The Word Gap

In the Age of Common Core Standards

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Tip of the iceberg
- Knowledge
- Symbolic representations
- Build concepts
Vocabulary is THE strongest predictor of children’s achievement.

- Not only in elementary school but in high school.
Risk factors

- Children of poor, marginalized populations
- Children of families who speak a language other than English
- Mother’s education
Hart and Risley...
Poverty
2007 results from National Assessment of Educational Progress at 4th Grade

Overall, 34% of 4th graders performed **below the Basic** Level of Proficiency in 17,600 schools

- **White**: 23%
- **Black**: 54%
- **Hispanic**: 51%
- **Poor**: 50%
- **Non-poor**: 21%

**NAEP 2012**
- Cumulative model of expectations
- Academic Vocabulary
- Building knowledge through texts
- Creating cross-textual experiences
- Integrating technology and print
- A focus on evidence
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percent below Basic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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The numbers are larger than you can imagine

No. of words children will need to know
The problem

“A space probe is an unpiloted spacecraft that leaves Earth’s orbit to explore the Moon, planets, asteroids, comets, or other objects in outer space as directed by onboard computers and/or instructions sent from Earth.”

Grade 6 text
- ‘asteroid’
- ‘comet’
- ‘Atmospheric conditions’
- ‘space probes’

- What is similar about them?
- Children are ‘word sponges’
- They learn words through day-to-day activities
- “I do it all the time”
- Schools are poor places to develop vocabulary
- Vocabulary is resistant to change
- Oral language development is highly amendable to instruction
- Meta-analyses of 65 studies indicate ES=.94
- Must begin early on (before preK)
- Must be meaningful to children
- Must remember that oral language instruction is foundational for learning other skills

Research base
How do children learn words?

- They need to become ‘word conscious’
- Frequency of encounters
- Word learning needs to be connected to developing knowledge networks
What we see too often

- Word selection from core reading program
  - Platypus
  - Around
  - OR:
  - Ride
  - move

- Question: are these words important?

What we see too often
Poorest children often end up in classrooms where the oral language is most impoverished.

Study of 55 kindergarten classrooms indicated that the richest oral language environment occurred in classrooms of middle- and upper-middle children.
Creating a vocabulary rich environment
Creating cozy spots for reading
curiosity
- Purposeful talk: Why do you think?
- Challenging words: meterologist
- Extend and clarify
- “Taking it up a notch”
  - Compare/contrast
  - If/then

Oral language
Eye to eye instruction
Most powerful way to promote language development and content rich instruction

- Books
- Teachers

Shared Book reading
o INSTEAD: insects, antennae, segments, legs

o Parts of the body: brain, heart, lungs

Knowledge networks
Traditionally, much instruction has been designed around themes.
We teach children words and content in categories.

- Living things
  - Insect
    - Moth
    - Mosquito
  - Reptile
    - Wasp
    - Alligator
Collections of different genres to support our vocabulary teaching sequence.

Collections of books that focus on a concept or a topic”
○ Predictable book

○ Rhyming books

○ Narrative nonfiction (storybook)

○ Informational books

Text Set Progression
New words
- Call and response; choral reading
- Closed-ended questions
- Open-ended questions
To summarize

- Teach content-rich words +
- Make sure these words are related in categories (to form a semantic network)

= SELF TEACHING DEVICE

  Ex: Is a spider an insect? A spider has 8 legs, and all others have 6, so it is not a spider
Why is it powerful?

- Supports word knowledge and conceptual development
- Enables children to develop ‘inter-textual links’ as they compare and contrast across genres
- Helps them to learn the ‘features of information books.’
Reducing disparities

Principles:
- The notion of acceleration
- Content-rich vocabulary
- Organization of word knowledge
- Use of text sets
- Gradual release of control
- Lots of practice and distributed review
- Don’t be afraid of challenging students; they love it!
Contact information

Book: All About Words (Teachers’ College Press, 2013)

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