

VOCABULARY - MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Vocabulary is more than just words! Vocabulary represents concepts and ideas. Vocabulary supports all aspects of literacy, learning and social interaction, so we need to take the time to help our children build vocabulary knowledge and make strong vocabulary connections.

Barbara Ehren says "*Because vocabulary is such an important area ... (we must) understand the variables that affect vocabulary acquisition. It is also essential that we conceptualise vocabulary in the broad context of all literacy processes (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), because vocabulary is a linchpin for reading and writing proficiency. (Ehren 2002)*

As we know there are in fact **four vocabularies** not one! See Newsletter No. 12, June 2005 for more detail about Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing vocabularies. We also need to understand the **reciprocal nature of growth** in these areas. Growth in one vocabulary area is likely to result in growth in another area. For example, a student with a wide vocabulary is at an advantage when facing the task of learning to read. As children become more competent readers they will be exposed to a richer and more extensive range of words. Of course the converse is also true.

This has implications for us as teachers and parents. We must be sure to nurture and extend children's interest in learning new words and as well create opportunities to have fun with language. Even when children become more independent in their own reading they can benefit enormously from listening to stories read aloud and discussing ideas and new words. This interaction becomes even more crucial for children who are struggling with reading.

Learning new words

A young child learns new words at a surprising rate. Nickola Wolf Nelson (2002) describes this process as the "vocabulary sponge" implying that new words are merely "soaked up". Nelson and others are quick to explain however, that learning new vocabulary is indeed a complex process which requires astute perception, repeated exposures and many opportunities to use and refine knowledge to truly "know" a word.

Degrees of knowing a word

Not all words in our vocabulary are known to the same degree. We might only have a "hunch", for example, about the meaning of many words that we read. Other words we understand thoroughly and can use them in our conversations or writing with confidence. Teachers (and parents) might find it useful to talk with children about how well they know the meaning of particular words. In this way we can create a positive 'climate' for word learning and reassure students that learning new words is not an "all or nothing" phenomenon. Vocabulary learning is a gradual and ongoing process which continues into adulthood.

A widening gap

Naturally there is a wide variation in children's exposure to language and the rate at which they learn new words. Unfortunately the research shows that the gap between those with an extensive vocabulary and those with few words continues to widen as time goes by. We

must promote maximum growth of vocabulary in the early years and should endeavour to keep building it throughout the school years. If we are to stem the widening gap we must not assume that vocabulary will just 'grow' of its own accord.

There are a lot of words in English.

English has the largest vocabulary of any language. There are said to be well over 650,000 words, of which 200,000 are in common use. Compare this with the German language which has a vocabulary of 184,000 words and French and Russian with fewer than 100,000 words each (King, 2000).

By the end of High School the average student speaker of English requires a working vocabulary of 80,000 words. To achieve this level, children will need to learn approximately 3,500 each year or 9-10 words each day through a variety of means. Children with language and literacy difficulties are likely to struggle.

Why so many words?

The main reason for the extensive vocabulary of English is that words have been gathered from other languages over time. The origins of English words are broad.

1. *Anglo-Saxon*. Although making up only about 1% of our language these words include the familiar and common words. These words are short and often contain silent letters, presenting problems for reading and spelling compared with more phonetically regular words. The common "sight words" are largely of Anglo-Saxon origin. For example, said, look, about.
2. *Latin* words form over half of the English words. They are often composed of prefixes, roots and suffixes. For example, territorial, insomnia
3. *Greek* words are usually abstract and 'scientific sounding' and make up about 10% of the words we use in English. For example, psychology, telephone.

Below is a practical example of the breadth of English vocabulary, showing the origins of the words (King, 2000). You can see the gradation from concrete to more abstract/scientific word use.

1. earth, fire, water (Anglo-Saxon)
2. terrain, ignite, aquatic (Latin)
3. geographic, pyre, (as in pyromaniac) hydrogen (Greek)

When words don't mean what they usually mean.

