

Teaching
vocabulary
in the
early years

Stephen Parsons & Anna Branagan

Please note that, for simplicity, throughout this book 'he' is used to refer to children and 'parents' to refer to parents, guardians and carers.

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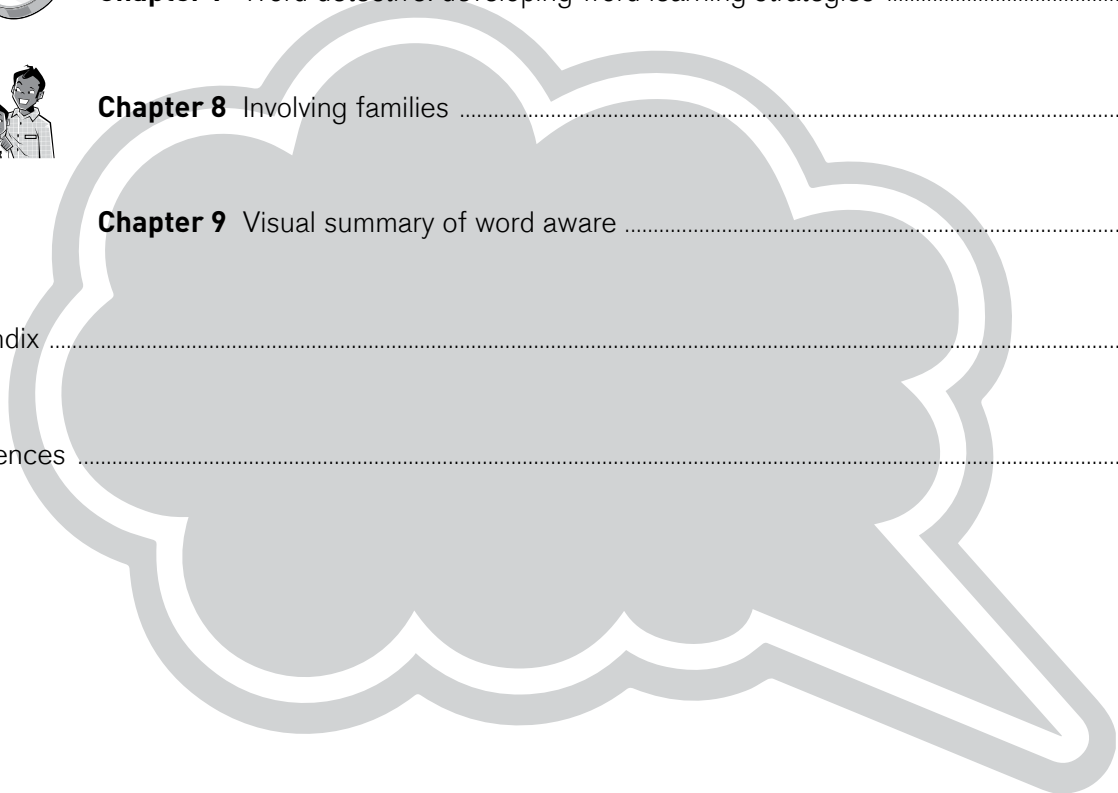
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Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan

January 2016



Chapter 1

Introduction

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The vocabulary gap

A pre-school child who comes from a family where language is appreciated will be exposed to a far greater range of vocabulary than his peer who has had relatively little language directed at them. In language-rich environments a child will have access to challenging vocabulary through books being read to him and wide-ranging daily interactions (Hart & Risley, 1995). The peer who has not benefited from this rich pre-school language experience will start school with a more limited vocabulary. The child who knows fewer words will also learn words at a slower rate, so this gap will continue to grow throughout childhood (Biemiller, 2004).

Vocabulary impacts

Spoken vocabulary is important in its own right but it also has a major impact on other areas of learning (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). A young child who does not understand early concepts such as **big** and **empty**, when his peers do, will miss out on crucial learning about the world around him. An eloquent child, who can talk with precision about his experiences, will develop more abstract thinking than a peer who is limited to pointing or simply labelling items. Thus a weakness in early vocabulary will impact on later mathematical and scientific understanding.

The young child with limited vocabulary will also struggle to comprehend the stories that are read to him and, even when he does learn to read, he may not fully understand the meaning because too many of the words will be unknown. In addition, he will be unable to use sophisticated language when writing, and may instead be limited to repetitious vocabulary (Beck *et al*, 2008). Thus limited early vocabulary impacts on later literacy development or, to summarise it another way: 'Literacy floats on a sea of talk' (based on Britton, 1970).

