

Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom

Primary

EYFS, KS1, and KS2



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Foreword

Geoff Barton is General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders. He was an English teacher for 32 years.



The importance of vocabulary may be the elephant in the room.

If that sentence makes any sense at all to you, then it's because you're one of us – a member of the word-rich as opposed to the word-poor, someone who knows that what language appears to offer on the surface isn't always what it means underneath.

You'll thus be adept at spotting the lurking undercurrents of subtexts. You'll know that in my opening sentence there is no actual elephant, no physical room. It's a metaphor, an idiom. It's the way our language works.

I was thinking of this last week when a teacher told me how disappointed she felt in her year 11 English class. They had just done another set of mock examination papers. She had prepared them well, she felt, and built their confidence.

But there in the reading paper that they dutifully undertook was the word *circus*. It was being used metaphorically – something along the lines of 'a media circus rolled into town'. And her students thought it was a real circus, a literal circus, and therefore misunderstood the whole point of the text, to the dismay of the teacher.

This is what we've realised in recent years, that vocabulary is a proxy for academic success. The child who writes, 'In the book the writer says ...' will be judged less capable in English or history or RE than the one who says, 'In the passage the author suggests ...'.

That's why our new-found interest in vocabulary matters so much. As Ludwig Wittgenstein memorably put it more than a century ago, 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world'. We are defined and constrained by the lexis at our disposal.

Oxford University Press's recent report *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* brings this into sharp focus. It reminds us that the size of a child's vocabulary is the best predictor of success in future tests, and that children with a poor vocabulary at five are four times more likely to struggle with reading in adulthood and three times more likely to have mental health issues.

It also shows that 69% of primary school teachers and 60% of secondary school teachers believe the word gap is increasing.

That's why we need to do all we can to work with the hardest-to-reach parents – reassuringly, constructively, unpatronisingly – to help them to build literacy habits long before their children come to school.

It's why we need classrooms that are rich in language, with adults modelling the way speakers and writers are constantly making choices, choosing words that are more or less formal, more or less technical, more or less colloquial – to show children that self-expression is a set of choices, not a matter of predetermined intelligence.

And it's why, most importantly of all, we need to keep harking back to George Sampson's 1921 mantra – that 'every teacher in English is a teacher of English'.

This has to be a non-negotiable, with the responsibility for literacy at the heart of every teacher's work on behalf of every child, whatever her or his background.



Closing the word gap: a whole-school vocabulary policy

A former head of department and English Advisor for Devon, Richard Durant is a widely published author of textbooks and teaching guides, and a long-standing Teachit contributor.



Drawing on his experiences in educational leadership and management, Richard shares his ideas for developing a whole-school vocabulary policy for primary and secondary schools.

From taking your first steps to key advice for policy implementation and staff training, he also offers a range of practical strategies for enriching students' vocabulary.

Whether you are a senior or middle leader, a lead practitioner, a SENDCo, a literacy coordinator, or a teacher with a special interest in children's literacy, you'll find suggestions to help you to close the word gap in your school.

Section 1: First steps to developing a vocabulary policy

We know from reading *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* that primary and secondary teachers believe that many students are disadvantaged by a word gap that widens throughout their schooling. Teachers in your school are already addressing this problem in a variety of ways, but a systematic approach to closing the word gap across the whole school is likely to make the efforts of individual teachers more rewarding and more effective.

Here are some suggestions to help you to take the first steps to develop a meaningful vocabulary policy in your school.

1. Early leadership

How the ground is prepared is a matter of leadership. Vocabulary is part of literacy and literacy is part of learning. Vocabulary therefore connects to the core focus of school leadership – learning. As Geoff Barton points out:

'Headteachers and principals need to act as leaders of learning. Whatever the other distractions, learning must be our core business. We set the tone for it. We make it happen in our schools. Thus we all need to know why literacy matters, and to ensure that someone in our leadership team relentlessly moves the literacy agenda forward, translating good intentions into action.' (OUP, 2018)

Most staff will not need persuading that the vocabulary gap needs closing, so at this point the most important leadership facets are vision, credibility, and responsiveness. A strong and enduring policy will be shaped out of existing expertise and excellent practice, and you need to know what those are. You can listen and find out 'relentlessly'! Talking to teachers and students will be the best way to clarify the issues around vocabulary so that an emerging policy seems credible to all and authentic to your context.

2. Key questions

Before launching a whole-school vocabulary policy, it is worth considering and discussing a range of key questions:

- Why is it important to improve children's vocabulary?
- What sorts of vocabulary should we help students to acquire?
- What methods are already being used?
- How would we know if these methods are effective? What measures of effectiveness should we use?
- What is the typical quality of spoken interactions between teachers and students? How does this vary according to student and according to teacher?
- How would a wider vocabulary enrich students' reading and writing?
- How would a vocabulary development policy relate to existing initiatives and common practices in the school?

Schools throughout the country are starting similar discussions, and you will want to interrogate the questions fully as teachers and explore their relevance for your students.

3. Lay the groundwork for a vocabulary development policy

The real groundwork for a word gap policy involves a process of finding out, sharing experiences and perceptions, and building a widespread focus on the issue. It also builds anticipation and a renewed sense of togetherness. Finally, and most importantly, it develops a shared commitment to the issue. You are much more likely to shrink or close the word gap if:

- teachers are emotionally as well as intellectually committed to the policy; in other words, you **feel** the importance of the issue, as well as agreeing with it
- teachers have a shared understanding of the issue and a shared enthusiasm for doing something about it.

