

Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction

Vocabulary



The goal of emergent literacy instruction is to teach the building blocks that will, in later grades, provide children the foundation needed to become good readers. Vocabulary is one of the building blocks.

What is Vocabulary?

Vocabulary is knowing words and word meanings. It includes **expressive vocabulary** (words said or produced) and **receptive vocabulary** (words heard and understood).

Why is Vocabulary Important at the Preschool Level?

- The more words a child knows and understands, the better they can communicate. Language represents knowledge. Children must learn the meanings of many words to use language effectively.
- Vocabulary is important for later reading comprehension; for **decoding** (recognizing words in print) and **language comprehension** (ability to understand the words we read).
- Vocabulary knowledge leads to more vocabulary knowledge.

What are Effective Instructional Practices for Teaching Vocabulary at the Preschool Level?

Effective vocabulary instruction occurs in meaningful contexts with many opportunities for active engagement, rich conversations, and targeted direct instruction. Be intentional about which words to teach. Children are more likely to learn and remember words that are connected and taught within a meaningful topic or theme. Teach new words using a **network of words** (words that are related to each other or associated with a larger topic of interest). Within a network of words, include varied parts of speech, frequently encountered words, and base words and word families.



Integrate vocabulary instruction throughout the day using these effective practices:

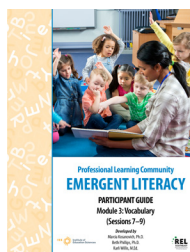
- **Dialogic Reading (DR).** Form small groups to enhance vocabulary and oral language skills through repeated, interactive book readings. During DR, use the book as a prop to teach new words, ask open-ended questions and expand child responses, and discuss narrative, concepts, and personal connections.

- **Explicit Instruction for Specific Words.** Intentionally design and deliver instruction for new words that builds on prior learning and moves from simple to complex. For example, create simple, **child-friendly definitions** (*Enormous* means really big); provide **opportunities for children to say the word** (“What is a word that means really big?” (*enormous*) “What does *enormous* mean?” (really big); and engage children in **active responses** (“I’m going to show you a picture. Put your thumb up if you think it is *enormous*. Put your thumb down if you don’t think it is *enormous*.”). Incorporate activities to reinforce and review previously learned words.



- **Play-based Interactions with Teacher Guidance.** Enhance the learning environment with specific props or activities that relate to your current theme or a meaningful topic and your network of words. Engage with children while allowing them to direct their own play. Ask questions that invite extended responses. Provide meaningful feedback to children’s comments by asking more questions, using more sophisticated words, defining words, and making connections. Introduce new vocabulary words. Use wait time effectively after asking a child a question. This allows them to think about the words you said and the words they want to put together to express their ideas.

Learn More



This infographic is part of a suite of materials designed to support early education leaders and providers to build understanding and implement evidence-based instruction in early language and literacy in preschool settings called, *Professional Learning*

Community: Emergent Literacy. Explore these materials [here](#).