

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

Introduction

This document draws on a paper that summarises research evidence from the UK and the US on effective practice in increasing the vocabulary of children who start education with a limited vocabulary. Refer to the full paper in the library for further information on the research evidence including references and further reading.

Background

Children start school with a vocabulary which has been learned primarily from their interactions with parents and the literacy environment at home.

Vocabulary is a strong determinant of reading success. It was established in the 70s that children's slow progress in reading comprehension compared to more able peers from age 8 onwards largely resulted from a lack of adequate vocabulary knowledge and that this was primarily caused by restricted learning opportunities, not innate ability. However, vocabulary instruction can have a positive impact on children's reading comprehension.

Having a limited vocabulary can trap children in a vicious circle, since children who cannot read more advanced texts miss out on opportunities to extend their vocabulary and are also less effective in deploying strategies necessary for independent word learning. Children with limited vocabularies need to be targeted early, since catching up is very difficult: Biemiller (2003) noted that children with smaller 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.

Addressing vocabulary deficits at 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 limited vocabularies. There is a broad consensus that vocabulary can be taught effectively at school and that a range of approaches used together is most effective.

Duke and Moses (2003) concluded that:

- **Reading to children;**
 - **Getting children to read;**
 - **Rich oral language;**
 - **Encouraging reading and talk at home;**
- are the basis of vocabulary growth

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 such as those which represent complex concepts, and words that are not part of pupils' everyday experience),
- **Indirect instruction** (i.e. exposure to a wide range of reading materials),
- **Multimedia methods** (including semantic mapping, graphic representations and hypertext),

- **Capacity methods** (focusing on making reading an automatic activity, rather than one which takes up cognitive capacity), and
- **Association methods** (encouraging learners to draw connections between what they do know and unfamiliar words).

What do these methods mean in practice?

- **Explicit instruction:** in planning a reading experience look ahead at the text and select words that are likely to be difficult. Teach what these words mean before sharing the text using props or images.
- **Indirect instruction:** provide a broad and rich language curriculum. Provide rich and challenging experiences so that language is developed in meaningful contexts. Provide many daily opportunities for sharing books, rhymes and songs.
- **Multimedia methods:** encourage children to use ICT texts that are hyperlinked to glossaries. Use the Internet with children to explore word meanings, particularly supporting children in connecting less familiar words with ones that they are using.
- **Capacity methods:** children need high quality phonic teaching to be able to decode the words on a page so that they can get to the purpose of reading, understanding texts.
- **Association methods:** help children to connect the new or less familiar words they are learning with words that they do know. Use these new words with children in meaningful contexts, 'Yes, you have built a really *tall building*, it's as big as a *skyscraper*'

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; how much knowing the word will help them with the texts and experiences they 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 the studies mentioned highlight the importance of repetition in the learning of vocabulary: children must engage with a word several times in different contexts before it is learnt.