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3 Reasons Why More Reading Won't Build Kid's Vocabulary

And What You Can Do About It

September 13, 2015 by [Shaun Killian](#) — [5 Comments](#)



Research shows that enriching students' **vocabulary** improves their reading, especially their comprehension. In fact, [John Hattie's review of research](#)¹ revealed that enhancing students' vocabulary has more impact on their subsequent reading comprehension than teaching them *phonics*, teaching them

comprehension strategies or placing them in a *Reading Recovery* program. It's not that these strategies aren't effective; it's just that *vocabulary programs* are even more effective.

Sadly, when I asked 248 teachers how they help students improve their vocabulary, **94%** of them said that they simply encouraged their students to *read more*. Don't get me wrong – *reading more* is great, but it is not an effective way to develop a richer vocabulary² – and here's why.

1

Guessing leads to many students coming up with vague or inaccurate understandings of words. Students need a firm understanding of what words mean. They also need a deep understanding of words and the way that they are used in different contexts.

2

Incidental exposure is unlikely to improve vocabulary. For students to internalize a new word, they need to be exposed to it several times. Leaving this to chance reduces the probability that this will happen. With this in mind, it is not surprising research shows that students only pick up 15% of new words they encounter through incidental reading³.

3

Many students don't work out unknown words – they simply keep reading. To learn words incidentally, students must be actively seeking to expand their vocabulary. They also need knowledge about how words work – knowledge that ranges from simple phonics to etymology and morphology. Only then will they be both *willing* and *able* to use word attack strategies to work out unknown words.

What You Can Do About It

Research shows that the single most important thing that you can do is to explicitly teach students new words. This includes working through comprehensive lists of general words, as well as teaching words associated with concepts you are teaching in other subject areas.

However, there are also things you can do to boost the chance of your students learning words incidentally from 15% to 41%⁴. These strategies centre on discussing words while reading to or with your students – be it from a big book with younger students or a textbook passage with older students.

Boosting Strategy 1: Model & Nurture An Interest In Words

Words are fascinating. Did you know that the word disaster stems from *dis*, meaning bad and *aster*, meaning star? Why? Because ancient Greeks blamed terrible events on the alignment of the stars. The word *jumbo* was originally the name of an elephant, and word *decimate* comes from a brutal way Romans would motivate their troops by killing every tenth soldier. Your job as a teacher is to nurture students' curiosity about words, leading to actively seek out new vocabulary as well as to deepen their understanding of words they already know⁵.

Boosting Strategy 2: Explicitly Teach Students About Words

While strategy one focuses on motivating students, strategy two gets to down to teaching students the nuts and bolts about words. Students need knowledge about words so that they can use this knowledge to help them decode unfamiliar words⁶. Essential knowledge includes phonics – teaching students about the relationship between letters and sounds so that they can 'sound-out' or 'stretch-out' new words. It also includes

morphology – teaching students about the meaningful chunks (base words, roots, prefixes and suffixes) that make up words, so that they can ‘analyse chunks’ of unknown words. Teaching students word attack strategies, without teaching them the knowledge they need to use those strategies, doesn’t work.

