



bungalow
welcome
chutney
cheetah avatar
pyjamas
shampoo
bangle

Vocabulary

Vocabulary develops as language in use, not by learning words out of context.

- Successful language development is supported by purposeful exposure to words in a language rich environment.
- Increased awareness of the power of words can help in making choices about language use.
- Opportunities to hear and experiment with new vocabulary can support reading and writing.
- Vocabulary will take root when children have opportunities to use newly learned words in writing, poetry, drama or talk.
- Bilingual/multilingual children have rich resources for vocabulary development.

UKLA supports the view that children bring a wealth of language experience with them when they enter school. In the last few years, however, there have been interventions to close what has been termed the ‘word gap’. This can be traced back to research from the United States of America on the vocabulary of children in high and low income families. This research has been critiqued for its methodology and for its possible impact on the assumptions that educators make about the children they teach (Adair *et al.*, 2017; Baugh, 2017). As Kuchirko points out:

We should move away from invoking a deficit discourse in research and in classrooms. “Gaps” and ‘deficits’ are labels that have profound consequences for children’s lived experiences. (Kuchirko, 2019: 553)

Research carried out in England (Cremin, *et al.*, 2015) explored the language ‘assets’ which children bring from school to home, including their experience of language drawn from digital, television and DVD texts. This more positive view means that teachers can build on what children bring to school if they first of all take the time to find out what those resources are. Interventions to close the so-called ‘word gap’ often fail because they begin from a position of deficit, rather than discovering children’s existing language ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll *et al.*, 1992). Such approaches often see language development as ‘adding words’, divorced from context. Language is best learned in the context of use, through social interaction and situations that mean that children want to understand and use language for their own communicative purposes. The role of the adult is key. When children are engaged in tasks with adults who deliberately introduce vocabulary in everyday contexts, observed language use increases significantly (US National Reading Technical Assistance Center, 2010).

Vocabulary size is important for reading comprehension. An extensive vocabulary ensures that children have a large bank of words they already understand. There is a strong relationship between vocabulary, reading and comprehension. Beyond a certain range of every day vocabulary, most new vocabulary is encountered through reading. So, reading builds vocabulary, and having a wide vocabulary aids comprehension. Discussion about language contributes significantly to vocabulary building and children or adults in the classroom who have access to languages other than English offer a rich resource for discussion about word derivation.

Vocabulary is important across the curriculum in different subjects (sometimes referred to as academic vocabulary) in order for students to express themselves effectively within a subject and use the domain-specific vocabulary of the subject.

The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that there is no single method for teaching vocabulary and they recommend: Teaching both specific words and word-learning strategies; seeing vocabulary in rich contexts provided by authentic texts; using ‘rich’ vocabulary instruction which goes beyond just defining a word but gets students actively engaged in using and thinking about word meanings, and fostering word consciousness by encouraging an awareness of and interest in words (NRP, 2000). Opportunities for developing children’s language in the classroom abound in: purposeful discussion over shared activities between adults and children; deliberate introduction of vocabulary in a context of use; hearing adults read aloud; shared book reading; role play and drama; performing poetry; telling stories; listening to audio recordings. In addition, a language rich environment will include word origin dictionaries and thesauruses as well as displays of the language experience of the class members. It is all too easy to assume that children have impoverished language in the home. Links with parents/carers and families are important in discovering what language assets children bring from home and building on these.

Sources

Adair, J.K., Colegrove, K.S. and McManus, M.E. (2017) How the word gap argument negatively impacts young children of Latinx immigrants' conceptualizations of learning. *Harvard Educational Review* 87(3) pp. 309-334.

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Department of Education Northern Ireland (2017). Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/speech-language-and-communication-difficulties.pdf>

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Classroom example

Developing vocabulary

This teacher, who has a passion for language, aimed to expand the vocabulary of his 8 and 9 year old class but wanted to find an approach which meant that they were doing the work of digging into language and uncovering some gems. He was not keen to adopt an approach which assumed that the children's language was in some way deficient and specifically wanted to involve families in the work. He introduced the class to the idea of language investigations; the first of these would last at least a couple of weeks – and longer if necessary. The class had 20 minutes dedicated time each morning to bring their ideas to school and build vocabulary banks.

The teacher began by establishing with the class what a language investigation involved, explaining that it was rather like forensic detective work and depended on gathering evidence. This evidence would be in the form of sentences which

used the chosen vocabulary so that it was clear what the words actually meant. He hoped, too, to show that some words had different meanings according to different contexts. He created a special section of the class library which had several copies of the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* and the *Oxford Children's Thesaurus*. He began by asking the class to spend fifteen minutes at home finding as many different words they could for 'investigate', 'investigated' or 'investigation'. They could ask their families for help but they must write a sentence for each word.

The next morning, the class brought in a range of words in sentences including:

I am going to research some words.

This research shows the causes of heart disease.

The SOCOs [scene of crime officers] have scrutinised the place where the body was found.

The survey showed that there were lots of people in favour of the new bus service.

This is an inquiry into who is guilty.

He checked on the alibis they had given.

They discussed the fact that a word can be both a verb and a noun as in the two examples of 'research'. In pairs or threes the class then set about finding these words in *The Dictionary of Word Origins* and found out all kinds of information about how the English language draws on other languages, sharing their findings with the class.

This was just the beginning of a year-long investigation into language. The habit spread across the curriculum, for example, to science lessons where the class enjoyed developing their technical scientific vocabulary and art where they gathered terms to describe different painting and drawing techniques. After reading *The Word Collector* the class set out to choose the kinds of words they wanted to collect. Some chose words associated with their interests, like sporting terms or words associated with particular animals. A group of bilingual children investigated words in English that had come into the language from the Indian sub-continent; others focused on science terminology. By the end of the year the class had collected thousands of words and ended the summer term with a 'wordfest' where they shared some of their findings with younger classes.

Books mentioned

John Ayto (2013) *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*. OUP ISBN 9780192733740

Sonja Wimmer (trans. Jon Brokenbrow) (2012) *The Word Collector*. Cuento de Luz. ISBN 9788415241348

Oxford Children's Thesaurus (2015) OUP ISBN 9780192744029

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See also

UKLA bookshop www.ukla.org/shop

Talk for Spelling by Tony Martin

Teaching Spelling 6-11: designing effective learning in English and across the curriculum by Kirstie Hewitt

Teaching Grammar Effectively in Primary Schools
by David Reedy and Eve Bearne

UKLA website www.ukla.org/resources

Website resource *Grammar in its place*: <https://ukla.org/resources>