WHITE PAPER

Vocabulary and Oral Language

VLP VIRGINIA LITERACY PARTNERSHIPS

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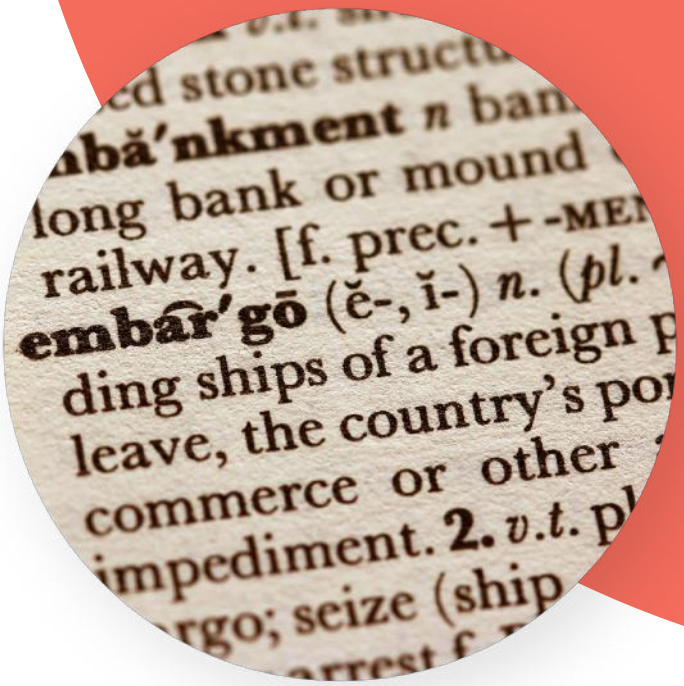

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As children enter school and progress through the grades, their oral language development, especially the size of their vocabulary, matters because vocabulary impacts a child's reading development as well as their success across subjects and even achievement across a lifetime. Even in the earliest grades, vocabulary knowledge contributes to phonological awareness and ultimately word recognition (Goswami, 2001; Nagy, 2005). Not only this but vocabulary knowledge in the earliest grades significantly predicts reading comprehension in later grades (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Moreover, vocabulary difficulty is one aspect of measuring text readability (Hiebert, 2011). In some ways, it is a literacy linchpin. Given its importance to a child's literacy success, let's think more about the role of vocabulary knowledge within the broader context of oral language.

What is Oral Language?

Oral language refers to the systems and processes that enable verbal communication. These systems include knowledge of phonology (sounds), vocabulary (words), morphology (units of meaning), syntax (function of words in phrases and sentences), and the discourse necessary for effectively communicating within a given context (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Children acquire many oral language skills during early childhood. Infants begin distinguishing the sounds associated with their native language by 6 months of age, and by age 2, many children can recognize and comprehend close to 300 spoken words (Law et al., 2017). However, there are substantial differences in the rate and quality of oral language acquisition in early childhood (Gibbs & Reed, 2021). Research underscores the importance of oral language development to reading comprehension and overall reading achievement, with vocabulary knowledge playing an especially significant role in an individual's ability to understand text (Wright & Cervetti, 2016). It is, therefore, imperative to explore instructional methods for supporting students' oral language acquisition and vocabulary development.

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Why Does Oral Language Matter?

Language comprehension plays an essential role in reading comprehension. In order to gather meaning from text, the reader must know what the individual words mean and how the words are connected. When an individual possesses these oral language skills, in conjunction with decoding skills, this knowledge can be applied for comprehending text (Ricketts et al., 2007; Wright & Cervetti, 2017). Evidence affirms that delays in oral language development may be an indicator of later reading difficulties (Gibbs & Reed, 2021). However, the provision of meaningful exposures and experiences with oral language can improve reading outcomes for students with the greatest needs (Phillips et al., 2016; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2016).

In order to successfully engage in academic tasks, students require knowledge of academic language or the oral language skills necessary to effectively communicate and comprehend within a typical school setting (Foorman et al., 2016). Academic language encompasses vocabulary knowledge, in addition to knowledge of inferential and narrative language. Knowledge of inferential language refers to the ability to discuss and comprehend ideas beyond the immediate context, while knowledge of narrative language refers to the ability to comprehend and describe a sequence of events (Foorman et al., 2016). Students who are already familiar with the kinds of language privileged in schools are, thus, at an advantage in their existing knowledge of academic language. However, language-rich experiences in the early grades can support the development of these necessary language skills.

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What is the Role of Vocabulary Knowledge within Oral Language Development?

When considering the skills and systems involved in oral language development, vocabulary, or semantic, knowledge plays a critical role in comprehending and communicating. Vocabulary knowledge comprises an individual's knowledge of words, their meanings, and word relations (Nation & Snowling, 2004). Vocabulary knowledge is not a finite skill to be mastered, but over time, one's understanding of vocabulary can expand and deepen (Honig et al., 2018). As an individual learns new vocabulary words or lexical items, these items are organized into semantic groups or categories (Duff & Hulme, 2012). Across development, these categories become more sophisticated and abstract to accommodate the acquisition of more complex vocabulary.