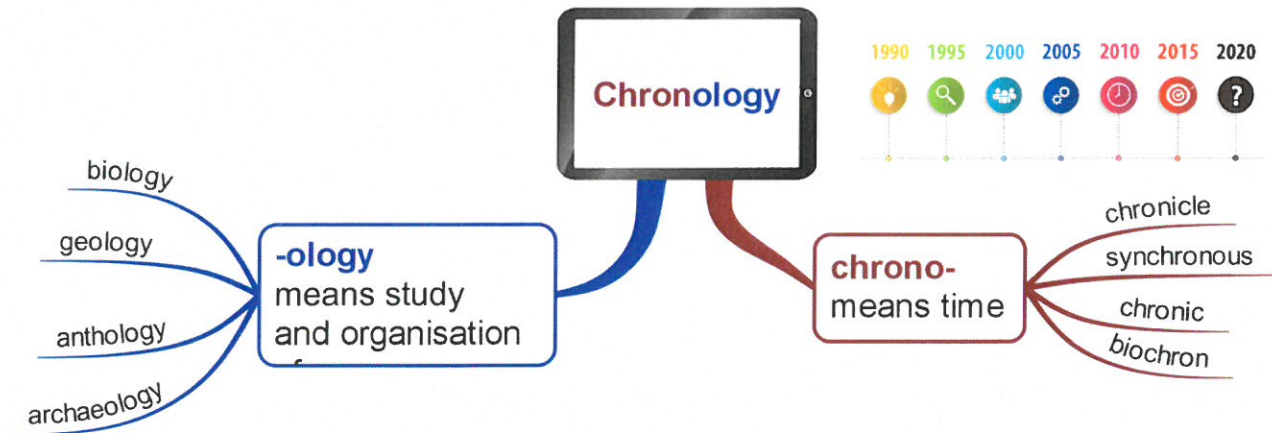
Boosting Strategy 3: Explain New Words As You Encounter Them

There are many times when students of all ages listen to the teacher or their peers read. A teacher in Year 7 may be reading a passage about how the interaction between the Sun and the Earth causes the seasons. An early-childhood teacher may be reading a big book about a lady who swallowed a fly, and a Year 10 teacher may be listening to a student read an article about the Holocaust to the class. We call this *reading together*, because no matter who is saying the actual words, the whole class is actively involved in understanding and discussing the text. If **you** explain what new words mean as they encountered, you nearly double the likelihood of your students remembering that word⁷.

Boosting Strategy 4: Have Your Students Engage With These New Words

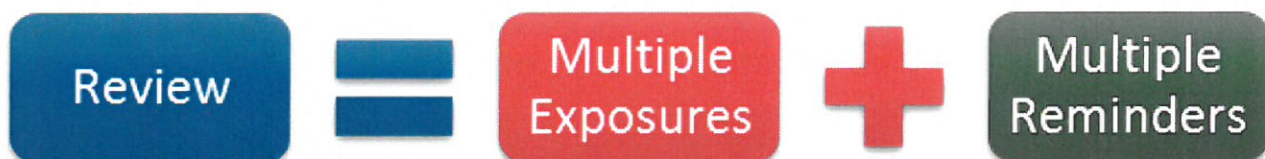
Explaining new words to students makes a big difference to their learning; however, you can make more of difference if you then actively engage your students in exploring the unknown word⁸. This could be as simple as writing their own explanation of the word. Yet, it can also involve far more. You can have students compare related words – when they first come across the word *axis* you could ask them to describe how it is similar and

different to *axle*. You could ask your students to create a hierarchical concept map of related words. You could also have students draw a picture or diagram that helps them remember the term (e.g. a timeline for chronology), or look at grammatical differences in related words (e.g. chronological, chronologically).



Boosting Strategy 5: Review These Words Several Times

Students are far more likely to internalize new words after being exposed to them multiple times⁹. Therefore, you need to draw attention to words already discussed when *reading together* whenever you encounter them. You can boost the chance of students adding new words to their permanent vocabulary by reminding students what the word means with each exposure.



Tech Tip


Do your students read things online? If so, you should check out a new vocabulary tool called **Propagate**. It incorporates some of the above into their online reading.

WARNING

It is dangerous to rely on students learning new vocabulary incidentally through their independent reading. Despite encouragement to 'read more' research¹⁰ shows that existing good readers will continue to read more than their less able peers. As a result, good readers expand their vocabulary at a faster rate. Given the link between expanded vocabularies and reading comprehension, this actually increases the gap between proficient and struggling readers.

	
	
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About the Author

Shaun Killian is an experienced teacher and principal with a passion for helping students to excel. He believes that assisting teachers to adopt evidence-based