Vocabulary Development

Introduction

Words are essential for speaking, reading and writing. Some pupils with language difficulties may present with:

- Limited vocabulary i.e. they do not understand many words
- Word finding difficulties: The pupil will know the word they want to say but have difficulty retrieving it at all or may use a related word in its place. This is a difficulty in accessing the word; it is like having a word on the ‘tip-of-the-tongue’, which can be frustrating for the pupil and the listener.

Pupils with language difficulties are likely to need extra opportunities to help them acquire vocabulary. The child will need support of the staff to identify key vocabulary in the various subjects to help them access the curriculum. It is best to do this before the vocabulary is used in class so familiarisation can take place at home or at school.

Vocabulary teaching activities also have benefits for literacy development as identifying sounds in words promotes the development of decoding skills and identifying the meaning of words helps reading comprehension.

Classroom strategies to help develop vocabulary

- Collect key words from each subject which need either pre-teaching or reinforcing.
- Present the class with a strategy for learning new words. This can be achieved using a simple diagram containing various questions to focus on the meanings and sounds of words. The more this strategy is used in the classroom, the more it will become an independent word learning strategy for the pupil.
- Make abstract language visual/concrete where possible. For example for the words hard/soft - encourage feeling the objects and sorting them according to texture.
- Use additional questions to support word storage, for example:
  - Ask the pupil to use the word in a sentence- when talking, perhaps in partner work
  - Encourage the pupil to think of alternative words in everyday activities e.g. “Today I don’t want to write with a pencil. What else could I use?
  - Say a word and ask the pupil to think of a word that is opposite e.g. Adult: ‘What’s the opposite of hard?’; Pupil: ‘Soft.’
  - Ideally this strategy will be a regular feature of classroom work to encourage the children to use this strategy independently when learning new words.
• Learning a ‘word of the week’ to introduce vocabulary learning into the classroom.
• Give the pupil plenty of opportunities to use the new word in real life situations.
• Model the word and continue discussing it where possible to securely anchor it in their minds.
• Give the pupil time to think of the word they want to use, let them know ‘it’s ok, I’m still listening.’
• Praise the pupil if they manage to find the word by themselves e.g. ‘good thinking’
• When you do need to ask a question, try to offer alternative responses for the pupil to select, e.g. “Do you think it will float or sink?”

Activities for use with small groups or individuals:

• Make a personal dictionary, record information for the words you have learned and revise these when possible, for example on a monthly basis. An exercise book/notebook/address book is good to use for this. You may divide the notebook into subjects or alphabetically and then:
  - Write the word(s) in,
  - Draw a picture of it, and or stick in a photograph/pictures from a magazine/catalogue which represent it
  - Draw a word map (see example) answering the questions about it.

For words like “soft” you may wish so stick a small square of soft fabric beside the word to help her remember it. Teach the vocabulary and create mind maps for the words together. Encourage thinking around the meaning of each word, e.g. its function, appearance, the category it belongs to and other items in the category. Put questions about the word onto cue cards:

- What does it begin with?
- What does it look like? Smell like? Feel like?
- What group/family/category does it belong to?
- What does it do? /What would you do with it?
- What is it made from? /What parts does it have?
- How many beats (syllables) are in the word?
- What does it rhyme with?
- Where would you find it?
- Have you seen it? Do you like it?

As the pupil becomes familiar with the cue cards they should be able to think of the questions without the visual aid. In order to answer questions like:

- What do you know about the word? /What can you tell me about the word?
- What else can you find out about the word?
- What do you do with it? /What does it do?
- Where do you find it?
- Describe it?
- Draw a picture to remind you of the word
- What group/category is it from?
- What are the sounds in the word?

- Once the pupil has learnt new words show them how these words relate to others using
  → sorting pictures into categories e.g. transport/furniture/buildings,
  → sorting words into groups e.g. ‘hot/cold things we eat’, ‘things we find in the house/school’, ‘things that are rough/smooth’
  → mind maps
  → venn diagrams
  This will develop the organisation of words in their mind.

- Once the pupil has learnt the vocabulary play “guess what” type games to see if they can remember the word from clues. For example take it in turns to select a word/object, describe it or give clues, the other person has to guess the word.

- Say two words and ask the Pupil to give you a similarity or a difference e.g. Adult: ‘Can you tell me the same between a kite and aeroplane?’ Pupil: ‘They can fly.’

- Play games to see who can think of the most items in a category.

**Possible Resources**

- Word Whizzer [www.wordwhizzer.com](http://www.wordwhizzer.com)
- Black Sheep Press: Vocabulary Learning Checklist (can be used as a visual cue card) page 8
- Elklan: Language Builders – mind maps, word webs,
- Colorcard Categories Pictures
- “Headbanz” game/What’s Up game
Self-help strategies for finding a word

If the pupil is having difficulties retrieving a word, use the following ideas to aid them (instead of supplying the word immediately):

- Encourage the pupil to tell you:
  - what you do with it (e.g. you ride it)
  - where you find it (e.g. in the park)
  - what it looks like (e.g. it's got four wheels)
  - what kind of thing it is (e.g. it's a sport)

  Giving you this type of information may help the pupil to think of the word, but if not, you may be able to guess the word.

- Ask them to show you or use gesture.

- Give the pupil a prompt to help them think of the word like
  → the first sound in the word e.g. “It’s a sh…” (for shark)
  → prompt them to finish a sentence e.g. “You sit on a…” (for chair)
  → give them an associated word e.g. “It’s not a shoe it’s a…” (for sock)

- Praise the pupil when they are able to convey their meaning by giving additional information.