Closing the word gap:
Developing and implementing a whole-school vocabulary policy

Includes practical whole-school strategies for enriching students’ vocabulary
Closing the word gap: a whole-school vocabulary policy

A former head of department and English Advisor for Devon, Richard Durant is a widely published author of textbooks and teaching guides, and a long-standing Teachit contributor.

Drawing on his experiences in educational leadership and management, Richard shares his ideas for developing a whole-school vocabulary policy for primary and secondary schools.

From taking your first steps to key advice for policy implementation and staff training, he also offers a range of practical strategies for enriching students’ vocabulary.

Whether you are a senior or middle leader, a lead practitioner, a SENDCo, a literacy coordinator, or a teacher with a special interest in children’s literacy, you’ll find suggestions to help you to close the word gap in your school.

Section 1: First steps to developing a vocabulary policy

We know from reading Why Closing the Word Gap Matters that primary and secondary teachers believe that many students are disadvantaged by a word gap that widens throughout their schooling. Teachers in your school are already addressing this problem in a variety of ways, but a systematic approach to closing the word gap across the whole school is likely to make the efforts of individual teachers more rewarding and more effective.

Here are some suggestions to help you to take the first steps to develop a meaningful vocabulary policy in your school.

1. Early leadership

How the ground is prepared is a matter of leadership. Vocabulary is part of literacy and literacy is part of learning. Vocabulary therefore connects to the core focus of school leadership – learning. As Geoff Barton points out:

‘Headteachers and principals need to act as leaders of learning. Whatever the other distractions, learning must be our core business. We set the tone for it. We make it happen in our schools. Thus we all need to know why literacy matters, and to ensure that someone in our leadership team relentlessly moves the literacy agenda forward, translating good intentions into action.’ (OUP, 2018)

Most staff will not need persuading that the vocabulary gap needs closing, so at this point the most important leadership facets are vision, credibility, and responsiveness. A strong and enduring policy will be shaped out of existing expertise and excellent practice, and you need to know what those are. You can listen and find out ‘relentlessly’! Talking to teachers and students will be the best way to clarify the issues around vocabulary so that an emerging policy seems credible to all and authentic to your context.
2. **Key questions**

Before launching a whole-school vocabulary policy, it is worth considering and discussing a range of key questions:

- Why is it important to improve children's vocabulary?
- What sorts of vocabulary should we help students to acquire?
- What methods are already being used?
- How would we know if these methods are effective? What measures of effectiveness should we use?
- What is the typical quality of spoken interactions between teachers and students? How does this vary according to student and according to teacher?
- How would a wider vocabulary enrich students' reading and writing?
- How would a vocabulary development policy relate to existing initiatives and common practices in the school?

Schools throughout the country are starting similar discussions, and you will want to interrogate the questions fully as teachers and explore their relevance for your students.

3. **Lay the groundwork for a vocabulary development policy**

The real groundwork for a word gap policy involves a process of finding out, sharing experiences and perceptions, and building a widespread focus on the issue. It also builds anticipation and a renewed sense of togetherness. Finally, and most importantly, it develops a shared commitment to the issue. You are much more likely to shrink or close the word gap if:

- teachers are emotionally as well as intellectually committed to the policy; in other words, you feel the importance of the issue, as well as agreeing with it
- teachers have a shared understanding of the issue and a shared enthusiasm for doing something about it.

The groundwork phase – prior to developing and implementing the policy – helps to nourish this shared commitment, which is also a shared responsibility:

> ‘Pupils' acquisition and command of vocabulary are key to their learning and progress across the whole curriculum.’ (DfE, 2014)

*Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* is a useful reference point for clarifying the issue and identifying practical ways to move forward. It found a groundswell of opinion that the word gap is a real and urgent phenomenon. Large numbers of both primary and secondary teachers in the OUP survey shared their belief that the number of students with a limited vocabulary is increasing year-on-year, with disastrous effects on test results and on children’s life chances. Despite these consequences, ‘38% of secondary school teachers surveyed said that they were unable to provide specific vocabulary support. Most cited insufficient time and not enough additional teaching support as the main challenges.’ (OUP, 2018)

A practical and supportive policy is therefore likely to be universally welcomed in your school.
4. Write a draft policy

Careful groundwork will lay secure foundations for a lasting policy. Initially, it's worth publishing a draft policy. Be prepared to revise the policy substantially in the light of practice in order to encourage the trialling, experimenting, and failure-risking that will eventually underpin a strong whole-school policy.

