



Words Children Need in Primary and Preschool Years

Andrew Biemiller

Department of Human Development and Applied
Psychology at University of Toronto
Ontario, CANADA

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Andrew Biemiller, PhD

Why worry about Vocabulary for Young Children?

The size of a child's vocabulary in kindergarten is the best predictor for their reading skills later.

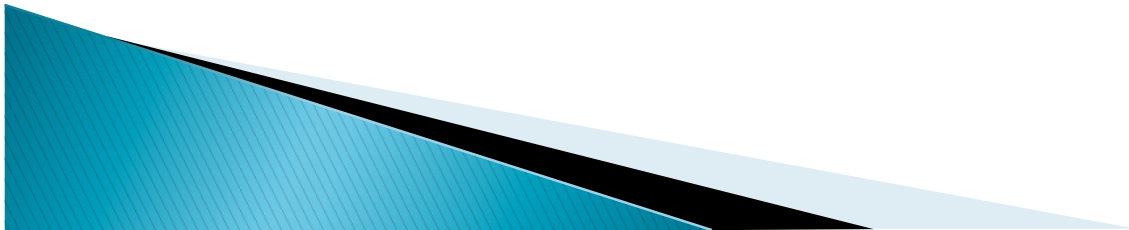


In this presentation we will use “word meaning” instead of “word” because many words have more than one meaning.

- I read the newspaper **column** near the **column** on the porch.
- You can **lean** against the wall while you eat the **lean** hamburger.
- We **can can** the tomatoes in August.

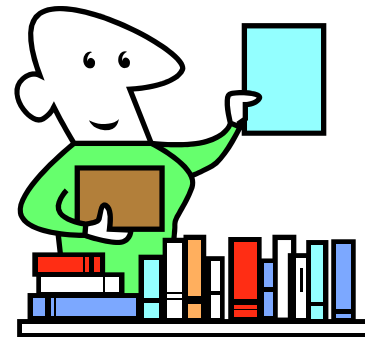
Table 1. Growth of *Average* Root Word Meanings

Age	Words Acquired	Cumulative	Grade
1-1.9	400	400	(early toddler)
2-2.9	800	1200	(late toddler)
3-3.9	800	2000	Preschool
4-4.9	1000	3000	Preschool or Pre K.
5-5.9	1000	4000	Kindergarten
6-6.9	1000	5000	One
7-7.9	1000	6000	Two



Can we teach enough words to make a difference?

- ▶ If we would start vocabulary instruction by age 4, many children with low vocabularies could attain average levels of vocabulary by age 8.



How much teaching?

- ▶ For children to learn 400 meanings per year, you must teach at least 1000 meanings.
- ▶ Meanings must be taught *each year* in primary grades.
- ▶ Teaching vocabulary for one year is not enough to bring children to adequate levels.

- ▶ Vocabulary programs that succeeded took about 30 minutes per day.
- ▶ “Success” meant children *retained* 2 or 3 meanings per day or about 10 per week.

This involved reading stories more than once, and explaining some meanings on each reading.



What meanings should we teach?

- ▶ It is best to teach meanings that would be appropriate to learn in the next year or two.
- ▶ Children learn word meanings mainly in the same order.
- ▶ For example, children who know 7000 meanings, know about the same words whether they are in 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade.

Isabel Beck's "Tiers of Words"

- ▶ Beck and her colleagues created the "Tier" system for selecting words.
 - Tier 1 easy—known by most. *run, stone, boy*
 - Tier 2 important meanings—teach. *coincidence, absurd*
 - Tier 3 difficult—learn later. *molecule, biosphere*

- ▶ I agree with Beck's Tiers, but I think they ignore needed meanings for primary and pre-primary children.
- ▶ Many young children *don't know* some important but less advanced meanings.
- ▶ For primary grades, examples that Beck ignores include: *absolute, pattern, or talent.*

- ▶ *Words Worth Teaching* lists 1600 high priority (Tier 2) meanings to teach to children between kindergarten and grade 2 .
- ▶ The book also contains 2900 meanings for upper elementary children.

POKE

RECYCLE

FLIP

MIGHT

SETTLE

Examples of Meanings for Primary Grade Instruction from Words Worth Teaching

- ▶ **Absolute** certain; positive
- ▶ **Brave** to face boldly
- ▶ **Community** group of people living
together
- ▶ **Great** excellent
- ▶ **Great** famous
- ▶ **Great** large in size

If children are to succeed in the upper elementary grades, many will need to learn more of the high priority meanings by the end of the primary grades.

Meanings Needed *before* Kindergarten

- ▶ By the time they begin kindergarten, advantaged children know a thousand more meanings than less advantaged children.
- ▶ *These 1000 word meanings are good candidates for instruction prior to kindergarten.*

- ▶ Colleagues at Waterford are working on a computerized vocabulary program for young children.
- ▶ Together, we have been hoping to conduct further research on needed word meanings for preschool children.

Examples of Pre-Kindergarten Meanings

- ▶ **Able** having the power to do something
- ▶ **Gentle** light and soft
- ▶ **Gentle** mild-tempered
- ▶ **Glue** fix so it sticks
- ▶ **Interest** a liking for
- ▶ **Law** a rule



Are some words “worth teaching” more important than others?

- ▶ *Verbally-defined* meanings may be more important than *concrete* meanings.

COURAGE

PEACE

THINK

MEMORY

IDEA

- ▶ “*Concrete*” meanings refer to things that can be pointed to or acted out. Examples are **rock, house, and run.**

- ▶ “*Verbally-Defined*” meanings refer to words that must be defined or explained using other words. Examples are **think, because, and maybe.**

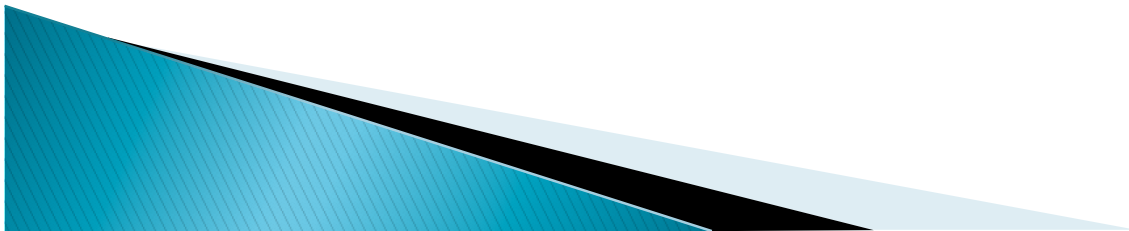
Evidence that knowledge of *verbally-defined* word meanings are better predictors of comprehension.

- ▶ Knowledge of *verbally-defined* meanings predicts 55% of reading comprehension a year later.
- ▶ Knowledge of *concrete* meanings predicts only 40% of reading comprehension a year later.

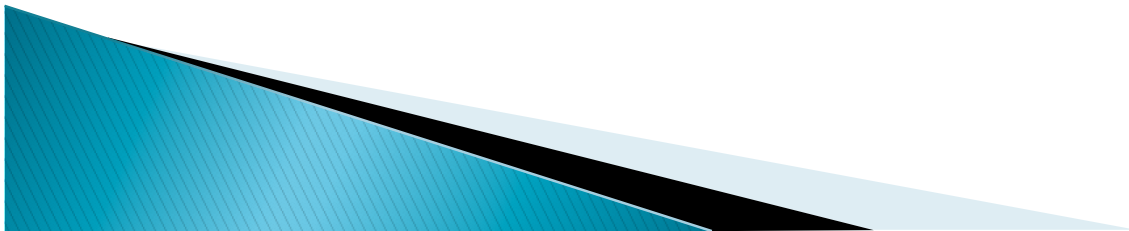
Caution, this finding is based on a sample of advantaged children.

Summary

- ▶ The size of young children's vocabulary is a major predictor of their later educational success.
- ▶ By the end of grade two, children from the lowest vocabulary group are about 4 years behind the children from the highest group.



- ▶ We do have a good idea what words should be taught.
- ▶ It is possible for children to learn enough needed meanings per year in the primary grades to attain grade-level by grade 2.



We just need to do it!