The groundwork phase – prior to developing and implementing the policy – helps to nourish this shared commitment, which is also a shared responsibility:

'Pupils' acquisition and command of vocabulary are key to their learning and progress across the whole curriculum.' (DfE, 2014)

Why Closing the Word Gap Matters is a useful reference point for clarifying the issue and identifying practical ways to move forward. It found a groundswell of opinion that the word gap is a real and urgent phenomenon. Large numbers of both primary and secondary teachers in the OUP survey shared their belief that the number of students with a limited vocabulary is increasing year-on-year, with disastrous effects on test results and on children's life chances. Despite these consequences, '38% of secondary school teachers surveyed said that they were unable to provide specific vocabulary support. Most cited insufficient time and not enough additional teaching support as the main challenges.' (OUP, 2018)

A practical and supportive policy is therefore likely to be universally welcomed in your school.

4. Write a draft policy

Careful groundwork will lay secure foundations for a lasting policy. Initially, it's worth publishing a draft policy. Be prepared to revise the policy substantially in the light of practice in order to encourage the trialling, experimenting, and failure-risking that will eventually underpin a strong whole-school policy.

The draft policy should be accompanied by an interim action plan, as you identify key staff, set up a steering group, and choose your priorities. It provides a clear reference point by establishing key elements:

- the **rationale** for a vocabulary development policy
- the **vision and aims** – what you want to achieve
- how the policy will be **monitored**
- how progress will be **measured** and key indicators
- what **key actions** will be taken, by whom, and when.

Rationale

The benefits of developing children's vocabulary are clearly defined in *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* and the academic studies referenced in the OUP report. Share these key findings where appropriate, but teacher testimony should also be a prominent (and motivating) feature of the rationale. Try to include brief quotations from your own staff, and include insights gleaned from your students as well. Everyone **knows** that the word gap needs bridging; local testimony makes staff, students and stakeholders **feel** it too.

Vision and aims

Your school vision will, of course, relate to your rationale. It will offer a picture of a better future that is both believable and challenging. However, you must be specific about some things that the policy is aimed at achieving. For example, you might express a vision of a word-rich school community in which everyone feels listened to and no one feels tongue-tied. In the first instance, though, your aim might be to ensure that all students are familiar with the core vocabulary of particular subject areas and can confidently define and use those words.

Observing and monitoring

Observation and monitoring will depend on your vision and aims, but they need to be as specific as possible. Not everything needs monitoring all the time. For example, you might decide to monitor progress in subject terminology through peer observation and discussion, prescribing a qualitative approach. Give priority to intelligent, supportive monitoring that nourishes commitment and debate as much as it provides data. Whatever the case, put necessary resources behind it.

Measuring progress

This again must be directly related to vision and aims. It is important to decide at the outset the criteria for progress. For example, if you aim to improve the use of subject-specific vocabulary in teacher and classroom talk, then you need to have already decided on the indicators of improvement. Perhaps you will use teacher observations to record progress throughout an academic year. Whether you choose to use qualitative and/or quantitative data, you need to have debated and decided on your school's approach in advance.

Key actions: who, what, and when?

At this point, not all staff will necessarily be involved. In fact, there are advantages to making the draft policy a limited pilot so that any lessons can be learned before rolling it out across the school. However, those staff who are involved at this stage need to be clear about what is expected of them and what support they will get. They also need to be very clear about timescales.

5. Key people and relationships

A crucial aspect of a draft policy is that it should build towards a permanent one. If the draft policy is a limited pilot, then it must be designed to be scalable. To ensure that the policy thrives, grows, and embeds over time, it needs to be launched and led by the **school leadership team**.

In a very small school, this will probably be the headteacher, unless the school has very good structural links with other schools, in which case it might be possible for one leader to assume responsibility across a MAT or other school partnership. Whatever the format of the leadership team, you will benefit from recruiting an internal expert or enthusiast as a **vocabulary advocate** who can help to advise and facilitate the policy work and implementation. This advocate will need to be a good communicator and practitioner who is both knowledgeable and highly committed.

Larger schools will/might have other people who must be actively involved, for example, the **SENDCo, literacy coordinator, lead practitioner**, etc. If you have additional expertise in your school, recruit a small steering group of advocates. The guiding principle should be that the vocabulary development policy should not step on people's toes but should be a new source of invigoration for them. If vocabulary is part of literacy and literacy is part of learning, the relationships between these areas must be recognised, and so must the relevant roles and structures. If the SENDCo is in charge of literacy development, then a successful vocabulary development policy must fit within their remit.

The larger the school, the more complex the relationships within it, and the greater the need for policy consistency. **Middle leaders** are crucial to students' progress in subject areas. Even in a pilot, middle leaders will enable and support the activity of the staff they lead. They need to be actively involved in generating, trialling, and refining the vocabulary policy.

6. Steering group

If vocabulary development really is going to be a priority, then a steering group – probably composed of the key people above – will be useful. One difficulty is that the people you will need to be part of the group are likely to be substantially committed to other areas of activity already. Perhaps you could make this group time-limited, such as by meeting every half term for an hour for one year. Their function would be to oversee the monitoring and refinement of the draft policy as it evolves into a permanent one.

7. Choosing priorities

There are so many ways you could try to raise vocabulary levels in your school. Where do you start? Will you focus on direct vocabulary instruction? Or creating contexts that are favourable to vocabulary acquisition? Or intervening with identified individuals? You will find a variety of methods to close the word gap in a range of different contexts below, but it is important that you develop your own understandings around the issue and that you don't try anything and everything.

Alongside wisdom accrued from your own experience, research will provide a useful academic framework for you to draw on when determining priorities, and *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* is an invaluable point of reference.

Another useful source is a 2010 report by the US National Reading Technical Assistance Centre, *A Review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction*. Although the review emphasises the early years, many of its insights are applicable or adaptable throughout the primary and secondary years. One of the key findings of this synthesis of prior research is that using a variety of methods and experiences optimises vocabulary acquisition.