The draft policy should be accompanied by an interim action plan, as you identify key staff, set up a steering group, and choose your priorities. It provides a clear reference point by establishing key elements:

- the rationale for a vocabulary development policy
- the vision and aims – what you want to achieve
- how the policy will be monitored
- how progress will be measured and key indicators
- what key actions will be taken, by whom, and when.

Rationale

The benefits of developing children's vocabulary are clearly defined in *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* and the academic studies referenced in the OUP report. Share these key findings where appropriate, but teacher testimony should also be a prominent (and motivating) feature of the rationale. Try to include brief quotations from your own staff, and include insights gleaned from your students as well. Everyone knows that the word gap needs bridging; local testimony makes staff, students and stakeholders feel it too.

Vision and aims

Your school vision will, of course, relate to your rationale. It will offer a picture of a better future that is both believable and challenging. However, you must be specific about some things that the policy is aimed at achieving. For example, you might express a vision of a word-rich school community in which everyone feels listened to and no one feels tongue-tied. In the first instance, though, your aim might be to ensure that all students are familiar with the core vocabulary of particular subject areas and can confidently define and use those words.

Observing and monitoring

Observation and monitoring will depend on your vision and aims, but they need to be as specific as possible. Not everything needs monitoring all the time. For example, you might decide to monitor progress in subject terminology through peer observation and discussion, prescribing a qualitative approach. Give priority to intelligent, supportive monitoring that nourishes commitment and debate as much as it provides data. Whatever the case, put necessary resources behind it.

Measuring progress

This again must be directly related to vision and aims. It is important to decide at the outset the criteria for progress. For example, if you aim to improve the use of subject-specific vocabulary in teacher and classroom talk, then you need to have already decided on the indicators of improvement. Perhaps you will use teacher observations to record progress throughout an academic year. Whether you choose to use qualitative and/or quantitative data, you need to have debated and decided on your school’s approach in advance.

Key actions: who, what, and when?

At this point, not all staff will necessarily be involved. In fact, there are advantages to making the draft policy a limited pilot so that any lessons can be learned before rolling it out across the school. However, those staff who are involved at this stage need to be clear about what is expected of them and what support they will get. They also need to be very clear about timescales.
5. Key people and relationships

A crucial aspect of a draft policy is that it should build towards a permanent one. If the draft policy is a limited pilot, then it must be designed to be scalable. To ensure that the policy thrives, grows, and embeds over time, it needs to be launched and led by the school leadership team.

In a very small school, this will probably be the headteacher, unless the school has very good structural links with other schools, in which case it might be possible for one leader to assume responsibility across a MAT or other school partnership. Whatever the format of the leadership team, you will benefit from recruiting an internal expert or enthusiast as a vocabulary advocate who can help to advise and facilitate the policy work and implementation. This advocate will need to be a good communicator and practitioner who is both knowledgeable and highly committed.

Larger schools will/might have other people who must be actively involved, for example, the SENDCo, literacy coordinator, lead practitioner, etc. If you have additional expertise in your school, recruit a small steering group of advocates. The guiding principle should be that the vocabulary development policy should not step on people's toes but should be a new source of invigoration for them. If vocabulary is part of literacy and literacy is part of learning, the relationships between these areas must be recognised, and so must the relevant roles and structures. If the SENDCo is in charge of literacy development, then a successful vocabulary development policy must fit within their remit.

The larger the school, the more complex the relationships within it, and the greater the need for policy consistency. Middle leaders are crucial to students’ progress in subject areas. Even in a pilot, middle leaders will enable and support the activity of the staff they lead. They need to be actively involved in generating, trialling, and refining the vocabulary policy.

6. Steering group

If vocabulary development really is going to be a priority, then a steering group – probably composed of the key people above – will be useful. One difficulty is that the people you will need to be part of the group are likely to be substantially committed to other areas of activity already. Perhaps you could make this group time-limited, such as by meeting every half term for an hour for one year. Their function would be to oversee the monitoring and refinement of the draft policy as it evolves into a permanent one.

7. Choosing priorities

There are so many ways you could try to raise vocabulary levels in your school. Where do you start? Will you focus on direct vocabulary instruction? Or creating contexts that are favourable to vocabulary acquisition? Or intervening with identified individuals? You will find a variety of methods to close the word gap in a range of different contexts below, but it is important that you develop your own understandings around the issue and that you don’t try anything and everything.

