

# BUILDING VOCABULARY



Curated by



## **What is it?**

One of the most important responsibilities of every teacher is to help students develop a strong working vocabulary. Vocabulary falls into four categories:

1. Listening: the words we understand when we hear them.
2. Speaking: the words we use when talking.
3. Reading: the words we understand when we read.
4. Writing: the words we use when writing.

To develop students' vocabulary, teachers must encourage a curiosity about the meaning and use of unfamiliar words and promote the use of strategies that will help students find the meaning of unfamiliar words.

## **Why is it important?**

The size of a person's working vocabulary is both a measure of educational attainment and a key to academic and career success. Vocabulary development, for example, is crucial to success in reading. Research shows that the proportion of "difficult" words in a text is the single most important predictor of the difficulty of the text, while the size of a person's vocabulary is the best predictor of how well that person can understand the text (Anderson and Freebody 1981).

Unfortunately, research also shows marked differences in vocabulary development in students from high- and low-income families, with a widening gap during the first three years in the lives of children much of which can be attributed to the level of verbal interactions that children have with their parents. For example, researchers have found a difference of almost 300 spoken words per hour between parents who hold professional positions and parents on welfare. As a result, by the age of three, children in "professional" families actually had a larger vocabulary than the parents with low incomes (Hart and Risley 1995).

Research also shows that children who enter school with a vocabulary deficit tend to continue to fall behind through the course of their schooling. If education is truly to be the "great leveller" and provide all children access to the same opportunities, teachers must somehow find ways to reverse this trend and help all children develop a rich working vocabulary.

## **How can you make it happen?**

Strategies for fostering vocabulary development fall into two broad categories: teaching strategies for vocabulary directly and learning new words indirectly. Generally, school-age children learn about 3,000 new words a year, but only about 10 per cent of

these words come from direct vocabulary instruction. The rest come from their everyday experiences with oral communication, listening to text read aloud, and reading a wide variety of texts independently.

Researchers conclude that teachers can have the biggest impact on vocabulary by increasing the amount of incidental word learning (Nagy and Herman 1987).

## **Indirect vocabulary instruction**

Teachers can help students increase vocabulary by including powerful, difficult words in their oral language while they teach, and by encouraging students to use those words in their speaking and writing.

### **Read, Read, Read**

The single most effective way of helping students build vocabulary is by increasing the amount that they read. Researchers have found that students who read just 10 minutes a day outside of school demonstrate significantly higher rates of vocabulary growth than students who do almost no reading outside of school (Nagy and Anderson 1984). Students are likely to develop vocabulary more rapidly when the books they read are not only easy enough to read fluently but also contain unfamiliar words. Most importantly, students need to read a lot to have frequent encounters with words in different contexts that lead to true word knowledge; the sheer volume of reading matters. Find ways to increase the amount of reading that students are doing, and they inevitably will build vocabulary. It's that simple.

### **Thoughtful classroom discourse**

Talk is also important. Children whose parents talk to them often on a range of topics come to school with a much larger vocabulary than children from homes where talk is limited. These children do not have a larger vocabulary because they are smarter – rather, they are smarter because they have a larger vocabulary. Assist children with vocabulary deficits by providing them with the same sort of highly interactive, language-rich environment that advantaged children have at home. Engage students in conversations on a wide range of topics, calling attention to the shades of meaning of interesting words in their daily interactions with text (both written and oral), and promote a spirit of curiosity about words and the different meanings that words can have in different contexts. Don't be afraid to use "big words," as this is how students will learn.

### **Direct vocabulary instruction: Learning new words**

Students can learn new words by finding meanings of words in meaningful contexts; using dictionaries, and using structural analysis to find the meaning of unfamiliar words.

## **Vocabulary in context**

Researchers have found that teaching dictionary definitions of words out of context does not enhance the comprehension of a text containing those vocabulary words (Stahl & Fairbanks 1986). Students need to encounter words repeatedly and in a range of contexts before the words become part of their working vocabulary. For example, McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Pople (1985) found that students did not really know and understand words they had only encountered 4 times, but they did know and understand words they encountered 12 times.

## **Using a dictionary**

Students should be taught how to use dictionaries to look up the meanings of unknown words. Small pocket dictionaries are inexpensive and can provide a wealth of information, provided that students know how to use them. Dictionary skills, such as using guide words, understanding parts of speech, and deciphering phonetic spelling, should be explicitly taught and practised. Dictionaries are also useful in introducing multiple meanings of words. Students can practice working out which of several defined meanings of a word is relevant in a given passage.

## **Word walls**

Words that are used often or are easily confused can be displayed in a classroom on a word wall. Be selective about which words go on the wall, making sure the words displayed are really those your students need to know. Add words gradually, a few each week, and provide plenty of opportunities for students to say and write them. Students can choose a word and give clues about the word for other students to guess. For example, "The word begins with the same sound as head and rhymes with the mouse."

