

Tanya S. Wright

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

Grades K-3

Vocabulary

Development

series editor
Katie Wood Ray

Across

THE

Day

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About the Online Resources

This Classroom Essentials book includes seven videos in its online resources that show teachers supporting children's vocabulary development across the day. Here's what you will see:



Video 3.1	Teachers offer child-friendly explanations of vocabulary in context. (Whole Class)
Video 3.2	Revisiting important vocabulary after the read-aloud. (Whole Class)
Video 4.1	Exploring words that represent important concepts for content-area learning. (Whole Class)
Video 4.2	Sentence stems help children use new vocabulary in authentic ways. (Small Group)
Video 5.1	Using context clues to figure out an unknown word. (Whole Class)
Video 5.2	Using word parts you know to figure out an unknown word. (Whole Class)
Video 5.3	A teacher previews words before children read a selection from <i>Mercy Watson</i> . (Small Group)

Thank you to the faculty and staff at Paddock Elementary School for graciously hosting us in their classrooms to capture this video.

HOW TO ACCESS ONLINE RESOURCES



To access online resources for *A Teacher's Guide to Vocabulary Development Across the Day*:

1. Go to <http://hein.pub/vocabdevelopment-login>.
2. Log in with your username and password. If you do not already have an account with Heinemann, you will need to create an account.
3. On the Welcome page, choose "**Click here to register an Online Resource.**"
4. Register your product by entering the code (be sure to read and check the acknowledgment box under the keycode).
5. Once you have registered your product, it will appear alphabetically in your account list of **My Online Resources**.

Note: When returning to Heinemann.com to access your previously registered products, simply log into your Heinemann account and click on "**View my registered Online Resources.**"

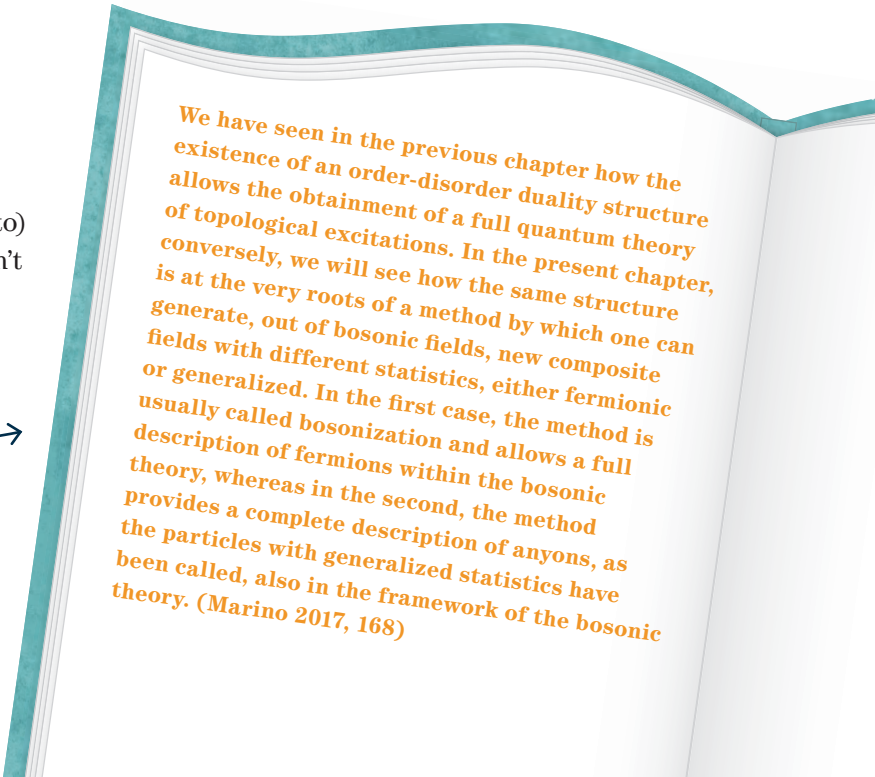
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Vocabulary Development Across the Day

Have you ever tried to read (or listen to) a text and understand it when you don't know the meanings of many of the words? Let's try it. As you read, think about what it would take for you to be able to read and comprehend this text.

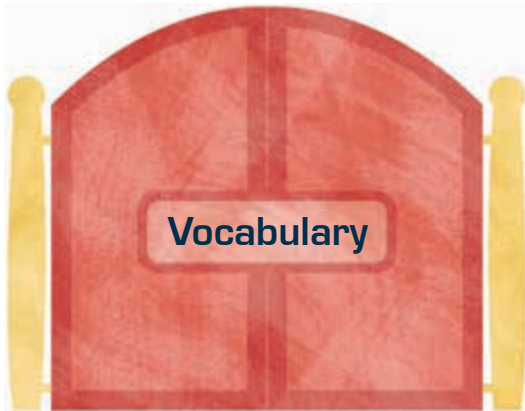
If you do not know what is meant by *order-disorder duality structure*, *quantum theory*, *topological excitations*, *bosonic fields*, *fermionic*, *bosonization*, and *anyons*, it's hard to understand this passage. Unless you are a



We have seen in the previous chapter how the existence of an order-disorder duality structure allows the obtainment of a full quantum theory of topological excitations. In the present chapter, conversely, we will see how the same structure is at the very roots of a method by which one can generate, out of bosonic fields, new composite fields with different statistics, either fermionic or generalized. In the first case, the method is usually called bosonization and allows a full description of fermions within the bosonic theory, whereas in the second, the method provides a complete description of anyons, as the particles with generalized statistics have been called, also in the framework of the bosonic theory. (Marino 2017, 168)

physicist, you are probably unable to provide a simple explanation of these terms or the concepts they represent. And this is not only a reading challenge; it's unlikely you would be able to understand these words in conversation or use them in your own writing either. In contrast, for someone with a strong background in quantum physics, these terms likely represent important concepts they can use to comprehend this text.