Alongside wisdom accrued from your own experience, research will provide a useful academic framework for you to draw on when determining priorities, and Why Closing the Word Gap Matters is an invaluable point of reference.

Another useful source is a 2010 report by the US National Reading Technical Assistance Centre, A Review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction. Although the review emphasises the early years, many of its insights are applicable or adaptable throughout the primary and secondary years. One of the key findings of this synthesis of prior research is that using a variety of methods and experiences optimises vocabulary acquisition.
Here is a summary of the report’s other key findings:

- **Context**
  Introduce children to any challenging words that they are about to meet in a class text. Repeatedly exposing children to the same words and in different contexts is important as children best learn words by encountering them in a variety of meaningful contexts.

- **Which words to teach?**
  The words chosen for teaching should be those that the student will find useful in many contexts. They can usefully include high-frequency words known and used by mature language users.

- **Active engagement in learning words**
  Learning through mere repetition or drilling of words is not effective. Vocabulary learning is effective when it entails active engagement that goes beyond a word's definition to explore its relationship with other words, and how it functions in different contexts.

- **Teacher–student spoken interaction**
  Scaffolding questions and moving from low-demand questions to high-demand questions promotes greater gains in vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction is enhanced by good teacher–student activities and interaction.

- **Learning through reading**
  Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning so reading volume is very important in terms of long-term vocabulary development. Reading aloud, discussion about reading, and independent reading experiences at school and at home can encourage vocabulary growth.
Section 2: Implementing a whole-school policy

1. Scaling up and accountability

If you started small with a draft policy, then now is the time to start scaling up and putting a full vocabulary development policy in place. Almost all the procedures associated with making the first steps successful also apply in this later phase: the structures, plans, leadership, and relationships are still just as important. There will now, though, be a greater emphasis on accountability. Eventual success will depend on consistency in the basics by all staff. However, even at this point, the aim should be to build and shape practice over time and to encourage and perhaps license some experimentation.

Don’t overwhelm teachers with a litany of items that they must include in their teaching straight away and for all time, or other important things might fall off their agenda.

2. Getting and keeping teachers engaged

Training and monitoring have to be thoughtfully planned and easy to implement and manage. More crucially, they have to be beneficial to teachers and their students. Like professionals in all fields, teachers are drawn towards things that seem to work, so identifying and eliminating ineffective practice quickly, while celebrating and spreading effective practice, is a vital component of this phase of the policy.

Engaging teachers in the short, medium and longer term is also essential. Subject teachers at secondary level will naturally be excited by any approaches that help to develop students’ understanding of key subject vocabulary, and an initial subject-specific emphasis might help to recruit teachers, leading to a joined-up approach across the curriculum and across year groups and key stages.

Three sorts of vocabulary need to be considered:

i. subject-specific vocabulary, e.g. in design and technology: construct, prototype, alignment

ii. cross-curricular conceptual vocabulary, e.g. despite, imply, analyse, however

iii. words that mean different things in different contexts, e.g. product, analyse, tolerance.

3. ‘High-vis’ initiatives

Make sure that the launch and initial implementation of the policy are noticed. Avoid gimmicks, but some ‘high-vis’ initiatives alongside subtler adjustments to routine classroom practice can be helpful in launching and occasionally refreshing a whole-school policy.

Choose such initiatives carefully according to their perceived relevance to the vision and aims, and their practicality. For example, a medium-sized primary school might place sheets of sugar paper and markers around the school with a word that means different things in different contexts written in the middle of each sheet. Students could be invited to write a web of definitions of the word, along with subject and other contextual information, plus sample sentences. Secondary leaders might shudder with horror about what such an activity might lead to. Fine. Do something else.

Here are some suggestions for ‘high-vis’ initiatives:

- word search contests
- word of the week: all staff wear a badge showing a word they particularly like
- funding the library for new, high-interest books
• reopen the library with someone famous coming in to lead the ceremony
• volume reading competitions with books pitched at different levels and knowledge quizzes at the end
• word games played out publicly at lunchtime.

