

How important is vocabulary development?

Vocabulary Develops a Child's Mind

by Carl Smith, Ph.D.

The children were all dressed in strange-looking clothes. Some wore masks, and others had painted makeup on their faces to resemble wrinkles, scars, and deep-set eyes. Some were comic, some ugly. A Halloween party? No, not at all. It was a vocabulary lesson.

We had read together *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, in which many character distinctions appeared. The children's efforts to discuss similarities were hampered by their weak understanding of the words used to describe those characters.

To encourage more precision in a character analysis, we developed a stack of thirty 3X5" cards. Each contained a word that could be used to describe a character. Each child pulled a card and was asked to dress and act the part of the word on the card. Each child also wore the card as a constant reminder of the character for the duration of the class. Some of the words in the stack were:

| | | |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| ambitious | bored | aloof |
| lonely | wishful | carefree |
| whimpering | lost | determined |
| pompous | worried | undecided |
| rich | surprised | excited |



passage because we have helped them to pronounce the words through word-recognition drills. Yet each of us has had the experience of pronouncing a word without knowing its meaning.

There is considerable evidence that knowledge of word meanings accounts for more than half of the comprehension scores on reading tests today. Vocabulary development merits considerable attention, both as a general and as a specific preparation for successful reading. Besides using words in context, we can help children understand words by having them group words by categories.

For primary-grade children I use a two-category system for grouping words into concrete terms and abstract ideas. Categorizing helps students sort out which words are easy to picture and which are not.

Category I: words that call to mind a specific picture. For example, names of persons, places, things; and words that describe persons, places, or things.

Category II: words that call to mind no specific mental picture. For example, terms for relationships, principles, policies, and beliefs.

in this issue...

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>Vocabulary Develops a Child's Mind</i> | 1 |
| <i>Processing Ideas and Vocabulary Strategies</i> | 3 |
| <i>Expanding Concepts and Word Building</i> | 5 |
| <i>Direct Teaching of Vocabulary to Improve Comprehension</i> | 6 |
| <i>Resources</i> | 7 |

Categorizing Words

Learning to make distinctions among words obviously leads to a keener understanding and appreciation of what is read. The vocabulary problems of the class that read *Little House on the Prairie* are not unique. Too often we, as parents, assume children are prepared to comprehend a

(continued on page 2)

Vocabulary Develops a Child's Mind

(continued from page 1)

With help from a parent and some practice, children can select words from their reading or they can be given a list of words to categorize. There are no right or wrong answers, only answers to be discussed. The determination of the category depends on the concreteness with which it shows up in the minds of your child. Given below is a sample worksheet with sample answer you might use with your child.

Vocabulary Worksheet
 Read the following list of words. Think about each word. Do you see a picture? If so, write the word in Column I. If you don't see a picture, or if your picture isn't very clear, write the word in Column II.

Martin Luther King, combat, diplomat, communication, justice, commander, telephone, court, civil rights, health.

| I. Picture Words | II. Non-picture Words |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

The likely answers are:

| I. Picture Words | II. Non-picture Words |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Martin Luther King</i> | <i>combat</i> |
| <i>diplomat</i> | <i>communication</i> |
| <i>commander</i> | <i>justice</i> |
| <i>telephone</i> | <i>civil rights</i> |
| <i>court</i> | <i>health</i> |

These categories represent a movement from concrete to abstract. They are designed to help children sort out words in their own minds and to see that they often have to work hard to understand what a word means and how a writer uses it. The word *health*, for example, does not lend itself to a mental

image. Children may wish to remind themselves of the meaning by associating the word with the thought of a person jogging. Through a categorization technique, parents can see the proportion of abstract and difficult words in a passage to gauge those that need special attention.

Word puzzles and word games that stress meaning help to develop vocabulary, but they are not meant to be substitutes for extending reading in books and magazines, nor for discussing words and concepts with others who have read the same work.

Crossword Puzzles

To build a subject-specific vocabulary, try a crossword puzzle. For regular crossword puzzles, you can use graph paper to simplify construction. Take a sheet and write the words you wish to teach. Limit the number of crossovers if you want to make the construction easier. then write clear definitions without using the actual word in the clue.



