

The CORE Reading Expert

Winter 2004

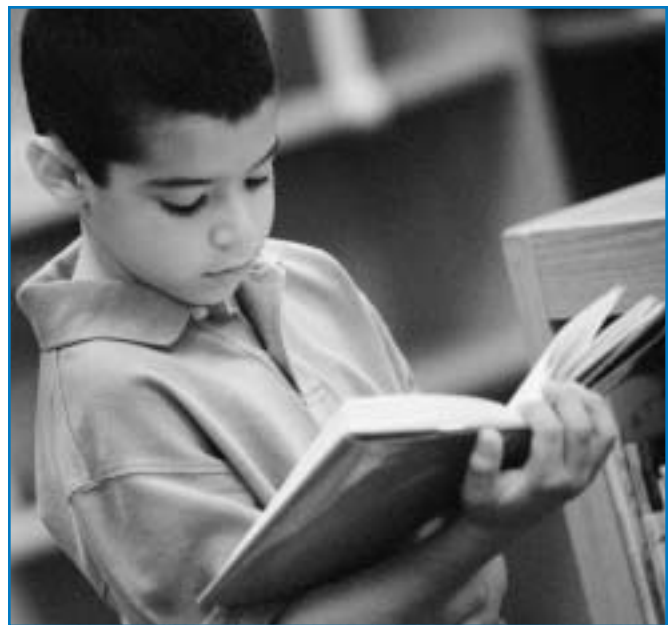
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The Role of Vocabulary in Building Comprehension

To Our Subscribers

This issue continues our focus on critical literacy issues. Our theme this time is the role of vocabulary in building comprehension. Current and past research points to the critical role limited vocabulary plays in the struggles of our lowest achieving readers, from primary to secondary grades. “We use words to think; the more words we know, the finer our understanding is about the world” (Stahl, 1999). Or more specifically, the more words our students know, the better their comprehension of what they read about the world. In this short newsletter we highlight what the research shows, provide some practicable ideas, and suggest avenues for further learning. Two such avenues are our own *Teaching Reading Sourcebook* and our new *Focus Seminar, Vocabulary*, a one-day intensive look at what K–12 teachers can do to increase vocabulary acquisition. (Call (888) 249-6155 or go to www.corelearn.com.) Enjoy and use! ■

■ Bill Honig, *President* ■ Linda Diamond, *Executive Vice President*



What the Research Says About Vocabulary Levels and Comprehension

Why should we be concerned with the size of students’ vocabularies? We all know that the size of a person’s vocabulary is one mark of an educated individual. Not surprisingly, research shows a direct correlation between vocabulary and reading. Vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading proficiency and to school achievement. Vocabulary levels are highly correlated with reading comprehension. And for English learners, increasing vocabulary is particularly vital.

■ Vocabulary size in kindergarten is an effective predictor of reading comprehension in the middle elementary

years (Scarborough, 1998).

- Orally-tested vocabulary at the end of first grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension ten years later, predicting more than 30% of grade 11 reading comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).
- Children with restricted vocabulary by third grade have declining comprehension scores in the later elementary years (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990).
- Adequate reading comprehension depends on a person already knowing 90–95% of the words in a text (Nagy & Scott, 2000). ■

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Impact of Language Exposure on Vocabulary Levels

Children in all economic strata—poverty, middle class, professional—have the same kinds of everyday language experiences; that is, they all hear talk about persons, things, relationships, actions, feelings, past and future events, etc. However, children in less economically privileged families have fewer of these experiences. Their trajectory of word learning (and therefore their future school achievement) reflects this.

By the end of grade 2, there is a root word gap of 3,000 to 4,000 words between the highest and lowest quartiles. By the end of grade 5, the lowest quartile students have only reached the median for grade 2 students.

The following table shows the differences researchers Hart and Risley found in early exposure to words among various social classes in the United States. ■

Actual Differences in Quantity of Words Heard

In a typical hour, the average child would hear:

Welfare:	615 words
Working Class:	1,251 words
Professional:	2,153 words

Actual Differences in Quality of Words Heard

In a typical hour, the average child would hear:

Welfare:	5 affirmations,	11 prohibitions
Working Class:	12 affirmations,	7 prohibitions
Professional:	32 affirmations,	5 prohibitions

Source: Hart, B. and Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

“By age 3, the spoken vocabularies recorded for the children from professional families were larger than those recorded for the parents in [poor] families.”

Hart, B. and Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

What Vocabulary Is Most Useful for Improving Comprehension?

One useful and increasingly popular way of selecting words to teach is the three-tiered approach of Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown (1985). In this approach, the vocabulary of a mature literate individual is considered to have three tiers of words, as outlined in the following table:

First tier: The most basic words (<i>talk, play, sad</i>).	Rarely require instruction in meanings in school, except for English learners.
Second tier: High-frequency words for mature literate individuals; found across a great range of domains (<i>vocabulary, ability, suggestion, transform</i>).	Should be taught explicitly because these words tremendously expand student vocabulary capabilities.
Third tier: Low-frequency words; frequently limited to specific domains (<i>genotype, rectilinear, isotope</i>).	Usually need to be pre-taught in order to help students understand the selection.

