

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## **Overview**

This book is written for teachers of young children aged from 5 to 12 years in primary schools. Most of these children will be native speakers of English, although the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of our communities suggests a significant number will be from homes where other languages are used dominantly or at least interwoven with English. ‘Knowing your learners’ should underpin teachers’ pedagogical decisions and the pathways of learning followed in the classroom. When learners are not native speakers of English—in the strict sense of using English as the only or dominant language in the family—this needs to be taken account of in approaches to develop learners’ vocabulary knowledge.

The book does not directly address learners’ knowledge of other languages, but it is important to stress that not capitalising on each learner’s language environments outside school is counterproductive. The book is focused on vocabulary learning for young school-age learners, and much of the book’s content is relevant to the development of vocabulary knowledge of young learners in any language. There are sections that pertain specifically to English, but these sections may well suggest considering another language in the same light.

Useful resources that specifically consider non-native speakers of English are available, and are referenced at the end of this chapter. It is important to remember that knowing more than one language is an asset, and young learners deserve to carry forward their family’s

languages other than English. Vocabulary and language knowledge in other languages can and should be woven into mainstream classroom learning where English is the dominant or only language of instruction.

The book draws strongly on research, but it is written in a non-academic way so that teachers are given clear, direct advice on what to do about vocabulary. At the end of each chapter the most relevant and useful pieces of research are discussed so that teachers can read more deeply on particular topics and check that the research is being properly represented and applied.

This book contains many resources for teachers, such as a Picture Vocabulary Size Test, ready-to-use activities for word consciousness-raising and word learning, and information about word parts. There are also resources that can be used with the book when it is used in in-service workshops for teachers. These include, among other things, a frequency-marked text, a 50-item multiple-choice test on the ideas in the book, a vocabulary size measure, and the activities listed in column three of Table 1.1.

### ***The book in a nutshell***

Young native speakers of English and young second-language learners in an English-speaking environment will inevitably learn English. Young learners cannot avoid picking up the language around them. Even if teachers did nothing special about vocabulary learning, young children would increase their vocabulary knowledge. However, teachers can make vocabulary learning more effective, and this is particularly important for the vocabulary needed for schooling and academic learning.

Words are learned largely in relation to how often they are met (multiple meetings) and how deeply they are processed. Especially in the early years of a child's life, words are mainly learned through talk—hearing and trying out spoken language. Reading is also an important source of vocabulary learning, initially for young children through being read to accompanied by conversational talk, and later, as they become more independent readers, by reading widely on their own or with peers. Reading provides extra input and repetition, and allows learners to meet words not often used in spoken language.

Table 1.1 Topics and activities for an in-service course for teachers on vocabulary

	Topic	Activities
<b>Chapter 2</b>	The nature of vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply the rule of thumb to working out the vocabulary size of learners of a given age (e.g. 10-year-olds).</li> <li>• Classify words into the high-, mid- and low- frequency levels.</li> <li>• Practise using the Frequency, Range and AntWordProfiler programs.</li> <li>• Look at frequency-marked texts to decide what words should be focused on for learners of a given age.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	Knowing vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a word and describe what could be known about its form, meaning and use, using Table 3.1 as a guide.</li> <li>• Suggest two activities in each of the four strands (a total of eight activities).</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Vocabulary size and growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer the Picture Vocabulary Size Test (PVST).</li> <li>• Sit the PVST yourself.</li> <li>• Sit the Vocabulary Size Test.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Vocabulary and learning conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find examples of each of the conditions.</li> <li>• Analyse some activities using a checklist based on learning conditions.</li> <li>• Analyse an activity such as shared reading or a problem-solving task using the conditions.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Oral language and vocabulary growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In pairs, demonstrate an elaborative conversation style with a learner about spiders.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	Vocabulary and reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the shared book activity.</li> <li>• Design a linked skills activity around a book.</li> <li>• Suggest two challenging language-use activities each for listening and for reading.</li> <li>• Suggest ways to increase the amount of reading your learners do.</li> <li>• Suggest ways to help learners deal with challenging reading.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	Teaching vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose your top three vocabulary teaching activities and defend your choice.</li> <li>• State and explain the principle of the four strands. How does it apply to teaching vocabulary?</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	Word consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rank the focuses, considering their value for your learners. Be ready to justify your top three.</li> <li>• Do the activities in each section of that chapter.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	Helping learners with below-average vocabulary sizes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at examples of text richness in spoken and written language use to see opportunities for learning.</li> </ul>
<b>Chapter 11</b>	Vocabulary learning procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse some activities to see their parts.</li> </ul>

