

Interrupting the Cycle of Word Poverty

Methods to stop the growing gap and help
build vocabulary knowledge

by Brenda J. Overturf

We've all heard the old playground taunt: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Unfortunately, a lack of words can hurt much more.

Vocabulary prowess can make or break academic achievement. Children who enter school without an adequate vocabulary base are already at a disadvantage. Betty Hart and Todd Risley found that preschool children growing up in professional households heard about 1,500 more words per hour than children living in low-income environments, creating a 32 million word gap between children in poverty and their more affluent peers before even starting school. And, as Keith Stanovich said, the rich get richer while the poor get poorer in word knowledge. Students who have larger vocabularies are able to move ahead more rapidly in academic settings because they have more words to build on. The gap gets wider and wider.

According to the most recent report of the National Center for Children in Poverty, 45% of children in the United States live in low-income households. Twenty-two percent live in actual poverty. The cycle of word poverty begins in early childhood. Kindergarten word knowledge is a predictor of third-grade reading achievement, which is a predictor of high school graduation.

Students who do not graduate often struggle financially while their own children struggle to achieve. And so the cycle rolls on.

What can we do?

As educators, we must be advocates for family literacy and quality preschool education. Young children need words to understand the world, and they need a lot of them.

In K–12 schools, teaching so students meet the expectations of the Common Core State Standards has the potential to interrupt the cycle. Reading Standard 4 in literature, informational text, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects is considered the all-encompassing vocabulary standard because it requires students to be able to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases in stories, poems, articles, essays, math problems, or arguments. But other standards support Reading Standard 4. The standards for Foundational Skills for Reading refer to knowing the meanings of word parts and using context to confirm or self-correct words. The Writing Standards discuss selecting expressive words and phrases or accurate content area terms in writing different genres. The Speaking and Listening Standards encourage collaborative conversation, which is a way to make vocabulary meaningful. However, the bulk of the specific

vocabulary standards are in Language Standards 4–6. And these standards are based on solid research proven to help students increase vocabulary knowledge.

Language Standard 4 delineates the three word-learning strategies Michael Graves found to be important for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words. One strategy is using sentence- or passage-level context to infer meaning. Another strategy is to use the meanings of prefixes, suffixes, and roots to figure out the meanings of multisyllabic words, including Greek and Latin roots. The third strategy is the use of reference materials, such as dictionaries, thesauri, and glossaries.

Language Standard 5 emphasizes word relationships. Stephen Stahl and other researchers have discussed the importance of knowing a word beyond an isolated meaning. Efficient readers understand that words exist within networks including synonyms, antonyms, homophones, and multiple meanings. Good readers can also interpret figurative language and understand shades of meaning, including connotation.

Language Standard 6 is the standard that tells us what words to teach. Most vocabulary researchers agree with Isabel Beck and her colleagues that words can be categorized as Tier 1, 2, and 3. Tier 1 are words students already know. In the Standards, Tier 2 words are called general academic words—high-utility words students will see in multiple contexts, such as *analyze*, *specific*, and *alert*. Domain-specific words are the same as Tier 3 words, those terms students will usually only encounter in content areas. Instruction should be focused on Tier 2 and 3 words that are important for comprehension.

Supporting students

Students have the right to engage in intentional, strategic vocabulary instruction based on research to break the cycle of word poverty. When we know many students come to school without a strong vocabulary base, we have to support them.

Introduce a small number of high-utility Tier 2 and 3 words at regular intervals and help students understand how to build networks of meaning. Teach students to use word-learning strategies so they can become independent. In the elementary grades, we can introduce words and connect word learning to different experiences across the day. At the middle and high school levels, all teachers need to work closely together to plan vocabulary instruction across the curriculum in ways that engage adolescents.

At the same time, create an environment where students are immersed in thought-provoking vocabulary. Read intriguing text aloud, play games with vocabulary, and encourage students to think about words in metaphorical ways. Students are excited about words when their teachers love words.

One final word

As I finished this article, the latest What's Hot in Literacy survey was just published in *Reading Today*. Since the survey's inception, vocabulary has received scant attention. This year, as for the last four, the topic of vocabulary/word meaning was slightly hot but respondents felt it should be hotter. We can no longer afford to ignore that vocabulary development is a major factor in student achievement. Ensuring students graduate owning a solid vocabulary base will help break the cycle of word poverty. When it comes to vocabulary instruction, actions speak louder than words. ■



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