

Introduction

This book is written for teachers but it is useful for anyone who wants to improve their vocabulary. Good readers and writers have a large and diverse vocabulary that gives them a head start on other readers. In reading, it helps not just with comprehension but with learning and remembering new words as well. In writing, it gives precision and depth to the ideas you want to convey.

The Internet is full of ideas and opinions about how best to learn and teach vocabulary, but the research is not so full of certainties. This is partly why we wrote the book, to make sure that the reader is aware of the best, research-based ideas for learning new words, and remembering them, and to explain how to bring those ideas into the classroom.

The New Zealand Curriculum

The importance of vocabulary is emphasised in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The term *vocabulary* is explicitly mentioned as a teaching objective from Level 3 to Level 8 of the *Curriculum*, and is implicit in Levels 1 and 2. The document repeatedly states that a student needs to be able to use *a range of vocabulary to communicate precise meaning*. The use of the word *precise* is because it is the ability to use the right word to express the right idea or emotion that distinguishes the good writer, and it is the ability to bring to the printed page a depth of vocabulary that enables the good reader to reconstruct the exact and sometimes subtle meanings the author wants to convey.

Vocabulary and the reading and writing standards: What children need to know

Vocabulary is becoming much more visible in the teaching of reading. The Ministry of Education (2009) reading and writing standards (for Years 1–8) set out expectations for reading and writing in terms of what students should be able to handle at each year level. These expectations include vocabulary. Let's look in a bit more detail at these expectations.

As early as Year 2 the standards expect pupils to be able to use vocabulary strategies to learn the meanings of new words; for example, when reading, to use sentence context clues and illustrations to work out the meaning of the word *maize* and understand that it is different to *maze*. In writing about a text topic, such as an article about worm farms, the standards expect that pupils can use vocabulary that is “precise” and “descriptive” (with words such as *sprinkle* and *dampen*).

In Year 4 the reading standards expect students to understand figurative language—such as metaphors, similes and personification—when they come across these vocabulary expressions in text. In writing, the standards expect pupils to draw on a deep vocabulary to use precise words such as *approach*, *stare* and *glance* in their descriptions; in other words, to use vocabulary that can “clearly convey ideas, experiences, or information”.

In Year 5 the standards expect students to use contextual and other strategies to unlock the meanings of unfamiliar words, such as *plight* and *black market* in the article “Plight of the Sea Turtle”. Pupils are also expected to understand and use topic-specific vocabulary; for example, when writing a report on building a “bottle submarine”, they should be able to handle topic-specific words such as *approximately*, *build*, *design*, *prototype* and *suspend*.

In Year 6 the reading standards expect pupils to cope with a significant amount of vocabulary that is unfamiliar to students” when they are reading text. The words and phrases in students’ writing are expected to show awareness of topic, register and purpose; that is, they should be able to draw on a rich database of vocabulary inside their heads. Such writing also requires an understanding of how to choose the right word for the right purpose, and how to source these words with a dictionary or thesaurus.

In Years 7 and 8 the standards continue to stress a high-level awareness of vocabulary, with an expectation that students will understand figurative vocabulary such as metaphor, analogy and connotation in their reading and be able to use figurative vocabulary in writing tasks. In Years 7 and 8 the standards emphasise the ability to understand academic and topic-specific vocabulary when reading, and when writing the students are expected to use precise, topic-specific vocabulary and be able to provide the reader of their work with explanations within the text of what these words mean.

Overall, the new reading and writing standards expect pupils to enrich their vocabulary knowledge through reading and be able to draw on this store of words for their writing. Ideas on teaching vocabulary are therefore very relevant to today’s classroom—and tomorrow’s as well.

Literacy Learning Progressions

The expectations of the Ministry’s reading and writing standards are mirrored in the *Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2010). This document outlines the knowledge and skills Years 1–8 children need in order to make year-appropriate progress and meet the “demands of *The New Zealand Curriculum*” (p. 3). According to the *Progressions*, by the end of the first year of school children should be able to apply “their knowledge of vocabulary in order to understand words as they decode them” (p. 12); by the end of their third

year of school they should “know the meaning of some common prefixes and suffixes and understand how they affect the meanings of words” (p. 14). and be “aware of synonyms for and multiple meaning of many common words” (ibid.); by the end of Year 6 they should be able to draw on “knowledge and skills that include: finding and learning the meanings of unknown vocabulary” (p. 16) using a range of strategies and “understanding that words and phrases can have figurative as well as literal meanings” (ibid.); and by the end of Year 8 they should be “using their growing academic and content-specific vocabulary to understand text” (p. 17) and be able to interpret “metaphor, analogy and connotative language” (ibid.). This is knowledge that teachers can teach using the ideas in this book.

The structure of the book

While we are strongly of the opinion that coaching students, giving them productive strategies for building vocabulary, should be based on the best research, our main goal has been to translate this research into practical strategies that classroom teachers can use straight away. We have done this by dividing the book into two sections. In Part 1, that is, Chapters 1 to 3, our goal is to give teachers a theoretical understanding of the nature of the English language, as well as an explanation of the latest research on learning and teaching vocabulary. In Part 2, Chapters 4 to 9, we focus on ideas for translating research into practice.

Vocabulary learning is more than knowing facts

Knowing a word is more than being able to recite a list of facts. There is something hollow, not quite right, about hearing someone explain a word as a list of facts. An example is in the book *Hard Times*, first published in 1862 by Charles Dickens, where the opening pages introduce the teacher, Mr Gradgrind, who believes that education is all about knowing facts: “Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.” When he asks for a definition of a *horse*, one of the children, Sissy, whose father worked with horses in a circus, could have described a horse in a way that brought all her experiences to the definition, but this was not what Mr Gradgrind wanted. What he wanted were the scientific facts, which one of his pupils, Bitzer, gave him: “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.” The definition is all about teeth and hoofs. It is as if a horse is an alien creature, not the animal that we usually think of as a *horse*.