The gap between a child with an enriched vocabulary experience and his peer who has fewer word-learning opportunities started out as a vocabulary gap but, over time, it becomes a gulf in overall academic achievement.

Vocabulary and the curriculum

Practitioners frequently report that many children start school without the necessary vocabulary to access the curriculum. At school entry, many children only have basic everyday words and lack the more advanced vocabulary expected within the curriculum. For children who can access it, the curriculum gives them many word-learning opportunities. But for those without the necessary foundation vocabulary, it is overwhelming.

As the curriculum advances, the hands-on, play-based opportunities of Early Years disappear and learning becomes increasingly language-based. Without a mastery of Early Years vocabulary, the more abstract, language-based curriculum of the primary or elementary classroom is beyond reach and this pattern continues as the curriculum becomes more vocabulary-heavy. Thus the limited vocabulary in the pre-school years continues to have an impact right through schooling.

Closing the gap

A child with less pre-school vocabulary experience starts school with fewer words and learns words at a slower rate than his peers. This gap continues to grow as children who know more words also learn new words more quickly (Biemiller, 2004). If children from linguistically deprived backgrounds are to keep pace, early intervention is crucial.

In many schools there will be a significant proportion of children who lack the vocabulary required to access the curriculum, and so a whole class intervention is warranted. This approach is known to be successful (Wasik & Bond, 2001). Even in schools where the number of children with poor vocabulary is limited, whole class approaches can still be used to promote the word-learning of all children.

The sheer number of words that children are required to learn makes closing the gap a daunting task. Even the most word-focused Early Years experience will not achieve this. Therefore, a whole school approach is required that starts in Early Years but extends right through the school.

A general enriched language environment will undoubtedly contribute to word learning because it exposes children to a wide range of language experiences, including vocabulary. However, for children who are missing key concepts in particular, this will not be enough.

English language learners or children with English as an additional language

A strong basis in the home language is essential for children to develop English proficiency, so parents should be urged to speak to their children in the language they are most comfortable with. A rich first language experience will equip children better to learn school language, including vocabulary.

Speaking a language other than English does not in itself cause vocabulary learning difficulties. As with their monolingual peers, children with English as an additional language (EAL) or English language learners (ELL) will also have a range of pre-school vocabulary experiences and innate word-learning abilities. This presents practitioners with complexities as, frequently, children will be learning words at school which they do not know in their home language. Therefore, an inclusive and adaptable approach to word learning is necessary so that the needs of all word learners can be met. Working with families is a crucial part of this approach, but with EAL or ELL students, it is essential to work closely with families so that children have increased word-learning opportunities across all languages.

Working with vocabulary learning in Early Years

Many children will start school with a limited number of spoken words. Closing this gap is an ambitious target and evidence suggests that Early Years interventions alone will not be enough (Marulis & Neuman, 2010). However, by starting early, children are given a greater chance to have the crucial words in place before the impacts of their poor vocabulary can be seen on literacy and conceptual understanding. The Early Years curriculum provides ample opportunities for teaching the fundamental concepts that underpin later learning. So it is essential that the whole school approach to vocabulary teaching starts when children enter educational provisions.

Word Aware in Early Years

If you are familiar with the first *Word Aware* book (Parsons & Branagan, 2014), this book is an extension of it, based on the same principles but adapted to the needs of the younger age group.

If you are not familiar with the previous publication, in essence, both *Word Aware* books are about working together as a school, in conjunction with parents, to provide a structured process for teaching vocabulary within a word-rich learning environment. This process uses a wide range of explicit and implicit methods which, in combination, build the power of the approach.

The two *Word Aware* books complement each another because they allow practitioners to apply the approach with children aged from 3 to 12 years. There is some necessary overlap but this book also emphasises elements such as early verbal concepts which are most relevant within the pre-school years.

Word Aware applies theory to a practical and structured approach that can be used across all parts of the curriculum. It can be used effectively by individual practitioners. However, *Word Aware* will have the most long-term effect on word learning if it is adopted by the whole school, so that everyone involved develops a common understanding and applies a consistent approach.

