

A Knowledge of Words: Four Vocabularies

by Lori Mammen

A knowledge of words is a knowledge of things.—Plato

What was your first word? It was probably something like “mama” or “dada.” In most families, a child’s first spoken word is a momentous event, as it should be. It marks the child’s first obvious entry into the language community and stands as one of the great achievements of early childhood.

But what was really your first word? What was the first word you understood and could attach to a person, place, thing, or feeling? Few people can remember that word. However, sometime between our birth and our first spoken word, we learned something very important: spoken sounds hold meaning.

I remember playing the “show-me” game with my babies: “show me your tummy” or “show me your eyes.” Long before they could talk, all three of my children could respond correctly by patting the appropriate body part. The same was true when we shared picture books. “Where is the horse?” I might ask, and each of my children could point correctly to the horse in the picture.

A child’s true entry into the language community takes place long before he or she can speak. Months before most children can utter their first recognizable word, they can understand dozens of words their parents and others speak to them. These understood words form the foundation of each child’s listening vocabulary and play an important role in further language development. In fact, a child’s first spoken words come directly from his or her listening vocabulary. This makes sense, since spoken words are the young child’s only source of language, providing a bank of concepts and ideas to use and build on.

From the listening vocabulary, a child begins to build his or her speaking vocabulary. Preceded by several months of “babbling,” the first recognizable spoken words usually appear sometime around the child’s first birthday. Then, for most children, the second birthday brings a burst of language. The emergence of spoken language may seem sudden to adults, but the talkative two-year-old’s speaking vocabulary has been “fermenting” for quite some time. The child has been absorbing spoken words for months and mentally connecting them to the ideas they represent. When children begin to speak, they naturally tap into this reservoir of words.

Ask kindergarten and first-grade teachers which children will have the easiest time learning to read, and most will identify the children who have experienced a language-rich environment prior to entering school. These children have parents, family members, or others who talk to them about pets, trips, people, events—almost everything. Just as importantly, these children have people who listen to what they have to say and encourage them to talk even more. So they have a head start on developing a strong reading vocabulary—the words readers recognize and comprehend as they read a text. Research tells us that readers better understand what they read if they can connect it

to something they already know. Children who have lived in a language-rich environment have a storehouse of concepts which they can connect to the ideas they encounter in print.

Reading itself builds and improves a child's reading vocabulary. In fact, reading may be the most effective way for children to increase their knowledge of words. In addition, appropriate direct instruction can help children increase their reading vocabulary. For example, learning common prefixes and suffixes gives children a useful tool for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words.

The writing vocabulary, usually the last to emerge, includes the words we use in writing. As we might expect, all the other vocabularies—listening, speaking, reading—contribute to the development of the writing vocabulary. A child may hear a new word and decide to use it in a story. Another child may learn a new word through reading and incorporate it into the next school writing assignment.

What is the importance of the different vocabularies? First, we should recognize the interconnectedness of all four. Talking to and listening to children are critical elements in helping them develop strong reading and writing vocabularies. And when children read, their writing vocabulary often grows. In short, growth in one type of vocabulary almost always contributes to growth in the other three types as well.

The wise teacher provides opportunities for students to build and use all four types of vocabulary. In every classroom, children benefit from an environment that gives them many meaningful experiences with words. They need to hear words used in many ways and in a variety of settings. They need to use words in ways that extend beyond simple memorization and recitation. And of course, they need many opportunities to encounter these words through reading. In this type of environment, children have their best chance to develop their knowledge of words and, consequently, enhance their reading comprehension.