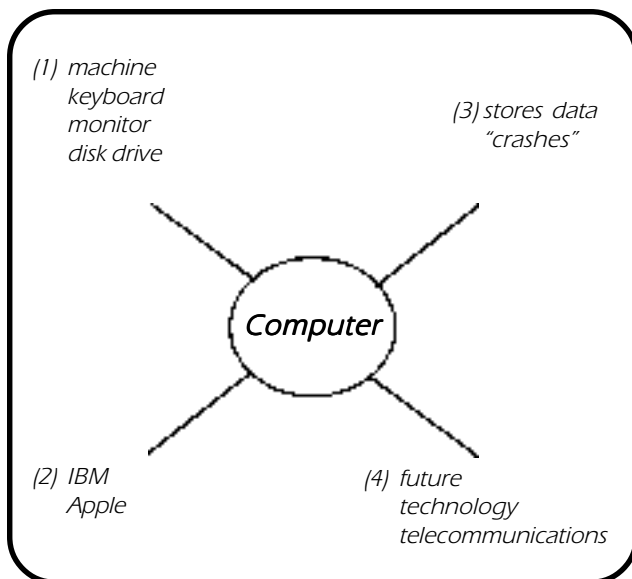
Through a variety of techniques, children will see that words can be stimulating, and they can provide a clear flow of images and concepts that will improve comprehension.

Processing ideas and vocabulary strategies

interesting words are popping into the vocabulary of teachers: schema, meta cognition, and semantic maps. These words emanate from cognitive psychology and reflect research on how effective learners guide their minds. Parents, too, want to know how children process ideas and how they use them in reading and in other areas of the curriculum.

Semantic Mapping

Recent studies emphasize the role of organizing schemes, such as mental patterns and web-like associations that learners use in trying to understand new ideas. Learners then employ those mental organizers to synthesize ideas into useful arrangements. Semantic maps and word-webs are concrete examples of these schemes that help learners organize their thoughts. Semantic refers to the meaning associated with a word. Just as a road map shows the interconnecting byways that enable a person to move from one place to another, so a semantic map helps students to integrate new information with what they know. Here is an example of a semantic map.



A semantic map is a diagram of relationships between a key concept and associated ideas. Much of our knowledge of words and concepts can be thought of as being stored and related in a web-like configuration, a configuration that differs from person to person. These maps represent the knowledge units we

store plus their linkages. These linkages incorporate four important relationships: (1) class or definition, (2) example, (3) attribute, and (4) related concepts. By thinking about the various aspects of a concept, we can relate what is new to what is known.

Comprehension may be considered a building of bridges between the new and the unknown. Therefore, it is important to understand how children organize information then to guide them as they relate the old and new concepts. Let's apply this mental linking to the important words that a child encounters while reading.

Words represent images, relationships or associations. The words (ideas) in an article call forth images and ideas that have personal connotations for the reader. As indicated in the box below, a stimulus may be associated with a specific example, a synonym, an antonym, a characteristic, or a category.

| <i>Stimulus Words</i> | <i>Associations evoked by the stimulus words</i> |
|-----------------------|--|
| Dog | Fido, cat, bark, pet, bite, collie, animal |
| Marxism | Communism, Russia, war, Democracy, philosophy, Lenin |

The nature of these associations implies that we try to organize new concepts schematically rather than randomly. Each association represents a predictable type of relation to the stimulus words.

Class Relations: dogs are related to pets and animals, in that dogs belong to the class of things called animals and are likely to belong to the class of things called pets.

Example Relations: Fido and collie are related to dog, in that collie, as a category, and Fido, as a particular individual, represent examples of dogs.

Attribute Relations: Concepts have properties or attributes. For example, dogs bark, bite, have hair and sometimes show loyalty. Again, the property

relation interacts with the class relation. If Fido is a member of the classes collie, dog, pet, and animal, then he inherits all the properties of collie, dog, pet, and animal by virtue of his various class memberships.

Related Concepts: Cats share certain attributes and class relations with dogs, but they differ in others. By thinking about the various relations of a concept, we can prompt children to relate what is new to what is already known.

When a set of relationships between concepts and their associations is graphically represented, it is called a semantic map or a semantic network.

When a new word is introduced, we want children to recall as many related words as possible. That gives

them a better chance of giving meaning to the new word. Semantic mapping is a useful strategy for teaching vocabulary and aiding comprehension.

