

# So Many Words, so little Time

Martin Galway shares his passion for developing vocabulary, making some very succinct points how developing children's vocabulary is essential if we want to enhance reading comprehension.



Vocabulary and reading comprehension are inextricably linked. An extensive body of research points to this but it is fair to say that we hardly need research to tell us so. You need to know what the words in a text mean, or at least the overwhelming majority of them, in order to understand, right? Here lies the problem. Early language deficits, word gaps and poor vocabulary hugely disadvantage children from the outset in terms of general academic performance, and this deficiency fuels what is commonly referred to as the *Matthew Effect* (to paraphrase the Gospel of Matthew: the (language) rich get richer, the (language) poor get poorer).

The logic is easily followed: the more word knowledge you have, the more you comprehend; the more you comprehend, the greater the volume and complexity of words you are likely to encounter; the more words you encounter, the more you continue to acquire vocabulary – and so a critical gap widens. Alongside the crucial focus on decoding to ensure that children are able to lift the words from the page, it's important that we are providing carefully designed opportunities for children to meet, engage with, and maintain a healthy relationship with an increasingly complex body of words.

The American author E.B. White felt children to be far from shy when it comes to facing up to a challenging word:

*Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth ... Children are game for anything. I throw them hard words and they backhand them across the net.*

Some might take issue with the above, perhaps arguing that it speaks of another time – a time reflected in those tricky, older texts such as *Jungle Book* and *Call of the Wild* that have come to be a feature of the KS2 statutory reading tests. Nevertheless, there is a real case to be made for the use of challenging texts, texts that have been written 'up' with an appropriate range of unfamiliar words, to help shape and drive vocabulary instruction across the primary phase. There's a galaxy of words out there and knowing which words to choose to teach (and why) can seem to be a mind-bogglingly huge question for the time-pressed teacher. Why choose when your shared text can lead the way in enhancing your pupils' lexicon?

In the excellent, and recently updated, guide to vocabulary instruction, *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013), E.B. White's most famous work is used to exemplify the potential difficulties that children may face in trying to establish the meaning of an unfamiliar word from contextual clues alone. Here is a quoted exchange between Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider:

*"It's time I made an egg sac and filled it with eggs."  
"I didn't know you could lay eggs," said Wilbur in amazement.  
"Oh sure," said the spider, "I'm versatile."  
"What does versatile mean? Full of eggs?" asks Wilbur.  
"Certainly not," said Charlotte.*

It was a fair assumption on Wilbur's part, based on what he had just heard, but it was wrong. Wilbur is saved from this misconception by Charlotte, who thankfully goes on to offer a clear, exemplified explanation of the word. In fact, Charlotte turns out to be quite a gifted

vocabulary instructor. Later in the book, she offers some etymological pearls to Wilbur, helping him to understand the meaning of the Latin '*magnum opus*'. In the quote above, Wilbur's oral comprehension fell short thanks to a fairly reasonable deduction on his part. Pitfalls like this can arise in certain reading contexts where there is insufficient supporting detail to help fully establish meaning.

This in turn points to the need to plan for explicit vocabulary instruction in support of developing language (oral and reading) comprehension. This is easier said than done and this is one of the central concerns of *Bringing Words to Life*: how to plan and deliver robust vocabulary instruction. The book sets out how to go about identifying words to teach for the greatest effect and a range of approaches to increase the likelihood that these words gain traction and anchorage in students' working vocabulary.

### Which Words and Why?

The trickiest aspect of vocabulary instruction is choosing which words to teach and why. What a task! Where to start? Seemingly random word and spelling lists abound and each probably adds another dash of anxiety to the teacher seeking to do all that they can to boost their children's word power. To help, Beck and her colleagues offer up a system. Words are divided into three – fairly familiar now – tiers:

**Tier 1:** words typically found in oral language. These are words which are likely to be known, used, or encountered without design;

**Tier 2:** words that tend to be used in written language and that are versatile or have high utility, e.g. occurrence, tended, haunting, fortune;

**Tier 3:** words either limited to specific domains (think science and maths vocabulary, for example) or extremely rare.

Not too surprisingly, Tier 2 words are the ones which are seen as the most profitable for vocabulary instruction. This is still a vast body of words, so the advice is to select words in advance from texts that will be shared with students. Narrow these down even further by considering how useful the words are and whether they can be explained in terms that the children will understand based on their existing knowledge and conceptual understanding. Around 6 to 10 words taught over a week to two-week period is seen as ideal. These words are explained in everyday language and then used in a range of contexts – oral work, sentence stems and word association activities are used to secure understanding.

So, in a recent reading of *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell, I skipped through '*bulwark*' because I have rarely encountered it in my 44 years so felt it might lack utility. In any case, showing a picture of one meant that we could simply move on. I also passed over '*translucent*' (Tier 3 – covered it in science). But I lingered on the verbs '*usher*' and '*billow*' and then on '*laden*', '*peevisly*' and '*endurance*' – all key to establishing how the sense of place underscored the feelings of the characters. In doing so, I am not just expanding the children's vocabulary, I am asking them to purposefully and consciously attend to it. In this way, when they read Chris Priestley's brilliant *Uncle*

*Montague's Tales of Terror*, for instance, they might be all the more likely to pick up on just why the writer tells us that some curtains '*smother*' the window, rather than cover them.

*Bringing Words to Life* offers a wealth of activities to support children in gaining a flexible understanding of new words. Dictionary definitions, simple word lists, and dry 'use the word in a sentence' exercises are seen as potentially unhelpful. Clear, child-friendly explanations and repeated encounters in different contexts are the recommended approach. I might well ask: '*Do you think I am feeling peevisly today, children?*' or '*Are the bags under my eyes taut?*'

**"Develop classrooms that make 'mature language a visible part of everyday practice.'"**

Varied usage and a general enthusiasm for the power of language are key ingredients. That last one is a must. Setting high expectations for talk and getting excited about language is not some elitist notion from the '*Robustly Rigorous*' handbook – it is freeing for the majority of children. Talk is cheap and powerful. We can offer it in abundance. Similarly, Beck rightly emphasises the importance of developing classrooms that make '*mature language a visible part of everyday practice*.' We all know that children generally relish the chance to flex their linguistic muscles – whether it be their increasingly confident use of the meta-language of grammar or, less happily, a sustained onslaught of synonymous adjectives – so don't duck the hard stuff. As long as we ground our more advanced word choices in meaningful, accessible explanations, E.B. White may just be proven right once again.

### Further reading

Jean Gross on *Building Vocabulary* page 6 of this magazine

Daisy Christodolou on Vocabulary Instruction: <https://thewingtoheaven.wordpress.com/2013/10/16/teaching-content-rich-lessons/>

*Just Imagine* is a wonderful site devoted to reading, but here blogs on vocabulary: <http://justimaginstorycentre.co.uk/blogs/news/12017045-whats-in-a-word-a-cautionary-tale-on-the-perils-of-swallowing-the-dictionary>

*Bringing Words to Life 2nd Ed* Beck, I., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2013). The Guildford Press, New York  
Hirsch, E.D. (2013)

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