This resource has been developed from classroom practice in conjunction with wide-ranging reading. We aim to build on these techniques for vocabulary teaching and, in particular, to investigate their effectiveness. We would appreciate hearing about your experiences and we can be contacted at www.thinkingtalking.co.uk.

Key principles of effective vocabulary teaching in Early Years

- 1. Build a strong foundation**
- 2. Make words a priority**
- 3. Maintain a sustained effort**
- 4. Use a range of methods**
- 5. Go with the child (at the right rate)**
- 6. Use multiple exposures**
- 7. Teach words in context**
- 8. Teach strategies**

The Word Aware principles have been developed by reviewing the literature and applying these concepts in the classroom. By working with children and practitioners over a period of time, the principles have been refined so that, while having a basis in theory, they also make sense in the classroom. The eight principles, which are described below, form the basis of the approach that is outlined in this book.

The overarching principle is that all children will benefit if they are exposed to enriched vocabulary within an environment where the spoken and the written word are appreciated. By creating a Word Aware environment, children will:

- be exposed to a large number of words at an accessible level
- experience the explicit teaching of useful words
- learn strategies for independent word learning
- have opportunities to enjoy words.

Principle 1: Build a strong foundation



- Recognise that poor vocabulary impacts on learning
- Target vocabulary early as this reduces impacts

A child who starts school without the necessary vocabulary required to access learning will encounter difficulties which will be amplified unless an effort is made to close the gap. Not being able to understand early verbal concepts such as **later** and **next** will impact on later mathematical understanding, as these concepts are fundamental in shaping thinking about time and space, respectively. Likewise, not being able to understand **different** and **heavy** will impact on children's later scientific understanding, as these relate to scientific experiment and weight, respectively.

It is well established that children with early difficulties with oral language, and in particular vocabulary, are most at risk of reading difficulties. Even if they do master phonics and can decode, they later struggle with reading comprehension because they do not understand the words they encounter.

By starting an effective vocabulary intervention at an early age, children have greater opportunities to build a strong foundation in spoken language, thus reducing any negative impacts of their weaker vocabulary skills.

Principle 2: Make words a priority



- Build a word-enriched environment



- Have fun with words

A word-enriched Early Years environment will expose children to wide and varied vocabulary and thus give them opportunities for incidental word learning. Building a word-enriched environment is not about one major event; rather it involves many small actions by everyone in the team. For example, selecting books or poetry for their use of vocabulary, highlighting the use of words in texts and other media, and commending students for their use of vocabulary will all contribute. Words can be given a higher profile by running whole class or whole school events, such as 'word of the week' awards.

One caveat is that the enriched vocabulary that children are exposed to still needs to be at an accessible level. Children need to be enthralled by words rather than overwhelmed by them.

Language is one of the core areas of development in Early Years and the settings can do a range of activities to promote language. The cornerstone is adult-child interaction.

Having fun with words (by playing vocabulary games) motivates word learners as well as giving them opportunities to learn new words and reinforce known words. Most word games require the player to use phonological (speech sound) and semantic (meaning) skills. These are the same skills that are needed for word learning. Therefore, having fun with words is important and should be a key component of any vocabulary intervention (Stahl & Nagy, 2005).

Principle 3: Maintain a sustained effort

- A whole school approach is needed
- Teach vocabulary across all ages



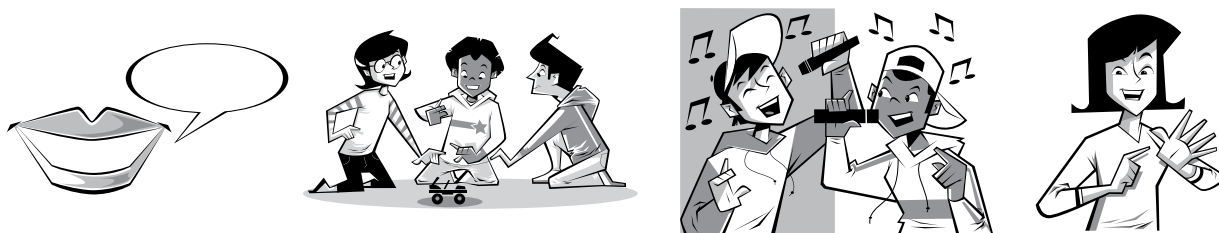
It is estimated that the average child learns 2000–3000 words per year, every year throughout their schooling (Clark, 1993). This equates to six to eight words per day on average. While many of these words will be learned without specific teaching, the sheer enormity of the task underlines that this process must be continued across a number of years.