4. Training

Staff working in schools generally already have the level of vocabulary that many of their students lack. Teachers just need to be made newly aware of the importance of sharing this vocabulary in effective ways and of modelling new vocabulary. All school adults need to become more conscious of the role of vocabulary in students’ development and in their academic performance. Part of this process is about becoming more sensitive to the issues surrounding language development. Here are a few perspectives that it would be useful for the whole staff team to be aware of:

Tiers of vocabulary

We can see vocabulary as inhabiting tiers or levels, as Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown identified (1985):

**Tier 1**

words are basic words used often in everyday conversation, e.g. *go, play, weather*. Some young children need help with acquiring these, while many of their peers will arrive at school very well equipped with everyday words.

**Tier 2**

words are complex words that are more likely to occur in academic settings, e.g. *compare, neutral, specific*.

**Tier 3**

words are highly specialised, subject-specific words, e.g. *isosceles, government*.

Another significant subset of vocabulary consists of words that – confusingly – mean different things in different contexts, e.g. *place, space, prime, revolution*.

Plain words as well as ‘big’ words

Teachers should introduce more complex, formal words, but they should also choose the clearest, most appropriate, and most accessible words for the classroom context. It is important not to imply to children that big words are better words. Speaking like you’ve swallowed a thesaurus is silly – as the character Joey in *Friends* demonstrated when he used ‘full-sized aortic pump’ instead of ‘big heart’. Watching this short episode from *Friends* is a useful and light-hearted starting point for a wider discussion with staff about appropriate vocabulary. As Joey fails to grasp, the best word is generally the most appropriate word for your audience. Our role as teachers is to help students by choosing carefully between synonyms and to explore the appropriacy of words in different spoken and written contexts.

Respect children’s own language

There are many words that children use that are completely unfamiliar to literate adults. To have this lexicon effectively ruled out must be dispiriting and perhaps makes the teacher’s own offered lexicon both intimidating and alien. To help colleagues see vocabulary acquisition from the students’ perspective, give them lists of vocabulary that may be familiar to students and not to them. Translate parts of a familiar text into ‘youth speak’. How does this make them feel about the text and the exercise of reading it? This might be similar to the daily experience of students when encountering new, and potentially intimidating, words.
Section 3: Practical whole-school strategies for enriching students’ vocabulary

Many of the following suggestions can be adapted for use across all the key stages. One of the most important considerations for classroom practitioners is choosing and adapting methods according to their suitability and relevance to your students, whatever their age.

Language – and its vocabulary – are social in use and socially learned. Most of the strategies suggested below are enhanced by having students talk and think together about new words, their meanings, and how these vary according to context.

Using a variety of methods will help to optimise vocabulary acquisition, and encouraging an exploratory approach should help to excite students as they discover new words.

1. Use context to deepen understanding

Students need to develop a deeper understanding of significant words. This means knowing how a word’s meaning can vary according to context, e.g. the noun *place* differs in meaning from the verb *to place*, even though the words’ meanings are related. *Solution* means different things in the context of chemistry and crossword puzzles. Deep understanding also means appreciating that synonyms can have different shades of meaning from each other, e.g. *overweight* and *fat* mean the same but can have different effects.

- **Introduce a range of meaningful contexts.** When you introduce a new or very important word that children may be unsure of, plan to expose children to the word repeatedly and in different contexts. Children best learn words by coming across them in varied, meaningful contexts. For example, you could introduce *train* (the noun, a vehicle) and *train* (the verb, to train a dog) on the same day.

- **Explore words in the context of books and subjects, and in everyday usage.** Compare the different meanings and effects of words in different, naturally occurring contexts. Prompt students to think about where else they have come across a word you want to draw attention to.

- **Use word clues.** Encourage students to try to work out the meaning of unknown words in a text by using the context to find clues about a word’s meaning. For example, *unworthy* includes the word *worth* and the prefix *un-*. Students are likely to have some understanding of both of those elements before they encounter *unworthy*. Making use of prior word knowledge will give them clues about the meaning of a ‘new’ word. This approach might seem time-consuming, but what you are doing is arming children for those times when they encounter a significant new word on their own. This is important from the early years right through to sitting a GCSE exam. We need to build children’s ability and willingness to make educated guesses at the meanings of words and to know that it is OK not to know what every word means.