Use the following questions as ways to draw a semantic map:

1. What is it? What is it like?
2. What's another name for it or give an example?
3. What does it do?
4. What related words come to mind?

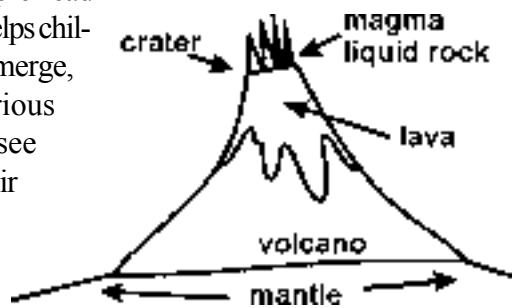
Example: Marxism

1. Philosophy of Government
2. Russian Communism, Lenin
3. Shares wealth, not democracy
4. Cold War



Visualizing and Labeling

Where feasible, a parent can use an image of the central term to focus a concept and to build a set of related words. In the illustration below, the image of a volcano is surrounded by the words that a group of fifth graders developed during a pre-reading exercise. The image not only helps children visualize the concepts that emerge, but also helps them tie the various words together. They begin to see relationships and to categorize their thoughts by visualizing the term they are discussing.



categories or through labeling. The overall effect on the child leads him to believe that there are orderly ways to unfold the words and concepts that surround a theme or topic.

Semantic maps (word webs) represent a community learning technique. Each of us builds new associations because someone identifies words or concepts that we had not thought of. Encourage your child to draw semantic maps, and don't hesitate to add your

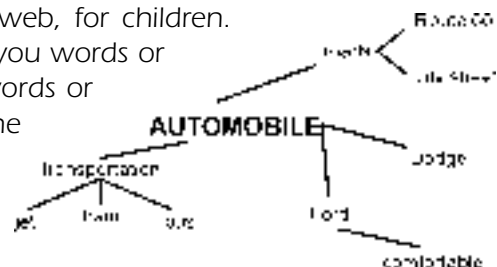
Summary

Your child does not have to generate a specific set of words, and you do not have to arrange each of the words into rigid categories. Both techniques, semantic mapping and visualizing, elicit vocabulary from the child and then try to connect the words through

own ideas when your child gets stuck. Through the diagrammatic techniques of semantic mapping and labeling, we begin to build schemes that will help us comprehend a particular text—even when we know a basic meaning for the word in the first place.

Making it Work

You should be able to do an informal map—call it a word web, for children. Take any new word and write it down. Ask your child to give you words or phrases that he thinks of when he hears this word. As new words or ideas are presented, draw a line from the center word to the associated word. Associated words can have their own web lines emanating from them as other examples spring from those words. Here's a brief example:



Expanding Concepts and Word Building

When kids play with mile-long words (bibliomaniacal) to see if they can pronounce them or to see if they can stump their friends, they give us a glimpse of their fascination with words and with language. After the movie **Mary Poppins** introduced us to supercal-ifragilistic-expialidocious, the halls elementary schools exploded with sesquipedalian words—even gerontology squeezed into one third-grade classroom.

But the true value of vocabulary goes far beyond mere curiosity. Vocabulary plays a central role in comprehension; reason enough, parents, to pay increasing attention to word meaning. Vocabulary accounts for more than 50% of the score on comprehension tests. That doesn't surprise classroom teachers who know from experience that words and concepts go hand-in-hand. Any effort to expand the number of words is in reality an effort to expand the concepts that children have available for use.

The Multiplier Effect

Even more important, we now learn from cognitive psychologists, that the categorizing which usually accompanies vocabulary development turns word work into a valuable thinking activity. The word hemisphere suddenly becomes a rich environment instead

of the single word to be defined:

What starts as one word turns into a multitude when that word is associated with others, is listed with synonyms, is countered with antonyms, is surrounded by words from the same subject or topic. Thereby the word becomes part of a related group. Connections are made to help children find the outlines or build the mental schemes that give context and structure to the subject that they are reading about

Five Ways to Teach a Word

As parents know, we can do more than simply expose words to children. Learning styles vary and parents have at least five different kinds of options for helping children understand new words. Sometimes it takes all five of those ways for a child to get the meaning of the word. Not everyone needs five tries, but a child may need five different approaches to capture the word in its intended use.

