



Session 3

It is remarkable that three-year-olds who can't tie their shoes or cross the street alone have vocabularies of thousands of words.

-Erica Hoff-Ginsberg (1997)

Understanding Vocabulary Development

Learning Objectives

- ◇ **Define** the terms receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, and lexical diversity.
- ◇ **Demonstrate** awareness of the difference between quality and quantity of words with respect to children's vocabulary exposure.
- ◇ **Analyze** children's knowledge of words on a continuum of shallow knowledge to deep knowledge.
- ◇ **Reflect** on why young children's vocabulary development is important.
- ◇ **Describe** a strategy used during storybook reading that can boost children's learning of new words.

Overview

Vocabulary describes children's receptive and expressive lexicon of words. The word "lexicon" refers to the mental dictionary of words that sits in a child's head – the larger a child's lexicon (or mental dictionary), the larger his or her vocabulary! One's mental dictionary includes not only the words we express when talking (our expressive vocabulary) but also all the words we understand (our receptive vocabulary). Typically, a child's receptive vocabulary is slightly larger than his or her expressive vocabulary. For instance, a toddler may understand 200 words but use only 50 of these in conversations with others. Children develop a receptive lexicon of about 3,000 words before they enter kindergarten – which equates to acquiring about 600 new words per year!

The words young children learn during the course of early childhood include all major word classes, including:

- **Nouns:** words that label persons, places, and things (e.g., *brain, book, dog, money*)
- **Pronouns:** words that take the place of nouns (e.g., *he, her, you, it*)
- **Verbs:** words that signify an action or state of being (e.g., *will, wait, walk*)

- **Adverbs:** words that modify or provide information about verbs (e.g., *certainly, still, never, slowly*)
- **Adjectives:** words that modify or provide information about nouns (e.g., *Janet's, tenth, easy, beautiful*)
- **Prepositions:** words that connect nouns and pronouns to other nouns, pronouns, and verbs (e.g., *in, with, off, between*)
- **Conjunctions:** words that connect clauses and phrases to other clauses and phrases (e.g., *and, but, so, because*)

The important point to be made here is that young children's vocabulary – or mental lexicon – contains not only a very large number of entries by the end of early childhood, but it also contains words of many different types.

Children's vocabulary development begins very early in life. At birth, the infant understands and produces no words, but one short year later he or she understands between 30 and 150 words and produces between 1 and 20 words. By 18 months, some toddlers may understand 300 words and produce 150 words, although the more typical toddler understands about 150 words and produces 50 different words. What these figures tell us is that:

- Early vocabulary development happens fast.
- Vocabulary development is one of the most remarkable achievements of early childhood.

Vocabulary development is exciting and remarkable. It is a very important area of growth for the developing child – and is one we want to actively cultivate in our role as teachers.

Vocabulary is important because:

- Words are how children express themselves; their feelings, their ideas, their frustrations, their needs.
- Words are how children gather information from others, by asking and requesting.
- Words are what children use to play dramatically with others and to explore the world around them.
- Words are what children comprehend when they read at later ages. Vocabulary knowledge during early childhood is positively related to later skill in reading comprehension.



Children only learn words they hear. Therefore, children who hear only a small number of different words in their home and/or classroom have smaller vocabularies than children who hear lots of different words in their home and/or classroom. Early childhood educators need to ensure that they expose the children in their classrooms to a large **quantity** and **quality** of words.

◇ **Quantity** refers to the number of words children hear.

- Children in a classroom in which the teacher uses a large quantity of words may hear 1000 words per day.
- Children in a classroom in which the teacher uses a small quantity of words may hear only 200 words per day.

◇ **Quality** refers to the kinds of words children hear.

- Children in a classroom in which the teacher uses high-quality words hear many different kinds of words (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs). Many of these words are new to the children in that they have never heard them before. We call this *lexical diversity*, or one's use of many different words.
- Children in a classroom in which the teacher uses low-quality words do not hear many different kinds of words, and few of the words they hear are new to them.

Terms and Background Knowledge

Vocabulary

Receptive vocabulary – The vocabulary words one understands or comprehends.

Expressive vocabulary – The vocabulary words one uses or expresses.

Lexicon – The total number of words one understands and uses, also called one's mental dictionary.

Noun – Words that label persons, places, and things.

Verbs – Words that signify an action or state of being.

Lexical diversity – The use of many different words.

Listen and Learn

Activity 1. Assessing Children's Vocabulary

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 3, Activity 1* from the RIA DVD menu.