- **Model how to use dictionaries and thesauruses.** Get students more sensitised to the effect of words by helping them to explore the connotations of different synonyms. Take some dramatic sentences from a story or newspaper report, and ask students to suggest alternatives for some of the emotive words and phrases. For example, show students the following headline:

  Gang runs riot through school

Ask students in pairs or groups to explore synonyms for the word *gang*. When they have shared their ideas (e.g. *group, crowd, tribe, crew, mob, band, horde*), students could arrange themselves into ‘heat order’ – the hottest, most dramatic, most emotive word on the left; the coolest, least engaging word on the right. If you get other students to do the rearranging, you create another good opportunity to practise precise vocabulary: ‘Sadia, move three places to the left; Harry, change places with Isla, please.’ This activity is a good opportunity for practising thesaurus use, which can be problematic. The emphasis should be on rediscovering words they already know, rather than finding bizarre (and often inappropriate) synonyms.
1. Play 'beat the author'. Give students a text (preferably not a particularly well-written one) with certain words highlighted. Ask them to find suitable alternative words and then justify why their choice beats that of the original author. Make thesauruses available, but do not insist on their use. The text could be non-fiction as well as fiction.

2. Role-play speech. Encourage children to role-play speech in varied contexts for different purposes.

3. Develop affective vocabulary. The vocabulary of things, actions, and processes is very important, but we should not overlook developing children's affective vocabulary – the words we use to label and express our feelings. With younger children, show the class an evocative photograph and talk it through with them. Who is in the picture? What are their feelings? What are the surroundings like? How can we describe facial expressions, the weather, and the landscape? Gather together the more interesting/useful words in a word bank, and ask students to select from them during a writing activity based on the picture.

4. Active engagement in learning words

Research suggests that learning through mere repetition or drilling of words is not effective. Vocabulary learning is most useful when it entails active engagement that goes beyond a word’s definitional knowledge to its logical relationship with other words and how it functions in different contexts. Getting students to engage actively with vocabulary also supports their contextual learning.

5. Illustrate words. In the early years, use animations or pictures to illustrate words or phrases in a book. For example, you could animate (and get children to animate) the word anxiously in the sentence, ‘she searched anxiously’.

6. Mime words. Give children different actions to mime in the manner of a given adverb. Other children can work out the adverb. For example, you might ask a child to mime brushing her hair, walking a dog, or drinking some water happily or grumpily.

3. Explore word structures

Exploring word structures is important in helping students to tackle new words.

7. Identify core words. The simplest activity is to ask students to identify the core word within a longer one: for example, beauty within beautify; help in unhelpful; move in movement.

8. Explore prefixes and suffixes. Identifying a word’s core naturally leads to exploring the affixes that transfer between words: in-, anti-, phon-, tele-, multi- (prefixes) or -ful, -ation, -ing, -ly (suffixes). Ask students to make new words by adding affixes – for example, they might invent antiboring, prewalk, uply, hammerish – and reflect on the meanings and possible uses of such newly coined words.

9. Play word games. Word Without End (also called Ghosts) is a team game that is good for getting students to jointly and competitively explore spellings. It is also an absorbing way to help students pool their implicit word knowledge, including their understanding of word structure. See the instructions on the next page for a full explanation of the game. It’s complicated to explain, but after a few practice runs almost all students get the hang of it.
In this game student teams take it in turns to add a letter to previously added letters, moving towards but never completing a word. If the next team thinks the previous team either has completed a word or has no proper target word in mind, they can then challenge. Points are won and lost on correct challenges.

- Put students into two teams.
- Write a letter on the board. The starting team adds the next letter of a word that they have in mind. (For example, you write the letter b and the starting team offers e, as they are thinking of the word beard.)
- The second team should add a third letter. After this point, both teams also have to avoid completing a word – even a word they didn’t have in mind. For example, the letters on the board so far are b e a. This does not yet spell a word. The first group has the word beard in mind and considers offering the letter r, but in doing so they would have completed the word bear. To avoid this, they may decide to bluff and offer the letter g, even though they don’t know a word beginning beag.-

Whenever it is a team’s turn, that team can choose to challenge the previous team for one of two reasons (and the challengers must use these exact words): ‘You haven’t got a proper word in mind!’ OR ‘You’ve completed a word.’

If the challenge is a correct one, then the challenging team gains a point, and the challenged team loses one. If the challenge is incorrect, then the points are awarded in reverse.