Here is a summary of the report's other key findings:

- **Context**
Introduce children to any challenging words that they are about to meet in a class text. Repeatedly exposing children to the same words and in different contexts is important as children best learn words by encountering them in a variety of meaningful contexts.
- **Which words to teach?**
The words chosen for teaching should be those that the student will find useful in many contexts. They can usefully include high-frequency words known and used by mature language users.
- **Active engagement in learning words**
Learning through mere repetition or drilling of words is not effective. Vocabulary learning is effective when it entails active engagement that goes beyond a word's definition to explore its relationship with other words, and how it functions in different contexts.
- **Teacher–student spoken interaction**
Scaffolding questions and moving from low-demand questions to high-demand questions promotes greater gains in vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction is enhanced by good teacher–student activities and interaction.
- **Learning through reading**
Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning so reading volume is very important in terms of long-term vocabulary development. Reading aloud, discussion about reading, and independent reading experiences at school and at home can encourage vocabulary growth.

Section 2: Implementing a whole-school policy

1. Scaling up and accountability

If you started small with a draft policy, then now is the time to start scaling up and putting a full vocabulary development policy in place. Almost all the procedures associated with making the first steps successful also apply in this later phase: the structures, plans, leadership, and relationships are still just as important. There will now, though, be a greater emphasis on accountability. Eventual success will depend on consistency in the basics by all staff. However, even at this point, the aim should be to build and shape practice over time and to encourage and perhaps license some experimentation.

Don't overwhelm teachers with a litany of items that they must include in their teaching straight away and for all time, or other important things might fall off their agenda.

2. Getting and keeping teachers engaged

Training and monitoring have to be thoughtfully planned and easy to implement and manage. More crucially, they have to be beneficial to teachers and their students. Like professionals in all fields, teachers are drawn towards things that seem to work, so identifying and eliminating ineffective practice quickly, while celebrating and spreading effective practice, is a vital component of this phase of the policy.

Engaging teachers in the short, medium and longer term is also essential. Subject teachers at secondary level will naturally be excited by any approaches that help to develop students' understanding of key subject vocabulary, and an initial subject-specific emphasis might help to recruit teachers, leading to a joined-up approach across the curriculum and across year groups and key stages.

Three sorts of vocabulary need to be considered:

- i. subject-specific vocabulary, e.g. in design and technology: *construct, prototype, alignment*
- ii. cross-curricular conceptual vocabulary, e.g. *despite, imply, analyse, however*
- iii. words that mean different things in different contexts, e.g. *product, analyse, tolerance*.

3. 'High-vis' initiatives

Make sure that the launch and initial implementation of the policy are noticed. Avoid gimmicks, but some 'high-vis' initiatives alongside subtler adjustments to routine classroom practice can be helpful in launching and occasionally refreshing a whole-school policy.

Choose such initiatives carefully according to their perceived relevance to the vision and aims, and their practicality. For example, a medium-sized primary school might place sheets of sugar paper and markers around the school with a word that means different things in different contexts written in the middle of each sheet. Students could be invited to write a web of definitions of the word, along with subject and other contextual information, plus sample sentences. Secondary leaders might shudder with horror about what such an activity might lead to. Fine. Do something else.

Here are some suggestions for 'high-vis' initiatives:

- word search contests
- word of the week: all staff wear a badge showing a word they particularly like
- funding the library for new, high-interest books

- reopen the library with someone famous coming in to lead the ceremony
- volume reading competitions with books pitched at different levels and knowledge quizzes at the end
- word games played out publicly at lunchtime.

4. Training

Staff working in schools generally already have the level of vocabulary that many of their students lack. Teachers just need to be made newly aware of the importance of sharing this vocabulary in effective ways and of modelling new vocabulary. All school adults need to become more conscious of the role of vocabulary in students' development and in their academic performance. Part of this process is about becoming more sensitive to the issues surrounding language development. Here are a few perspectives that it would be useful for the whole staff team to be aware of:

Tiers of vocabulary

We can see vocabulary as inhabiting tiers or levels, as Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown identified (1985):

Tier 1 words are basic words used often in everyday conversation, e.g. *go, play, weather*. Some young children need help with acquiring these, while many of their peers will arrive at school very well equipped with everyday words.

Tier 2 words are complex words that are more likely to occur in academic settings, e.g. *compare, neutral, specific*.

Tier 3 words are highly specialised, subject-specific words, e.g. *isosceles, government*.

Another significant subset of vocabulary consists of words that – confusingly – mean different things in different contexts, e.g. *place, space, prime, revolution*.

Plain words as well as 'big' words

Teachers should introduce more complex, formal words, but they should also choose the clearest, most appropriate, and most accessible words for the classroom context. It is important not to imply to children that big words are better words. Speaking like you've swallowed a thesaurus is silly – as the character Joey in *Friends* demonstrated when he used 'full-sized aortic pump' instead of 'big heart'. Watching this short episode from *Friends* is a useful and light-hearted starting point for a wider discussion with staff about appropriate vocabulary. As Joey fails to grasp, the best word is generally the most appropriate word for your audience. Our role as teachers is to help students by choosing carefully between synonyms and to explore the appropriacy of words in different spoken and written contexts.

Respect children's own language

There are many words that children use that are completely unfamiliar to literate adults. To have this lexicon effectively ruled out must be dispiriting and perhaps makes the teacher's own offered lexicon both intimidating and alien. To help colleagues see vocabulary acquisition from the students' perspective, give them lists of vocabulary that may be familiar to students and not to them. Translate parts of a familiar text into 'youth speak'. How does this make them feel about the text and the exercise of reading it? This might be similar to the daily experience of students when encountering new, and potentially intimidating, words.

