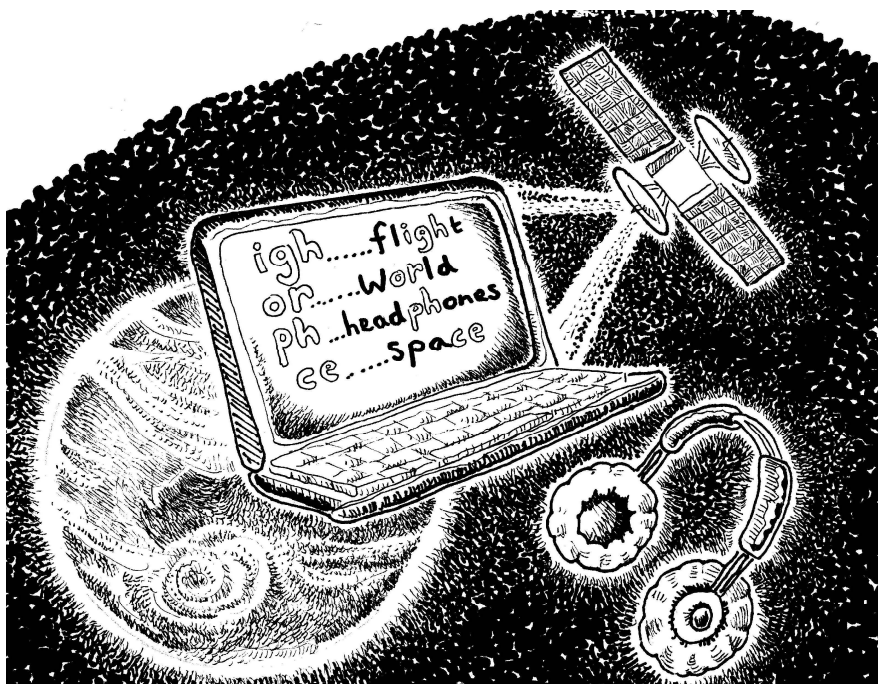# Developing vocabulary:

what we're (still) learning about the 'tight' but tricky bits!

In this entertaining and detailed article, **Rebecca New** shares her passion, experience and evidence for developing vocabulary, making succinct points about the importance of effective vocabulary teaching.

For over 4 years now, the Babcock LDP English team has engaged in a series of projects to develop the teaching and learning of vocabulary. My colleagues and I have worked in a range of settings, predominantly in Devon where we're based, but increasingly further afield: training teachers and leaders, supporting in-school pedagogical practice, and publishing a package of materials for continuing professional development which has, to date, been used by over 170 schools. Our understanding of what makes for successful vocabulary teaching and learning has grown considerably and is still evolving. We now have much evidence on the 'ingredients' needed for effective implementation of a school-wide vocabulary curriculum, coming to similar conclusions as the EEF describes in its 2019 recommendations (Sharples, et al., 2019).

IMPLEMENTATION—FOUR 'ACTIVE INGREDIENTS'

One of the joys of working alongside so many teachers is that we get to witness, constantly learn from, and share in a huge variety of approaches taken. When schools really think about what they and their children need in terms of improving vocabulary, and address this in a manner that suits their peculiar contexts, they often enjoy similar success from often quite different practice.

So what are the commonalities in practice that we have noticed, and what have we learnt to emphasise when introducing ideas and materials to those new to dedicated vocabulary instruction?

We have learnt that the most highly effective vocabulary development in schools…

1…**is sharply-focused and personalised;**
2…**is strategically planned, continually reflected upon and refined;**
3…**addresses two strands: a) the direct instruction of selected words and word-learning strategies, and b) the growth of a school culture that fosters word consciousness and curiosity;**
4…**is grounded in good teacher subject knowledge.**

The EEF might call these bullets the 'active ingredients' of the intervention—'the key behaviours and content that make it work' (Sharples, et al., 2019b, p.2).

The fourth of their recommendations suggests schools should, 'know where to be 'tight' and where to be 'loose'' (p.6) within their own context: these may vary from school to school. Within those 'tight' elements, schools may specify further, and what may be 'loose' in one setting might be considered an additional 'active

