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How to Best Teach Vocabulary



Part 1

Teach frequently and focus
on breadth and depth

"Words are important. If you cannot say what you mean, you will never mean what you say. And you should always mean what you say."

Paraphrased from ***The Last Emperor***,
screenplay by Mark Peploe and Bernardo Bertolucci

Not unlike the principles behind leading a healthy lifestyle, vocabulary is a matter of habit, and the key for success is consistency and perseverance

Teach few words frequently, not more words rarely

Learning a few words thoroughly and frequently has been shown to work much better than teaching many more in one go, less frequently (Marulis & Neuman, 2010; Smith, 2008).

The evidence

- A research study found that thorough and frequent teaching of words (distributed practice) was 90% more effective than less frequent teaching of many units in one go (massed practice) (Kornell, 2009).
- Another study found that, in the long run, students who learned new vocabulary through distributed practice remembered 35% more words than students who were taught the same vocabulary through massed practice (Bloom & Shuell, 1981).

A possible explanation for the effectiveness of distributed learning is that words are more likely to enter the long-term memory, whereas in massed learning they don't go beyond working-memory.

Emphasize both learning and memorization

It's possible for children to understand what a word means without memorizing it, or to memorize it without having understood it. Proper word learning consists of both learning and retention.

- Giving out a list of words enables students to memorize them, but not understand them.
- Exposing children to texts that contain new words encourages them to guess what these words mean, but doesn't guarantee that their guess will be correct; and, even if it is, it doesn't mean that children will remember these words.
- A method that fosters both learning and memorization is crucial for effective teaching. Research suggests that direct vocabulary instruction, by focusing on both breadth and depth, has this effect (Loftus-Rattan & Mitchell, 2016).

To foster both learning and retention, teach words in thematic categories. This will help children to organize their knowledge by building new concepts upon existing ones. Here's one way of doing this:



Tell students the category that a new word belongs to, and then get them to think what it is that makes something part of that category. For example, "A fig is a type of fruit. Which properties do you think all fruits have?", etc. (based on Neuman & Wright, 2013).

Focus on both breadth and depth

Vocabulary is a matter of breadth, i.e. knowing enough words, and depth, i.e. understanding what words mean, how they are used in context, and which other words they are combined with. Words have complex and multiple meanings. For a reader to fully grasp the meaning of a word, two things must happen:

- The reader must be well equipped with information about the word, like its definition, how it is used, and which contexts it is likely to be used in.
- The reader must be able to look at the surrounding words in the sentence or paragraph and understand the general context. Using this information, the reader must then be able to select the intended meaning from the range of possible meanings. (State Standards, English Language Arts & Literacy, Appendix A: 32).

As we've explained in our '**Why vocabulary matters and direct vocabulary instruction is necessary**' resource, direct vocabulary instruction is the recommended method for fostering learning and memorization, and breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. (Loftus-Rattan & Mitchell, 2016).



Turn the classroom into a space where children can play with words. Fill it with stimuli and opportunities for students to familiarize themselves with different concepts and to practice using them; for example, you can create a science area, a classroom library, an area where children can experiment with technology, etc. and add labels of relevant words in each (see Neuman & Wright, 2013: Ch. 2).

You can also display the words that students are learning on a word-wall so that they can refer to them throughout the week.

Activities

Use these activities to give students the opportunity to interact with words:

Activity 1

Ask the students which words best suit a scenario you are giving them (based on Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002/2013).

Example: “If I say something that you can describe as idyllic, say ‘Idyllic!’”:

- I drove through the countryside which was as pretty as a picture and had gorgeous views.
- He remembered his childhood with nostalgia as those were the most carefree and fun years of his life.
- The mountain’s slope was totally bare, without any trees or vegetation, making it harder to climb.

You can then discuss with the students what an idyllic countryside and an idyllic childhood have in common.

Activity 2

Ask students to come up with their own scenarios for words (based on Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002/2013).

Example: “What situation would make someone say...”:

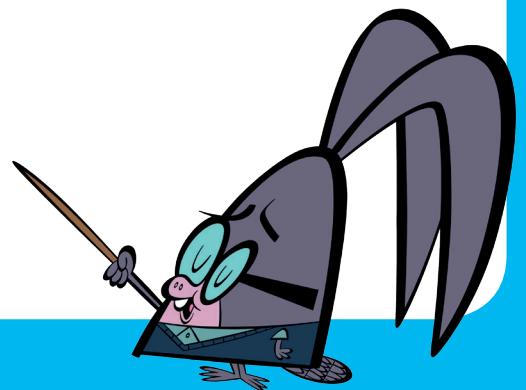
- “I am totally ecstatic.”
- “I am inconsolable.”
- “I am light-hearted.”
- “I am speechless.”

Activity 3

Ask students to describe what a certain person would have to do to be described with a certain word (based on Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002/2013).

Example: “How might a cook/musician/basketball player/teacher show that they are...”:

- Innovative
- Perceptive
- Ingenious
- Masterful

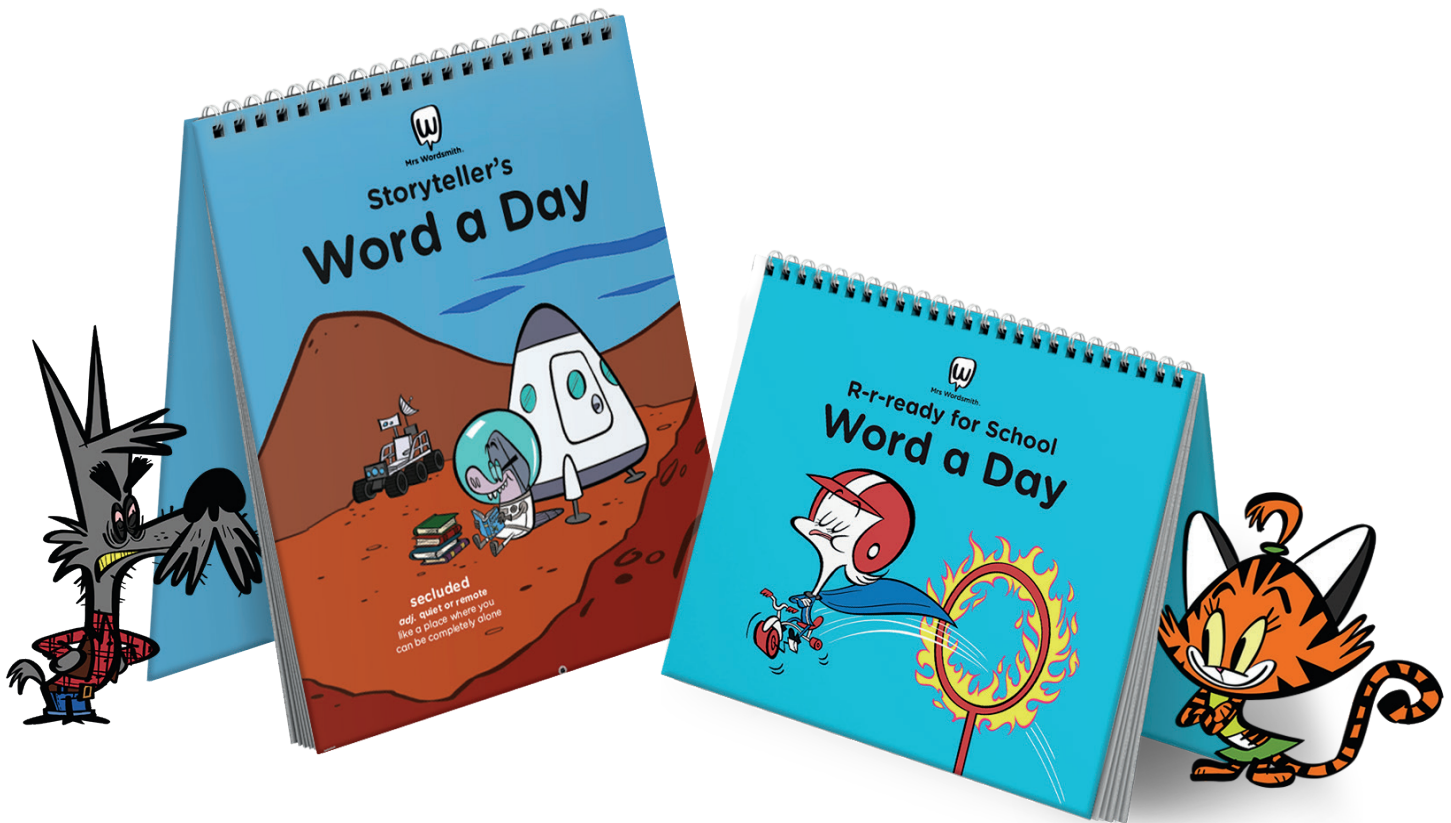


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