



SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY DEPARTMENT

PROMOTING TALK IN THE CLASSROOM: APPROACHES TO TOPIC WORK

DEVELOPING VOCABULARY IN THE CLASSROOM

All curriculum areas have key words and concepts that children need to understand and use in their spoken language if they are to talk about what they have done and what they are going to do. It is important that teachers identify such words and develop strategies to ensure that opportunities are given for learning and using them confidently. Children who talk confidently and take an interest in learning and using new words and ideas are much more likely to understand such vocabulary when they are reading and to write in an increasingly precise or imaginative way.

Which words are *key words* and concepts?

Often the answer is obvious. Teachers will quite explicitly set out to teach colour and shape concepts in Mathematics, while in Science, parts of the body or plants may be considered important words for children to learn to use if they are to talk about their observations. In English, children learn what 'author' and 'illustrator' mean and, with experience, will use these words in their discussions about books. Thus, at the planning stage, key words and concepts can be written down and teaching strategies developed to ensure children learn them.

Difficulties in selecting key vocabulary can arise for two main reasons. Firstly, a topic may involve a considerable amount of vocabulary – which are the **key** words and idea to target? Secondly, in a class of thirty children, with a wide range of ability, knowledge and experience, which vocabulary should be taught to which children?

There are solutions

1. Identify the key vocabulary

During research and planning for a topic teachers need to identify vocabulary, particularly specialist vocabulary, that children might be expected to learn. It is useful to select a small number of words or concepts (6-12) that are essential to children's understanding and a more advanced core of words that would be helpful.

2. Find out what pupils already know about the topic

With a reasonable idea of the range of vocabulary that is involved in the topic, the teacher then has to address the issue of the children's current understanding and confidence to such words.

If most of the topic or subject vocabulary is new to a group of children, it is possible that they will have difficulty keeping up with class instructions, activities and discussions. If most of the vocabulary is familiar, the teacher runs the risk of boring children, since the experiences that underpin such knowledge may very well be about to be repeated. An example might be the child who is growing cress for the hundredth time and is not learning anything new.

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Whole class

One way forward with this difficulty is to **ask** children what they know already. This work would need to take place before the topic begins, so that there is time for planning based on the information gained. Armed with a stimulus, perhaps an activity, a story or some pictures, related to the topic, the teacher sets the scene and encourages her or her class to talk about their current knowledge. While this can be done at whole class level, there is a danger that the most verbal children will contribute most and the teacher will be left with no clear idea of the needs of less confident or perhaps less linguistically able pupils.

Groups

An alternative strategy would be to divide the class into three groups:

- 1) Children who communicate fluently and confidently in most situations.
- 2) Children who communicate quite well, though less confidently.
- 3) Children who find it rather difficult to communicate their ideas.

Ask each group in turn what they know about a topic. Clearly the two groups of children not directly involved will need to be working on activities that do not require the teacher's attention for a period of time.

As each group talks about the topic, the teacher can write down key words and phrases used by them, either on a 'flip char' or perhaps in a 'topic or resource book'. This strategy will give a 'baseline' assessment for the group and give the teacher a clear sense of what needs to be learnt by pupils in terms of knowledge and vocabulary. It may also be possible to ask the groups what they would to know about the topic and to incorporate this into the planning process.

If staffing or classroom organisation allow, it may be possible to carry out this strategy with smaller groups and to record in the same way.

Assessment

As well as giving the teacher a clearer picture of where children are in their understanding of a topic at the beginning, the same strategy can be used during and towards the end of the topic to gain some assessment of how much particular groups are learning. Groups of children can be asked about aspects of the topic again and the teacher or another adult 'scribe' their ideas into the same 'topic or resource' book.

This gives the opportunity not only to note the growth in vocabulary but also the children's understanding of connections and underlying ideas. The 'scribed' work can be photocopies for each child and put into their own books, as evidence of learning achieved.

Evaluating children's learning will help the teacher decide whether or not changes need to be made to the teaching of the same topic in the future.



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STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP VOCABULARY

The importance of context

Children need to hear new words used in contexts that are meaningful if they are to understand them and appreciate how they are used. For young children and less able older children this is likely to mean that learning will happen most effectively when opportunities are given for **listening and talking** around a variety of practical activities, as well as about stories, poems and information books.

Older pupils may not need as much practical activity to understand new words or concepts but, when a new topic is introduced, understanding might be best developed through such activities. For example, many ideas in science are complex and while a demonstration of some aspect is useful, is usually the opportunity to 'have a go' oneself that sparks off discussion and thought. Children expect the teacher to be able to make a circuit but to do this for themselves is, for most children, an extremely rewarding experience and much more likely to encourage children to learn the specialist vocabulary involved and to explore complicated ideas.