## **Vocabulary journals**

Encourage students to build their vocabulary every day and keep a vocabulary journal. Students can write 10 words in their journals each week that they have either heard in class or read in a textbook or novel. Have them use context clues or structural analysis to try to figure out the meanings, and then allow them to use a dictionary to check the definitions. Students can use the 10 new words they've learned to write pairs of analogies that express one of the relationships you have reviewed with them. Examples of analogies can be found in the "How can you stretch students' thinking?" section.

## **Structural analysis**

The structural analysis involves looking at word structure or word parts that students know—a base word, prefix, suffix, or word root to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Once students understand how multisyllabic words are constructed, and once

they master the meanings of common prefixes and suffixes, they can deconstruct the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

- Base words are words that are complete by themselves. Words that can be divided are made up of two or more prefixes, suffixes, and word roots.
- A prefix is a letter or series of letters that are added to the beginning of a word that has meaning only when attached to a word root. It changes the meaning of a word root. The most common prefixes are un- (not), re- (back, again), dis- (away, off, opposing), and in- (not).
- A suffix is a letter or series of letters that are added to the end of a word that changes the word's part of speech or tense. Many suffixes do have meanings, but they are more difficult to learn than are prefixes, which should be emphasised.
- Root words, mainly Greek and Latin, are the words that carry the main meaning of the word but usually cannot stand alone. When introducing structural analysis, write a relatively easy and well-known word such as redo or rewrite on the chalkboard. Ask students how they might determine the meaning of the words if they could not use a dictionary or read them in context. Ask students to come up with several other words that they know that begin with the prefix re-, and have them infer the meaning of the prefix. Guide students to understand that the prefix re- means "back" or "again," and they know what the base words do and write mean. Therefore, they can figure out that rewrite means "write again," and redo means "to do again." Review common prefixes with students, put five grade-appropriate vocabulary words that contain those prefixes on the board, and then ask students to find the meanings of the words.

To model finding an unknown word, draw a word web, and place the Latin root bene- in the middle of the circle. Ask students to come up with three words that have been or in them. For example, students might say beneficial, benefit, or benign. Now, ask students to use their knowledge of what these words mean to figure out what beneficent, a more difficult word, means. Guide students to understand that bene- means "good" by having them explain how the three words that they know relate to something that is good.

Now, have them predict that beneficent means "doing or producing good." Explain that if they were taking a test and came across this word, they could at least use their knowledge of the meaning of bene- and the words that they know that contain bene- to figure out a working definition for beneficent. Have students practice the same process with the word roots -uni- (one) and ver- (turn) using grade-appropriate words that contain those roots.

To help younger students decode unknown words, have them deconstruct compound words. For example, you might start by writing the word birdhouse on the board. Ask

students to tell you what bird and house mean, and then guide them to figure out the meaning of the compound word by combining the meanings of the two base words. Group younger students into pairs, and have them find the meanings of several grade-appropriate compound words.

## **Specific word instruction**

Providing students with contexts in which they can learn new words incidentally is the most effective way to build vocabulary. Nevertheless, explicit vocabulary instruction can also help, especially if it is focused on helping students develop strategies to learn new words representing new concepts or to clarify and enrich the meanings of known words.

## **How can you stretch students' thinking?**

One way to enrich explicit vocabulary study is through the use of analogies. An analogy shows a relationship between words and can be used to help students learn new words. Analogies are also frequently used in standardized tests, so it is important that students learn a step-by-step strategy to decode analogies. To solve word analogies, students must first understand the relationship between the words. Many different types of analogies can be used to help students understand words:

Category: tea:drink :: deer:animal

Synonym: rare:scarce :: dry:arid

Antonym: hot:cold :: day:night

Part to Whole: collar:shirt :: buckle:belt

Object to Use: pen:write :: brush:paint

Product to Producer: fire:match :: pearl:oyster

When teaching vocabulary using analogies, model the process using a simple analogy, such as cat:pet:: tulip: flower. Help students talk through the analogy by saying, "A cat is to a pet as a tulip is to a flower." Ask students to determine what type of relationship they see in this analogy (category a cat is a type of pet and a tulip is a type of flower). Select a few other types of analogies, such as antonyms and synonyms, and work with students to help them understand the relationships.

Give students sets of analogies that are grade- and subject-appropriate, with each set containing one word that students might not know. Group students, and ask them to figure out the meaning of the unknown word by first identifying the relationship expressed in the analogy and then by using their knowledge of the three words they

know. For example, happy:enthralled:: intelligent: smart is a synonym analogy. Once students identify this relationship, they can figure out that enthralled means "happy."

Source:

