

Foreword to *Words Are Wonderful*

Andrew Biemiller

We have long known that vocabulary is intimately related to reading comprehension, and hence to most school learning. Indeed, Jean Chall argued that testing vocabulary is functionally equivalent to testing reading comprehension. Chall found the correlation between the two to be so high that only vocabulary needed be assessed. There is evidence of the usefulness of teaching children vocabulary to improve comprehension. Beck and her colleagues reported significant gains in reading comprehension following vocabulary instruction in the fifth grade.¹ Unfortunately, relatively few studies of vocabulary instruction have been implemented for long enough to have a “real-world” effect. But we are relatively certain that unless vocabulary instruction and support are maintained over a period of several years, at-risk children will achieve relatively few academic gains. With vocabulary there is no easy way.

At one time, most educators believed that children would learn the vocabulary they needed spontaneously once they had learned to read. Educators also believed that children with small vocabularies were simply “less intelligent.” Now we are beginning to realize a number of things:

- that vocabulary differences reflect home learning, especially before grade three²;
- that although children with both small and large vocabularies typically gain new root words at about the same rate after grade two, they already differ by several thousand words;
- that unless we teachers actively begin to introduce and explain root words and to acquire skills for extending word meanings, most at-risk children will never “catch up.”

There has been substantial debate about the numbers of words children need to acquire. My research indicates that on average, children acquire roughly 750 root word meanings per year—a little more than two per day.³ Unfortunately, one-quarter of all children learn no more than one root word meaning per day before third grade. By this time, they are already behind the average by two thousand words.

My research has also shown that children acquire words in roughly the same order. This means that for at-risk children, we need to concentrate on words most often known by children who are on level. So by third grade, teachers need to help at-risk children acquire word meanings faster in order to narrow the gap. Making progress requires both direct explanation of many new words and help in extending word meanings with prefixes, suffixes, and compounding; and in using context to clarify or select meanings.

¹ Beck, I., Perfetti, C., and M. G. McKeown. 1982. Effects of long-term vocabulary instruction on lexical access and reading comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 74: 506–521.

² The sad evidence regarding home effects are best presented in Betty Hart and Todd Risley’s *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing Co, 1995).

³ See A. Biemiller and N. Slonim, “Estimating Root Word Vocabulary Growth in Normative and Advantaged Population: Evidence for Common Sequence of Vocabulary Acquisition,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 93, no. 3 (2001): 498-520.

Dorothy Grant Hennings's *Words Are Wonderful* is a valuable teaching tool for all children, whether at risk or on-level. One particular strength of her program is the direct instruction of about 330 words a year, presented in context. Since children with relatively small vocabularies need to learn an additional 600 words a year or more to “catch up” to their peers, Hennings’s inclusion of 330 words for direct instruction or monitored learning is a far stronger start than most vocabulary programs offer.

A second strength of *Words Are Wonderful* is the attention paid to many words with multiple meanings. Once the meanings are learned, using context can be very helpful in determining which of the possible meanings of a word applies. Providing direct instruction in using context with multiple meanings is another strength of the program.

Finally, *Words Are Wonderful* contains many needed tools for teaching children about prefixes and suffixes. As White and his associates show, about 20 prefixes and suffixes account for a large majority of derived words.⁴ The combination of direct explanation of a variety of prefixes and suffixes, with uses of these affixes illustrated in context, has proved quite effective. Dorothy Hennings’s program provides many examples of this type of teaching.

Words Are Wonderful offers the level of vocabulary intensity needed for long-term success. When we have such effective curriculum tools for the primary years, we will be in a much better position to prevent children from falling behind in vocabulary in the first place.

Andrew Biemiller is Professor, Institute of Child Study, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Ontario.

⁴ White, T. G., M. A. Power, and S. Whilte. 1989. Morphological analysis: Implications for teaching and understanding vocabulary growth. *Reading Research Quarterly* 24: 283–304.