None of this is your fault. None of us have grown up speaking the language of “quantum physics.” Rather, these words, and the concepts that they represent, need to be learned over time in meaningful contexts, such as while studying physics.

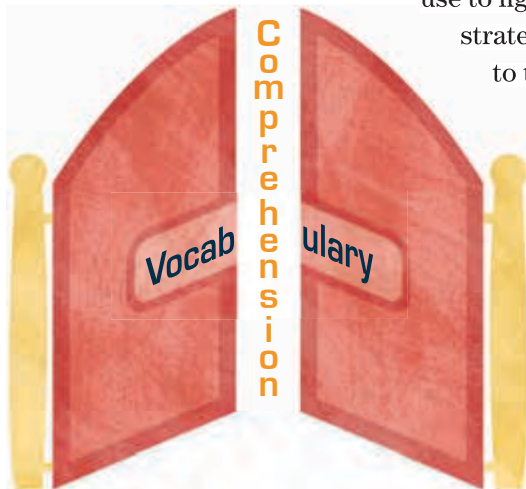


When It Comes to Comprehension, Word Meanings *Matter*

The challenge, for all types of communication, is if we don't know what words mean, it can feel like there is a locked gate that limits comprehension. In particular, if we do not know the meaning of several vocabulary words in a text or in conversation, it is very difficult to understand the overall meaning. This is true even for highly skilled readers.

You were probably able to say the words in the physics text relatively fluently. If particular words were challenging to decode, you likely had strategies you could use to figure out how to pronounce them. You probably also have comprehension strategies you can use when you don't understand a text. For example, you know to try rereading when something is confusing and to make inferences when all of the information is not provided directly in the text. Yet, for most of us (physics majors aside), this text is *still* too challenging to read. Unfortunately, no amount of fluent decoding or strategic reading can open the locked vocabulary gate—the barrier to comprehension of this text.

Now think about young children who are not yet highly skilled readers. Even if we spend lots of instructional time teaching decoding and strategic reading, they will continue to struggle to comprehend unless we *also* support their vocabulary development.



Even if we spend lots of instructional time teaching decoding and strategic reading, [students] will continue to struggle to comprehend text unless we also support their vocabulary development.

Vocabulary and Conceptual Knowledge Are Connected

To understand the relationship between vocabulary and knowledge, it is helpful to think of another image, an iceberg (Gotwals and Wright 2017).

When we think about vocabulary learning, we think about the word itself as only the tip of the iceberg. Children can know how to say a word without a deep understanding of the underlying concepts that the word represents. For example, a teacher might say, “One thing you can do when your feelings are hurt is communicate with your friends. Let’s all say *communicate*.” A child could easily repeat the word without really understanding what it means.

In contrast, children can have an initial understanding of a concept (know some of the ideas hidden on the part of the iceberg that is under the ocean) without knowing the vocabulary word to label these ideas (the visible part of the iceberg).

For example, by the time they enter elementary school, children know that people have ways of sharing messages and ideas, but they may not know the term *communicate*. Other children might know the word *communicate* as well as lots of information about it, including types of communication, methods of communication, or that the word has specialized meanings when we study biology.

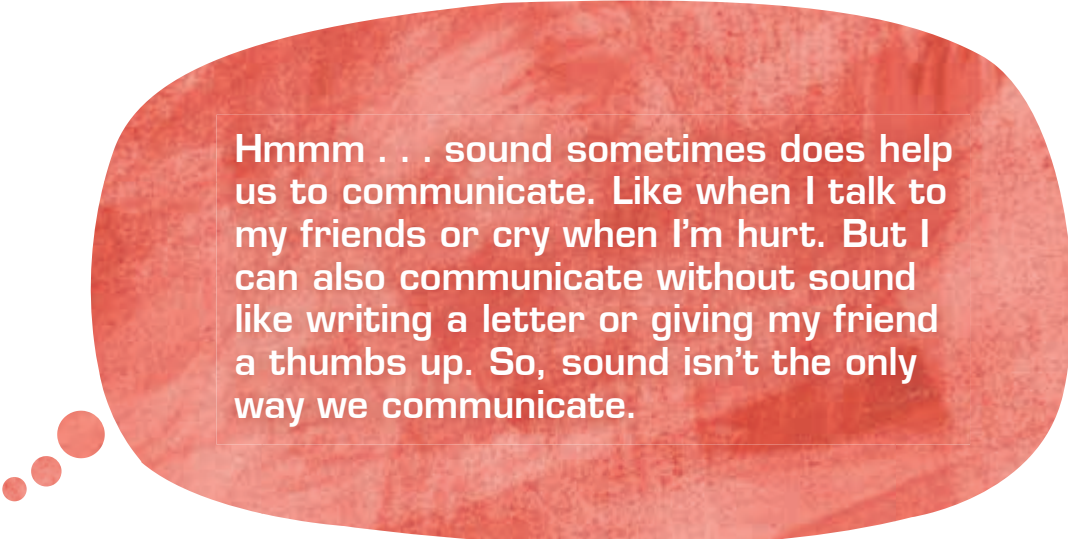
Word

Concept

Communicate


Exchange and flow of ideas from one person to another • Ways of sharing messages, ideas, and information • Verbal, nonverbal, written • Speaking, listening, letters, notes, emails, texts, announcements, conversations, speeches, news, signals, codes, symbols, sign, transmission, dispatch, report, debate, deliberation • Computers, telephones, television, telegraph, radio • Encoding, decoding, symbols • Influenced by culture, language • Other meanings: (biology) transmit disease or transfer of information from one cell or molecule to another by chemical or electrical signal

