



# Early language development in the classroom: the language bases of reading comprehension

## **The beginner reader**

For the beginner reader, word reading ability constrains reading comprehension. Accordingly, books in early reading schemes typically contain a limited and largely decodable vocabulary (apart from the necessary tricky words), and the focus of early reading instruction is learning to read words and applying this in the context of a simple book. However, successful reading extends beyond accurate word recognition; skilled readers are able to extract and construct meaning from a variety of texts with ease. So, activities to support reading and, critically, listening comprehension should be central in the early years and primary school classroom.

## **Oral language and reading: what should we foster and why?**

Children's proficiency in oral language is predictive of both the rate and the course of reading development from initial literacy instruction through to adolescence. Children who know the meanings of more words, who produce longer sentences, and who are better at understanding and recalling narratives at school entry, are more likely to develop effective reading (and listening) comprehension skills than their peers.

### **Vocabulary: knowledge of word meanings**

Words are the building blocks of sentence- and discourse-level comprehension. By discourse, we refer to extended segments of written language such as that found in story books and text books. Accordingly, children with larger vocabularies are better at understanding written and spoken text. To support good comprehension and communication, children need high-quality representations of word meanings that are both precise and flexible to enable accurate contextual-appropriate use (e.g. 'bark', 'swing', 'park'). To achieve this, it is necessary to develop depth of vocabulary knowledge – what a child knows about word meanings (synonyms, antonyms, multiple meanings), in addition to vocabulary breadth (the number of words known). There is significant variation in children's word knowledge at school entry due to variation in language exposure and learning opportunities in the home. However, vocabulary is an unconstrained skill; we acquire new words and nuances of word meaning across our lifetime, and knowledge growth and learning strategies can be fostered at school.

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## Grammar: understanding sentences

Grammar concerns the rules for combining words and phrases into sentences and aids the combination of sentences within paragraphs. Children typically start school speaking and understanding a wide range of sentence structures, but the ability to understand and correctly produce multi-clause sentences continues to develop throughout the school years. This includes sentences expressed in the passive voice; those linked by conjunctions to signal causality, temporal sequence, and contrast (e.g. 'because', 'after', 'although'); and those containing embedded clauses. Morphology (which is related to both vocabulary and grammar) concerns the rules about how words are formed through compounding ('sunhat'), inflection ('hat'/'hats'), and derivation ('sunny'). Morphological awareness is related to reading ability, and it continues to develop throughout the school years.

## Discourse: beyond single words and sentences

Beyond word and sentence comprehension, readers and listeners integrate meanings across sentences to construct a memory-based representation of the situation described by the text. To produce an accurate and coherent representation of the text's meaning, readers must generate inferences to fill in implicit details, draw on prior knowledge, evaluate their understanding, and apply knowledge about text structure. These skills and knowledge are all evident in pre-schoolers, but they continue to develop throughout the school years and support the ability to understanding increasingly long, complex and varied texts. These skills become even more critical as children transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'.

## Language in the classroom: supportive and meaningful activities

Although a child's oral language proficiency at school entry is a strong predictor of progress in reading comprehension, language development does not stop at school entry and, for children with limited language skills at school entry, school experiences may be particularly critical.

## Different question types

Classroom activities can provide the necessary exposure to rich and varied language, but the quality of the interaction matters. Supportive reciprocal interactions with teachers are key. Teachers need to be responsive to children's language production to maintain interest and to encourage interaction, for example by expanding on a child's responses and asking questions to motivate turn-taking in conversation. Different question types pose different levels of cognitive challenge and can serve functions. Open-ended questions that promote inferential thinking (e.g. How do you think she is feeling?), rather than a literal descriptive response (e.g. What happened here?), can provide immediate feedback on a child's understanding and also result in longer multi-word responses from children and consolidation of knowledge through explanation. Sensitivity to a child's current language proficiency is critical, and different question types and scaffolds should be used as necessary. Thus, high-support questions that provide a model for a child to reproduce information, or closed questions with yes/no responses, may be appropriate to assess understanding and sustain an interaction, particularly for those with initial low levels of language.