Section 3: Practical whole-school strategies for enriching students' vocabulary

Many of the following suggestions can be adapted for use across all the key stages. One of the most important considerations for classroom practitioners is choosing and adapting methods according to their suitability and relevance to your students, whatever their age.

Language – and its vocabulary – are social in use and socially learned. Most of the strategies suggested below are enhanced by having students talk and think together about new words, their meanings, and how these vary according to context.

Using a variety of methods will help to optimise vocabulary acquisition, and encouraging an exploratory approach should help to excite students as they discover new words.

1. Use context to deepen understanding

Students need to develop a deeper understanding of significant words. This means knowing how a word's meaning can vary according to context, e.g. the noun *place* differs in meaning from the verb *to place*, even though the words' meanings are related. *Solution* means different things in the context of chemistry and crossword puzzles. Deep understanding also means appreciating that synonyms can have different shades of meaning from each other, e.g. *overweight* and *fat* mean the same but can have different effects.

- **Introduce a range of meaningful contexts.** When you introduce a new or very important word that children may be unsure of, plan to expose children to the word repeatedly and in different contexts. Children best learn words by coming across them in varied, meaningful contexts. For example, you could introduce *train* (the noun, a vehicle) and *train* (the verb, to *train* a dog) on the same day.
- **Explore words in the context of books and subjects, and in everyday usage.** Compare the different meanings and effects of words in different, naturally occurring contexts. Prompt students to think about where else they have come across a word you want to draw attention to.
- **Use word clues.** Encourage students to try to work out the meaning of unknown words in a text by using the context to find clues about a word's meaning. For example, *unworthy* includes the word *worth* and the prefix *un-*. Students are likely to have some understanding of both of those elements before they encounter *unworthy*. Making use of prior word knowledge will give them clues about the meaning of a 'new' word. This approach might seem time-consuming, but what you are doing is arming children for those times when they encounter a significant new word on their own. This is important from the early years right through to sitting a GCSE exam. We need to build children's ability and willingness to make educated guesses at the meanings of words and to know that it is OK not to know what every word means.
- **Model how to use dictionaries and thesauruses.** Get students more sensitised to the effect of words by helping them to explore the connotations of different synonyms. Take some dramatic sentences from a story or newspaper report, and ask students to suggest alternatives for some of the emotive words and phrases. For example, show students the following headline:

Gang runs riot through school

Ask students in pairs or groups to explore synonyms for the word *gang*. When they have shared their ideas (e.g. *group*, *crowd*, *tribe*, *crew*, *mob*, *band*, *horde*), students could arrange themselves into 'heat order' – the hottest, most dramatic, most emotive word on the left; the coolest, least engaging word on the right. If you get other students to do the rearranging, you create another good opportunity to practise precise vocabulary: 'Sadia, move three places to the left; Harry, change places with Isla, please.' This activity is a good opportunity for practising thesaurus use, which can be problematic. The emphasis should be on rediscovering words they already know, rather than finding bizarre (and often inappropriate) synonyms.

- **Play ‘beat the author’.** Give students a text (preferably not a particularly well-written one) with certain words highlighted. Ask them to find suitable alternative words and then justify why their choice beats that of the original author. Make thesauruses available, but do not insist on their use. The text could be non-fiction as well as fiction.
- **Role-play speech.** Encourage children to role-play speech in varied contexts for different purposes.
- **Develop affective vocabulary.** The vocabulary of things, actions, and processes is very important, but we should not overlook developing children’s **affective** vocabulary – the words we use to label and express our feelings. With younger children, show the class an evocative photograph and talk it through with them. Who is in the picture? What are their feelings? What are the surroundings like? How can we describe facial expressions, the weather, and the landscape? Gather together the more interesting/useful words in a word bank, and ask students to select from them during a writing activity based on the picture.

2. Active engagement in learning words

Research suggests that learning through mere repetition or drilling of words is not effective. Vocabulary learning is most useful when it entails **active engagement** that goes beyond a word’s definitional knowledge to its logical relationship with other words and how it functions in different contexts. Getting students to engage actively with vocabulary also supports their contextual learning.

- **Illustrate words.** In the early years, use animations or pictures to illustrate words or phrases in a book. For example, you could animate (and get children to animate) the word *anxiously* in the sentence, ‘she searched anxiously’.
- **Mime words.** Give children different actions to mime in the manner of a given adverb. Other children can work out the adverb. For example, you might ask a child to mime brushing her hair, walking a dog, or drinking some water *happily* or *grumpily*.

3. Explore word structures

Exploring word structures is important in helping students to tackle new words.

- **Identify core words.** The simplest activity is to ask students to identify the core word within a longer one: for example, *beauty* within *beautify*; *help* in *unhelpful*; *move* in *movement*.
- **Explore prefixes and suffixes.** Identifying a word’s core naturally leads to exploring the affixes that transfer between words: *in-*, *anti-*, *phon-*, *tele-*, *multi-* (prefixes) or *-ful*, *-ation*, *-ing*, *-ly* (suffixes). Ask students to make new words by adding affixes – for example, they might invent *antiboring*, *prewalk*, *uply*, *hammerish* – and reflect on the meanings and possible uses of such newly coined words.
- **Play word games.** Word Without End (also called Ghosts) is a team game that is good for getting students to jointly and competitively explore spellings. It is also an absorbing way to help students pool their implicit word knowledge, including their understanding of word structure. See the instructions on the next page for a full explanation of the game. It’s complicated to explain, but after a few practice runs almost all students get the hang of it.