One of the interesting features of English is the use of idiomatic phrases and figurative language. It is usually the shorter and simpler Anglo-Saxon words that are used in such forms of English.

For example: He got all *fired* up about it. It was *water* off a duck's back. He was a salt of the *earth* character and had an *earthy* sense of humour.

The Love and Reilly resource **Word Journey** is a fun way of exploring vocabulary meanings and developing confidence in expression. The five game boards teach multiple aspects of vocabulary development including meaning, use, associations, word building and idiomatic expressions. **The Word Journey supplement** on our website gives further support for words with multiple meanings and their use in idiomatic expressions.

"One" meaning but lots of words

In English many different words are used to express what may initially seem to be the same concept. Looking more closely however, we discover that these words describe finer shades of meaning. Consider the following groups of words and the slightly different meanings that are conveyed within each group of words.

cross, angry, annoyed, aggravated, furious, exasperated

nudge, bump, push, prod, shove, ram

beautiful, gorgeous, elegant, attractive, dazzling

"One" word but more than one meaning

A large percentage of English words have more than one meaning. Many of these are common words such as *play* and *back* which children learn first as simple concepts and later begin to realize can be used in a variety of more abstract ways. Many of these changes in word meanings occur because of the influence of other smaller words or context. For example: *I hurt my back; I can back up the computer; back into the car space; take a back step; in the back row; backwards; backyard; back me up; backstab* etc.

- Have some light hearted fun as you brainstorm different meanings and uses of the words *play, fall* and *head*.
- Some of the phrases that you create are likely to highlight idiomatic speech such as *play the field; play up to the boss*. The real meaning of these phrases is more than the literal meanings of the individual words.
- Try to think of other idioms - *raining cats and dogs; chip on your shoulder; full of himself*.

Language is a Game

Young children love to play games and in particular, word games with rhyme and humour. Jokes also create opportunities to think about some of the similarities in sounds and meanings of words. At first children may be very literal in their interpretation of words but soon come to relish jokes, puns and tongue-twisters. We have recently added to the vocabulary activities in Paddy's Playroom on our website.

Literature

There are some terrific children's books which will not only give great pleasure but also offer the readers fun while exploring vocabulary. A browse through the books at the local library or visit to the children's section of the bookstore will reveal many books that include interesting vocabulary within a story framework.

- The book *Possum Magic* by Mem Fox is a classic example. This much loved story could lead to a discussion about the following words and phrases- *miserable, unexpectedly, visible, precious, appeared, in her heart of hearts*.

Here is a small selection of other story books rich with vocabulary.

- *Dulcie Dando, Football Player*
- *A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts*
- *Grandpa's Teeth*

- What Do We Do With Dawson?
- Never keep a Python as a Pet
- Boomer's Big Day

For the sheer richness and absurdity of the English language it is hard to go past the following books:

- *Even More Parts*
- *A Bee in Ben's Bonnet*
- *Duck for Cover*
- *Oh, Dear, What can the Matter be?*

SO?

Let's make the commitment to having fun with words.

Let's make the time to talk about words with our children.

Let's all become 'word explorers'.

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Books:

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A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts, by Dennis Reader. Walker Books, 1989.

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What Do We Do With Dawson? By Ted Greenwood. Puffin Books, 1996.

Never keep a Python as a Pet, by Scoular Anderson. Hippo Books, 1990.

Boomer's Big Day, by Constance George. Chronicle Books, 1994.

Even More Parts, by Tedd Arnold. Puffin Books, 2004.

A Bee in Ben's Bonnet, by Ferg McKinnon and Kim Gamble. Red Fox, 2002.

Duck for Cover, by Paul Jennings, Ted Greenwood & Terry Denton. Viking, Penguin. 1994.

Oh, Dear, What can the Matter be? by June Factor & Annie Marshall. Hodder & Stoughton 1993.

What a Joke! The Puffin Book of Kids' Jokes, by Phillip Adams and Patrice Newell. Puffin 1998