(and therefore essential) ingredient' in another. Like Bedlington Academy (see the case study in the EEF's *Examples of Implementation Plans*, 2019, p.2), some of our project schools 'tightly' agreed particular word-learning strategies to be taught across all year groups. For example, one primary expects this 'honeycomb' activity, simplified for the younger children, to feature always (among other methods) when familiarising pupils with new words.
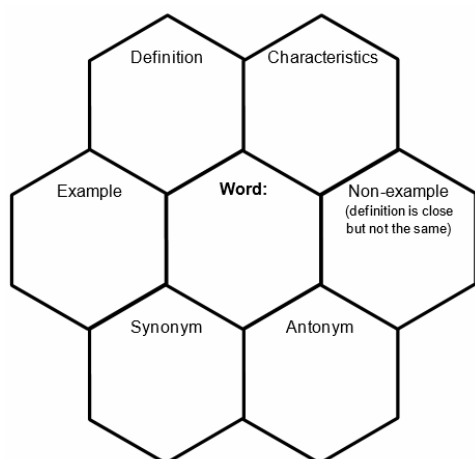
'Honeycomb' activity used in one of our cohort 3 project schools
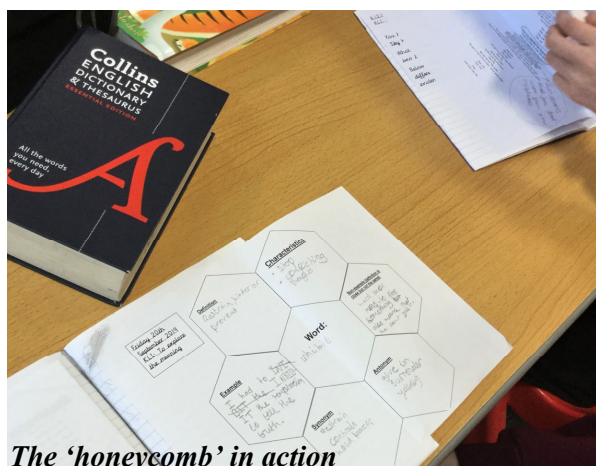
The 'honeycomb' in action

No matter the number of 'tight' elements a school identifies, what's become very clear to us is that none of the four active ingredients listed above can be ignored. We'd consider these 'the fixed elements of the intervention (i.e. those that require fidelity)' (Sharples, et al., 2019, p.4).

Let's take a closer look at a couple of these: personalisation and direct instruction, elements that are intrinsically linked and two areas that, in our experience, schools typically find more challenging to implement.

PERSONALISATION

Because a knowledge of words is essential for pretty much everything we do in school and beyond, it's understandable that many of us would say we are aiming 'to improve our children's vocabulary'. This aim,

though, is far too woolly to helpfully steer teaching. What do we actually mean by 'improve', 'our children', 'vocabulary'? Do we want children to know a greater *number* of words, to understand them when they are read or heard (have them in their receptive vocabulary) or go that step further and use them themselves when speaking, or when writing (a move to their productive vocabulary)? Are these *more* words, 'harder' words, a wider *variety* of words? Are all children a concern or have we spotted patterns: which are the most 'word poor' among them; who is being held back by their smaller word hoard and what is their vocabulary lacking?

We can often create a buzz about words simply by grabbing at tasty ones, discovered incidentally, and sharing them out willy-nilly. With hindsight, I think that's what I did as a teacher. I have an abiding memory of Sophie who, in a silent exam room one May, exploded in a delighted shriek when realising 'cacophonous' and 'whimsical'—words locked away and secretly treasured—now at long last had use as the perfect description of her imaginary creature, the Miptor (yes, I realise how this dates me!).

Looking back, I wonder whether I actually *taught* vocabulary, or if my children left me at the end of each year with bellies full of mis-matched candied words of the week—a veritable pic'n'mix: wonderful, mouth-watering, desirable for sure but, in isolation, not entirely good for them?! Sophie's whimsical cacophony was undoubtedly a sweet treat, but she'd be hard pressed to make a decent meal of it.

Don't get me wrong: I have a sweet tooth myself and am not suggesting we deny children variety, a sugar rush, nor the lingering flavours of delicious words consumed. I suppose what I'm advocating is that alongside the treats, we have a duty as responsible adults and trusted guides to provide nutritious balanced meals with the long-term goal of helping our children grow strong and independent and, in time, capable of their own grocery shopping to create healthy meals.

Something we explore in depth with schools is *which* words to teach, and *why*. Many find this tricky and need to wrestle with the question over time. An early element

Do we want children to know a greater *number* of words, to understand them when they are read or heard (have them in their receptive vocabulary) or go that step further and use them themselves when speaking, or when writing (a move to their productive vocabulary)?

of our CPD is to secure teachers' understanding of Beck et al.'s 'tiers' of words (1987) and to recognise the fundamental power of the Tier 2 ones—those with utility in many different contexts, generally characteristic of written text and not so common in everyday conversation. But this still leaves a plethora of choices and decisions to make!

The Global Language Monitor on February 1st 2020 estimated there were at that point 1,062,759.4 words in English (yes, I too am still puzzled by the 0.4!). Collins' online dictionary offers over one million, with 722,000 in its 12th edition printed version.

It is unsurprising then that the discussion about the 'best' words to choose for explicit teaching is one we're continually having. Sometimes this can stem from teachers' misconception that these will be the *only* words taught; more often, it's because there are so many worthwhile candidates vying for attention. But words breed words: for every word selected, there are likely to be several others—close synonyms, antonyms, ones altered by affixes, etc.—that will be explored. And in order to truly appreciate the nuance of one word, children need to make comparisons with others.

Any attempt at definition will draw upon related vocabulary, something exemplified well by the Frayer Method. This is a widely-employed graphical organiser which requires any word investigation to consider what is an example and also a 'non-example' of the word. (You can see how teachers in the 'honeycomb' school have adapted it.)

Example of a Frayer model exercise that we use in our Developing Vocabulary CPD materials (2018)

What has become self-evident is that those schools most successful in developing vocabulary, and those who have worked on this long enough to have learned from false starts and setbacks tend now to choose in line with an agreed and clearly-defined rationale that is tailor-made to suit the school's context, and community of learners.

We often quote from Law, Charlton and Asmussen (2017) who present stark and disquieting evidence that 'those with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 [are] four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood, three times as likely to have mental health problems, and twice as likely to be unemployed when they reached adulthood' (p.8). I've recently worked with a number of schools keen to broaden pupils' horizons beyond their immediate experience, and better children's life chances partly through the vocabulary they are equipped with. Some aim to encourage emotional literacy and empathy through teaching 'feelings' words; others strive to build confidence in their pupils' articulation of original ideas and thus teach words useful in signposting an argument in critical or other academic discussion, an area of vocabulary that is increasingly noted as causing particular challenge at primary-secondary transition (Menzies et al., 2020).

'We try to teach our children that your voice is your responsibility and that you need to come from a place of knowledge, [therefore] you need the language to back you up… We want them to be able to leave with those tools so they can compete and stand up […] against other candidates from other areas of the country that are more well off, and be okay with that. [We] would like our children to feel empowered.'

English SL/ Deputy Head, Cohort 1 project school

Where schools have decided on which words to teach, and share beliefs and values about why, their direction is purposeful and we begin to see evidence of significant positive impact.

Questions to ask about personalisation:
- Which of my pupils' progress is being hampered by their poorer vocabulary skills?
- What needs to improve for them?
- So what sorts of words would it most help them to learn?

DIRECT INSTRUCTION

When we first starting exploring research on vocabulary development, we were drawn to Michael Graves' *The Vocabulary Book* (2016). He sets out a four-part programme in a bid to present a comprehensive plan for vocabulary instruction, and we'd initially parcelled up our training into these four areas. Over the first project year, however, we'd continually noted how these components were often quite tightly interwoven. To simplify how we and our schools thought about vocabulary instruction, we began talking in terms of two key strands, or elements, to consider when planning for whole school improvement:
- direct instruction
- creating a language-rich culture

Many project school teachers initiated vocabulary work by paying attention to the language-rich 'bit'. Up went the word walls and people scrabbled for apps and commercially-produced resources that delivered Words of the Week. Teachers collected the shiniest of vocabulary and plastered this over the classroom; displays got a facelift and became festooned with bold words on bright cards.

Children's curiosity about words was quickly piqued through this and the kind of low-stakes activity provided by fun games and off the cuff chats. An initial buzz often reassured even the more sceptical teachers; the early belief their new efforts were all worthwhile then sometimes motivated more meaningful consideration and adaptation to teaching and learning.

'Do you want a synonym with that?'
interactive collection of word alternatives from
a cohort 3 project school

Edgar H. Schein (2010) when writing of organisational culture, talks of 'the three levels of culture': artefacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. He defines artefacts as the 'visible and feelable structures and processes', and 'observed behaviours' which are easy to spot but generally hard for an outsider to decipher what they stand for. They can indicate a shared vision and might even get the ball rolling when it comes to shifting culture in that everyone feels as though they're 'in it together', seeing the same symbols of the focus around school. But without an agreed underlying rationale—a shared belief about what constitutes genuine vocabulary development, and clear intentions for *your* pupils—games, posters and collect-a-word routines can become simply (and quite literally in our classrooms) wallpaper, the sprinkles on top of a still-raw cake, if you'll indulge the confectionary metaphor a little longer. It is rarely sustainable.
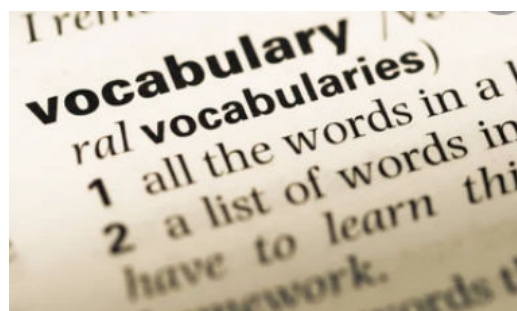
Graves emphasises the importance of planning 'frequent, varied and extensive language experiences': an appreciation of vocabulary and opportunities to develop this thoroughly should be woven into everything we do, thereby contributing in a more meaningful way to a culture that fosters word consciousness. It's easy to paddle about in weekly word lists and lively displays under the impression that pupils' vocabulary development needs are being dutifully catered for, much harder to plunge the depths of truly transformative teaching.

For sustained improvement in vocabulary development, it is crucial to address both key strands. One cannot work without the other, but we've noticed it's the direct instruction of words and word-learning strategies that more often presents teachers with a considerable challenge, in part because it must be planned for and not simply kept 'ticking over' or tackled incidentally. It takes some hard graft. Time constraints, a seeming glut of school priorities, insufficient subject knowledge, and confidence, or both, are often barriers.

When it comes to planning for direct vocabulary instruction, Graves sets out 'some general principles' (2016, pp.95-96). These are useful in planning for and monitoring effective word teaching:

- Include both definitional and contextual information.
- Involve students in active and deep processing of the words.
- Provide students with multiple exposures to the word.
- Review, rehearse and remind students about the word in various contexts over time.
- Include discussion as a prominent part of instruction.
- Spend a significant amount of time on the word.

He recognises while the ideal would be to do all of the above all of the time, this isn't practicable for most busy teachers, but he emphasises we should aim to do as many as we can as regularly as we can.
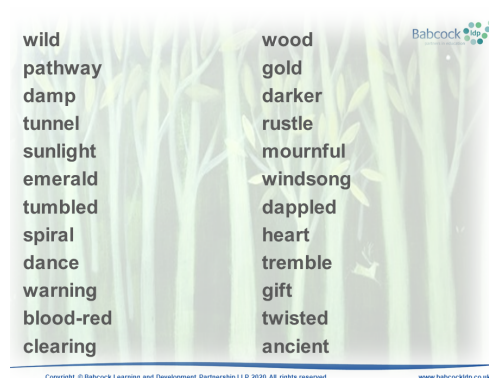
We frequently find ourselves talking with teachers about 'active and deep processing'. Graves is right—simply presenting a word and mentioning it once or twice is not enough to move this into most children's

productive vocabulary. Avid readers will pick up new and wonderful words from their reading but even these, unless required to actually *do* something with the word, are likely retain only a surface-level knowledge of it and solely in the context it was encountered, therefore liable to misuse or under-use. We all have what I call our 'thesaurus-gobblers' in class—children pleasingly greedy for words, enormous synonym fans. These are the ones whose writing will be peppered with apparently impressive vocabulary that on closer examination is uncomfortably revealed to be ever-so-slightly 'off' — the enthusiastic Year 2 in one of our project schools who proudly shared her poster for a charity event at which she aimed to 'hoist' money.

Marilee Sprenger writes in *101 Strategies to Make Academic Vocabulary Stick*, '[to] change the future outcomes of vocabulary learning and close […] gaps, teachers need both professional development in teaching vocabulary and vocabulary strategies at their fingertips' (2017, pp.2-3). Our CPD materials (2018) are packed full of activities for direct vocabulary instruction, sourced from all over. Whenever we introduce this training, we recommend schools deliver the first three of the six sessions as quickly as possible: session 2 tussles with which words and why and the third introduces lots of lesson ideas, so once teachers have their chosen words and activities they can immediately get going and try things out in the classroom. One resource that just keeps on giving is the 'Menu of Instructional Activities'. Developed by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown and Linda Kucan (2008, 2013), this is a bank of ideas for use in the direct teaching of your chosen words. They offer seven categories of activities, many with a number of variations to keep things interesting.

One project school teacher brilliantly used variation 4 of the Example/Non example activity to establish which of two previously introduced target words fit best in a given context by asking her Year 1 class, "When we walk to assembly, do you think I'd rather you were 'relaxed' or 'calm'?" She got the children to stand first in a relaxed manner and then a calm way; they very quickly noticed there was something more controlled, perhaps polite and well-behaved, certainly appropriate, about the latter. The teacher had created significant challenge by selecting very close synonyms but in this way, even 5- and 6-year-olds were happily able to talk about nuances of meaning. On a later visit, I'd heard her encourage talk about the differences between 'fierce' and 'scary'. Some in the class thought a spider was scary but recognised only its prey would find it fierce. Clever stuff!