This is *not* the way we think vocabulary should be taught or learnt. When we first acquire meaning for the word *horse*, it might be associated with seeing a picture of a horse, or watching a horse on television, the experience of having seen or touched or ridden a horse, or even having it mentioned in a conversation or in a text. What we store in memory are key features that enable us to relate a *horse* to other animals we know about, but also note features that make it different. We store an image of a horse in memory, how to pronounce the word horse and (if we can read) we store the written form of the word. We argue in this book that words are best learnt if our understanding can include all these things.

How to stick words in memory

In this book we describe how best to come across new words, which we think is best done through reading, but also how to glue those words in memory so that we do not lose them. We argue that we learn much new vocabulary, and enrich existing vocabulary, simply by reading or listening, but that if we want to glue those words in memory it is useful to think about words as we read them, to ask questions like: What language is it from? What meaningful parts is it made of? How does it connect to other words we already know? What is its emotive side? and Is it meant to be understood literally or metaphorically? This does not necessarily mean reaching for the dictionary, though you can do this, and in the book we do champion making more use of the much-maligned dictionary. Learning a new word in a conscious way is really a mind set, where you can stand back from a word, and think about it in several ways at once, in ways that help to keep that word in memory.

The research is compelling that we best remember new words by reading them, and then associating them with some kind of image if at all possible, linking them to other known words, linking their written form to their pronunciation, and to their spelling. We may not have to do all these things but they all help, especially for the struggling reader; for example, writing down just a few new words (not too many) each day on a piece of paper when they occur in reading, looking up their meanings, pronouncing them and using them in speech, all act like glue on a poster on a wall—to help new words to stick in memory.

Not everyone has a wide vocabulary

Vocabulary is critical to success in school and in life. It is easy to overlook how important vocabulary is in school. Books and other reading material that children encounter in school can contain more than 100,000 different words yet the average five-year-old only knows 10,000 different words, and some, especially those from homes with few books, or from poverty or second-

language backgrounds, know far fewer than that. By the end of primary school most children know 25,000 words and by the end of high school 40,000 words. This is good, but there are still many words to learn. Knowing the meanings of many thousands of words is essential for oral and written literacy. The child who can understand and use effectively many different words has a much better chance of becoming a successful reader, writer and communicator.

What this book covers

The book discusses current research on vocabulary and presents research-based strategies teachers can use for increasing students' word level knowledge. It begins with a short history of the English language that explains the richness and complexity of English: that it is a polyglot, that it has borrowed words from at least 100 languages and that knowing where a word comes from helps to remember it. It also explains what it means to know a word, how words are learnt and how this is relevant to diverse learners.

The practical focus of the book is on suggesting ideas for teaching and learning new vocabulary, ranging from ideas for extensive reading, shared and guided reading with discussion, webbing and weaving, semantic classification (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, denotation, connotation, homographs and homophones, similes and metaphors, idioms and proverbs), using prefixes and suffixes, etymology and the effective use of a dictionary and thesaurus.

Part 1—Theory

In Chapter 1 we give a short history of the English language so as to explain to the reader that English is not just one language. English has been influenced by many languages but when it comes down to it we argue that the student is better off to think of the language as having three main layers of words: Anglo-Saxon, Romance (Latin and French) and Greek. We show how students can compare and contrast these different words with each other.

In Chapter 2, we explore what it means to know a word. The chapter reviews the role vocabulary plays in reading comprehension and also writing, listening and speaking.

In Chapter 3, we describe how to meet the learning needs of all children. Classroom teachers must consider how to cater for children who are gifted, have special needs, who come from homes without books and/or who are learning English as an additional language. This chapter takes a look at what research has to say about teaching vocabulary to diverse learners. We show how to meet the challenge, and recommend the best conditions for learning English vocabulary, including ideas on how to foster the relationship between vocabulary learning in two languages.

Part 2—Practice

In Chapter 4, we explain how a great deal of new vocabulary is learnt through reading. Research suggests that reading, rather than oral language, is the main contributor to vocabulary growth once a child reaches 10 years of age (i.e., Year 5). This chapter explains why reading is an important source of vocabulary. Implications for the classroom teacher are discussed including how to motivate the reluctant reader, as well as the student who can read but does not. We also discuss using contextual clues while reading.

In Chapter 5, we explain how the meanings of many new words can be reconstructed by building them up in terms of their meaningful parts. The chapter discusses how to go about teaching vocabulary through breaking words into parts. Instruction tackles prefixes, suffixes, Latin roots and Greek combining forms.

In Chapter 6, we show how words can be learnt by making links from new words to known words. We describe a small number of useful visual strategies for teaching students how to make links. We cover semantic mapping (i.e., web, weave, thermometer, Venn diagram). Concept maps provide a visual image that aids comprehension.

In Chapter 7, we describe how many words have more than one meaning and how we need to have a set for the multiple meanings of words when we read, otherwise we can get confused. We discuss the multiple meanings of many words, as well as synonyms, antonyms, homographs, homophones, homonyms, idioms and proverbs. Students should be aware that many words have multiple meanings.

In Chapter 8, we discuss the fact that many students do not like using dictionaries and the thesaurus but we argue that we need to find ways to inspire pupils to acquire a love of these amazing resources. We suggest a number of activities to do this.

In Chapter 9, we reflect on what we have tried to achieve in the book. Our aim is to inspire a love of words in our students and we have suggested many activities that we think do this. We hope you enjoy using the book, and that your students do as well, and we would appreciate any feedback you can give us for the future.