Think about two children who hear the following sentence during a read-aloud: “Sound can help us to communicate.” One child might know many concepts associated with the word *communicate*. That child would be able to make lots of inferences to better understand the text:



Hmmm . . . sound sometimes does help us to communicate. Like when I talk to my friends or cry when I’m hurt. But I can also communicate without sound like writing a letter or giving my friend a thumbs up. So, sound isn’t the only way we communicate.

A second child who only knows that *communicate* means talk, might think:



Yes. Sound helps me talk.

Clearly, the child with a wealth of conceptual knowledge related to the word *communicate* brings more to comprehending this text (just as the physics major brought more to the earlier text). Vocabulary and conceptual knowledge are deeply connected, and so it makes sense for children to learn new word meanings as they learn the concepts and ideas that these words represent. When we support children to learn new words in conjunction with building new ideas and knowledge, this can help to open the gate to comprehension.

What We Know



Reviews of multiple research studies show that knowledge of the meaning of words in a text and knowledge of the topic of a text both support comprehension of that text (Cervetti and Wright 2020; Stahl and Fairbanks 1986; Wright and Cervetti 2017).

What We Know

Numerous studies demonstrate that look-it-up-in-the-dictionary is not an effective method for supporting vocabulary development (e.g., McKeown 1993; Miller and Gildea 1987; Scott and Nagy 1997). In a recent review of multiple studies, my colleague Gina Cervetti and I found that using a dictionary to look up words in a text that is about to be read was less effective than almost any other type of vocabulary instruction for supporting comprehension of the text (Wright and Cervetti 2017).

What Does It Mean to Know the Meaning of a Word?

If I asked you the meaning of a word that you know really well, such as *precipitation*, you probably could not provide me with the exact dictionary definition for that word. However, you could use the word when you talk or write, and you could understand the word when someone else uses it or when you read it. For example, you could check the weather forecast and understand the information being provided. And those things are far more important for real learning and communication than being able to recite a dictionary definition.

Similarly, suppose I provided you with dictionary definitions for the words in the physics text earlier in this chapter, such as:

Anyon

An elementary particle or particle-like excitation having properties intermediate between those of bosons and fermions

Does this definition help you understand the text any better? Probably not, because it doesn't provide you with enough meaningful information or knowledge of the concepts that the word represents to be practically useful. To unlock the vocabulary gate, you would need to learn terms like this in the context of learning more about quantum physics.

When we really know the meaning of a word, when we can use that word to learn and communicate, we know far more information about it than is contained in a brief dictionary definition.

Types of Vocabulary Knowledge

An informal explanation of the word's meanings

- ★ *Precipitation* is water falling from the sky like rain, snow, sleet, or hail.

Synonyms or antonyms for the word

- ★ *Sleepy, fatigued, weary,* and *exhausted* are other ways to say *tired*.
- ★ *Energized, lively,* and *refreshed* are ways to say *not tired*.

Categorical information

- ★ An *apple* and a *papaya* are both types of fruit.

Multiple meanings of the word in different contexts

- ★ *Bark* is the sound made by a dog. *Bark* is also the outside covering of a woody plant.

Morphological knowledge (knowledge of the meaningful word parts inside the word)

- ★ The prefix *re* means again. So, *redo* means to do again, *reappear* means to appear again.

Concepts that the word represents

- ★ *Communication* might be verbal, nonverbal, or written.

Formal compared to slang/informal meaning of the word

- ★ *Cow* is an adult female of certain types of animals.
- ★ "Don't have a *cow*!" means don't get upset.

Slight differences between the meaning of this word and the meaning of similar words

- ★ *Happy* is a feeling of joy or being pleased, but *elated* is extremely happy.

Phonological knowledge

- ★ How to say or pronounce the word.

Orthographic knowledge

- ★ How to spell the word.

Discipline-specific meanings of the word

- ★ When we use the word *plot* while discussing literature, we likely mean the storyline or sequence of events.
- ★ When we talk about *plot* while discussing geography, it likely means to mark a route on a map or a piece of land.
- ★ When we talk about *plot* when discussing history, we likely mean a secret plan.
- ★ When we talk about *plot* in math or science, we likely mean a graphical technique for representing data.