Research indicates that vocabulary is predictive of later literacy outcomes including reading comprehension (Biemiller, 2012; Nation & Snowling, 2004). It is estimated that students entering kindergarten know between 3,500 and 5,000 words (Amorsen & Miller, 2017; Biemiller & Slonim, 2001). By the end of the second grade, Biemiller (2005) found that the average student knows approximately 6,000 root words (words without inflected endings). From the third through sixth grades, the typical student acquires approximately 1,000 words per year (Biemiller, 2005). During this time, without intervention, differences in oral language vocabulary become even more pronounced. For example, a second grader in the lowest quartile for vocabulary knows the same number of words as an average kindergartener (Biemiller, 2005). In order to close gaps in word knowledge, it is, therefore, essential to understand effective methods for supporting vocabulary growth.

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What Does it Mean to Know a Word?

An individual's vocabulary consists of two funds of knowledge including their receptive vocabulary (the words that can be understood when encountered in conversation or text) and their expressive vocabulary (the words that an individual can accurately use when speaking and writing). Both funds of knowledge are critical to oral language development and reading comprehension (Hiebert, 2020). As articulated by Steven Stahl, "vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how the word fits into the world" (2005, p. 95). Fully knowing a word, therefore, entails both comprehension of its meaning and knowledge of how to use the word within its appropriate context.

Word learning is complex, insofar as knowing a word involves knowing its phonology (sounds) and orthography (spelling) in addition to its meaning(s). As previously noted, knowing a word's meaning also extends beyond the dictionary definition and includes syntactical knowledge and use within a proper context (Zucker et al., 2021). It follows that learning new vocabulary occurs incrementally (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). In other words, vocabulary is acquired over time with multiple exposures and distributed opportunities for practice.

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How Do We Learn New Vocabulary?

Building vocabulary knowledge involves incidental learning as well as direct teaching of selected vocabulary. Incidental learning occurs through meaningful exposures to a word. Teachers can facilitate incidental learning by providing rich language experiences through shared reading, turn-taking dialogue, and intentionally fostering word consciousness (Gibbs & Reed, 2021). Word consciousness refers to an awareness of and interest in new words. By modeling this awareness and interest in new words, in addition to the flexible application of word learning strategies, teachers can support incidental learning.

Unlike incidental learning, direct instruction of new vocabulary involves the intentional selection of certain words for further explanation and practice. While students can learn new words incidentally, direct vocabulary instruction improves recall of the selected words and their meanings (National Reading Panel, 2000). Researchers often categorize vocabulary words based on prevalence and specificity to domains or disciplines. A commonly used framework is Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's tiers of vocabulary (2013). Tier 1 words or basic words are common terms that individuals typically acquire incidentally through regular use. Tier 2 words or domain-general words are vocabulary terms that are more sophisticated but span academic disciplines. These words are significant for comprehending texts of all genres. Tier 3 words or domain-specific words are vocabulary terms that are relevant to a specific discipline or subject area. Evidence supports the careful selection of academic vocabulary (i.e., Tier 2 and 3 words) for direct instruction (Foorman et al., 2016).

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What are evidence-based strategies for supporting oral language development and vocabulary growth?

Providing rich language experiences beginning in the early grades promotes word consciousness and oral language development. To support students' oral language, teachers can elevate the complexity of their dialogue through questioning, recasts, and expansions (Justice et al., 2008). Questioning encourages children to participate in sustained, meaningful conversations. Recasts involve restatements of student responses using correct grammatical structures, and expansions refer to additions to or an elaboration upon a child's initial response. By prompting meaningful dialogue with students and using recasts and expansions to model more complex syntactic structures, teachers can provide feedback and encourage more sophisticated language use (Justice et al., 2008).

To support vocabulary development, teachers can provide repeated exposures to new words within meaningful contexts in addition to supplying child-friendly definitions and multiple opportunities for word use (Gibbs & Reed, 2021). When selecting words for direct vocabulary instruction, it's important to consider semantically related terms. By choosing words that are conceptually related, teachers can support the construction of semantic networks to facilitate recall of an individual word's meaning (Hiebert, 2020). For example, words like sand, castle, and beach often occur together or words like cry, sob, and wail offer shades of meaning. Following the initial introduction of a new word, students need repeated exposures and distributed opportunities for practice (Justice et al., 2008). Many of these evidence-based strategies for word learning can be incorporated within a regular shared reading routine.

In addition to direct instruction, teachers can facilitate incidental learning of new vocabulary by explicitly teaching word learning strategies and modeling how to actively process word meaning when encountering an unfamiliar word in text (Honig et al., 2018; Wright & Cervetti, 2017). One effective way to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word involves analyzing the morphemes, or units of meaning, within the word (e.g., portable - port means 'to carry' so portable describes something I can carry). Evidence demonstrates that training students to use morphological analysis can contribute to vocabulary development (Gellert et al., 2020). By teaching students the most common morphemes, students can transfer this knowledge to deduce the meaning of new words (Gellert et al., 2020). Through a combination of word learning strategies, students can learn to monitor their own comprehension of vocabulary while reading (Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

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Conclusion

Students enter school with diverse oral language skills and needs. These differences are especially pronounced when considering each child's oral language vocabulary. Evidence demonstrates the significant role that vocabulary knowledge plays within later reading comprehension. By providing rich language experiences and incorporating evidence-based practices for direct instruction and incidental word learning, teachers can work to close gaps in vocabulary knowledge and support students' language comprehension.

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