



Habilitation Outreach for
Professionals in Education

HOPE Note

Vocabulary Development for Children with Cochlear Implants



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It is well established that children with rich spoken language vocabularies have a greater chance of reading with comprehension in their school age years. Auditory access provided by the cochlear implant can contribute to the development of a broad lexical base in the pre-reading years that supports subsequent vocabulary accrual for reading achievement. This HOPE Note outlines important information for early and later vocabulary learning by children with cochlear implants.

The task of vocabulary learning for typically developing children is a lifelong undertaking which begins at home as parents and caregivers supply important labels for the people, items and actions that are part of the young child's immediate world. At about 18 months of age, after the child has learned approximately 50 words, two word combinations emerge and practice with combining known words competes with the task of learning new lexical items. Soon, words and their relationships to other words, begin to form networks that will allow for easy storage and retrieval from a cache of all known words. Continued attention to the way words are used provides the depth and breadth of an individual's vocabulary that is necessary to support literacy across the lifespan.

Choosing Words for the Young Implant Recipient

Language researchers have created lists of the most frequently occurring first 50 words for the developing toddler that may serve as a guideline for the early intervention professional working with a child with an implant. On any list can be found words that have high utility for the youngster just beginning to negotiate and categorize the environment. While many of these early words are labels such as "mommy" or "shoes," a considerable number are verbs or action words such as "up" and "open." Using these early words helps a child get immediate needs and wants met.

Words used by parents and other language experts in the child's circle of communication will influence the development of later vocabulary. When words are used in meaningful contexts, the child with the cochlear implant has the opportunity to hear or overhear the words used by these experts, and may then be able to store those words in the mental lexicon. When initial contact with a new word occurs in a rich context, the more likely is the child to recall the word and its meaning. Parents, caregivers and educational personnel can take

advantage of circumstances to support vocabulary learning by offering synonyms for known words (“disappointed” for “sad,”) providing superordinate terms for basic level words (“furniture” for “bed”, “chair” and “table”) and specifying subordinates for common terms (“tank top” for “shirt”). Every time a parent or teacher provides a new word in place of one already known, a deposit in the lexical bank is made.

Vocabulary Learning in School

Upon entering the educational setting, the child’s vocabulary accrual begins in earnest. Not only is the child expected to acquire subject specific vocabulary such as “condensation,” “revolutionary,” “sum” and “nutrition,” but also begin the task of learning multiple meanings of words (“stable” meaning “steady,”) new words that also represent known words (“parched” for “thirsty”) and new words that represent new concepts (“hesitation,” “admittedly” or “infer”). Parents continue to support this lexical development in the home as they explain new vocabulary that a child encounters in their assigned schoolwork. With regard to vocabulary learning in school, there has been great debate regarding incidental vocabulary acquisition (i.e., learning new words simply by reading widely) versus intentional vocabulary instruction (i.e., specifically teaching vocabulary). However, most reading specialists who have worked with children at risk for developing a vocabulary that will support reading with comprehension (such as children with hearing loss) agree that teaching vocabulary is necessary. Instructional practices for vocabulary learning have been studied over the years; those practices that encourage active processing of new vocabulary are preferred over the rote recitation of dictionary definitions of lists of new words.

Active Processing of Vocabulary

Keeping in mind that the ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction is recognition and understanding new words in subsequent encounters, it is likely that simple exposure to novel words will be insufficient to support this goal. Use of semantic maps or networks, and word webs may assist the vocabulary learner in envisioning the “big picture” of a new lexical item. When encountering a word evokes rich recall of associated known words, meaning is more clear and the student reads and understands the lexical item. This, in turn, contributes to comprehension of the passage or text in which the word was found.

One of the major strategies for vocabulary teaching, requiring students to look up and memorize definitions of new words, has been criticized by many reading professionals. Because dictionary definitions supply terse and abbreviated phrases containing additional unknown words, it is suggested that transparent definitions that offer an explanation of the new word using words already known to the student be provided (McKeown, 1993). These friendly definitions also attempt to identify the “essence” of the word so as to help the vocabulary learner glean its precise meaning. In addition, activities that reinforce understanding of a new word through multiple opportunities to make judgments about its proper use in statements and questions should be part of instruction. Strategies such as these designed for all children learning new vocabulary have particular application to students using cochlear implants. These students are at risk for a cycle of frustration when attempting to use a dictionary to determine the meaning of unknown words. Thus, instructional strategies that model the “understandability” of words may provide the encouragement to seek an alternative source (e. g. teacher, parent) to assist in understanding a new word. When students are empowered to take an active role in their own lexical development, they have a greater chance of learning the staggering number of words required for academic success today.

Related Resources

Beck, I., McKeown, M & Kucan, L. (2002) *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press

Johnson, D. (2001). *Vocabulary in the Elementary and Middle School*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon

Mc Keown, M (1993). *Creating effective definitions for young word learners*. Reading Research Quarterly, 28, 16-31

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