

What if they can SAY the words but don't know what they MEAN?
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Recently, I read an article in a children's magazine about King Tut titled "The King of Bling." When I finished the article, I looked again at the title. What did it mean to be the king of bling? I skimmed the article again and found no explanation. Annoyed, I checked my dictionary. Just as I thought—no such word as "bling!" As I was composing an e-mail to the editor complaining about using a word in the title that children wouldn't know and not giving any explanation for that word, one of my undergrads appeared in my office. I then sat there mortified as my student explained things to me. "Everyone knows what 'bling' means. It's things that are gold and glittery, as in 'bling, bling!' I tell this story not to illustrate how "un-with-it" I am, but to show that it doesn't matter if you can say a word if you don't know what it means!

Vocabulary is critical to reading comprehension. Children differ greatly in the size of their meaning vocabularies at school entrance. Children who enter school with small vocabularies tend to add fewer words than children who enter with larger vocabularies. Here are some ways to include more meaning vocabulary development in your classroom instruction.

Provide as Much Real Experience as Possible

The words we know best and remember longest are those we have had real, direct experience with. To build vocabulary, begin with real things.

Bring Real Things into the Classroom and Anchor Words to Them

Do you have items in your house that your students might not know the names of—even if they have the same objects in their houses? Bring in a few objects each week and have children talk about them. In addition to naming the objects, use lots of descriptive words to describe the objects and verbs to talk about what you do with them. Teach children a simple version of "20 questions," in which you think of an object and they see how many questions they have to ask you to narrow down which one it is.

Mine Your School Environment for Real Things

Look around your school and think about what objects your students might not know the names for. They probably know the words *door* and *window*, but can they tell you that what goes around them is the *frame*? Can they tell you that the "things" that allow the door to open and close are the *hinges* and that the thing you grab to open and close the door is the *knob*? Is your playground covered with *asphalt*? *Gravel*? *Grass*? *Sand*? What kind of *equipment* do you have in your *gymnasium* and what can you do with it?

Send Students Looking for Real Things in their Home Environments

Pose questions that will send students looking for similar objects in their environments:

"Do you have tools (kitchen implements, balls, vases, picture frames, etc.) in your house? What do they look like? What do you use them for?"

"Is there gravel (asphalt, grass, sand etc.) anywhere in your neighborhood?"

Seize upon Unexpected Events as Opportunities for Vocabulary Development

The misfortune suffered by a child who arrives at school with his leg in a cast and walking on crutches is an opportunity for vocabulary development. Encourage your children to ask questions and share their own experiences with broken bones. Take a photo of the child with the broken leg and write a

few sentences summarizing his experience.

Take Advantage of Media and Technology

Many children have a concept for mountain even if they have never seen a real mountain. Most children who have never been to a zoo or circus can recognize zebras and monkeys. When children have concepts for things they have never directly experienced, they have usually seen these things in videos or pictures. The internet makes providing visual images and simulated experiences a daily possibility in every classroom. You and your children can take virtual fieldtrips all over the world and backwards in time. You can follow the progress of the latest space probe, find images of all the major desserts of the world and see and hear Winston Churchill as he rallies the people of London during the Second World War.

Simulate Real Experiences with Dramatization

Skits are powerful ways to help students build word meanings. To prepare your students to do vocabulary skits, select six words and write these on index cards. Choose a few students to work with you and model how to plan a skit. Talk with your group as the rest of the class listens in. Plan a scene in which you use the word several times. Act out your skit using the target word as many times as possible. Have one member of your group hold up the word every time it occurs.

Imagine, for example, that the word your group is acting out is the word, *curious*. You decide that the skit will involve a dad and his two-year old walking to the post office. The dad and the two-year old meet several people on their walk and each time, the two year old stops, points to the stranger and asks questions:

“What’s your name? Where are you going? What are you doing? What’s in the bag?

Why are you wearing that funny hat?”

The dad smiles each time and explains that his son is curious about everything. The strangers walk away remarking, “He’s the most curious kid I ever saw.”

Perform the skit. Then, have the people in the skit ask the audience how the skit showed that the little boy was curious? Finally, ask the audience to share stories about a curious person.

After modeling how to plan and do a skit, put your children into groups and have them plan skits for other adjectives. Follow the same procedures as your class acts out scenes for: *nervous, frantic, impatient, jubilant* and *serene*.

Increase Meaning Vocabularies Through Reading

Many words occur more frequently in written text than in spoken language. As children listen to the teacher read and as they read, they have many opportunities to add words to their vocabulary. Here are some ways to help all children increase their meaning vocabulary through reading.