As we begin to think about the vocabulary of young children, it may be useful to think about some of the different words a young child uses. Listen to this 4-year-old's story and answer the following questions.

What are some interesting words that he used?

What are some words that he used over and over?

What are some nouns that he used?

What are some verbs that he used?

How would you characterize this child's lexical diversity?

Did the child use many different words in his story, or did he tend to use the same words over and over? What does this tell you about his vocabulary knowledge?

Activity 1. Assessing Children's Vocabulary – The Interesting Words Children Use



Activity 2. Learning Objectives

Review the learning objectives for the target domain of Vocabulary addressed in *Read It Again—PreK!* These include:

- To understand and use words for the names of unfamiliar objects (nouns), actions (verbs) and words that describe things and actions (adjectives and adverbs)
- To understand and use new words representing spatial concepts (e.g., *over, under, above, beside*)
- To understand and use new words representing time concepts (e.g., *first, second, third, before, after, then, during, once*)
- To talk about the meaning of new words, including how words can have more than one meaning
- To understand and use new words representing feelings (e.g., *embarrassed, disgusted, sad, joyful*)
- To understand and use new words representing thinking processes (e.g., *believe, dream, imagine, think, remember*)

Of these six objectives, which ones do you feel you address often in your daily instruction?

What teaching techniques or materials do you commonly use to address these objectives?

Which objectives do you tend not to address, and why?

Activity 2. Learning Objectives – Reviewing Vocabulary

What's New?

This lesson addresses two new topics related to vocabulary:

- ◇ When Do We Know a Word?
- ◇ Children With Small Vocabularies

Topic 1. When Do We Know a Word?

When do we actually “know” a word? This is important to think about given that the topic of this lesson is vocabulary **knowledge**! While we often presume that a child knows or does not know a certain word, it is actually the case that words come to be known gradually over time. It may take a long time for a child to really **know** a word.

Consider the five words in the first column of the table below, and, for each, identify how well you **know** it by placing a check mark in the column that best reflects your knowledge of the word.

Topic 1. When Do We Know a Word?

	(1) I've never heard it before...	(2) I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means...	(3) I recognize it, it has something to do with...	(4) I know it, it means...
Tawdry				
Boisterous				
Askew				
Pontificate				
Concordance				

(Column headers adapted from work by Curtis, 1987.)

For those words for which you checked the second column (*I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means...*) or the third column (*I recognize it, it has something to do with...*), would you say that you **know** these words? Or, does **knowing** a word mean that you have to be able to define it, as is the case for the words for which you marked the fourth column (*I know it, it means...*)?

As this exercise is meant to demonstrate, our knowledge of a specific word is not always complete. Although there are some words that we know at a deep level (column four), there are many other words with which we are familiar but we know in only a shallow way. In fact, knowledge of a word usually moves gradually over time from very shallow knowledge to very deep knowledge:



Children are exposed to many new words every day as they build their lexicons. For them to actually come to know a word, they may have to hear it a number of times in a number of different contexts. Each of the words they learn will move along a pathway from shallow knowledge (*I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means...*) to deep knowledge (*I know it, it means...*). One goal of the early childhood educator is to ensure that children hear a variety of words many different times and in many different contexts, so that they can achieve deep knowledge of vocabulary.

Listen and Learn

Activity 3. Assessing Vocabulary Knowledge

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 3, Activity 3* from the RIA DVD menu.

Listen to this 4-year-old define a few different words and think about how well each word is known.

- For which words does she exhibit no knowledge?

- For which words does she exhibit shallow knowledge?

- For which words does she exhibit deep knowledge?

- Are there any words you were surprised she did not know?

Activity 3: Assessing Vocabulary Knowledge: From Shallow to Deep

Take Note!

This activity tested not only the child's knowledge of nouns (e.g., *stove, ear, pocket, flower*) but also her knowledge of adjectives and verbs, which describe objects and their functions.

"What do you do with a stove?"
"Why do people plant flowers?"

Take Note!

While this child had a relatively easy time identifying many of the pictures in this book, one task type was particularly difficult for her. Did you notice what was different about this task? It involved category names!

"Cherry, apple, banana, orange...
What's a name for all of these things?" *Fruit.*

Topic 2. Children with Small Vocabularies

Some children have relatively small vocabularies when compared to their age-matched peers. This may be because:

1. The child hears relatively few vocabulary words in his or her primary caregiving environment.
2. The child has a language or cognitive disability that makes it hard to learn new words.
3. The child is learning English as a second language.

