

## *Ways with Words: Effective Vocabulary Instruction*

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Vocabulary knowledge contributes to reading comprehension, and is linked to academic success (National Reading Panel, 2000). Those of us who enjoy reading, and who read frequently, are constantly learning new words.

Vocabulary growth takes place as children encounter unknown words in oral and written language. Yet many children with reading problems read very little and may hear only limited numbers of words; they rarely confront new, unfamiliar words through reading.

Children benefit from learning strategies in six specific areas that often are problematic for word meaning. These include learning about available clues such as (a) context clues and (b) structural clues, (c) dictionary definitions and thesaurus entries, (d) semantic relationships such as antonyms and synonyms, (e) multiple meanings of many words, and (f) appreciation of figurative language such as metaphors, idioms, similes, and analogies.

### Context Clues

Teachers often point out context clues to children. Yet Miller & Gildea (1987) pointed out the “Learning words by reading them in context is effective but not efficient. Some contexts are uninformative, others misleading” (p. 96). Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) noted that contexts may be ‘misdirective,’ non-directive,’ ‘general,’ or ‘directive.’ Only directive contexts lead the reader to a correct meaning of the word as in ‘the waves *undulated* smoothly in the calm ocean.’ Teachers should point out directive

context clues, but children cannot depend solely on context clues for meaning of all unknown words.

### Structural Clues

Children who understand word structure often get the meaning of words when they understand the meaning of prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Primary grade children can begin adding prefixes and suffixes to short Anglo-Saxon base words and discuss the meaning. They discuss the meaning of *spell*, *misspell*, *respell*, *spelled*, and *speller* and of *read*, *reread*, *preread*, *misread*, *reader*, and *reading*. Children in upper elementary school and the secondary grades will benefit as they learn the meanings of additional affixes and common Latin roots and Greek combining forms. Knowing the *spect* is Latin for *to see* helps learn the meaning of *respect*, *inspect*, *spectator*, *spectacular*, *introspective*, *spectacles* and *retrospective*. Knowing the Greek combining forms *graph* and *gram*, meaning written or drawn, accesses words such as *phonograph*, *autograph*, *biography*, *telegram*, *phonogram*, and *histogram*. (See Henry, 2003; Henry & Redding, 2005 for lists of affixes, Latin roots, and Greek combining forms, along with activities for building vocabulary.)

### Dictionaries and Thesauri

Dictionaries provide formal definitions along with other important word information. Be sure to introduce using guidewords, and discuss the parts of an entry with your students including pronunciation, part of speech, definition(s), and etymology (the history and word origin of the word). Provide vocabulary activities such as: Find the difference in *interstate* and *intrastate* highways, or *extroversion* vs. *introversion*.

Each classroom should have thesauri as resources for students. Have students make their own wall charts or *word wall* with many words to use instead of *said*. Or, have them find as many words as possible to substitute for *happy* or *sad* and other common words.

### Semantic Relationships

Synonyms and antonyms are among the first semantic relationships that students encounter. Have your students brainstorm as many opposites as possible. Also, ask them to make a thermometer as they find words describing the happiest to the angriest words. Words they select might include happy words such as *hilarious*, *delightful*, *buoyant*, and *cheerful*, and angry words such as *aggravated*, *exasperated*, *fuming*, and *boiling*.

### Multiple Meanings

One of the most difficult areas of vocabulary is the large number of meanings a single word can have. The word, *run*, has 31 definitions as a transitive verb, 28 definitions as an intransitive verb, and 30 definitions as a noun (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). In addition, there are many common phrases with *run* such as *run after*, *run against*, and *run along*. Finally, there are common idioms containing *run* including *the long run*, *in the short run*, *a run for the money*, and *run rings around*. Ask children to see how many definitions of *run* they know.

### Figurative Language

Many children with learning disabilities have difficulty understanding a variety of figures of speech. Figurative language tends to be vague and requires a special understanding. Metaphors, idioms, similes, and analogies all may be difficult for children

with reading problems. Introduce your students to these forms of figurative language and play word games to enhance students' understanding.

### **Conclusions**

Students learn new words as they encounter them in reading and in speaking. We can enhance their understanding of words through discussion, word play, reading, and direct instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) reminded us "Repeated exposure to vocabulary items is important for learning gains. The best gains were made in instruction that extended beyond single class periods and involved multiple exposures in authentic contexts beyond the classroom" (p. 4-4). Specific content area words and words found in literature may need to be introduced and taught directly. Graphic organizers such as webs, matrices, and thermometers may be useful in showing semantic relationships and word associations.

### **References**

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