**Teaching tips:** When a team has its turn, the teacher should take an answer only from the appointed group leader. This prevents any team member from shouting out answers. The point is to encourage teamwork based on intelligent scrutiny of word structures. The original name of the game was Ghosts, probably because it was supposed to be played very quietly so that each team could plan subtle tactics in secret.

**Variations:** Give teams limited numbers of lifelines. For example, they can change one letter once, consult a dictionary three times, ask the teacher twice, or even phone a family member. You could also allow teams to add a letter to the front of the word rather than the end. This is very hard, though.

**Acceptable words:** ‘Proper’ words are words that appear in a standard dictionary, excluding names (i.e. proper nouns that would start with a capital letter such as Sarah or Harris). All slang words are excluded, and the teacher’s word is final.
4. **Reading for pleasure and learning through reading**

Becoming a reading school is essential so that reading for pleasure is embedded in the culture and fabric of the school. To do this successfully, you will want to explore all the exciting approaches that other schools are using to celebrate reading. This will also mean training staff to become enthusiastic reading advocates and building time for reading in the school day. You’ll want to invest in developing your reading environment and materials over a sustained period of time. As a school, you will also need to take time to engage with parents so they understand and fully embrace your plans.

As Ian Thompson and Nicole Dingwall commented,

‘Schools … can play a major role … by making available a wide range of interesting and accessible texts. This means putting significant resources into school libraries and using students to support each other to recommend authors and titles. Reading for pleasure is an issue of social justice and one that society cannot afford to ignore.’ (OUP, 2018)

Becoming a reading school will help you to close the word gap at a fundamental level because vocabulary is absorbed and internalised during wider reading. Reading continuous texts – whether in book form, online, fiction, non-fiction – all expose students to useful vocabulary.

In the classroom, prepare children for meeting new and challenging words in their reading, but also ensure that you provide them with appropriate levels of support. As Kate Cain and Jane Oakhill observed, ‘Children need reading texts that have an appropriate level of vocabulary so that they are not overwhelmed by a plethora of unknown words, but they also need to be challenged to learn (or refine) the meaning of words in the text.’ (OUP, 2018)

- **Introduce challenging words.** Give children time to engage with ‘challenging’ words that they are about to meet in a class text or activity. Talk about the new words, display them, explore them – their structures, core words, prefixes and suffixes, etc. Display illustrations of the words, or ask students to illustrate or act them out for themselves.
- **Support weaker readers when they encounter more advanced vocabulary.** It is important to plan for this, rather than just using texts at students’ existing reading level.
- **Increase opportunities for individual, silent reading.** This can be scaffolded using the strategies suggested above.
- **Read in volume.** Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning (as opposed to direct instruction), so reading volume (amount) makes a crucial, ongoing contribution to vocabulary development.
- **Read aloud, clearly and expressively, to students.** Hearing new words read well will help to build vocabulary. Read aloud regularly and take time to discuss the texts.
- **Promote your whole-school reading ethos.** Refer to it, reinforce it, and show how you are contributing to it from your subject-, topic- or year-specific position.

5. **Subject-specific and academic vocabulary**

- **Check students’ understanding frequently.** Don’t assume that all children will know all the important simple words, let alone key words. Some will know surprisingly few of them.
- **Teach vocabulary explicitly in all subjects.** Identify specific new words to introduce each lesson. Revisit new words a number of times in a lesson, and reintroduce new words in different contexts.
- **Make vocabulary lists.** When planning a topic, make a list of vocabulary that students will need to know. Display, refer to, and revisit this list often. Share pictures for as many of the words as possible. Ask students to notice when each word comes up during the topic.
Celebrate original ways to learn words. Send lists of new or key words home. Ask students to work out original ways of remembering new words. They can be as active as they like – video, pictures, mime – but emphasise that they should develop methods they think will help their peers to learn the words too. Students can then present their methods to the class.

Use a variety of texts in the classroom. Expose students to a wide variety of texts relevant to your subject/topic, not just the course textbook, such as newspaper articles on relevant developments in science. Ask students to use these to expand their knowledge and understanding of the topic.

Work together. Build students’ confidence and skills by working out the meanings of unfamiliar words together through context cues. This prompts them to use their existing knowledge of a subject to make sense of new information.

Predict words. Give the class part of a text you have been reading in class but with key, predictable words (e.g. some adjectives, adverbs, subject terminology) blanked out. Establish what sort of tone the writer is trying to create. Ask pairs to fill in the blanks appropriately.

