What Is the Important Vocabulary to Teach in Preschool?

Kathleen T. Williams, PhD
Snapshot of Speaker

• Began professional life as a second grade teacher in 1968
• Involved in test and instructional material development since 1989
• Has been a speech pathologist, classroom teacher, school psychologist, graduate & undergraduate instructor
• Author of EVT-2, GRADE, G•MADE, RLI, & MLI
• Has a BS in speech pathology, MEd in elementary education, MA in educational psychology, and PhD in school psychology
Overview

• Importance of vocabulary
• How vocabulary impacts literacy development
• Categories of important words
• 3-steps to verbal learning
• Suggested activities
Vocabulary & Literacy

- **Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children**
  - 2 1/2 year study of professional & welfare families
  - In one year a child with professional parents will hear 11 million words and a child in a welfare family will hear just 3 million words.
  - Longitudinal research demonstrated that early differences noted in children entering school remain static throughout their education.
The “Matthew” Effect

• The more words you know, the more you can read
• The more you read, the more words you will learn
• For children starting school with a limited vocabulary, “more” reading does not result in “more” vocabulary (Stanovich, 1986)
Pre-alphabetic Stage

• 1st stage of reading & spelling development
  – Don’t understand that letters represent sounds in words
  – Do know that print represents spoken messages
  – Can remember words by visual appearance
  – Don’t know the alphabetic principle
Early Alphabetic Stage

• Do know letters correspond to the sounds that make up spoken words (the alphabetic principle)
• Growing awareness of speech sounds and knowledge of letter forms
  – Attempt to “read” words by guessing from initial consonant & context
  – Spell by writing a few consonants & leaving out less distinct sounds
  – Beginning to demonstrate awareness of phonemes and the use of the alphabet to represent them
Later Alphabetic Reading & Writing

• Gradual development of skill at sounding out words and spelling them phonetically
  – Ability to identify all speech sounds in a word and match to letters
  – Awareness of letter sequences & orthographic patterns
Emergent Literacy Skills

- Rhyming, rhyming, rhyming
- Sound matching with initial consonants
- Auditory recognition of syllables
- Model correct syntactic patterns
The Importance of Syntactic Awareness

• Dialogue
  – Nouns label
  – Verbs tell action
  – Adjectives & adverbs describe
Important Word Categories

• Labeling: Nouns
  – Household objects & food items
  – Body parts
  – Common domesticated & wild animals

• Actions: Verbs

• Attributes: Adjectives & Adverbs
  – Basic numbers & colors

• Basic concepts & prepositions
• The 25 most frequent words make up about one-third of all print material.

• Top 25:
  • the of and a to
  • in is you that it
  • he was for on are
  • as with his they I
  • at be this have from
• Prepositions in the Top 25:
  • the  of  and  a  to
  • in  is  you  that  it
  • he  was  for  on  are
  • as  with  his  they  I
  • at  be  this  have  from
3 Steps to Verbal Learning

• Verbal Learning: Gaining information from the spoken or written word
3-Steps to Verbal Learning

• Step One: Paying attention
• Step Two: Encoding
  – Putting new information into personally meaningful form
    • Not just “in your own words”
    • Actively processing information individually or with peers
• Step Three: Linking the new information to what you already know
  – To move from immediate memory into long-term memory
Vocabulary Instruction Steps

1. Introduce new word.
2. Link: Integrates new information with prior knowledge.
3. Rehearse: Facilitates reexposure to words.
4. Practice: Provides opportunities for meaningful use.
Vocabulary Development in Natural Contexts

- Matching perception - What is this?
- Analysis of perception - Show 4 pictures; Which one cries?
- Reordering Perception - Show 4 pictures; Tell me the name of the one that is not an animal.
- Reasoning about Perception - What made the milk fall off the table?
Pivotal Early Childhood Themes: Provide Natural Context for Vocabulary Development

- Animals
- Weather
- Self-esteem
- Family
- Holidays
- World Cultures
- Community
Basic Conceptual Words

• Form the functional vocabulary of early learning experiences
  – Following directions
  – Describing an object
  – Understanding spatial relationships
• 30% of the 220 high-frequency words
  – *Dolch Basic Sight Word List*
Basic Conceptual Words

- Direction (up, down)
- Position (inside, outside)
- Size (large, big, little, small)
- Comparison (longer, shorter)
- Texture (smooth, rough)
- Quantity (many, few)
- Shapes (star, circle, triangle)
Developing Conceptual Words

• Cut cardboard tubes into graduated lengths.
  – Longest, tallest, shortest, identical, nearest, etc.
• Use toys from fast-food restaurants for teaching position
  – Over, on, above, next, etc.
• Empty egg cartons & dry cereal pieces can illustrate quantity & numerical concepts.
  – More, less, some, none, few, many, same, etc.
  – One, two, three, etc.
Labeling Activities for Young Children

• Outline the shape of simple objects
  – Child must match objects to shape (in one try) and name it

• Using grocery and discount store flyers, create separate posters
  – Things that go in the kitchen, the bath, the bedroom, the garage, etc

• Have child sort various buttons in an empty egg carton
  – Ask child why buttons are sorted the way they are
Vocabulary-Building in Natural Contexts

• Read or tell stories
  – Ask questions
  – Ask for a different word
  – Ask student to retell story
  – Demonstrate how the context of the story can explain the meaning of an unknown word

• Tell jokes or tall tales.
  – Why is it funny? Unusual? Odd?
  – Retell changing a key word
Reading Aloud

• Why:
  – Develops background knowledge
  – Builds vocabulary
  – Increases familiarity with language patterns
  – Develops familiarity with story structure
  – Develops print awareness
  – Models fluency, prosody, appropriate emotion
  – Helps to view reading as pleasurable
References & Resources


• Cultivating Readers: Making Reading Active and Fun! See [www.famlit.org](http://www.famlit.org)
References & Resources


References & Resources


Questions?

dr.kathleenwilliams@gmail.com