and challenge understanding of vocabulary, for example exploring words in other curriculum areas (e.g. a *foul* in sport and other meanings and usages), or identifying and focusing on words which act as more than one part of speech (e.g. address (noun) and address (verb)).
- Developing and extending independent reading experiences, for example, you have a 'special set' of books by the same author or text type of class novel. The pupils recommend and swap books from the set and then discuss through a reading circle.
- Encouraging reading partners/buddies to talk about books read, to ask questions and make recommendations. This could effectively be run across year groups or with targeted specific groups.
- Encouraging pupils to use the learning environment to support independence by making sure they know where to find resources and prompts.

**Develop vocabulary through the use of ICT by:**

- Encouraging pupils to compose and edit on screen, using word processing tools such as dictionary and thesaurus.
- Showing a short film (e.g. BFI story shorts) without sound and asking pupils to discuss what dialogue they would expect to hear.
- Showing a scene from a film without sound and asking pupils to use the facial expression to determine emotion. They could then add thought bubbles to the image on the Interactive Whiteboard.
- Using Digi-blue cameras to create a short film or take stills to produce promotional material. Pupils would be encouraged to produce a storyboard and write a script using appropriate language to the task.
- Promoting online book communities to establish the top ten reads as recommendations for the class or school.

**Using talk to support vocabulary development by:**

- Encouraging the use of talk or response partners whereby pupils can share and orally rehearse ideas before writing.
- Asking pupils to provide verbal feedback in response to a piece of writing or question.
- Establishing a role play/drama area to develop confidence and functional language skills, for example linked to a travel agents, café, or post office.
- Using drama to encourage pupils to use unfamiliar vocabulary in 'safe' situations to prompt a response and discussion of dialogue used.
- Developing STOP REWIND activities whereby pupils have a catch phrase to interrupt read aloud sessions to ask about the meaning of words and phrases.

**Create a language rich environment which supports vocabulary development by:**

- Providing a range of quality texts and text types that link to and extend the pupils' interests.
- Creating interactive working walls/displays so that pupils can capture new, exciting and unusual vocabulary for later use.
- Displaying whole class vocabulary choices, for example by using images of the pupils, with speech bubbles showing good examples. This could be populated by you or the pupils and regularly updated with links to specific themes or texts.

**Direct teaching of vocabulary enhances listening and reading comprehension.**

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