Make word maps. Encourage students to develop word maps that explore the meanings and structures of words. For example, students could break photosynthesis down into its word parts, and find other scientific words that use some of those parts (photograph, photoelectricity), and so on. The key aim of this sort of activity is to build students’ confidence and ability to identify what they do know, rather than fixating on a word they don’t know.

Share writing activities as a class. Work collaboratively, using new words and words the students suggest. Discuss the best word choice together before using it in the text, ensuring words are chosen in terms of precision, impact, and appropriateness. This sort of shared writing is a vital opportunity to model for students how to reach inside themselves for the words they already know and how to reach outside themselves for new and appropriate vocabulary.

Display academic words. Display lists of cross-curricular academic or tier 2 words and their meanings, such as conclusion, analysis, reference, evidence, etc. Prompt students to use these words when answering questions in class, and model their use. For example, a child might say, ‘I think the Romans were really clever to do that’. You can reply, ‘What evidence do you have for that conclusion?’ These are different ways to prompt a greater level of clarity and precision. Sometimes point to key words on the displayed lists as you use words from them, and vary lists according to current need.

Emphasise cross-curricular links. Deliberately explore how the same words are used in different subject areas. This will help them to become part of students’ working lexicon.

Display lists of connecting words. Share list of conjunctions and other ‘connectives’ and prompt students to choose from these at appropriate times. Connecting words can help students to clarify their existing thinking, but often they will also steer students towards making new and revealing connections between different events and concepts. Sort connecting words into their different purposes:

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|                     |                  | finally    | if          | for example  | equally   | whereas    |
|                     |                  | before     |            | such as      | in the same way | by contrast |
|                     |                  |            |            | particularly | similarly | alternatively |
|                     |                  |            |            | especially   | likewise  | otherwise   |
|                     |                  |            |            | significantly| as with   | on the other hand |
6. Classroom talk: teachers as role models

We need to model the use of appropriate language. Over time, how we pitch our own vocabulary has an influence on children's own vocabulary. We shouldn't forget that some students might never hear at home the sort of precise, formal vocabulary that will help them in tests and exams. Potentially, teachers are the only people that some children will hear speaking or see writing in formal ways.

Of course, the nature of the relationships between children and teachers will be reflected in the language we use together, and close and relaxed relationships will tend to be expressed in more informal, vague, or imprecise spoken language.

However, teachers should think carefully about the language they use and its long-term effect. In many situations, modelling precise, relatively formal language when appropriate is more valuable than mirroring students' own language.

Deliberate vocabulary instruction can be very effective, especially in the context of positive teacher–student interaction. As David Reedy observes, 'when children are deeply engaged in tasks with us, we should challenge ourselves to use rich vocabulary.' (OUP, 2018)

- **Structure and scale questions.** Deliberately move from low-demand questions to high-demand, more conceptual questions in classroom talk.
- **Use brief comprehension questions.** Assess students’ understanding to reinforce key words, and check that learning is taking place.
- **Expect answers in full sentences and with precise vocabulary.** Expect students to use subject-specific, linking, and cross-curricular conceptual words such as however, analysis, etc.
- **Prompt and scaffold precision.** When students use vague words such as stuff, prompt them to find a more specific word, such as chemicals. Repeat students' vague answers using more precise synonyms.
- **Give students time.** Give students time to reflect and rehearse their thoughts and answers.
- **Use different tiers of vocabulary.** In the early years, plan to sometimes introduce higher-level vocabulary in routine situations. For example, say ‘Could you help me to distribute the paper?’ rather than give out.
- **Choose useful, high-frequency words.** Choose words that the student will find useful in many contexts, including high-frequency words known and used by mature language users.

7. Vocabulary for assessments and exams

It can be challenging for students with a limited vocabulary to achieve their potential in assessment and examination contexts. We need to ensure that we teach precise subject terminology at an appropriate level and that we explicitly teach exam vocabulary. Use academic words such as find or analyse and explicitly use the language of tests and exams in the classroom. Share the aims of a lesson/topic in the terminology that is typical of past test questions. Consciously use these key terms as part of the ordinary discourse of your classroom.

For further guidance and strategies to support vocabulary development for exams and assessment, read the relevant primary sections (EYFS, KS1, and KS2), or the secondary subject-specific chapters in Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom on the following pages.


For further information

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