Word

Without End

In this game student teams take it in turns to add a letter to previously added letters, moving towards but never completing a word. If the next team thinks the previous team either has completed a word or has no proper target word in mind, they can then challenge. Points are won and lost on correct challenges.

- Put students into two teams.
- Write a letter on the board. The starting team adds the next letter of a word that they have in mind. (For example, you write the letter *b* and the starting team offers *e*, as they are thinking of the word *beard*.)
- The second team should add a third letter. After this point, both teams also have to avoid completing a word – even a word they didn't have in mind. For example, the letters on the board so far are *b e a*. This does not yet spell a word. The first group has the word *beard* in mind and considers offering the letter *r*, but in doing so they would have completed the word *bear*. To avoid this, they may decide to bluff and offer the letter *g*, even though they don't know a word beginning *beag-*.

Whenever it is a team's turn, that team can choose to challenge the previous team for one of two reasons (and the challengers must use these exact words): 'You haven't got a proper word in mind!' OR 'You've completed a word.'

If the challenge is a correct one, then the challenging team gains a point, and the challenged team loses one. If the challenge is incorrect, then the points are awarded in reverse.

Teaching tips: When a team has its turn, the teacher should take an answer only from the appointed group leader. This prevents any team member from shouting out answers. The point is to encourage teamwork based on intelligent scrutiny of word structures. The original name of the game was Ghosts, probably because it was supposed to be played very quietly so that each team could plan subtle tactics in secret.

Variations: Give teams limited numbers of lifelines. For example, they can change one letter once, consult a dictionary three times, ask the teacher twice, or even phone a family member. You could also allow teams to add a letter to the front of the word rather than the end. This is very hard, though.

Acceptable words: 'Proper' words are words that appear in a standard dictionary, excluding names (i.e. proper nouns that would start with a capital letter such as *Sarah* or *Harris*). All slang words are excluded, and the teacher's word is final.

4. Reading for pleasure and learning through reading

Becoming a reading school is essential so that reading for pleasure is embedded in the culture and fabric of the school. To do this successfully, you will want to explore all the exciting approaches that other schools are using to celebrate reading. This will also mean training staff to become enthusiastic reading advocates and building time for reading in the school day. You'll want to invest in developing your reading environment and materials over a sustained period of time. As a school, you will also need to take time to engage with parents so they understand and fully embrace your plans.

As Ian Thompson and Nicole Dingwall commented,

'Schools ... can play a major role ... by making available a wide range of interesting and accessible texts. This means putting significant resources into school libraries and using students to support each other to recommend authors and titles. Reading for pleasure is an issue of social justice and one that society cannot afford to ignore.' (OUP, 2018)

Becoming a reading school will help you to close the word gap at a fundamental level because vocabulary is absorbed and internalised during wider reading. Reading continuous texts – whether in book form, online, fiction, non-fiction – all expose students to useful vocabulary.

In the classroom, prepare children for meeting new and challenging words in their reading, but also ensure that you provide them with appropriate levels of support. As Kate Cain and Jane Oakhill observed, 'Children need reading texts that have an appropriate level of vocabulary so that they are not overwhelmed by a plethora of unknown words, but they also need to be challenged to learn (or refine) the meaning of words in the text.' (OUP, 2018)

- **Introduce challenging words.** Give children time to engage with 'challenging' words that they are about to meet in a class text or activity. Talk about the new words, display them, explore them – their structures, core words, prefixes and suffixes, etc. Display illustrations of the words, or ask students to illustrate or act them out for themselves.
- **Support weaker readers when they encounter more advanced vocabulary.** It is important to plan for this, rather than just using texts at students' existing reading level.
- **Increase opportunities for individual, silent reading.** This can be scaffolded using the strategies suggested above.
- **Read in volume.** Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning (as opposed to direct instruction), so reading volume (amount) makes a crucial, ongoing contribution to vocabulary development.
- **Read aloud, clearly and expressively, to students.** Hearing new words read well will help to build vocabulary. Read aloud regularly and take time to discuss the texts.
- **Promote your whole-school reading ethos.** Refer to it, reinforce it, and show how you are contributing to it from your subject-, topic- or year-specific position.

5. Subject-specific and academic vocabulary

- **Check students' understanding frequently.** Don't assume that all children will know all the important simple words, let alone key words. Some will know surprisingly few of them.
- **Teach vocabulary explicitly in all subjects.** Identify specific new words to introduce each lesson. Revisit new words a number of times in a lesson, and reintroduce new words in different contexts.
- **Make vocabulary lists.** When planning a topic, make a list of vocabulary that students will need to know. Display, refer to, and revisit this list often. Share pictures for as many of the words as possible. Ask students to notice when each word comes up during the topic.