Teach Words from Your Teacher-Read-Aloud

Teacher read aloud is one of the major opportunities for children to learn new word meanings. Several studies have demonstrated the power of focused read alouds on fostering vocabulary growth (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker and Deffes, 2003). To increase meaning vocabulary, you need to go beyond just reading aloud to children. Before you read something aloud, select a few words that many children may not have meanings for. After the book had been read aloud and discussed, return to those words and focus student attention on them. Lead them to use pictures and context to figure out meanings for the words and then lead them to connect these words to their own experience by asking questions such as:

“When have you felt....? Have you ever experienced a ...?”

To keep your children’s attention on these words, display them along with the cover of the book. Encourage your children to be on the lookout for these words and to put a tally mark on the word each time they hear it or read it.

Use Picture Walks to Build Vocabulary

Get in the habit of taking your students on a picture walk before you read to them or they read to themselves and you will find lots of opportunities to build meanings for words. When you picture walk a text, do not stop on every page or take a long time to develop meaning. Children are going to read or listen to the text soon and they will build more meaning for words as they read or listen. Your purpose before reading is only to alert them to the words and get them in the habit of “mining” the pictures for all the information they can.

Designate a Weekly “Sticky Note Day.”

If you are focusing on words from your teacher read-aloud and taking your student on picture walks before reading, you are already doing a lot to help children be alert to new words in their own reading. To give them an additional nudge to use what they know about learning word meanings from their reading, designate one day each week as a “sticky note” day. At the beginning of their reading time, give each child one sticky note. Ask them to be on the lookout for one word that is new to them and that they figure out the meaning of based on the context and the pictures and to write that word on a sticky note and place the sticky note on the sentence in which they first see the word. When the time for reading is over, let volunteers tell their word and read the context that helped them with the meaning of that word.

Teach Morphemes, Context and the Dictionary to Learn New Words

In addition to teaching words using real things and fostering vocabulary development through reading, your students need to learn to use morphemes, context and the dictionary to help them refine the meanings of words.

Morphemes

Four prefixes *un*, *re*, *in* and *dis* are the most common and will help students figure out the meaning of over 1500 words. When teaching morphemes to help students build meanings for words, it is probably best to begin with these four prefixes because students will encounter so many words in which these prefixes have this predictable meaning. Once students are comfortable with these prefixes, you can teach some of the less common prefixes.

Elementary students can also learn to notice root words and think about how words with the same root are related. Again, we would want to start with the most common words. The word *play* occurs in such related words as *replay*, *playground* and *playoffs*. *Work* is part of many word including *workers*, *workout* and *workstation*. *Place* is another common base word and students often know the meaning of *placemats*, *replace* and *workplace*. Beginning a chart with common words and asking students to be on the lookout for other words containing that word will help them become attuned to root words in their reading.

Context

By focusing on words from your teacher read aloud, taking your students on regular picture walks and having students share how they figured out the meaning of a sticky-note word in their own reading one day each week, you are teaching students to use context to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Use the Dictionary Strategically

Copying and memorizing definitions does not increase children's vocabulary or love of words. Model for your students how people "really" use dictionaries. When you encounter a word whose meaning is unclear, ask one child to consult the dictionary. A teacher who regularly says, "Let's see what the dictionary can tell us about this word," and sends one child to look it up models the way adults who use the dictionary actually use it. If you have a dictionary on your classroom computers, model how useful this is by asking a child to "see what our computer dictionary has to say about this word."

Promote Word Wonder

Enthusiasm is contagious! Teachers who are enthusiastic about words project that enthusiasm by conveying their eagerness to learn unfamiliar words and by sharing fascinating words they encounter outside the classroom. Young children are usually enthusiastic about new words, repeating them over and over, enjoying the sound of language and marveling at the meanings being expressed. Encourage the continuation of this natural enthusiasm. Open your class to wondering about words, to spontaneous questions about unfamiliar words, to judgments about the sounds and values of words.

Don't Forget about Vocabulary when Teaching Science and Social Studies

All the ideas described here can be used not only during the language arts time but also during science and social studies. You do not need to develop a whole new set of activities for teaching content-area vocabulary. All you have to do is remember to use them even when your schedule says science or social studies

Vocabulary Matters—Especially for Struggling Readers

Biemiller and Slonim (2001) cite evidence that lack of vocabulary is a key component underlying school failure for disadvantaged students. More and more of the children in our schools are English language learners. The limited English vocabularies of many of these children is one of the major factors impeding their literacy development. As we work to close the achievement gap, we must remember that vocabulary matters.

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