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10 Research-Tested Ways to Build Children's Vocabulary

by

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Each year the International Reading Association surveys literacy leaders from around the world regarding “what’s hot” and “what’s not” in literacy (e.g., Cassidy and Cassidy, 2001/2002; 2002/2003). Year after year vocabulary has been rated “not hot.” Yet over 75% of those surveyed think it “should be hot” (ibid.). We agree, and the fact that you are reading this means that you probably do, too.

Research suggests that vocabulary is enormously important to children’s development, especially in reading. Research clearly indicates that children with larger vocabularies have higher school achievement in general (Smith, 1941, cited in Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002) and higher reading achievement in particular (Anderson and Freebody, 1981; Graves, 1986; Stahl, 1998). In fact, people with larger vocabularies even have higher IQs (Bell, Lassiter, Matthews, and Hutchinson, 2001; Hodapp, and Gerken, 1999)!

Fortunately, a child’s vocabulary is not predestined. Rather, teachers can have a real impact on children’s vocabulary knowledge. Research shows that teachers can do things that significantly increase children’s vocabularies (Baumann, Kame’enui, and Ash, 2003; Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986), and by doing so children’s reading comprehension will also improve (National Reading Panel, 2000; Stahl, 1998).



There are many research-tested ways that teachers can improve children's vocabulary knowledge. Here are 10 that seem especially important for teachers of young children:

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

READ TO THEM

- Studies indicate that children do learn words from books read aloud to them (e.g., Elley, 1989). Most helpful will be reading aloud books and other materials (such as magazines or environmental print) that have some, but not too many, words that are new to children. Read-aloud of storybooks is important, but also important is read-aloud of other types of text, such as information books (Duke, 2003; Pappas, 1991). Some research even suggests that teachers and parents highlight vocabulary more when reading aloud information books than when reading aloud stories (Lennox, 1995; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, and Brody, 1990).

GET THEM READING

- Children also learn new words through reading independently. Researchers estimate that 5–15% of all the words we learn we learn from reading (e.g., Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985). And indeed, children who read more tend to have richer vocabularies (Stahl, 1998). So when we engage students in motivational activities to encourage reading, we are simultaneously improving their vocabularies.

READINGLINE SUPPORT*

- The ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit offers fiction and nonfiction Little Books that inspire discussion and present new vocabulary.
- The ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit centers on Little Books that children read using sight words and patterns. The books present engaging fiction and nonfiction text that feature important concepts and vocabulary. The imaginative illustrations further encourage exploration and discussion, prompting children to read more.

* ReadingLine Support is the work of Scholastic Editors. The examples and implications therein are based on but do not represent the work of Nell Duke or her colleagues.



RESEARCH EVIDENCE

ENGAGE CHILDREN IN RICH ORAL LANGUAGE

- Children also learn words through talk, especially from listening to and participating in high-level conversations. For example, one study showed that young children whose parents use more “rare words” at the dinner table had higher vocabularies and later reading achievement than other children (e.g., Beals, 1997). In school we need to involve children in rich, meaningful conversations whenever we can.

ENCOURAGE READING AND TALK AT HOME

- As the “rare words” study suggests, children can also develop their vocabularies at home. Encouraging reading and conversations outside of school, for example by sending home books and interactive activities, can have positive effects (e.g., Koskinen, Blum, Bisson, Phillips, Creamer, and Baker, 2000). Even viewing certain television programs, most notably *Sesame Street*, has been shown to improve young children’s vocabularies (Rice, Huston, Truglio, and Wright, 1990; Rice and Woodsmall, 1984).

READINGLINE SUPPORT

- Each ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit lesson plan features discussion ideas, questions and oral language exercises designed to expand children’s vocabulary while addressing issues and content brought up by the books. Manipulatives such as the Oral Language Cards help children to increase their content-related vocabulary.
- The ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit includes Take Home versions of the Little Books that come with a family letter that includes activity and discussion ideas.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

RAISE WORD CONSCIOUSNESS

- We want children to notice when they encounter new words and to want to learn them. Some researchers refer to this as *word consciousness* (Graves and Watts-Taffe, 2002). There are many ways to draw children's attention to and interest in words around them. Playing with words through games, songs, and humor can be powerful. Simply encouraging children to recognize when they have encountered new words, and to notice special characteristics of words, will also raise word consciousness (e.g., Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, 1982).

