

Vocabulary Development During the Preschool Years:



Its Influence on the Achievement Gap



Why Should We Be Concerned About Vocabulary Development?

- From toddlers through high school students, differences in vocabulary knowledge exist among learners from different ability and socioeconomic groups.
- Children enter kindergarten with “meaningful differences” in early language and literacy experiences (i.e. skills, exposure, opportunities).

Hart & Risley (1995)



Studies Report Startling News -

- “First grade children from higher-SES groups knew about twice as many words as lower SES children.”

Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2002)

- Large differences in vocabulary remain by fifth grade (i.e., children in the lowest quartile have vocabularies similar to the median second-grade children).

Biemiller (2004)



Studies Report Startling News –

(continued)

- On average children from one year old to second grade, acquire approximately 860 root word meanings per year or 2.4 root words per day (approximately 6,000 root word meanings).
- Twenty-five percent of children with the smallest vocabularies acquire approximately 1.6 root words a day (approximately 4,000 root words meanings)...some acquire fewer meanings by the end of second grade.

Biemiller (2005)



Studies Report Startling News -

(continued)

- High school seniors near the top of their class knew about four times as many words as their lower-performing classmates.
- High-knowledge third graders had vocabularies about equal to lowest-performing 12th graders.

Smith (1941)

- Children who are less advantaged or learning a second language are affected most.



How Does Vocabulary Development Influence the Achievement Gap?

- Vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading proficiency and ultimately school achievement.

Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2002)

- By the end of third grade, many children master phonics and can read more words correctly than they understand in context.



How Does Vocabulary Development Influence the Achievement Gap?

(continued)

- Readers who understand less than 95% of the words in a text lose the meaning of what they have read.
- Vocabulary, as assessed in first grade, can predict more than 30% of grade 11 reading comprehension.

Biemiller (2001, 2005)



How Does Vocabulary Development Influence the Achievement Gap?

(continued)

- Rapid vocabulary acquisition occurs in the pre-literate years; that is, before children are reading books that introduce unfamiliar vocabulary.

Biemiller (2001)



The Good News...

- Deficits in vocabulary may be fundamentally more remediable than many other school learning problems.
- We can do more in the early years to ensure rapid vocabulary development and greater comprehension of grade-level texts in the upper grades.

Biemiller (2001)



Vocabulary is the Missing Link!

- “The significance of vocabulary (oral language) has often been underestimated because it is not a prerequisite for first or second grade reading success. It is not until reading texts involve age-normal vocabulary demands that early (kindergarten or pre-kindergarten) vocabulary becomes a significant predictor of reading comprehension.”

Biemiller (2005) p.2



What Are the Implications for Preschool Programs?

- Educators must “target differences in early literacy skills and experiences at the outset of formal schooling before reading difficulties become entrenched and intractable.”

Coyne, Simmons & Kame'enui (2004) p. 42

- Children have to “catch up” at above-average rates when vocabulary limitations exist.

Biemiller (2001)



Supporting Vocabulary Acquisition: What Makes a Difference?

- Systematic and direct approaches promote vocabulary development more than acquiring word meanings by inference.

Biemiller (2001)

- Active participation and engagement can increase the likelihood that preschoolers would learn more vocabulary.

Coyne, Simmons & Kame'enui (2004)



Supporting Vocabulary Acquisition: What Makes a Difference?

(continued)

- Multiple opportunities for children to interact with target vocabulary in meaningful contexts can result in increased vocabulary learning.

Coyne, Simmons & Kame'enui (2004)

- “In order for a vocabulary intervention to have a measurable impact on general vocabulary, children must acquire several hundred word meanings that would not otherwise be acquired.”

(Biemiller, 2005, p. 3)



Supporting Vocabulary Acquisition for Diverse Learners

- Materials and an environment that encourage children to communicate must be accessible to **all** children.
- Activities need to be individualized for children speaking different languages and children who require alternative communication methods.



Activities For Diverse Learners That Support Vocabulary Development

- Frequent reading of books in class & home
- Books in the primary language
- Rereading of books appropriate to the developmental level of the child at home and school
- Use of pictures, props, and gestures to enhance the meaning
- Books coordinated with ongoing classroom activities



Supporting Vocabulary Development for Diverse Learners Through Conversations

- Conversations that are rich with content
(Dickenson 2001)
- Conversations appropriate to the needs of the children
- Extended conversation on a single topic during play time, meal time, outdoor time, during read alouds and shared reading.
- Adult - child verbal interaction in which *sufficient time* is allowed



Create a Culture of Classroom Conversations Inclusive of All Children

- Talk about non-present topics
- Extend and deepen topics over multiple turns
- Use varied vocabulary and draw attention to words
- Encourage children to listen to each other
- Suggest strategies to families that are used in the classroom



Materials That Encourage Vocabulary Development for All Children:

- Play telephones
- Puppets
- Flannel board stories
- Dolls and other dramatic play props
- Tape Recorders with Microphones
- Interactive books
- Other multi-sensory experiences



Children with Diverse Learning Needs May Need:

- Additional repetitions
- More one-to-one adult support
- More extensive practice
- Longer wait time for responses



How Do You Promote Vocabulary Development...

...for ALL children?

...for families?



Final Thought -

- “If education is going to have a serious ‘compensatory’ function, we must do more to promote vocabulary. Our current data show large ‘environmental’ effects in kindergarten to grade 2. Large differences remain by grade 5. (i.e., children in the lowest grade 5 quartile have vocabularies similar to median second-grade children)...If we could keep them from being so far behind by grade 2, they wouldn’t be so far behind in grade 5!”

Biemiller (2001), p. 28



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