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## Speaking and listening

Speaking and listening skills can be fostered through a range of activities, including shared book reading, narrative activities, 'Show and tell', and exploring non-literal language such as riddles, jokes, and idioms. Oral language activities can also be adapted to help children to become better listeners, for example through 'Show and ask', which also helps the children in the audience to learn how to ask questions. Critically, effective language instruction occurs within a meaningful activity, rather than isolated 'drill and skill'.

## Story time: the power of book reading

Books are a powerful resource to provide a rich and meaningful language environment. When books are read aloud to children in a dialogic reading style, there are opportunities for supportive interactions in which teachers can ask questions to probe comprehension, expand upon and comment on the text, and facilitate extra-textual talk. Books also provide a focus for attention and support children's interest and engagement, which are important for learning.

### The rich language of books

The language of books differs from typical conversation and child-directed speech: books contain more unique words, include a greater range of complex multi-clause sentence structures, and follow more complex structures and novel ideas. The richness of this language is evident even in books targeted at young readers. Take this example from *Ada Twist – Scientist* by Andrea Beaty (Abrams Books, 2016), a book considered suitable for children aged six and above: "*a horrible stench whacked her right in the nose – a pungent aroma that curled up her toes*". Whereas words such as 'nose' are acquired early between two to three years of age, 'aroma' and 'stench' are not typically learned until around nine years, and 'pungent' not until 13. Thus, book reading can provide a language-rich environment to foster vocabulary growth.

These language-learning opportunities extend beyond vocabulary. Compared with child-directed speech, picture books for pre-schoolers contain a greater variety and density of complex sentence structures such as passives and relative clauses, so can be used to support the development of grammar. And the content of books permits access to worlds and knowledge beyond a child's own direct experience. Thus, shared book reading plays a central role in language development. It is also critical to foster a love of books due to the strong associations between book reading and language and knowledge growth across the lifespan.

Exposure to high-quality, language-rich interactions fosters the development of young school children's language skills, particularly those that are important for literacy success. Access to a variety of books through shared book reading can provide this opportunity.

# Developing vocabulary breadth and depth

## Breadth of vocabulary knowledge:

How many words you recognise and have superficial and/or literal knowledge of

### Example word: bark

'Bark' is a good example of a Tier 1 word – most children will know at least the superficial meaning of two uses of 'bark': the sound a dog makes, and the outer protective coating of a tree, from their spoken language

## Depth of vocabulary knowledge:

The quality of knowledge about a word – both **form** and **meaning**.

Good quality knowledge of a word meaning involves having a **precise representation** of the word's meaning and **flexible knowledge** that takes account of context. If you have high-quality lexical representations of words, you can access the meaning of written words accurately and quickly, and can use the word in proper context.

<p><b>Form</b></p> <p>Phonological (spoken)</p> <p>Orthographic (written)</p> <p>Morphological (grammatical)</p>	<p><b>bark</b> /b/+/ar/+/k/</p> <p>Bark can be a noun – the dog's bark, the tree's bark, and also a verb 'to bark', and 'bark' is the root of barks, barking, barked).</p>	<p><b>Flexible knowledge</b> that can be used in different contexts and is sensitive to context (in order to retrieve the appropriate meaning)</p> <p>If you know that 'bark' means more than just a loud sound from a dog, but is typically a sound a dog makes when it is angry or trying to get one's attention, then you can understand the use of the word 'bark' in relation to a person, even if you have not heard that before:</p> <p><i>"The football coach barked orders at the team."</i></p> <p>If you know that a dog bark is loud and angry, it is easy to understand the causal relation between these sentences:</p> <p><i>"The dog barked when it saw a cat walk past. The boy nearly jumped out of his skin."</i></p> <p>What made the boy jump? (The dog bark.) Why? (Loud, abrupt, etc.)</p>
<p><b>Meaning</b></p> <p>Knowledge of the meaning(s) of a word, and associated semantics</p>	<p>For 'bark' (dog's), we have associations with dog, sound, loud, angry, synonyms ('woof'), related meanings ('yelp', 'bay') antonyms ('whimper').</p>	
<p><b>Precise representation</b> of a word's meaning</p>	<p>The bark of a dog is loud, angry, and/or aggressive; not just a whimper or a yelp or a hound baying.</p>	