In addition, some children start school with a limited vocabulary. A reasonable target for them might be to develop their vocabulary so that it progresses from the 20th to the 50th centile over three years, thus moving from below average to average. To meet this target, the child's rate of learning needs to increase from seven to ten words per day, and to be sustained at this level for three years (Stahl & Nagy, 2005). No matter how effective they are, one teacher in one year will not be enough to make a difference. Instead, a sustained day-on-day, year-on-year, whole school approach is required.

While the specific techniques will change as children move through the school, there needs to be a consistent commitment to the principles and their application.

Principle 4: Use a range of methods

- Sensory experiences are important in Early Years
- Adapt over time to maintain interest

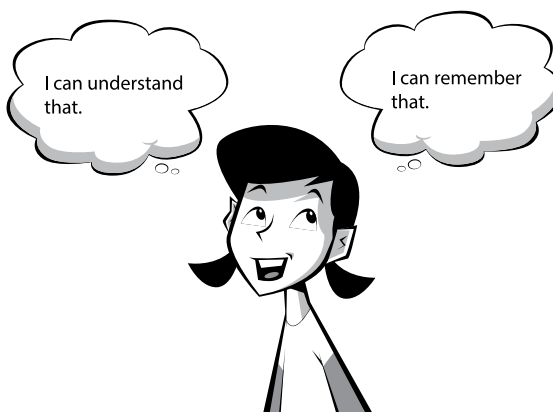


The multisensory experiences available in Early Years should be fully utilised so that children can use the hands-on opportunities to gain an in-depth understanding of words, and in particular concepts. Where possible, go for a high impact. So, for example, when teaching **big**, find things that really are **big**; when teaching interesting words from text, make them sound wonderfully enticing by emphasising their sounds, eg **whoosh**.

As children develop over time, they will be able to access more language to support their learning and so the style of presentation will change. However, by building in songs, signs, pictures and games, all word learners will continue to be engaged.

Principle 5: Go with the child (at the right rate)

- Select words at the right level
- Ensure time for in-depth teaching
- Teach concepts one at a time



Selecting the right vocabulary is one of the most powerful tasks that a practitioner can undertake. It is important to select words that are at the right level and equate to Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' (Robson, 2006). Selecting words that are beyond the grasp of a child may lead to superficial knowledge and the child being unable to apply the word meaningfully to their understanding of the world. While reinforcing existing words is important, selecting words that are too well known is an inefficient use of time.

Similarly, the rate of vocabulary learning is also important. With so many words to learn, and within the general tempo of the curriculum, there are inevitable time pressures. Despite this, it is important to allocate enough time to teach useful words to an appropriate depth (Stahl & Nagy, 2005; Beck *et al.*, 2008). In-depth teaching allows children to experience several meaningful exposures of the word and to link the new word to existing knowledge, thus avoiding superficial learning.

Principle 6: Use multiple exposures

- Children need to hear or read a word many times
- They need opportunities to link new knowledge to what they already know



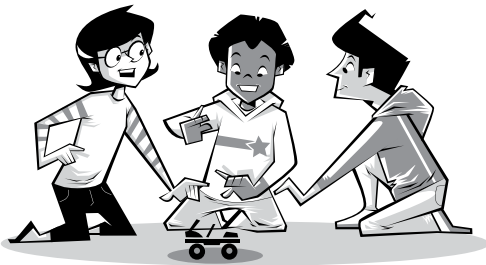
Young children have well-developed word-learning abilities and may form a tentative understanding after a few exposures (Rice *et al.*, 1990). Research indicates that a child needs 12 instructional encounters to fully know the word (Stahl & Nagy, 2005). Exposures should be in a variety of contexts so that the child has the opportunity to build full comprehension (Block & Mangieri, 2006). Rather than learning definitions, children should hear the new word in real sentences which are related to situations that they are familiar with. For young children, this is about adults using the target word while engaging with the child. High quality adult–child interaction is the key to word learning.

Word knowledge develops over time and, initially, a child will have only a vague understanding of a new word. However, as he hears the word in a variety of contexts, he will add new information and develop a richer and more complete understanding. Exposures to the word may come from adults in school and at home. Opportunities to use the word will further reinforce word knowledge as well as add to the word knowledge of other children in the class.