The beginning of a lesson

Teachers who know their children and are aware of the differing levels of spoken language ability will be able to anticipate which key words or concepts are likely to need explanation in the forthcoming lesson. Writing up key words on a board or flipchart and talking about these briefly can help some, if not all, children in the class gain a better understanding of the talk that begins the lesson and of the ensuing activities. It also helps children see the connection between spoken and written language in a highly relevant situation.

Pupils who need additional help

It may sometimes be possible before a lesson to give small groups of three to four pupils who are experiencing difficulty with learning, the opportunity to talk about key words and concepts with an adult so that, when they are involved in a whole class lesson, they have had some preparation for the questions, explanations and discussions. Obviously whether or not this is possible may depend on a number of factors, including classroom organisation and the availability of additional support.

Perhaps the most important factor in determining whether or not children are given this opportunity lies in the priority given to the development of spoken language in the classroom and throughout the school.



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Wall charts, books

Areas of the classroom are sometimes designated for particular aspects of the curriculum. For example, in nursery and infant classrooms there may be listening or writing areas, book corners, sand and wet play, or craft areas. All such areas of the classroom invite talk and it is helpful to think through some of the key words or concepts that might be developed as children play and work in these areas and to put these up on the walls. This is valuable to remind adults to check understanding and encourage use as well as developing children's ability to read and write the words.

For example, charts and labelled pictures of key words near the water play area could include:

- the names of equipment used (e.g. water wheel, funnel, tube)
- verbs (e.g. pour, float, sink)
- adjectives (e.g. more than, full empty half full)

Pictures and writing in the book corner could illustrate:

- 'picture' 'writing' 'word' 'front' 'back' 'sentence' 'title' 'author' 'illustrator' 'publisher'

Wallcharts, labels on displays and friezes, and books made in school can all help children understand and eventually use key words and concepts that are important for a particular topic. Children can illustrate wall charts and books.

Encourage older children to use dictionaries to find out the meanings of new curriculum words and 'quiz' each other on word definitions. Games and activities such as 'Hangman' and simple crosswords encourage talk about words and their meanings as well as being fun.

The importance of consolidation

The curriculum in schools is broad and covers considerable areas of knowledge. If children are to progress they need to understand and use many new words and concepts. This will only be possible for all children if **the whole curriculum** forms the basis for all language work.

Publishers produce many 'language' activities to develop children's knowledge about words and grammar. Teachers need to ask whether pupils see the relevance of such activities and whether the same teaching points could be made using key words and concepts from the curriculum. For example, could the use of a dictionary be taught using key words from the current science or history topic, rather than from a published worksheet? Could understanding of written work in class, rather than through the completion of published 'comprehension' exercises?

The teacher who 'revisits' key curriculum vocabulary and concepts in as many different ways as possible will give the opportunities for consolidation that enable children to learn and demonstrate their learning through relevant and specific spoken and written language.



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WAYS OF ASSESSING A CHILD'S VOCABULARY

The best way to assess children's acquisition of items of vocabulary is to have them respond to the use of a word by others and hear them use words spontaneously. The amount of time this would take however makes it virtually impossible in classroom contexts. A further difficulty for the teacher is that while all children need repetition of words in varying contexts to help them consolidate understanding and expression, they will vary in the amount of repetition they need to establish learning. The most manageable solution to the latter problem is to provide plenty of opportunities to practice hearing and using new words and assume the children in the fluent and adequate groups, described above, will be learning well. This then gives time to check the learning of the least verbal children. This can be approached in the following ways:

1. Ask a child to put each word from those being learnt into a sentence, one word at a time.
2. Where possible, write out simple definitions of all the words to be learnt and ask children what word they need, e.g. *I am in the sky, I am round, I shine at night(moon)*. This can be made into a reading comprehension exercise for children to work on in pairs or on their own.
3. Ask children to give a definition of key words in talk or again in writing where children are able to do so. Allow children to work in pairs when first introducing the task in writing.
4. Where appropriate, check the breadth of a child's understands by asking them to give such things:
 - another word that means the same
 - words that are opposite
 - words in the same category (e.g. colours, fruit, furniture, etc.)
 - word association games
 - words beginning with the same sound
5. Remember, too, to encourage children to learn their own new words around a topic, writing them on a class topic board, or in individual topic books.



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