The frequency and quality of talk exchanges or conversations a child is involved in is a major contributor to their learning of vocabulary. A second major oral language source is the increasingly wide range of digital material children have access to, especially through the internet. Usually the internet provides a combination of audio and visual, often accompanied by print, rather than audio only. Even very young children are likely to view and listen using digital sources.

An essential part of increasing young learners' vocabulary size is being engaged in plenty of reading. This may be through books, other non-digital sources, or through a myriad of texts now available digitally. When a child is young and an emerging reader, engaging in talk with an adult or older peer during reading is how they learn new words through print. As a child becomes increasingly able to read independently, many more words are available to them if they read often and widely. Ideally, young native speakers should be engaged in reading for at least an hour per school day, complemented by home reading, and participating often in high-quality spoken texts throughout the day.

Young native speakers of English increase their *receptive* vocabulary size (the vocabulary used for listening and reading) on average by around 500 to 1,000 words a year, or around two to three words per day. Some native speakers have smaller vocabulary increases but still learn several hundred words a year. Learners need to know at least 2,000 words for early reading (most 5-year-olds know at least 3,000 words), and around 6,000 words to cope with later reading in primary school.

Direct teaching of vocabulary can help a child learn new words. The focus should be on topic-related, context-relevant vocabulary. Chapter 11 describes powerful ways such words can be focused on as part of the classroom programme. To provide an extra boost in vocabulary growth of around 500 words a year beyond the normal increase, teachers may need to deliberately focus on vocabulary learning in the classroom. An exciting and effective way to do this is through developing *word consciousness*, whereby the learners are encouraged to become interested in words and are confident in ways of dealing with them.

Direct attention to vocabulary complements a strong focus on spoken language, reading, and rich language use in the classroom.

Specific vocabulary strategies—including breaking words into parts and doing *morphological problem-solving*, making use of dictionaries, talking about words, and deliberately studying words—will be further explained in later chapters.

### **What should teachers do?**

1. Get learners consciously and actively engaged with words using a range of word consciousness activities and activities that enrich word meanings and focus on the use of words. An important goal is to get learners interested in and excited about vocabulary so that they initiate their own vocabulary learning as well as participating in focused discussion with others.
2. Focus on a rich conversational classroom in which learners have multiple opportunities to participate in spoken language that provides vocabulary the learners need, and that supports learners to try out newly available vocabulary.
3. Create a rich, extensive reading environment in the classroom to encourage learners to do large amounts of interesting and challenging reading, including reading for themselves and listening to and talking about books read to them.
4. During spoken and print-related activities, take the opportunity to explore and discuss the meanings of words.
5. Be systematic about helping learners expand their vocabulary size by making sure that each day there are planned opportunities (as in point 1 above) for vocabulary growth.
6. Gather continuous formative evidence about learners' vocabulary knowledge (their strengths and gaps) during class activities. This evidence is readily available when a conversational teaching and learning environment is created, where each learner gets plenty of opportunity to speak and respond. Use a suitable vocabulary size test to measure and track learners' overall vocabulary knowledge. We recommend the Picture Vocabulary Size Test.
7. Support learners in their writing to make effective word choices and stretch their word knowledge, and to use words that are appropriate to the topic, purpose and audience.

8. Learn more about the nature of vocabulary, including vocabulary size, vocabulary levels and the spread of word frequency, what is involved in knowing a word, and the conditions that support vocabulary learning across the four strands (discussed later).