Selecting words that will be encountered in other contexts, such as in books, at home, through other media or in other subject areas, will give the child opportunities to further develop his understanding of the word naturally. For instance, if **discover** is introduced at nursery or kindergarten, the child may also encounter it in conversation in various parts of the setting, both inside and outside, as well as at home or on a DVD. However, if a specific term such as **Jolly Roger** had been taught during a pirate topic, the child is far less likely to encounter the word again and, therefore, will not have natural opportunities to expand his learning of the word. Of course, exposures can be increased by reading books to children that contain the target word or sending home ‘talking homework’ tasks that require parents and children to talk about the targeted word.

Principle 7: Teach words in context

- Teach the words in practical, 'hands-on' contexts
- Follow the child's lead
- Use the word in a variety of sentences



Children learn the meaning of words by linking the language they hear to the context around them. For instance, if a young child has a toy **bunny**, he can use his senses to explore the object. He touches its soft fur, he looks at its pink eyes and maybe even tastes its ear. When his parent labels the toy **bunny**, the child will, over time, link the word **bunny** to the toy. By learning all about **bunny** in a physical context, the child can establish its meaning.

The parent will also use a range of linguistic (language) contexts such as 'He's a soft **bunny**', 'The **bunny** is jumping' and 'You're cuddling **bunny**'. By using a range of different sentences, the word **bunny** is also placed in a linguistic context and the child will learn that it is a noun. The physical and linguistic contexts have both added to the development of a full understanding of the word. This is a natural process that children are predisposed to.

In the classroom, children's natural word-learning can be enhanced by giving them opportunities to explore new words in their physical context. This is well-established Early Years practice. Hands-on experience will give children an understanding of the world, but it is adults' use of language that will build their vocabulary. Adults should therefore engage children in meaningful ongoing conversations that follow what the children are interested in at that time. Vocabulary can then be added to this, but the high quality interaction needs to be in place first.

Principle 8: Teach strategies

- Children need to develop their own strategies
- Strategies become more important as children get older, but they can be started in Early Years







The most advanced Early Years word learners are the same children who frequently ask what words mean, whereas children with more limited vocabularies are less likely to enquire about the meaning of words. By establishing a supportive classroom culture, as well as specifically teaching simple strategies to identify and ask about words' meanings, the foundation for later developing strategies will be established.

Having strategies to decipher the meaning of new words in both spoken and written form becomes increasingly important for older children, but establishing children's awareness and skills at an early age will set them on the right path.

The Word Aware approach

The Word Aware approach for Early Years has been developed to guide practitioners in implementing the principles of word learning. It is based on the same theory that informs the first *Word Aware* book (Parsons & Branagan, 2014) but it has been adapted to meet the needs of younger children and the practitioners who work with them. It is easy to understand, flexible, quick to implement, and can be applied across a wide range of ability levels.

The Word Aware approach consists of four strands:

	Make words count	Provide an environment in which children are surrounded by spoken and written words and are inspired to learn them.
	Teaching vocabulary	Introduce new words from the curriculum as well as teach words sourced from books. This includes teaching concepts which are particularly important in Early Years.
	Word detective	Teach strategies to enhance children's independent word learning
	Fun with words	Enjoy, celebrate and reinforce vocabulary

Each part will be explained more fully later in this book, but briefly they are as follows:

1. 'Make words count' is about providing an enriched word-learning environment. Children need to know that spoken and written words are important. They need to be exposed to many words through many different methods and to be encouraged to use an extended vocabulary.

2. 'Teaching vocabulary' is based on the 'select, teach, activate and review' process outlined by Blachowicz & Fisher (2010). Here it has been applied to teaching curriculum vocabulary, early verbal concepts and the rich vocabulary that is found in children's literature.
3. The 'word detective' strand teaches children how to learn new words. In the pre-school years, this is very simple but it forms the basis for skills that become increasingly important as children develop.
4. 'Fun with words' completes the approach. Playing with words and having fun instils enjoyment and subsequent motivation. Word games are, of course, in themselves instructional and can be used to reinforce new vocabulary as well as word-learning skills.

Each of the four strands is in itself useful but, together, they form a powerful approach to vocabulary learning. If all four strands are used, within a word-rich environment, children will be taught vocabulary in a methodical manner, master independent strategies for learning unknown words and have fun. As a result, they will become competent and motivated word learners.