

# Interesting vocabulary

A group of reception-aged children in a Luton primary school have been learning new ideas and words quickly by talking together as part of fun and imaginative activities, using stories as a starting point.



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**C**HILDREN WITH well-developed language skills at school entry often continue to be effective learners throughout school. Conversely, children with less well-developed language often fail to achieve as well as they should. One of the key factors that distinguishes these groups of children from each other is the extent of their vocabularies.

A child with an extensive vocabulary, both understood and expressed, will usually have learned these words and phrases during a wide range of exciting experiences that they have shared with adults. These adults are likely to be parents and practitioners. The child's vocabulary will also reflect their understanding of underlying concepts; for example, in maths, and through their growing knowledge and understanding of the world.

## How do children learn vocabulary quickly?

So, how do children learn new vocabulary, particularly if they are learning it in an additional language? It is a commonly held belief that in order for a child to learn a new item of vocabulary, they will need to hear and use it as many as 60 times. Some words, however, need only be heard once for them to be used immediately – names of dinosaurs and television characters, for example, and especially swear words!

Adults learning an additional language often report that they learn new vocabulary quickest if they use it in interesting conversations, on subjects they know something about. This suggests that words and phrases that will be learned quickest are those that provide high interest, or have a high emotional content, and are learned in an interesting context, and subsequently used in conversation.

Children often learn new words quickly because they are very interested in them. Four-year-old Ethan, for example, loves outer space and building rockets out of anything he can lay his hands on, but especially using geometric shapes. When his teacher taught him the names of the shapes, he only needed to hear them a few times before he was naming them himself. Only the word 'cylinder' remained a problem, because he had difficulty pronouncing it, so he was happy to call it a 'silly-der'.

If children are attracted to new words because the concepts they represent are exciting and interesting, and remember them by practising using them in

conversation, how can we help children in early years settings learn new words and phrases, in English and in their home language?

One answer is to introduce new concepts and associated vocabulary through fun and exciting stories, and then follow these with interesting play activities. These play activities give children the chance to practice using the new words in conversation, with adults and with each other.

## Previous action research

We decided to put these ideas to the test at Tennyson Road Primary School in Luton. There are 30 children in the foundation class, speaking four different languages. Class teacher Abbie Rainbow-Dias and I had worked five years previously on a small piece of action research, in response to a concern that many children in the class had poor language skills, despite the fact that most of them were from families where English was spoken as a first language.

We looked at the effectiveness of recording stories onto audio cassettes, so children could listen to them regularly, and thus develop their language.

Each week we recorded a story with the children. The stories were fun, and were also part of a literacy focus throughout the week. We set up a 'listening corner', where children could sit in groups of up to three children and listen to the stories.

Abbie also set up a small world play area, where children could play with toys and objects related to the story. *The Duck in the Truck* by Jez Alborough was one example. It is a rhyming story about an excitable duck who gets his truck stuck in the mud, and the series of animals who try and rescue him.

The children and I recorded the story together and we made a small world play area that had a duck, a truck, lots of mud, and some small plastic animals.

This turned out to be highly successful, and enjoyable, as children listened to stories regularly and picked up new vocabulary and phrases very quickly. While they played with the toys they were able to rehearse the words and phrases that they had learned from the story. As a result their vocabulary improved, and there was a noticeable increase in the children's interest in books and stories... and reading skills!

## Expanding the research

This time we wanted to be more adventurous, and see exactly how long it would take all children in the class

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Having fun with small world toys and a good book helps children to learn new vocabulary by bringing stories to life and giving them context

to learn a new concept, and link it to new vocabulary. I was keen to take a concept linked to maths, because children often have mathematical ideas, but do not necessarily have the vocabulary to express them.

Children may also have the concept and vocabulary in their own language, but need to learn how to express their ideas in English. In Abbie's class there were also children who needed to learn the concept and the vocabulary, either in English, their home language, or in both.