- **Celebrate original ways to learn words.** Send lists of new or key words home. Ask students to work out original ways of remembering new words. They can be as active as they like – video, pictures, mime – but emphasise that they should develop methods they think will help their peers to learn the words too. Students can then present their methods to the class.
- **Use a variety of texts in the classroom.** Expose students to a wide variety of texts relevant to your subject/topic, not just the course textbook, such as newspaper articles on relevant developments in science. Ask students to use these to expand their knowledge and understanding of the topic.
- **Work together.** Build students' confidence and skills by working out the meanings of unfamiliar words together through context cues. This prompts them to use their existing knowledge of a subject to make sense of new information.
- **Predict words.** Give the class part of a text you have been reading in class but with key, predictable words (e.g. some adjectives, adverbs, subject terminology) blanked out. Establish what sort of tone the writer is trying to create. Ask pairs to fill in the blanks appropriately.
- **Make word maps.** Encourage students to develop word maps that explore the meanings and structures of words. For example, students could break *photosynthesis* down into its word parts, and find other scientific words that use some of those parts (*photograph, photoelectricity*), and so on. The key aim of this sort of activity is to build students' confidence and ability to identify what they do know, rather than fixating on a word they don't know.
- **Share writing activities as a class.** Work collaboratively, using new words and words the students suggest. Discuss the best word choice together before using it in the text, ensuring words are chosen in terms of precision, impact, and appropriateness. This sort of shared writing is a vital opportunity to model for students how to reach inside themselves for the words they already know and how to reach outside themselves for new and appropriate vocabulary.
- **Display academic words.** Display lists of cross-curricular academic or tier 2 words and their meanings, such as *conclusion, analysis, reference, evidence*, etc. Prompt students to use these words when answering questions in class, and model their use. For example, a child might say, 'I think the Romans were really clever to do that.' You can reply, 'What *evidence* do you have for that *conclusion*?' These are different ways to prompt a greater level of clarity and precision. Sometimes point to key words on the displayed lists as you use words from them, and vary lists according to current need.
- **Emphasise cross-curricular links.** Deliberately explore how the same words are used in different subject areas. This will help them to become part of students' working lexicon.
- **Display lists of connecting words.** Share list of conjunctions and other 'connectives' and prompt students to choose from these at appropriate times. Connecting words can help students to clarify their existing thinking, but often they will also steer students towards making new and revealing connections between different events and concepts. Sort connecting words into their different purposes:

ADDING	CAUSE AND EFFECT	SEQUENCING	QUALIFYING	EMPHASISING	ILLUSTRATING	COMPARING	CONTRASTING
and	because	next	however	above all	for example	equally	whereas
also	so	then	although	in particular	such as	in the same way	by contrast
as well as	therefore	firstly	unless	particularly	for instance	similarly	alternatively
in addition	as a result	finally	except	especially	as revealed by	likewise	otherwise
		before	if	significantly	in the case of	as with	on the other hand

6. Classroom talk: teachers as role models

We need to model the use of appropriate language. Over time, how we pitch our own vocabulary has an influence on children's own vocabulary. We shouldn't forget that some students might never hear at home the sort of precise, formal vocabulary that will help them in tests and exams. Potentially, teachers are the only people that some children will hear speaking or see writing in formal ways.

Of course, the nature of the relationships between children and teachers will be reflected in the language we use together, and close and relaxed relationships will tend to be expressed in more informal, vague, or imprecise spoken language.

However, teachers should think carefully about the language they use and its long-term effect. In many situations, modelling precise, relatively formal language when appropriate is more valuable than mirroring students' own language.

Deliberate vocabulary instruction can be very effective, especially in the context of positive teacher–student interaction. As David Reedy observes, 'when children are deeply engaged in tasks with us, we should challenge ourselves to use rich vocabulary.' (OUP, 2018)

- **Structure and scale questions.** Deliberately move from low-demand questions to high-demand, more conceptual questions in classroom talk.
- **Use brief comprehension questions.** Assess students' understanding to reinforce key words, and check that learning is taking place.
- **Expect answers in full sentences and with precise vocabulary.** Expect students to use subject-specific, linking, and cross-curricular conceptual words such as *however*, *analysis*, etc.
- **Prompt and scaffold precision.** When students use vague words such as *stuff*, prompt them to find a more specific word, such as *chemicals*. Repeat students' vague answers using more precise synonyms.
- **Give students time.** Give students time to reflect and rehearse their thoughts and answers.
- **Use different tiers of vocabulary.** In the early years, plan to sometimes introduce higher-level vocabulary in routine situations. For example, say 'Could you help me to *distribute* the paper?' rather than *give out*.
- **Choose useful, high-frequency words.** Choose words that the student will find useful in many contexts, including high-frequency words known and used by mature language users.

7. Vocabulary for assessments and exams

It can be challenging for students with a limited vocabulary to achieve their potential in assessment and examination contexts. We need to ensure that we teach precise subject terminology at an appropriate level and that we explicitly teach exam vocabulary. Use academic words such as *find* or *analyse* and explicitly use the language of tests and exams in the classroom. Share the aims of a lesson/topic in the terminology that is typical of past test questions. Consciously use these key terms as part of the ordinary discourse of your classroom.

For further guidance and strategies to support vocabulary development for exams and assessment, read the relevant primary sections (EYFS, KS1, and KS2), or the secondary subject-specific chapters in *Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom* on the following pages.

Reference list

Beck, I. & McKeown, M.G. (1985) *Teaching vocabulary: Making the instruction fit the goal*. *Educational Perspectives*, 23 (1), 11–15.

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Early years foundation stage

Jo Holmes has been teaching in Birmingham primary schools for almost 20 years. She specialises in English and has taught across the key stages, from EYFS through to KS3. Jo is passionate about encouraging children to read for pleasure. Here she shares practical ideas for developing children's vocabulary and closing the word gap.



Introduction

The development of language – in all its forms – is crucial to the learning and development of children in the early years. This is recognised, not only by families and early years practitioners, but also by the DfE; Communication and language is identified as a prime area of learning, and 12 of the 17 early learning goals make explicit reference to children's ability to talk about their knowledge, skills, and understanding.

'Communication and language development involves giving children opportunities to experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations.'

Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage, 2017

As such, many EYFS settings choose to structure their curriculum with language at the core, with communication and language running through learning opportunities like a 'golden thread'. The role of the adult is key in this scenario, and adults should exploit any opportunity to reinforce taught vocabulary, modelling correct usage in different contexts. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may suffer from a paucity of language, which, when starting school, immediately places them in a less advantageous position than their peers. The importance of providing a language-rich environment cannot be overestimated for these children. Every interaction with a child provides an opportunity to extend vocabulary, model standard English, encourage the use of extended sentences, and to have fun with language. While the ideas and activities below provide specific opportunities to close the word gap, adults should ensure that they are also teaching vocabulary during child-initiated learning. Language development is incredibly effective when in the context of purposeful play.

