

Teaching Vocabulary is Rocket Science

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Over the years working as a speech pathologist both in clinics and public schools, I have found that most teachers and parents are not properly trained to teach vocabulary. Many of the students that I have tested especially in the public schools have a very limited vocabulary which has and will greatly interfere with their ability to succeed within a language enriched environment as that found within a school setting.

The problem, I have found through many years of talking to parents and teachers and my own personal experiences in working with students are that this limited knowledge of vocabulary starts when the child is very young. My personal theory is that it starts when a child begins to walk. Once children begin to walk and they are able to get items from their immediate environment on their own and no longer need to ask for things, their vocabulary can take a significant nosedive or it can continue to expand.

A child does not have to know the label of a spoon in order to use it nor does it need to know the label of a bureau or banister in order to use them. As the years pass, the child interacts with his environment confidently and successfully without ever really needing to know the labels of the items because they can now get them on their own. The problem comes up when they see the name in a book or they need to ask for item from a parent and teacher and then the all too familiar word appears "thing". Ask a teacher how often they hear the word thing or read it in their students' essays at school. The word thing begins to replace the word of the item, which the child never needed to learn growing up.

When I started to do home tutoring, I usually started my lessons by explaining to the parents that they should not be surprised that words that they thought their child understood may not be the case. For example, I once pointed to a light switch for the child to name in front of her mother and the child just shrugged her shoulders to indicate that she did not know what it was called. I thought for a moment that her mother was going to have a heart attack. The mother began to run around the house pointing to items for her daughter to name, which she was able to do about 50% of the time. Even though her daughter has turned on and off light switches throughout her house, she did not need to know the name in order to use them. Imagine how her mother felt to find out that her daughter did not know the label of a light switch.

In the years that I have been working in the public schools in Boston, I have only found about 6 students out of a possible 600 plus who knew the label of a door hinge. They see them everyday and

they are obviously using them to open and close doors, but once again they do not need to know the name hinge in order to open up or close a door.

As a teacher or parent you have to learn never to assume. As a parent, a student needs to hear the labels of the items and should be periodically tested to make sure that they understand and know the label of the item in question. When our daughter was very young, my wife and I both would talk out loud about everything we were doing and what we were using. For example, if we were going to cook some scrambled eggs, we would say we need to get the eggs as we retrieved the eggs from the refrigerator then once in the refrigerator, we would talk about needing the butter and then go to the pantry and retrieve the pan and place it on the stove, all the while talking and labeling the items. Our interactions with her over the years obviously paid off as demonstrated by her receiving the highest score on the 10th grade ELA MCAS in her school.

As a teacher, you cannot assume that your students who are able to read fluently are able to comprehend what they have read or heard within the classroom. I have seen many students who are fluent readers but were unable to tell me what the author wanted them to picture or visualize or understood what the teacher had stated based on the text that they read or what they heard. Teachers also assume that the student understands and knows the labels of item on their person or found in their immediate environment. I have many students that do not know the label of cuff as that found at the end of their sleeves or pants leg or the label seam as found on their clothing.

I can go on for pages upon pages about examples of items that students do not know the name of even though they see them everyday and have used them for years.

As I have stated for years to teachers and administrators that I only teach 3 basic skills which are Vocabulary, Comprehension and Inference. These skills also follow the order of elementary, middle and high school. The basis of learning is vocabulary, which is needed for student to comprehend, and they need to comprehend in order to infer. In that I have had the opportunity of working in grades from kindergarten to high school, I have seen way too many students with the intelligence to succeed but not the vocabulary which would have afforded them with a greater chance to be successful. The chance of a student being successful in school with a limited vocabulary is not very promising and if a student has not achieved the level of inference by high school, their chances of failing or dropping out of school become much greater.

The problem is that teaching vocabulary **is** rocket science and parents and teachers need to be trained as to how to do it in such a way that students are prepared for school and as life long learners.