

Dispelling Myths and Reinforcing Facts About Early Oral Language Development & Instruction

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One of the better-documented facts in education is that learning gaps can emerge very early and that children who are not given the opportunity of a good start usually do not thrive later on. A good oral language foundation, however, can level the learning field for all children. Language is the key to all subsequent learning; it is the door to the world of knowledge and ideas for young children. But what does good oral language instruction look like? The following short statements represent myths that have been perpetuated about oral language development and facts (or key principles) that characterize high quality vocabulary instruction.

1. Teachers have to be intentional about choosing words to teach in order for children to build their vocabulary.

FACT: So little time, so many words...

Teachers must carefully select the words they plan to teach. It's best to focus on high-utility but sophisticated words such as "fortunate" instead of "lucky." Also, teachers must consider content-related words very early on; such words will serve as anchors for developing knowledge in key subject areas. For instance, science vocabulary words such as compare, contrast, observe, and predict; these are fundamental inquiry words used across subject areas. Introducing students to these words helps them to build knowledge that is essential for learning systematically from texts.

2. There is a vocabulary explosion period in a child's language development.

MYTH: Word learning is cumulative.

Word learning is perceived to start rather slowly, then at about 16 months or when a child learns about 50 words, all of a sudden, there seems to be a "vocabulary explosion" or "word spurt" – a time when children dramatically increase their ability to acquire new words. Recent evidence, however, does not support this view. By contrast, it suggests that children accumulate words at a *constant* rate and that it is the written and verbal use of these words that accelerates. Thus, the course of word learning has little to do with explosions,

bursts, or spurts; word learning is constant and cumulative. This means that the optimal time for oral vocabulary instruction and development is not limited to the toddler years; it occurs *before, during* and *after* those years.

3. Reading storybooks is sufficient for oral vocabulary development.

MYTH: Exposure to words through book reading may not be potent enough.

Reading books to children is a powerful strategy for vocabulary development, but recent studies have begun to question whether the technique is substantial enough to boost all children's language development. Several meta-analyses have reported only small to moderate effects of book reading on vocabulary growth, which suggests that exposure to words through storybooks may not be potent enough, particularly for at-risk students. This means that teachers will need to augment read-aloud experiences with more intentional strategies that require children to process words at deeper levels of understanding.

4. Teachable moments – or informal opportunities to engage children in word learning – are sufficient for explaining word meanings.

MYTH: Teachers need to be much more strategic about vocabulary instruction.

Most teachers try to consciously engage children in active experiences that involve lots of conversation throughout the day. Teachable moments are informal opportunities to engage children in word learning, similar to the types of language exchanges that occur between parents and children. But repetition is key here –and teachers, unlike parents, don't always have this luxury. Teachers need to adopt a much more strategic approach to vocabulary instruction. Children need planned, sequenced, and systematic vocabulary instruction. This means selecting words, concepts, and ideas that matter most right from the very beginning and focusing on those throughout the early years.

5. The vocabulary scope and sequence in core reading programs generally have a good selection of words for oral vocabulary instruction.

MYTH: Many programs have a haphazard approach to vocabulary instruction.

Neuman and colleagues examined the prevalence of oral vocabulary instruction in core reading programs at the pre-K level, finding a dearth of instructional

guidance for teachers, despite some “mentioning” of words. The elementary grades are much different; although there is greater attention to words, there is a tremendous disparity across curricula. Until appropriate materials are developed and made available consistently, teachers will have to rely on research-based principles to ensure that students receive the oral language instruction they need.

6. Children need both explicit and implicit instruction to learn the meaning of words.

FACT: Children who are given friendly definitions of words are more likely to remember them.

Prior to the beginning of a story, for example, a teacher might begin by introducing several words that are integral to the story. While vocabulary gains are higher when words are identified explicitly, the largest gains occur when teachers provide both explicit *and* implicit instruction. In other words, when teachers make children aware of the meaning of the words and engage them in using those words in a specific relevant context.

7. Children Are Word Sponges.

MYTH: Word learning requires many exposures over an extended period of time.

Children seem to pick up words so prodigiously and effortlessly that, too often, word learning has been assumed to occur naturally. But there is ample evidence to suggest that word learning is complex and incremental. Think about children’s struggles to understand color words. It is not until about age four that most children accurately apply individual color terms. Typically, words such as red or yellow can appear early in children’s vocabulary; but the application of these words may be haphazard and interchangeable. Word learning requires many exposures over an extended period of time. With each additional exposure, the word may become incrementally closer to being fully learned.

8. Words should be taught in categories, based around their inclusion in a larger category.

FACT: Children learn best when words are presented in integrated contexts that make sense to them.

Words represent the tip of the iceberg; underlying them is a set of emerging interconnections and concepts. It is the rich network of concepts and facts accompanying these words that aids in children's comprehension. Helping children to learn new words in clusters that represent knowledge networks has been shown to strongly support children's inferential reasoning and comprehension. Teaching words this way also aids in retention thereby accelerating word learning. Children learn best when words are presented in integrated contexts that make sense to them.

9. A child only needs to hear a word three times in order to learn it.

MYTH: Children need many more encounters with new words than previously suspected.

Children are most likely to learn the words they hear the most. Findings from a large number of correlational studies on language have shown that frequency of exposure strongly predicts word learning. Although this finding is often mentioned in the literature, what is new is that we may have underestimated the amount of frequency required to learn words. Research by Pinkham, Neuman and Lillard (2011) suggests that children need many more encounters with new words than previously suspected. In addition to repetition and rich explanation of newly encountered words, video and dynamic visuals/sounds can help children learn by clarifying and adding more information.

10. Teachers should have ongoing professional development in oral vocabulary instruction to ensure that children make significant, accelerated gains.

FACT: Only skilled teachers can significantly improve large gaps in children's oral vocabulary development.

Children's oral vocabulary development can be significantly improved through intervention. However, research has shown that untrained teachers and teachers with limited educational backgrounds are not as effective in helping children make significant gains in vocabulary. This finding highlights the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers and aides who regularly work with children.

Note: If you are interested in learning more about the research supporting these ideas, check out *All About Words* (2013) by Susan B. Neuman and Tanya S. Wright (pages 5-17).