Developing children's enthusiasm for reading is fundamental in helping to develop their language skills and in closing the word gap. Never is this truer than for disadvantaged pupils. Research has shown that reading for pleasure has more impact on educational attainment than any socio-economic factors. However, it is precisely those disadvantaged children who are less likely to read often, to see themselves positively as readers, and to have access to a broad range of different reading materials. It is therefore incumbent on us in school to provide children with an environment that fosters a love of reading, offering every child the benefits associated with becoming a lifelong lover of books.

Strategies to promote an ethos of reading for pleasure may include:

- Providing a well-stocked reading area, allowing children access to a wide range of reading materials, such as picture books (with and without words), comics and magazines for children, age-appropriate information books, and texts relating to children's interests.
- Ensuring there is time, every day, for children to be read to. This allows children to access books – and language – beyond their reading ability and to begin to internalise the music of language, as well as enjoying the sheer pleasure of being immersed in a great story. Building in time to talk about the stories being read will also help children to develop critical thinking around books, supporting them to develop their own thoughts and opinions about what they have encountered.
- Developing teachers' subject knowledge regarding high-quality children's literature, including newly published works.
- Celebrating reading through whole-school events, such as World Book Day assemblies, author visits, and competitions.
- Modelling a love of reading and valuing different 'forms' of reading – class reading displays could incorporate images of adults and children reading different types of text in different locations.
- Providing cosy and comfortable spaces for reading. Small 'book nooks' seem particularly attractive to young children, and, in appropriate weather, a blanket and a basket of books outside will always be enjoyed.
- Responding to books in different ways, including those which incorporate drama and role-play, or visual art.
- Building reading relationships via paired reading across year groups; inviting parents and friends into school for regular 'reading for pleasure' sessions or, ideally, building a relationship with a published author who acts as a '[Patron of Reading](#)'.

The activities in this section fall into two categories: quick activity ideas – ideal for registration, lining up, or for when you have a few minutes before lunch or at the end of the day – and session ideas – activities which require more time and a little more preparation. There is also a section at the end which you may wish to hand out to parents. This section comprises ideas for games and conversations at home, and useful links.

Please note that you will need to join www.oxfordowl.co.uk for free to access some of the featured resources.

Quick activity ideas

Activity 1: How could I ...?

When preparing for lunch, model the use of adverbs to children:

'Today, I shall eat my lunch *hungrily!*

Encourage other adults to offer alternative adverbs, and then, as they are lining up, ask each child how they will eat their lunch today. Encourage children to answer in full sentences, offering them a starter prompt if necessary.

Use the same activity in different contexts.

'How could you walk to the hall today?' (*quickly, slowly, happily*)

'How could you put your coat on today?'

Activity 2: What's in my bucket?

Use a bucket, or a picture of a bucket, as a visual prompt and model a sentence using alliterative adjectives.

'My bucket is full of *slimy slugs!*

'My bucket of full of *glittering gold!*

Ask children to contribute their own ideas, encouraging the use of full sentences and celebrating the use of alliterative adjectives – the sillier the better!

Activity 3: Guess who?

Use higher-order vocabulary to describe a member of the class, or a character linked to children's interests.

'She is *powerful, icy* and wears a *glittering* dress. Guess who?'

'When he is *furious*, he transforms into an *enormous*, green monster. Guess who?'

Photographs or other visual cues can be used to support children with additional needs.

Activity 4: Say more!

Give children a starter sentence, and then go around the group, encouraging children to change one word each.

'I love my new toy.'

'I love my new *dog.*

'I love my *beautiful* dog.'

'I *cuddle* my beautiful dog.'

Activity 5: Grandpa's shopping list

Challenge children to add alliterative nouns and adjectives to the starter sentence: 'Grandpa went shopping and he bought ... crumbly cookies / scarlet strawberries / fresh fish ...'

This could be linked to sounds children are learning in Phase Two and Phase Three phonics lessons.

As in the traditional version of the game, higher-attaining children could be encouraged to include previous items on the list in order to develop their memory skills.

Visual cues or objects could support children with additional needs.

Activity 6: Adding adjectives

Draw a simple picture on the board, for example, a cat. Ask children to first name the parts of the cat: *paws, whiskers, tail* etc., and then to contribute adjectives to describe the cat in more detail.

'She has sharp claws.'

'She has bright green eyes.'

'She has a fluffy tail.'

Give children the opportunity to add their detail to the image on the board.

Activity 7: Finish my sentence

Offer children an oral sentence starter with a conjunction, and then ask them to complete your sentence before repeating the whole sentence aloud.

'I am furious *because* ...' 'I love apples *but* ...'

'I am frightened of monsters *and* ...'

Listen out for – and celebrate – children using conjunctions independently.

Session ideas

Session 1: Listening walk

You will need: large pictures of ears – cut out and laminated, a checklist of sound vocabulary (both resource 1 and resource 2), a simple map of your setting.

Orientating task

Show children the laminated ears, and use them as a prompt to discuss what we use our ears for. This is a good opportunity to revise what it means to be a good listener (i.e. being still and quiet, looking in the direction of the sound, thinking about what they are listening to). Explain that you are going to take a listening walk to collect different sounds around school. Decide on a checklist of different sounds, using higher-order vocabulary, such as a *shriek*, a *babble*, a *whisper*. Note these on the checklist.

Teaching input

Divide children into groups with an accompanying adult. Accompany groups around different parts of the setting, such as the entrance lobby, the hall during a PE lesson, or outside a busy classroom. Stop at different points, and discuss the sounds that can be heard, using vocabulary from the checklist. Add further sounds to the checklist.