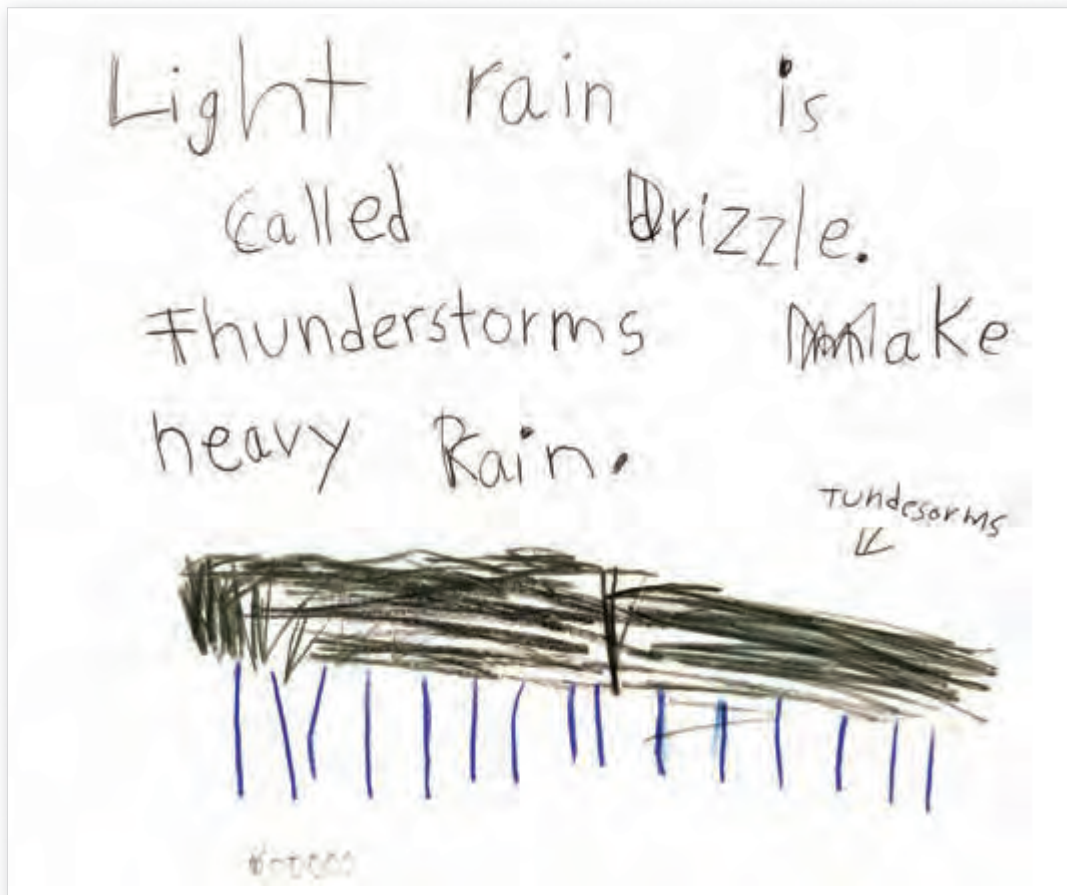
Appropriate syntax for the word

- ★ When and how to use the word in a sentence.

As teachers, we need to understand that a formal definition, particularly when it is out of context such as on a flash card or worksheet, provides only a very limited amount of word meaning information. Formal definitions may also include other complex words, making learning word meanings even more complicated for young children (think about explaining a word that you don't understand using words that you don't understand, like in the *anyon* example earlier).

It can be helpful to think of word meaning knowledge as a continuum. We may know some but not all of the information about a word. Sometimes we hear a word and we know something about what it means, but not enough to know how to use it on our own. We use

the term *receptive language* for words we can understand when someone says them or when we read them, and *expressive language* for words that we can use in speaking or writing. We often have enough knowledge about a word to understand it receptively before we feel comfortable using it expressively. In classrooms, this means that children may understand more than we know!



Writing about weather, this child shows they know the difference between *drizzle* and *heavy rain*.



What We Know

In a study with sixty fourth-grade students, vocabulary depth (how well children know words) predicted reading comprehension on standardized measures. In this study, the researchers defined *depth* as students being able to provide *their own* definitions for words as well as being able to select synonyms for vocabulary words (Ouellette 2006).

How Do We Learn New Words?

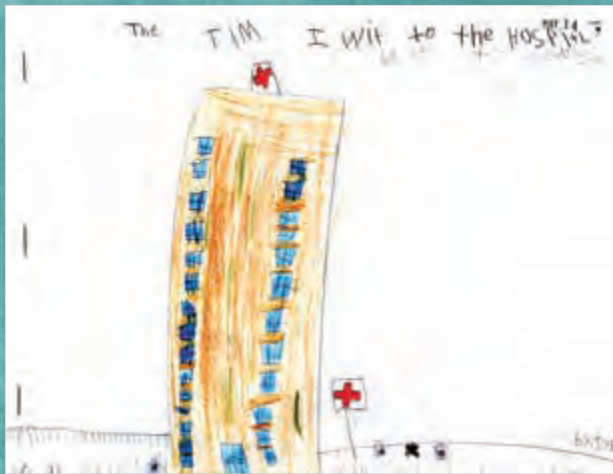
We Need Repeated Exposure to Words in Meaningful Contexts

Most word knowledge is acquired incidentally, without conscious attention. We did not memorize the many thousands of word meanings we know on flashcards—we just learned them incrementally over time. As we are exposed to words that are a part of our environment (we hear them or read them), we pick up more and more precise information about their meanings.



A birthday party is the perfect place to learn what the word *piñata* means.

The Time I Went to the Hospital



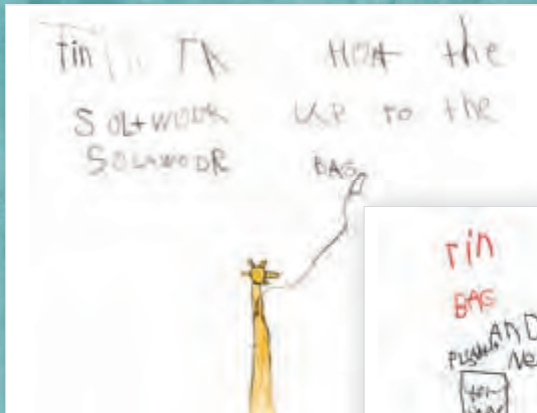
Then they called us in.



