

# Improving Literacy Brief

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## VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AND INSTRUCTION

### WHAT IS VOCABULARY?

Vocabulary is knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly.

THERE ARE FOUR TYPES OF VOCABULARY:

1. **Listening Vocabulary** – the words that we hear in spoken language.
2. **Speaking Vocabulary** – the words that we use when we speak.
3. **Reading Vocabulary** – the words that we read.
4. **Writing vocabulary** – the words that we use when writing.

Vocabulary development starts early, before children learn to read. Young children who hear more words spoken at home and in their community, and engage in more conversations with adults, enter school with more word knowledge.

Differences in children's vocabulary knowledge are usually due to relative economic advantage, not race, ethnicity, gender, or birth order. The gap between the growth of children with less exposure to rich vocabulary and that of their peers often widens over time. So, it's essential that vocabulary development is a fundamental goal for all students in the early grades (National Research Council, 1998).

### WHY IS VOCABULARY IMPORTANT?

Vocabulary knowledge is important to school success. Learning, as a language-based activity, is dependent on vocabulary knowledge. To learn, students must have access to the meanings of words that teachers use (Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998).

Vocabulary knowledge is also important for comprehension. Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas, and content together to make reading comprehension possible for children (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999).

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COMPREHENSION DEPENDS ON KNOWING WORD MEANINGS.

- If a word is decoded and pronounced but the meaning is not recognized, comprehension will likely be impaired.
- If a word is not recognized automatically, comprehension may also be affected.
- Knowledge of a word's meaning facilitates accurate word recognition.

WHAT IT MEANS TO “KNOW” A WORD CAN VARY. FOR EXAMPLE:

1. *I never saw it before.*
2. *I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means.*
3. *I recognize it in context – it has something to do with...*
4. *I know it* (Dale & O'Rourke, 1986).

## WHAT SHOULD VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION LOOK LIKE?

Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly (Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006). Direct vocabulary instruction includes providing explicit instruction, facilitating students' use of word learning strategies, and developing students' word consciousness or, an awareness of and interest in words and their meanings (Beck et al, 2002). Indirect vocabulary learning includes providing oral language experiences, reading aloud, and facilitating students' wide reading. While children do learn some vocabulary incidentally, indirect instruction is not enough. Research indicates that teachers must directly teach specific words explicitly and intentionally to build students' vocabularies.

## ATTRIBUTES OF GOOD VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION INCLUDE

- Active student engagement
- Definitional and contextual information
- Sufficient instructional time to ensure understanding of words
- Multiple exposures to words
- Lots of practice opportunities

## DIRECT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Teaching vocabulary directly can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers and non-native English learners (Carlo et al., 2004). Direct instruction is important since around 70% of the most frequently used words have multiple meanings (Lederer, 1991).

At all ages, children should be **explicitly** taught the meanings of specific words with repetition and multiple exposures to the words over time. This should occur in rich contexts with active student engagement in vocabulary learning tasks and provide students with skills and opportunities to learn words independently. This includes an expectation that students can use the new vocabulary word in a sentence (Coyne et al., 2010).



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THE RESEARCH REPORTED HERE IS FUNDED BY A GRANT TO THE NATIONAL CENTER ON IMPROVING LITERACY FROM THE OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS (AWARD #: H283D210004). THE OPINIONS OR POLICIES EXPRESSED ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHORS AND DO NOT REPRESENT VIEWS OF OESE, OSEP, OR THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. YOU SHOULD NOT ASSUME ENDORSEMENT BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. COPYRIGHT © NATIONAL CENTER ON IMPROVING LITERACY.

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## WORD LEARNING STRATEGIES

Younger students and striving readers can be taught new vocabulary explicitly through read alouds and by discussing words.

1. Choose 2-5 words to teach directly from text.
2. Choose words that are important for understanding the text, have general utility that are likely to be encountered many times, or are difficult words that need interpretation.
3. Give simple, student-friendly definitions, illustrate the words with examples, and discuss and ask questions about the words in the context of the read aloud.
4. Check for student understanding and review.

Fluent and grade-level readers can be taught independent word-learning **strategies** to access word meanings when reading.

1. Teach **contextual analysis** skills, or predicting the meaning of a word from the context in which it appears.
2. Teach **morphemic analysis**, examining the meaningful parts of words (prefixes, suffixes, roots) to determine meaning.
3. Choose words that will enhance the meaning of what students are reading or are important for students to know.
4. Use both context and definitions when modeling how to determine word meanings and pronounce words.
5. Teach word meanings by using examples, non-examples, synonyms, and definitions.
6. Set aside time for students to talk to each other about words in their reading materials.

Teaching independent word-learning strategies to students is critical because it is impossible for teachers to provide explicit instruction for all the words students do not know. Students also need to be able to determine the meaning of words on their own.

## WORD CONSCIOUSNESS

***To increase students' word consciousness – the knowledge that words have meaning – teachers can:***

- Emphasize learning new words using elaborate and extended language throughout the day.
- Draw attention to specific words, their meanings, and their use.
- Read aloud rich literature daily.
- Communicate their own appreciation and love for words.
- Have fun with words and language (idioms, analogies, tongue twisters, rhymes).

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## INDIRECT VOCABULARY LEARNING

Vocabulary size and the amount a child reads are correlated (Anderson & Nagy, 1992). Students learn new words by encountering them when reading independently or when someone reads aloud to them. The more students read, the more expansive and richer their vocabulary and background knowledge becomes. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Students who find reading difficult tend to read less and don't build their vocabularies at rates equal with their well-read peers (Stanovich, 1986). Indirect vocabulary learning therefore enhances direct vocabulary instruction by increasing exposure to words and their meanings in various contexts.

## WIDE READING

Reading widely means reading a lot in a variety of texts, like books, articles, and magazines. It also includes reading a lot on various topics. Wide reading is important because direct instruction cannot possibly account for the number of word meanings students acquire. However, wide reading is not enough to develop students' vocabulary because context is generally unreliable for inferring word meanings. Likewise, most words occur too infrequently to provide the number of exposures needed for students to learn them.

## ORAL LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES

Many students need intentional and repeated exposure to the type of language found in academic books (i.e., academic language skills). Academic language skills include engaging students in conversations that support the use and comprehension of inferential language (thinking beyond the here and now), explicitly engaging students in developing narrative language skills (connecting a series of events); and teaching academic vocabulary, including grammatical structures, in the context of other reading activities (Foorman et al., 2016). All students, regardless of their reading ability, should have regular opportunities to develop academic language skills.

For those students struggling with decoding and fluency, allow them to listen to audiobooks to expand vocabulary and engage with grade-level content. Keep in mind, students with smaller vocabularies are less likely to learn new words from indirect exposure than students with larger vocabularies. Therefore, teachers should not rely on audiobooks alone. Teachers need to provide these students with more explicit vocabulary instruction.

It's important to provide children with rich vocabulary learning opportunities in and out of school. Teachers and families alike can nurture a love and appreciation of words and their use with children. This can be accomplished by choosing quality text that children enjoy reading or listening to, promoting the use of word learning strategies, and talking about words and their meanings.

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# VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AND INSTRUCTION

## SUGGESTED CITATION

National Center on Improving Literacy (2023). *Vocabulary Development and Instruction*. <https://improvingliteracy.org/resource/vocabulary-development-and-instruction-building-the-foundation-for-school-success/>

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