We chose to focus on *Pardon? Said the Giraffe* by Colin West. The story is very simple: A frog keeps asking a giraffe a question, and in order for the giraffe to hear him, the frog climbs on the backs of animals of increasing height. The main maths concept was: 'You can order objects depending on their size, length and height.' Linked to this was a language concept: 'In English, vertical objects are described as tall or high, while horizontal ones are long.'

Student teacher Deepika Giddy and I began by finding out what the children knew about the concepts of 'tall' and 'long'. We showed each child a giraffe and a snake, and asked them to describe them. I had a suspicion that most of the children would call

each animal 'big', and this turned out to be the case.

We were able to establish that the two children in the class at an early stage of learning English, and who were both originally from Poland, understood both these ideas in Polish, and also had an understanding of the vocabulary. So, how long would it take all the children to learn the concept and the right vocabulary and, most importantly, would they be able to remember this information?

## Bringing the story to life

We acted out the story with the whole class, using large animal puppets. Then we re-told the story with small groups of children, using small plastic animals as props. Though the words 'tall' and 'long' do not appear in the story, we emphasised these words while talking with the children about the story and helping them to describe the animals.

Technology has moved on since our last project, and audio cassettes are now largely obsolete, so I recorded myself reading the story using an Easispeak digital microphone. This was transferred onto a set of StoryPhones – a digital audio system with six headsets. Each headset is an individual MP3 player





*A boy who loves geometric shapes, will learn their names very quickly through play*

and the whole system is completely free of wires. This means listening activities can be delivered in different areas of the classroom, throughout the setting, and even for outdoor learning.

We set up a 'listening corner' with the StoryPhones, the book and the small toys. As part of this process we took time to show the children how to use the StoryPhones, and how to look after the listening corner, so they could be in the corner without the need for adult supervision.

Abbie is passionate about small world play: 'I see this as essential for young children to explore ideas, through

play and through conversation. These conversations are often hopefully between children, as well as with adults. 'We always have a builders' tray with a weekly theme. In this case we put out the animals from the story, and encouraged the children to make a jungle. When we listened to the children talking with each other, we found that they were spontaneously talking about "big, long, and short". One little girl was so fascinated by the story that she developed long monologues as she played. For me, this is one of the most effective ways to develop language.'

### Extra activities

As well as setting up a small world play area, we decided to extend the number of activities that included the concepts of 'tall' and 'long'. The children played with sets of stacking beakers, made long shapes with playdough, and painted a huge wall display.

All these activities were very popular. As children played and talked together, we could hear that they were spontaneously using the target vocabulary. Some children were particularly drawn to the listening corner, and as a result learned the story by heart. An added bonus was that the children became fascinated by all of Colin West's other books, and Abbie feels that this has greatly added to their growing reading skills, as well as their language.

Because the activities were planned to spontaneously attract the children's interest, it was very noticeable how absorbed they became in their play and conversation. Abbie sees this as an important part of learning: 'If children can become deeply involved in an activity, and are having spontaneous conversations linked to a target concept and vocabulary, then there will be rapid learning.'

### Lasting gains

It is one thing for children to develop new ideas and use words in the short-term, but we can only say they are truly learned if they remember and use them in the long-term. Six weeks later, Deepika and I asked the children to describe a giraffe and a snake. We were delighted to find that most of the children automatically responded: 'A giraffe is tall, and a snake is long.' Those that did not say it first time did so with a gentle reminder.

What had we learned? Mainly that any words can be taught, remembered and used as long as the concepts they represent are presented in an exciting way. Children who are given the chance to play and talk during equally exciting and related activities are likely to learn very quickly.

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## Key points

- Choose your concept. Link the concept to a few key vocabulary items
- Choose an exciting story or poem that illustrates the concept and vocabulary
- Plan fun activities that are related to the story, including recording the story, possibly onto CD
- Play with the children and encourage them to use the core vocabulary
- Plan to change the story and activities each week

### Useful resources

- StoryPhones and Easispeak digital microphones are widely available
- Stevens J (2008) *Maths in stories* ([www.beam.co.uk](http://www.beam.co.uk))
- Bromley H (2007) *50 exciting ideas for developing maths through stories*. Lawrence Educational: Birmingham