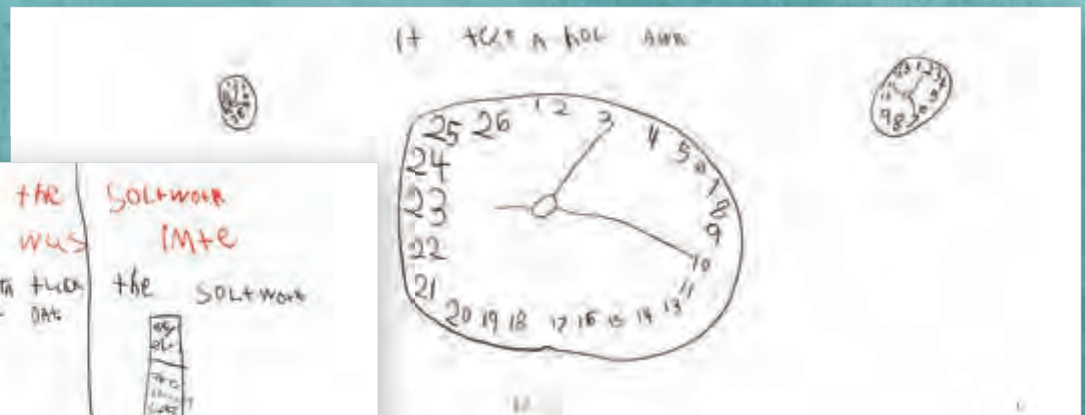
Then they put an IV in me and my mom came in too.



Then they hooked the salt water up to the salt water bag.



It took a whole hour.



After a trip to the emergency room, this child has learned some critical new vocabulary—*IV*, *saltwater bag*, *plastic needle*—in a clearly meaningful context.



Then the salt water bag was empty and they took the salt water needle out.

Let's start at the end of this sentence—We need *repeated exposure* to words in *meaningful contexts*—and unpack the three key concepts it suggests:

Meaningful Contexts

- ★ When babies first learn to speak, they might overgeneralize and call all liquids *milk* or all adult males *dada*. But over time, this knowledge is refined, based on pertinent information in the environment. For example, maybe a toddler says their word for milk and receives milk but is frustrated because what they really want is water. The toddler throws the milk on the floor but keeps yelling for milk. An adult eventually offers water and uses the word *water*, thereby providing more information about both words (i.e., “It doesn’t work to use the word *milk* if you want water. You need to say a different word for that.”).
- ★ Texts, discussions, and opportunities to learn new things both in and out of school (a trip to a zoo or farm, a math lesson) can all provide meaningful contexts like this for vocabulary learning.

Exposure

- ★ The primary way young children (who are not yet reading independently) are exposed to new words is through adults. Adults use new words, read books that contain new words, or may provide access to media (TV shows, songs, videos) and experiences that bring new words into a child’s environment. Children can also learn new words from their peers, but typically children of similar ages in similar contexts know similar words, so exposure to *new* words from peer conversation may be limited.
- ★ Children cannot possibly learn words that they are not exposed to. If adults use simple words (“Someone is speaking in your story; add some *talkie marks*”), those are the words children will learn and use. If we use sophisticated words (“Someone is speaking in your story; add some *quotation marks*”), children will learn and use these words. If we read to children and discuss texts, children will learn the new words that are in those texts. If we rarely read to children, they will have limited access to the vocabulary of texts. Teachers are the adults who are with children for many hours each day, so the language we expose children to in our K–3 classrooms really matters for supporting children’s vocabulary development.

Repeated

- ★ We learn words incrementally over time, building more and more word knowledge with each exposure in a meaningful context. If we want children to learn the meanings of new words, we need to create lots of opportunities for them to hear and use the words, over time, in meaningful contexts.

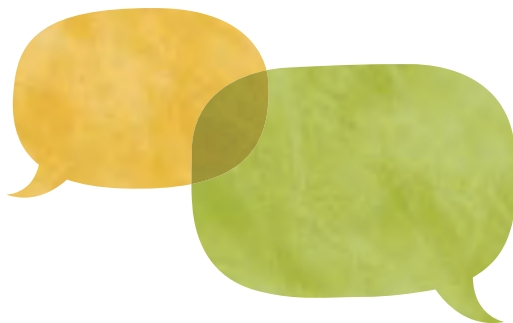
We Learn Words That Are Relevant and Useful



Have you ever traveled to a country where they speak a different language? During your trip, you probably learned words that helped you to order food or find your way, but you were less likely to learn words you didn't need to have an enjoyable trip. Children learn new words the same way—they learn what's relevant and useful. A child growing up in Michigan may learn the words for *mittens*, *scarf*, and *coat* before a child growing up in Florida.

The children who enter our classrooms have been exposed to different words based on their particular life experiences, needs, and contexts, so we can't make assumptions about what they know. If a word is important for learning something in school, we need to help children to learn it. Across the school day, we need to open the vocabulary gate so that *all* children have access to the ideas (especially those they will encounter in texts) they need for school success.

The challenge is how to teach these word meanings in ways that feel relevant and useful to young children. Learning words because they are on flashcards, worksheets, or tests will not feel relevant and useful even if the words actually are. We need an instructional approach that is more aligned with the purposeful word learning that occurs naturalistically in children's environments.



