

Building word knowledge

Prof Lilli Pretorius and Catherine Langsford

During the Intermediate Phase, learners use language skills gained in the Foundation Phase to understand texts, moving from basic forms of communication to more complex academic language needed for school. Also most learners now work in English for their lessons. This can be a difficult time, particularly for learners whose skills did not develop well in Grades 1-3.

How can you help your learners read and write better? The key lies in successful vocabulary development. There are four ingredients:

- (1) getting learners to read as much as possible
- (2) explicitly teaching words
- (3) teaching learners vocabulary strategies and
- (4) having fun with words to motivate word knowledge.

Word learning happens in two ways: **incidental** and **explicit** learning. With incidental learning you learn something by chance. It is estimated that 1,500 – 2,500 new words are gained this way per year. However, *how much* incidental learning occurs **depends on exposure to language** and being in a **stimulating environment**. The more learners are exposed to rich language input, the greater the chances of incidental learning. Once children learn to read and write, their exposure to language doubles, because they now get exposure to spoken and written language. After about Grade 2, most of the new words children learn is gained through reading. The implications are clear: children who don't read do not develop large vocabularies. In a study in the USA it was estimated that Grade 5 children who read 14 minutes on average a day *outside* of school were exposed to 2,5 million additional words a year, compared to children who only read about 1 minute outside the classroom, who were exposed to a mere 52,000 additional words a year.

Explicit learning refers to a situation where something is taught deliberately. Directly teaching words related to a specific topic or text can deepen learners' understanding and increase their word knowledge. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Teaching an average of 10-12 new words a week. This will give your learners an opportunity to learn at least 360 new words a year.
- Focus on words that are important for a specific topic or text, or teach academic words that will help learners understand textbooks better.
- Provide a learner-friendly explanation of the word (dictionary definitions are often difficult to follow). For example, explain that *mischievous* is behaviour that is naughty but not really bad. Puppies often get into mischief but gangsters commit crimes.
- Say the word aloud again and get learners to say it. They need to get used to hearing, saying, seeing and writing the new word.
- Let learners engage with new words. Provide different contexts so that learners use new words in different contexts, e.g. discuss which situations show *mischievous* and which ones don't. For example, *putting salt (not sugar) into a friend's cup of tea or stealing food in a shop*.
- Provide multiple exposures to new words during the week and test learners once a week. Make sure they can recognise the word, write it and say what it means.

Teaching children **vocabulary strategies** helps them become independent learners. Help them to see the relationship between words by breaking words into their parts and making connections (also called

morphological analysis). For example, if learners do not know what *unhappy* means, break it into *un* + *happy*. Explain that *un* is an English prefix to show the opposite. So if *happy* means something positive, *unhappy* is the opposite. Another example is *biodegrade*: *bio* + *degrade*. *Bio* means *life*. If we look up *degrade* we see it means to break down, decay. Putting the two ideas together, we see that *biodegrade* refers to something living that can break down.

Teaching learners **to use context to understand unfamiliar words** also helps them build word knowledge, e.g.: *The mother was **anxious** because her daughter was not home yet and it was already dark.* If learners do not know what *anxious* means, they can use the meaning of the rest of the sentence to work out the meaning. Ask how a mother would feel if it was dark and her daughter had not arrived home. That way they can figure out from the context that *anxious* means *worried*.

Encourage learners to take an interest in words and be enthusiastic about them. Keep a word wall in your classroom and update it each week, have bilingual labels around the classroom, keep monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in prominent places, have mini competitions where learners compete to look up words in their dictionaries and produce explanations for the class.

It is also useful to know which words are important. **High frequency** words occur commonly in spoken language and refer to everyday things and events (e.g. *food, talk, small*). High frequency words also include **function** words (e.g. *the, so, because* and prepositions such as *in(to), through, by*). In English there is a list of the 2,000 – 3,000 most frequent words. After the 3,000 frequency level, words occur more in **written** language than in spoken language. **Oral/spoken language is no longer an adequate source of word learning!**

There is also a core of about 570 **academic words**. These are words such as *hypothesis, definition, theory* that occur in educational contexts. Knowledge of these words is important for understanding textbooks. These words can be explicitly taught.

Knowledge of words at the **5,000 word level** is important. This is the 'magic' level that gives learners enough word power to push them to a higher level of understanding.

The vocabulary size for each grade level is given on p22 of the CAPS document (Foundation Phase). The 300 most frequent words are given on pp87-89.

The vocabulary size for each grade level in Intermediate Phase is given on p27 of the CAPS document.

The *Cobuild English Dictionary* gives the frequency level of each word entry in the dictionary.

VocabProfile (Cobb 2002) is available at <http://www.lexutor.ca>. You can upload any document into the lexutor programme and it will give you a breakdown of the frequency level of the words.