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Do you delve below the tip of the iceberg? Language for thinking and learning

Sandra Lennox

What are the similarities between an iceberg and language and literacy? Usually only about 10% of an iceberg is above the surface; the shape of the underwater portion is difficult to judge and can cause problems for the unwary. Identifying and providing the most effective support to foster early language and literacy skills can be equally hidden.

But language is complex. It is a tool for thinking and learning. Key skills developed during the early years are critical for success at school. Yet for many young children, gaps in vocabulary acquisition and development are well established before they enter school. Research confirms that these gaps are likely to grow more discrepant over time (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Sinatra, Zygouris-Coe & Dasinger, 2011). Nevertheless, in the early years, there is increasing pressure to focus attention on the tip of the iceberg – teaching and monitoring basic code-breaking aspects such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and phonics. Although these skills are important, they may sometimes dominate teaching, and potentially reduce attention given to aspects of learning that have a more pervasive and long-lasting effect. It is essential to devote attention to the less readily observable and assessable, ‘hidden elements’ including receptive and expressive language, vocabulary development and inferential language skills.

What do we know?

A wealth of evidence confirms the critical importance of oral language to long term literacy development and future life success (e.g. Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Wasik, Hindman & Snell, 2016). Recent literature (e.g. Barnes, Grifenhagen & Dickinson, 2016) also indicates young children’s oral language skills reflect two patterns of language use: casual talk (which serves daily living), and

academic talk (which involves use of more abstract, decontextualised language). It is the latter register that is predominantly used in learning and teaching, and which provides a necessary foundation for comprehension and school success.

What will make a difference?

1. The linguistic environment influences oral language development; high quality conversational interactions build children’s language skills (Neuman & Wright, 2013; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012-13).
2. Teachers’ language use and pedagogical knowledge can enhance or limit learning opportunities. This is especially critical for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom English is an additional language or dialect.

Silverman and Hartranft (2015) call for intentional instruction that requires children’s active thinking about word meanings and production of new words in conversation, so they can gradually transfer them to use in other contexts. Research offers clear guidance about strategies to increase vocabulary and inferential language (e.g. Neuman & Wright, 2013; Sinatra et al., 2011; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012-13).

How can we do it?

Interactive read-alouds, with both narrative and information books have long been recognised as a rich source to develop breadth and depth of vocabulary. Simply hearing words however, isn’t enough to build vocabulary to full potential. Young listeners find it challenging to attend to new words in a stream of speech. Although the context of the book provides implicit information about the meaning of words, children make greater gains when implicit and explicit instruction is combined. Teachers draw attention to novel or unfamiliar words and help active processing and review of words, with multiple opportunities to construct meaning.

This requires planning. Teachers must read books ahead of time and select a few interesting words to highlight. These words must be more sophisticated than those used in everyday conversations. They offer a more precise use of language, or are words that introduce new concepts and build world knowledge.

Adults can provide rich explanations that include multimodal input for selected 'target' words using the **Show-tell-relate strategy** outlined by Weitzman and Greenberg (2010).

Show

Show the meaning physically, by, for example, pointing to an illustration; showing a picture or a prop to clarify meaning, using facial expression or gestures; or changing the way you say the word.

Here is an example, using *Pig the pug* (Blabey, 2014). 'Pig was a Pug, and I'm sorry to say, he was greedy and selfish in most every way.'



Point to the illustration of Pig, salivating over his bowl of food.

'That word on his bowl says 'MINE'. I think he's going to eat that food all by himself. Someone who's selfish doesn't like to share!'

You are also modelling how text and pictures work together and how the illustration adds to the story, giving clues about Pig's character.

Tell – with a child-friendly definition

On this page of *Pig the pug*, it has: 'Pig would just grumble.' Explain with something like, 'when you grumble, you speak in an unhappy way, a bit like when you complain to your

mum to tell her you don't want to go to bed yet.'



Relate and review

Asking questions that promote active engagement with target words has been demonstrated to build depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge.

Sometimes play a game after reading and discussion. For example, say, 'In the story, Pig was very selfish. I'm going to say some sentences with our special word, *selfish*. You have to listen to see if you think the sentence sounds right and makes sense. Put your thumbs up if you think it's right, or thumbs down if it's not.' Ask a child to explain his/her response. Example sentences could include:

- *Am I selfish if I hide the Lego wheels so I can use them all?*
- *Am I selfish because I share my pencils?*

Think about ways words can be used:

- Expand words within a category, such as finding synonyms and antonyms for *selfish*, *greedy*, *grumble*.
- Study the concepts that underlie words, such as categories of dogs like pug or dachshund.

Teaching **clue words** helps children to 'take stock' and integrate ideas. Use of simple clue words, or linking words and phrases, can enhance both receptive and expressive language in the following ways:

- to recall story structure and sequence ideas (first, before, next, after, then, last);
- to compare and contrast (the same, like, different)

- to reason/give consequences (because, so), e.g., 'I think Pig is different from (or same as) Hairy Maclary because.....

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions can help young children move beyond labelling and describing. These questions elicit more talk and also allow for practice using newly acquired vocabulary in extended conversations that encourage speculation and inferential thinking (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012-13).

Examples of open-ended questions include:

- **Predict** (*What do you think might happen?*)
- **Explain or clarify** (*Why do you think...?*)
- **Visualise** (*What would you see/hear/feel if you could have a close-up view of Pig and Trevor once Pig had recovered from his fall?*)
- **Connect with emotions** (*How do you think Trevor felt when...?*)
- **Project** – to understand others' perspectives (*I wonder what Pig's thinking now?*)
- **Link to own experiences** (*Think of a time when you*)
- **Problem-solve** (*How could we find the answers to our some of our questions? e.g. Can you teach dogs to be kind?*)

In conclusion

When you build language, thinking and reasoning using these strategies, you are making a significant contribution to later literacy success. A rich vocabulary facilitates early reading. And, if you can't talk about it, you can't write about it; it underpins early writing too!

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