You May Be Wondering

Q : *I have used flash cards with dictionary definitions to study vocabulary and it raised my scores on my GREs. I still remember a few of the words I studied. Is there a place for this type of word study in the elementary classroom?*

A : Can people memorize definitions for a test? Absolutely. And if it is a test that requires you to know definitions then, sure, it will probably help—especially if you are motivated to do well on the test. The fact that you now remember only a few of those definitions shows that this served your purposes at the time, but that you weren't motivated to actually learn and use these words in real life to read, write, speak, listen, and learn. Memorizing definitions (for a test) is just not how we learn most words. The words that stick with us are the ones we learned in meaningful contexts such as reading, conversations, or learning new things.



We Learn Words When We Have Opportunities for Active Processing

Children are more likely to learn when they can actively engage with a word and its meaning rather than just passively receiving information from the teacher. In discussions about texts or new ideas, children have opportunities to use new words that are connected to their learning. Sometimes in these discussions, we invite children to think very specifically about a particular word or set of words that are important to learn. For example, we might:

- **Discuss images:** “What is similar about the *insects* in these pictures?”
- **Discuss objects:** “Do you know what this is? It’s a *thermometer*. Can anyone tell me why we use a *thermometer*?”
- **Use movement:** “Can you stand up and show me what it looks like when someone *strolls* down the street?”
- **Think about examples:** “When is a time when you felt *exuberant*?”
- **Compare and contrast the meanings of words:** “What do you think is the difference between *giggle* and *guffaw*?”
- **Discuss multiple meanings of the same word in different contexts:** “So we know that the *seasons* are summer, winter, spring, and fall, but in this recipe it says to *season* the food. Let’s talk about what that could mean.”
- **Think about meaningful word parts:** “*Triangle*, *tricycle*, and *tripod* all have the beginning *tri*. What do we think that *tri* might mean?”
- **Think about cognates (words that exist in two different languages and have the same root or origin):** “Does the word *fantastic* sound like a word you already know in Spanish?”
- **Use new vocabulary during writing:** “What is a more precise or interesting word that you could use instead of *happy* in your writing?”

What We Know

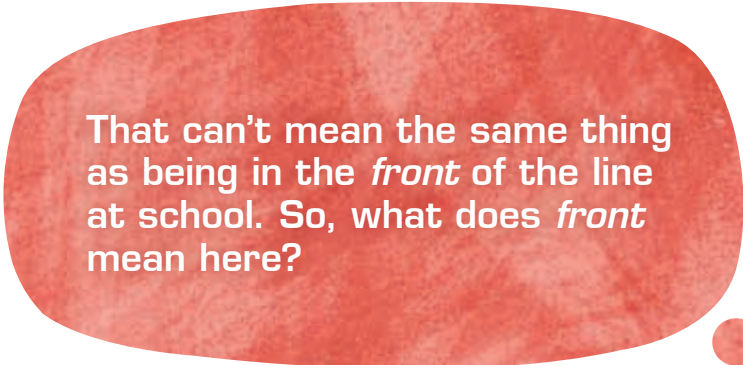
When we have opportunities to actively think about and use word meanings, we are more likely to retain those word meanings (Beck and McKeown 1991; McKeown and Beck 2014).

What We Know




Across seven studies, instruction that focused on supporting active engagement with word meanings was more useful than a definition or a dictionary method for supporting comprehension of text containing the new words (Wright and Cervetti 2017).

We don't need to spend a long time on out-of-context vocabulary activities. Instead, we plan "brains on" opportunities for children to think about and use words in meaningful contexts during the day. When we do this, children also learn about how language works, which helps them when they encounter new words or word meanings. For example, if a familiar word is used in a new way, it is a lot less confusing if you already understand that words *can* have more than one meaning. So, when the weather report says that there is a cold *front*, we want children to know enough about language to think:



That can't mean the same thing as being in the *front* of the line at school. So, what does *front* mean here?



When Do We Learn New Words?

We Learn New Words When We Engage in Conversation

In day-to-day oral language interactions, children are exposed to words in meaningful contexts, and the words we use often when we talk with children in our classrooms are the words they will learn over time. If we regularly use sophisticated words (“Let’s *observe* the weather” or “Let’s *compare* these texts” or “Do you *concur* with Sara’s idea?”), children will begin to understand and use these words as well. Talk is a powerful teaching tool when it comes to vocabulary development, so we need to be intentional about using new words with young children in our classrooms.

We Learn New Words When We Read

We know that vocabulary supports text comprehension—the vocabulary gate needs to be open in order to comprehend a text—but the reverse is true as well. Reading a lot is positively associated with vocabulary development. When readers comprehend a text, they can learn word meaning information for the few words they may not know in that text (Sternberg 1987). Of course, “reading a lot” for young children (who are not yet reading independently) really means that adults need to read aloud a lot. If we want to build children’s vocabulary in our K–3 classrooms, we need to make time for read-alouds every single day and maybe even more than once per day.

Importantly, the language of texts is different from spoken language. In everyday conversation, the goal is typically to communicate in a clear and straightforward way, and we can use the immediate context to support our communication. For example, we might say, “Can you flip that on?” (while pointing to the light switch). Facial expressions, gestures, and the shared context help to support this clear communication.

What We Know



Studies in homes and in classrooms, beginning in the early childhood years, demonstrate that when children are exposed to explanations of sophisticated words during oral language interactions with adults in their environments, there are long-term benefits for children’s vocabulary development and literacy achievement (Dickinson and Porche 2011; Weizman and Snow 2001).