1. Use it in context parallel to its usage in the passage.
2. Define it with examples and explanation.
3. Give synonyms/antonyms.
4. Use decoding clues and context.
5. Have children apply it in sentences.

Expansion Through Exploration

From what was said earlier it might be surmised that the continuing effort of the parent is to find every opportunity to build words/concepts. One word is not a single word but an opportunity to reach out horizontally, to find other words that children know within the same field. It is a search for synonyms/antonyms and for other words that they associate with the one they are studying. Those activities turn into mental maps and word webs which provide the mental schemes so necessary for to increase reading comprehension.

Once children have a basic meaning for a word, they can push the word to understand it better in its derivation, in its roots or history. How can they accomplish a better understanding of words that are built off the same root? By working together in pairs, they can learn from each other and can prod each other to move beyond their present experience to make the new concept grow.

Hemisphere geography

half the world
U.S. in northern hemisphere
Brazil in southern
hemisphere
Europe in northern hemi-
sphere



| | |
|-------------|---------------|
| hemi | sphere |
| half | round |
| Greek | ball |
| semi | orange |

How many ways can you cut something in half?

Direct Teaching of Vocabulary to Improve Comprehension

As I stepped into the school hallway, I had to flatten myself against the wall to avoid a collision. Two second-grade girls were skipping along, oblivious to the world, and chanting, “negotiation, negotiation, negotiation!” Much to their surprise, I joined them in skipping and chanting “negotiation”. We were instant friends. *Negotiation* was their word for the day. It meant, they informed me, that two people with a problem had sat down together to work it out.

Impressive for second graders? Not really. Children have a remarkable interest in new words, even in the music of their sounds, and in the power that vocabulary growth gives them.

We have long known that vocabulary is correlated significantly with measures of intelligence and with measures of reading comprehension. Recently, we have learned that teaching vocabulary can actually improve comprehension, that is, there is a cause-and-effect relationship between vocabulary instruction and comprehension. Therefore, if vocabulary is taught directly it offers students an advantage when they read and write. That may not be surprising, since vocabulary represents concepts and images. The richer our storehouse of concepts and images, the more likely will we be able to comprehend a broad range of messages.

One Word a Day

It may seem mechanistic to teach one new word each day under the pretext of improving comprehension, but it isn't as mechanical as it first sounds. For instance, the word “currency” moves quickly from a generic term for money to examples of the currency that people use: dollar, pound, franc, yen, peso and so on. When people travel to another country, they exchange their own money for a foreign currency. A one-minute discussion can open up a world of concepts and images, all around one new word—currency.

Perhaps more significantly, the one-word-a-day routine reminds children that words are important, interesting, and powerful. They begin to pay attention to words and to use them with increasing discrimination. As interesting words arise in reading, those words become a natural opportunity to expand on a concept and to elicit synonyms or related words. By listing words as they are introduced, a parent can help their child learn discrimination and nuance among similar words. Shown here as an example is the word *menace*.

Menace

Synonyms

threaten
frighten
scare
harm
harmful

Related

evil
crooks
storms
bully
toxic waste

You can organize these concepts differently, but ask your child to offer sample sentences that suggest how these words are used and how they differ.

Word Helper

Many children enjoy the challenge of helping other children. A parent can prompt them by saying: “Skim this article and list five or six words that you think someone else will find difficult. Next to each word write a word or phrase that means the same thing but is easier.” These words and their less difficult partners are shared with you and with brothers or sisters or neighbors.

This activity works effectively in small groups, and children will often find ways to clarify or concepts. Your child may want to rewrite textbook passages to make them more accessible to a younger child. Thus a vocabulary activity turns into a writing exercise that stirs up thought. *(continued on page 8)*

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.



PARENT TALK

A publication of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication

Editor: Dr. Carl B. Smith
Production Editor: Ianny Thomas

Published by

ERIC/REC & The Family Learning Association
2805 East 10th St., Suite 140
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698

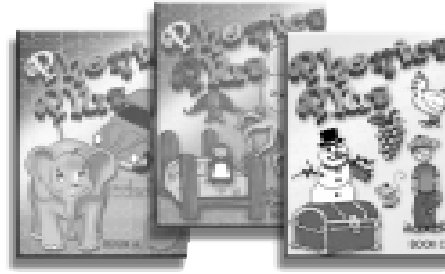
Resources for Critical Thinking and Reading



Building a Strong Vocabulary by Carl B. Smith

This guide offers strategies to help children develop strong vocabularies. They'll explore the world of context clues, synonyms, word maps, roots, words from other languages, dictionaries, and much more.