TEACH IMPORTANT WORDS

- Yes, we can teach children new words (Baumann, Kame'enui, and Ash, 2003; Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986). But time and other factors mean there are limits to how many new words we can teach. For this reason, it is important to select words for teaching very carefully. Factors to consider include how important and useful knowledge of the word would be, how easily relatable the word is to other words the children know, and how much knowing the word will help with the unit, text, or situation at hand (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002).

READINGLINE SUPPORT

- The ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit features classic rhymes, songs, and fingerplays that offer new language experiences so children become aware of new words. Oral Language Picture Cards are included to improve knowledge of content-related vocabulary.
- The ReadingLine Vocabulary includes words in key knowledge areas—such as animals, tools, occupations—that help children to better understand the world around them. Words were also chosen that would help children better express their thoughts and ideas and their ability to work with language.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

TEACH CONCEPTUALLY-RELATED WORDS

- It often makes sense to teach words not individually but in sets that are conceptually-related, for example words related to farms, words related to families, or names of different animals. Indeed, several research-tested techniques for teaching vocabulary are well suited to teaching groups of words (see, e.g., Rupley, Logan, and Nichols, 1998/1999).

RELATE NEW WORDS TO KNOWN WORDS

- Theory and research on vocabulary learning suggest that helping children relate new words to words they already know is very important (see citations throughout). For example, if a child knows the word *fruit*, and knows the word *apple*, these words can help children learn the word *kiwi*. If a child knows what it means to *be mad*, that may help him learn *frustrated*. Teaching children to use the context around a word to try to figure out word meanings can also be effective. (Kuhn and Stahl, 1998).

READINGLINE SUPPORT

- In the ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit, vocabulary words are taught by topic and concept. The topics are derived from the books and are addressed in discussions and oral language activities throughout the week. Some concept areas covered include: family words, action words, colors, household objects, occupations, animals, and position words.
- In the ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit, vocabulary is taught in meaning-based groups—such as action words, feelings words, fruits and vegetables—so that children can relate the similar words.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

EXPOSE CHILDREN TO WORDS MULTIPLE TIMES IN MULTIPLE MEANINGFUL CONTEXTS

- Clearly, knowledge of a word is likely to be stronger after three encounters than after just one, and more thorough after encounters in multiple contexts than just one (Nagy and Scott, 2000). Successful vocabulary programs have children encountering words repeatedly and diversely (e.g., McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Perfetti, 1983). As you well know, simply hearing or reading a dictionary definition for a word does not do enough to help children “get it,” nor does basic drill and practice. Rather, children need to encounter words in meaningful activities, conversations, and texts. Children need to live new words.

ENJOY WORDS

- There has not been a lot of research on the relationship between motivation and vocabulary learning, but successful vocabulary programs seem to have motivational elements (e.g., McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Perfetti, 1983), and motivation or interest is a part of word consciousness (Graves and Watts-Taffe, 2002). Certainly in our own teaching we have noticed that when children were more motivated to learn new words, they did so more readily, and we would guess that you have noticed this, too. We should strive to have classrooms in which words are enjoyed, relished, celebrated, even loved. Congratulations for all that you do to make that happen.

READINGLINE SUPPORT

- With the ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit, children have an opportunity to work with both the sight words and the oral language vocabulary in many contexts. The sight words presented are reviewed in subsequent books so that children receive multiple exposures. The oral language vocabulary is used in different contexts throughout the weekly lesson plan: in songs and fingerplays, book discussions, oral language exercises, and projects.
- The ReadingLine Vocabulary Kit is full of fun and engaging language-building activities; including songs and fingerplays, games and projects. The Little Books feature imaginative illustrations and texts that encourage exploration and discussion.

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