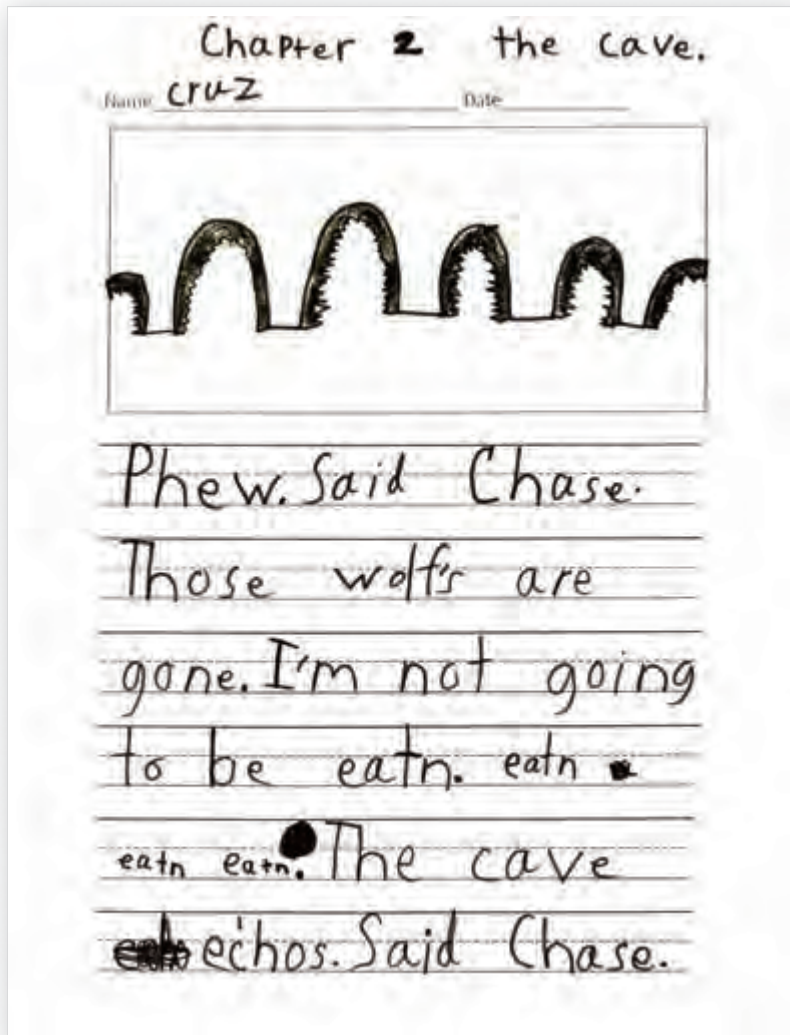
In contrast, authors do not benefit from shared context, so they typically use more decontextualized language (i.e., language that is used to convey ideas that are beyond the immediate shared context). This might include discussions of worlds that are imaginary (*once upon a time . . .*) or places that are far away (*in a land far, far away*). Stories and poems may use less direct and more figurative language (metaphors, similes, allusions)

because the goal is to help the reader feel a character's emotions or visualize a scene. Authors of informational text may discuss categories (Why are spiders not considered *insects*?) or concepts (What is a *community*?). Because of this specialized language, texts include vocabulary that we rarely use in everyday speech and provide lots of opportunities to expose children to new words. The more children experience and learn the *vocabulary of text*, the easier it is for them to comprehend new texts.

We Learn New Words When We Learn New Things

Every topic, domain, or area of knowledge has associated vocabulary. There are words associated with science, social studies, and math, but also with different sports or the arts. My children participate in theater, and along with many other new “theater” words I’ve had to learn (*sitzprobe, vomitory*), I recently learned that the edges of the stage are called the *legs* of the stage. Beyond the legs, the actor cannot be seen by the audience. (Some people think that the reason we wish actors good luck by saying “break a leg” is because we hope they make it past the “legs” and onto the actual stage.) Understanding this familiar word in a totally new context opens new ideas and possibilities.

This young writer demonstrates knowledge of the concepts of *echo* by repeating the word *eaten* and making the letters get smaller with each repetition.





Think about your own experiences of learning new things that may not have been part of formal schooling. If you decide to start running marathons, you would probably learn and use terms like *cadence* and *foot strike* or specialized running-related meanings for words like *splits* or *form*. If you decide to take up gardening, you would need to learn plant names (*hydrangea*), plant parts (*pistil*), plant types (*perennials*), the words for the tools to use (*trowel*, *shears*), the words for the work you would do (*pruning*, *deadheading*), including special gardening meanings for everyday words (a *cutting* or an *annual*).

All this applies to school as well. In order to create opportunities for young children to learn new words, we need to build their knowledge of the world and make sure that they are learning new things. They need lots of time to engage in content-area learning, including science, social studies, math, the arts, and physical education.

As Aiden learned about whale sharks, he learned topic-related vocabulary such as *plankton* and *endangered*: I use my mouth to swallow small fish and plankton and other small things. Whale sharks are endangered.

You May Be Wondering

Q : Which words should children learn?

A : Whenever I am asked this question, I usually joke that the answer is: all of them! I say this because if a child does not know the meaning of a word, it never hurts to learn it. And, of course, we always want children to understand the texts, conversations, and learning that happen in school, and this includes knowing the word meanings that will help them to understand and participate. So, if a word comes up that a child doesn't know, it is always a good idea to open the vocabulary gate and discuss its meaning.