Ages 8 and up, 200 pgs., \$12.95



Phonics Plus, Books A, B, & C

Tutoring Children in Reading and Writing: A Step-by-Step Guide

These new guidebooks show parents how to work with their primary-grade children in order to improve the essential skills of reading and writing.

Book 1: Kindergarten, 106 pgs., \$15.95

Book 2: Grades 1 & 2, 178 pgs., \$15.95



These workbooks start with phonemic awareness (basic sounds in words) and help children become skilled in using the major sound-spelling patterns. Lessons systematically develop the decoding and writing skills needed to achieve success as an independent reader.

Ages 5-10, Book A: 104 pgs. Book B: 132 pgs.

Book C: 84 pgs. \$11.95

| QTY. | ORDER NO. | TITLE | PRICE | SUBTOTAL |
|------|-------------|---|----------------|----------|
| | F1-127-1742 | Building a Strong Vocabulary | \$14.95 | |
| | F1-F58-2014 | Tutoring Children in Reading & Writing Book 1 | \$15.95 | |
| | F1-F58-2015 | Tutoring Children in Reading & Writing Book 1 | \$15.95 | |
| | F1-F58-2011 | Phonics Plus Book A | \$11.95 | |
| | F1-F58-2012 | Phonics Plus Book B | \$11.95 | |
| | F1-F58-2013 | Phonics Plus Book C | \$11.95 | |

3 EASY WAYS TO ORDER!

PHONE your order: **(800) 759-4723**

FAX your order: **(812) 331-2776**

MAIL your order to: **Family Learning Assn.**
3925 Hagan St., Suite 101
Bloomington, IN 47401

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|--|
| *Shipping | Subtotal | |
| If your order is: Shipping is: | | |
| \$0.00-\$50.00 \$5.00 | Shipping* | |
| \$50.01-\$499.99 10% of order | | |
| \$500.00+ 5% of order | TOTAL | |

YOUR SATISFACTION IS GUARANTEED!

If for any reason you are not totally satisfied with a product or publication you purchase from us, simply return the item within 30 days, and we will refund your money.

| Ship to | Method of Payment |
|--|---|
| <p>NAME _____</p> <p>TITLE _____</p> <p>ORGANIZATION _____</p> <p>ADDRESS _____</p> <p>CITY/STATE/ZIP _____</p> <p>PHONE _____</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> Check Enclosed <input type="checkbox"/> P.O. # _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> </p> <p>CARDHOLDER'S NAME _____</p> <p>CARD NUMBER _____ EXP. DATE _____</p> <p>CARDHOLDER'S SIGNATURE _____</p> |

**ERIC/REC &
The Family Learning Association**
2805 East 10th St., Suite 140
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698

Nonprofit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Bloomington, IN
Permit No. 2

Vocabulary Development Issue

***PARENTALK is a monthly publication for parents
who help their children with learning. For infor-
mation and a free catalog call 800-759-4723***

Direct Teaching of Vocabulary

(continued on page 8)

Concept Path

Another way to build vocabulary is to identify the major ideas in an article by selecting a single term to represent each key concept. By listing those words in the order that they appear in the text you can create a concept path of the article, a brief step-by-step walk across the article through its key terms. Here is an example of one concept sequence that stemmed from an article on dangers to our environment.

**disasters→→overpopulation→→
erosion→→greenhouse effect→→
resourcefulness→→intervention→→
recycling**

Using these terms as pegs to hang information, a word exercise becomes a thinking exercise. This concept-sequence strategy allows the child to discuss the words that he or she needs to clarify.

These terms do not necessarily appear in subheads within the article. They are key concepts listed in the order of their appearance. You can encourage your child to learn the terms as they are used in the article. Later, you can discuss the contents of the article by using the terms as a pathway through the article.

Conclusion

Since vocabulary accounts for more than 50% of measured comprehension, direct your child to attend to this relatively simple element. Learning vocabulary should be an integral part of every reading lesson. The study of word meanings merely helps a reader achieve the goal of understanding the text. Words represent perceptions of the world. By showing children uses of words, we tune up their thinking about the world around them.