We need to be concerned about children who have small vocabularies because they may find it difficult to converse effectively with others. They may have difficulties getting their needs met and may become frustrated when trying to communicate their needs and interests. Likewise, vocabulary knowledge is important to children as they become readers. Part of reading involves comprehension, which is an understanding of what is read. Children who have limited vocabularies find it difficult to comprehend what they read, and therefore have a hard time reading for meaning.

Children who have very small vocabularies will benefit from increased opportunities to hear new words (words that are not in their lexicon). One way to do this is to read books with them and to pause when reading to talk very explicitly about words they may not know. This explicit talk might look like this:

Teacher (reading): The animals all **gazed** at the small bird.

Teacher: The animals **gazed** at the bird. **Gaze** means to look at something for a long time, to look at it very seriously. Have you ever *gazed* at something?

Student: I **gaze** at the book.

Teacher: Right, you are **gazing** at the book! I am too! Let's say the word together:

Teacher and Students: **Gaze.**

Think about the word this teacher selected for discussion: *gaze*. This word might seem a little difficult for preschool children. However, as a general rule of thumb, as long as a child can understand the meaning of a word or its underlying concept, it can be taught. The word *gaze*, which means to look at something intently and seriously, is something even young children can understand. When teaching new words to young children, we want to teach two different kinds of words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002):

Topic 2. Children with Small Vocabularies

Basic words—Basic high frequency words that children use to express themselves in everyday conversations (e.g., *cat, light, drink, go, father, ear, pretty, mean*).

Interesting words—Lower frequency words that children use to express themselves with precision and to comprehend the language of books (e.g., *gaze, squint, fever, boring, awful, considerate*).

Listen and Learn

Activity 4. Assessing Vocabulary

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 3, Activity 4* from the RIA DVD menu.

Watch the 4-year-old being read a storybook.

What five specific words does the educator try to teach him?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Which words, if any, did the child seem to learn?

Which words did the child seem to have difficulty with?

Which of these words are interesting words and which are basic words?

Interesting: _____

Basic: _____

Now, listen to what we have to say:

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 3, Activity 4 Discussion* from the RIA DVD menu.

Activity 4. Assessing Vocabulary Through Reading

Reflect and Apply

Reflect

1. Think about a child in your classroom. Write that child's name here: _____.

How often in a given week do you explicitly try to teach this child new words?

Do you think this is enough opportunity for this child to strengthen his or her vocabulary knowledge?

2. Look at the six vocabulary knowledge objectives addressed in *Read It Again–PreK!*

- To understand and use words for the names of unfamiliar objects (nouns), actions (verbs) and words that describe things and actions (adjectives and adverbs)
- To understand and use new words representing spatial concepts (e.g., *over, under, above, beside*)
- To understand and use new words representing time concepts (e.g., *first, second, third, before, after, then, during, once*)
- To talk about the meaning of new words, including how words can have more than one meaning
- To understand and use new words representing feelings (e.g., *embarrassed, disgusted, sad, joyful*)
- To understand and use new words representing thinking processes (e.g., *believe, dream, imagine, think, remember*)

Which of these objectives do you give the most attention to in your classroom? Why?

Which of these objectives do you give the least attention to? Why?

What could you do this week in order to provide additional opportunities for children in your classroom to learn this objective?

3. Which children in your classroom, in your opinion, have small vocabularies?

What do you think is the reason for this?

Which children in your classroom, in your opinion, have large vocabularies?

What do you think is the reason for this?

Apply

1. Read a storybook to all of the children in your classroom, stopping to talk about five interesting words during reading. Refer to Topic 2 for instructional guidelines.

Did you feel that this was a helpful way of developing children's vocabulary knowledge?

Did you feel that this approach detracted from the storybook reading session?

2. Engage the children in your classroom in a discovery activity early this week that is focused on nature (e.g., hibernation, thunder and lightning). Select five words specific to the nature activity and use these words repeatedly in your classroom for the entire week. At the end of the week, select a few children and “test” their knowledge of the target words by asking them what they mean.

Were the five words learned by the children?

Were there differences among the children in how many words were learned? If so, why do you think these differences occurred?

3. Ask four children in your classroom to define each of the following words and write down their responses (do this activity individually with each child).

Students =>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
antelope				
boring				
cavity				
front				
far				

Study each child's responses and identify each word as

- (a) known at a deep level,
- (b) known at a shallow level, or
- (c) not known.

How many words did each child know at a deep level compared to those known at a shallow level?

Were there differences among children in their performance on this activity? If so, why do you think these differences occurred?

Resources

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