The challenge with vocabulary is that there are so many words to learn in our language. Some researchers (e.g., Paris 2005) have referred to vocabulary as an “unconstrained” skill, meaning that the number of words to learn is almost unlimited, compared to “constrained skills” such as alphabet knowledge, where there are just twenty-six letters for children to know. But the challenge is also an exciting opportunity, because there are so many wonderful words for children to learn. That said, instructional time is precious and we do need to think about which words we'll select to support children's vocabulary development, so we'll revisit this question again in the pages that follow.



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Why Should We Think Differently About Vocabulary Instruction?

Recent studies of vocabulary instruction in the early years of school have shown that a year of schooling is unlikely to impact children's vocabulary learning trajectory at all (Christian et al. 2000; Skibbe et al. 2011)! This finding made me wonder how this could possibly be, so my colleague Susan Neuman and I followed up with several studies of curriculum and instruction including observing for 660 hours in fifty-five kindergarten classrooms as well as studying the most commonly used English language arts (ELA) core curriculum materials (Wright and Neuman 2013, 2014). Here is what we found:

Teachers rarely provided planned vocabulary instruction. They typically explained word meanings to children when they thought children did not understand, but they only explained words once, in the teachable moment. This meant that children had only one exposure to new words and no opportunities at all to use or apply these words. While this probably helped children to comprehend the text or learning in the moment, children would be unlikely to retain very much information about these words from this type of instruction.

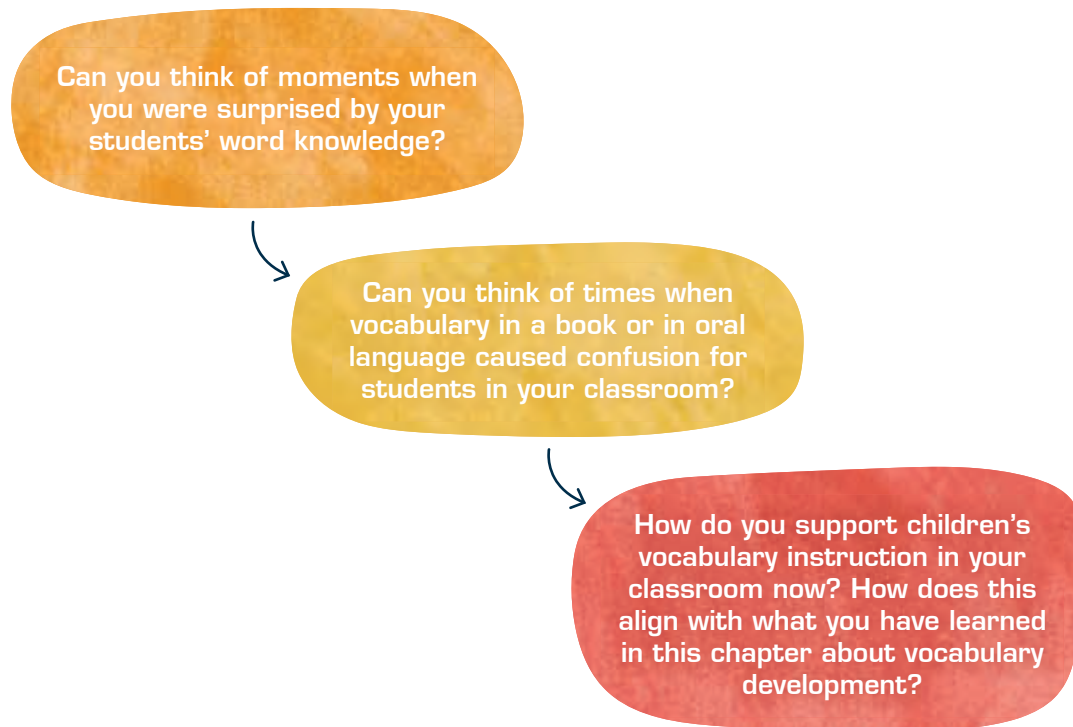
Teachers were more likely to explain word meanings to children in teachable moments when they taught more affluent student populations. Teachers were least likely to explain words when they taught in schools where more than 50 percent of children received free and reduced lunch. So, even teachable moment vocabulary supports were inequitably distributed from classroom to classroom.

When teachers used a core reading curriculum, this made no difference at all to the teachable-moments-only vocabulary instruction that we observed. This was surprising, so we examined core curriculum materials to try to understand their supports for vocabulary instruction. We found that these materials provided teachers with a list of vocabulary to teach each week (although the number of words ranged greatly across curricula from two to twenty), a definition, and an example sentence to use when introducing the word meaning to children. But, they rarely supported teachers in doing more than introducing word meanings. Also, it was not always clear how the selected words related to ongoing learning in the classroom.

What we learned from these studies is that if we want to support children’s vocabulary development, we are going to need to do something very different. We cannot teach one word per day or five words per week or only explain word meanings coincidentally when they come up. If we want to make a difference, we have to be intentional and make plans to support children to learn word meanings across all parts of the school day.

Take a Moment to Reflect

In the sections that follow, we’ll dig into the practical application of all you’ve read about so far, but before we do, take a moment to think about these questions:



Learn More

Neuman, S. B., and T. S. Wright. 2014. “The Magic of Words: Teaching Vocabulary in the Early Childhood Classroom.” *American Educator*, 38(2): 4–13. www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/summer-2014/magic-words.

Cobb, Charlene, and Camille Blachowicz. 2014. *No More “Look Up the List” Vocabulary Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.