One of our *Menu…* favourites is 'Word Relationships' and in our training, we often present variation 1 as a sentence-making challenge:

wild	wood
pathway	gold
damp	darker
tunnel	rustle
sunlight	mournful
emerald	windsong
tumbled	dappled
spiral	heart
dance	tremble
warning	gift
blood-red	twisted
clearing	ancient

Using one word from each column, children create a sentence that links the two in some way. They can pick their own but, by choosing carefully, a teacher can steer pupils to create basic and then with less obviously related words more abstract and often poetic links, which can be fun to explore. How might *you* connect the following?

> **wild + wood**
> **dance + darker**
> **tumbled + heart**
> **blood-red + windsong**

This makes for a lovely prediction activity in reading before introducing a new book: it helps orientate pupils, encourages inference, and prepares them for the words in the text to come.

Other activities involving lines of continuum such as paint colour charts are great for exploring subtle nuances of meaning. Ordering 'hubbub', 'noise', 'din', 'racket', and my Sophie's personal favourite, 'cacophony', will engage children in considered discussion, stretching them to articulate and refine their understanding of word meaning.

But not every collection of words can be usefully explored in this way. I recently worked with some KS1 colleagues as they planned their classes' investigation of the word 'image', chosen for its links to the pictures and fantasy worlds children were about to meet in their new teaching sequence text, Michelle Robinson's *Daisy Doodles* (2017). Here, the teachers planned activities focused on morphology, looking at how prefixes and suffixes can change words: images, imagery, imagine, imagines, imagination, imagining, imaginary, reimagined, unimaginable…

Once familiar with a number of 'dishes' on the menu, the trick to effective vocabulary instruction is then understanding which best combine to create the most nutritious, delicious and satisfying meal.

THE (NOT SO) SECRET INGREDIENT
A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

While individual teachers in isolated classrooms can certainly implement a vocabulary initiative by addressing those active ingredients we've identified, the impact on pupils, pedagogy and school culture will be far greater and is more likely to be sustained with adoption of a whole school implementation programme.

Back in 2017 when we were first investigating research on effective vocabulary development and beginning our own, we worked with a couple of teachers from 23 schools across Devon. We focused on delivering subject knowledge training as fast as we learned it ourselves to support them with individual action research projects.

Initial evidence of impact was encouraging. Teachers reported children's increased willingness to have a go at working out word meanings, leading to improved reading scores, more ambitious and more wisely selected words in writing, a big boost to children's confidence, among other successes.

> *'I have seen children become more interested and have a greater awareness of their vocabulary. I now have a class who is eager to talk and discuss this in great depth which has made for an effective learning environment and atmosphere'*
>
> Cohort 1 project school teacher.

What really got our attention that first year, however, was feedback from the few schools that had chosen to include other teachers and classes in whole-school vocabulary improvement, led by those receiving the central training. One school's KS2 reading results rose from 57% to 94%, with a 16% increase in writing, and while to a significant degree cohort-specific, these figures were nonetheless impressive.

Another school's Ofsted report remarked on the positive impact the school's approach to developing vocabulary had on pupils' writing.

It was a desire to maximise impact that led in 2018 to us writing *Developing Vocabulary: CPD package for teaching & learning*, materials for whole school training delivery. These are designed to introduce schools to and support them with a strategic and systematic approach to developing the teaching and learning of vocabulary, with the aim of having a more enduring effect on a greater number of children.

These days, we insist our project schools add a crucial fifth element to the list of active ingredients:

The most highly effective vocabulary development in schools…

5…is part of a whole-school approach, with agreed principles and practice.

We're seeing some exciting results, and currently collating these into an evaluation report for publication.

Rebecca New is a Primary English Adviser for Babcock LDP having joined the team in 2016 after over eighteen years' experience of teaching in Key Stages 2 and 3. She has worked as a Leading Literacy Teacher, an Advanced Skills Teacher, was Head of English and Assistant Headteacher at a middle school, alongside her class teaching. Rebecca has a Master of Arts degree in Education and is an accredited KS2 lead moderator.

More information on *Developing Vocabulary—CPD package for teaching & learning* can be found at Developing Vocabulary - CPD package for teaching & learning | Babcock LDP where there is a link to a short video explaining 'What's in the Pack'.

Contact Rebecca and the Babcock LDP English team by visiting the website Babcock LDP - English or following on Twitter @BabcockLDPEng.