- Importance and usefulness: Words that are characteristic of mature language users; appear frequently across many domains.
- Potential for instruction: Words that can be used often and in many ways; can be connected to other words and concepts.
- Conceptual knowledge: Words for which students know the general concept, but which are more precise or specific in describing the concept than the words they already use (e.g., “fortunate” for the student word “lucky”). ■

Suggestions For Further Reading

1. Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., and Kucan, L. 2003. “Taking Delight in Words.” *American Educator* (Spring 2003).
2. Walsh, K. 2003. “Basal Readers: The Lost Opportunity to Build the Knowledge that Propels Comprehension.” *American Educator* (Spring 2003).
3. Hart, B. and Risley, T.R. 2003. “The Early Catastrophe.” *American Educator* (Spring 2003).
4. Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., and Kucan, L. 2002. *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*. New York: Guilford Press.
5. Honig, B., Diamond, L., and Gutlohn, L. 2000. *Teaching Reading Sourcebook for Kindergarten through Eighth Grade*. Novato, CA: Arena Press.

Selecting Tier Two Words for Instruction

To select second tier words for instruction, look for words useful in many contexts. Here are some criteria to help your search.

Reading Volume and Vocabulary Growth

Reading volume is a prime contributor to individual differences in students' vocabularies (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Stanovich, 1986). The typical daily oral language experiences in which children participate—conversations with family members and friends, watching television, and so forth—do not contain enough new or less frequently used words to bring about significant vocabulary growth (Anderson, 1996; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Hayes & Ahrens, 1988).

Hayes and Ahrens (1988) found that, in terms of exposure to new vocabulary, speech is far more limited than written

language. The researchers analyzed three different categories of language, as listed in the table below. They ranked the words from each category according to the frequency with which they appear in written English.

The researchers found that the appearance of less frequently used, or “rare,” words in children's books is greater than such words in adult conversation, with the exception of expert testimony. In fact, children's books contain 50% more rare words than speech from television or the conversation of college graduates. ■

	Rank of Median Word*	Rare Words per 1,000
Printed texts		
Newspapers	1690	68.3
Adult books	1058	52.7
Comic books	867	53.2
Children's books	627	30.9
Television		
Prime-time adult shows	490	22.7
Prime-time children's shows	543	20.2
Cartoons	598	30.8
Mr. Rogers & Sesame Street	413	2.0
Adult Speech		
Expert testimony	1008	28.4
College graduate conversation	496	17.3

Source: Adapted from “Vocabulary Simplification for Children: A Special Case of ‘Motherese’?” (1988) by Donald P. Hayes and Margaret G. Ahrens in *Journal of Child Language*, Vol. 15, No. 2.

* A rank of 10,000 or higher is considered infrequent, or rare. The word *amplified* has a rank of 16,000.

The Keyword Method for Introducing New Words

The Keyword Method is one of many useful strategies for teaching vocabulary for grades 2 and higher, based on a procedure developed by Pressley, Levin, and McDaniel (1987). The method consists of two stages: an “acoustic link” stage, in which students acquire a keyword that sounds in some way like a part of the unfamiliar word; and an “imagery

link” stage, in which students form an image that associates the keyword with the definition of the unfamiliar word.

1. Define the unfamiliar word

Print an unfamiliar word, such as *predator*, on the board. Tell students that predator means “an animal that lives by hunting other animals for food.”

2. Select a keyword for the unfamiliar word

Have students choose a keyword for *predator*. Tell them that the keyword should be familiar, should sound like an important part of the word, and should be easy to picture in their minds. For example, the word *tore* is

a suitable keyword for predator.

3. Link keyword with unfamiliar word

Next, ask students to associate, or relate, the keyword *tore* and the unfamiliar word *predator* by visualizing them interacting. For example, students may form a picture of a large, meat-eating dinosaur tearing the meat of its prey.

4. Recall the meaning

Tell students that the next time they see the word *predator*, they should think of the keyword *tore*, recall the image of a large, meat-eating dinosaur tearing the meat of its prey, and link the image to the word's definition. ■

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Winter 2004

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Upcoming CORE Events

- Reading Leader Institute, Secondary
June 28–30, 2004, Emeryville, CA
- Reading Coach Institute (Fall, 2004)
We are setting dates for this institute. Please contact us at (888) 249-6155 ext. 112 or www.corelearn.com (contact tab) to get onto our mailing list. You will receive notification once final dates and location have been set.



Do you or your staff need to know more about teaching vocabulary?

Introducing the CORE *Focus Seminar, Vocabulary*

Some of the content from this newsletter is drawn from our new *CORE Focus Seminar, Vocabulary*. *CORE Focus Seminars* are one-day sessions for K–12 designed to deepen participants' knowledge in topics extremely critical to reading proficiency. CORE currently offers seminars on vocabulary and comprehension. All activities can link to techniques in selected basal reading programs and can work with content-area texts.

Participants learn

- What role schools and teachers can play in increasing student vocabulary.
- Instructional techniques for increasing student vocabulary acquisition, based on current research.
- How to apply these techniques to your current reading program or to grade-level-appropriate literature.

Want to find out more or explore offering a CORE seminar on vocabulary or comprehension at your location? Contact us at (888) 249-6155 or www.corelearn.com.