Follow-up small-group activity

Run through each of the sounds on the checklist, and discuss where each sound was heard. Encourage children to draw pictures to mark 'sounds' on the school map.

Reinforce new vocabulary with continued discussion.

'Where else might you hear a *shrieking* sound?'

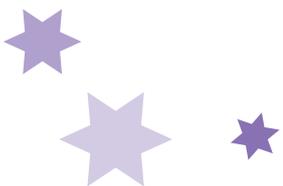
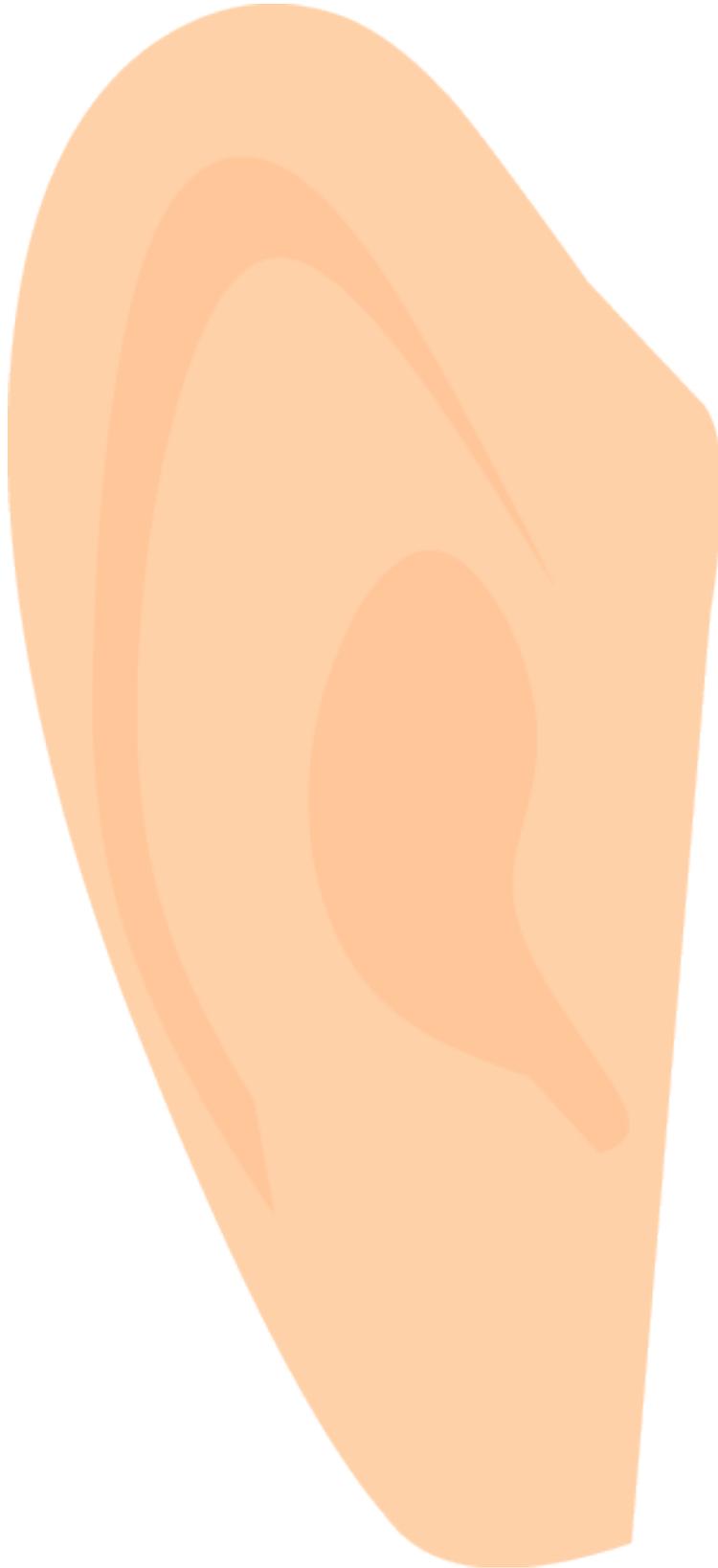
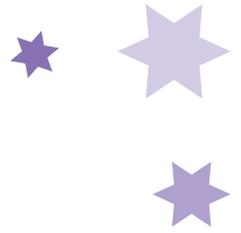
'Have you ever heard a *rustling* at night?'

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Use photographs of different sound-making objects as a prompt for talk in the snack area.
- Place instruments in an explore and investigate area for children to use in exploratory play, with adults modelling and extending the use of vocabulary relating to sounds.

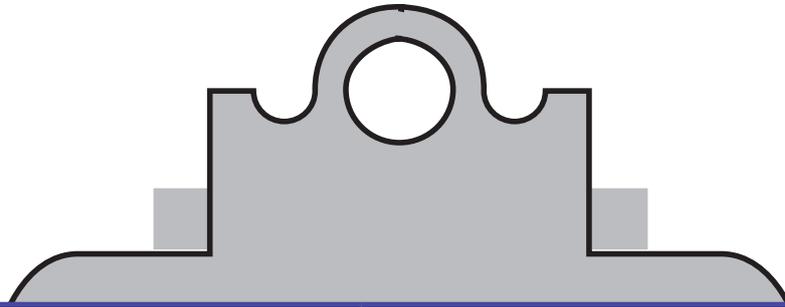
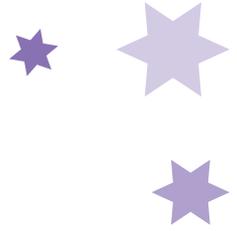
Resource 1:

A listening prompt

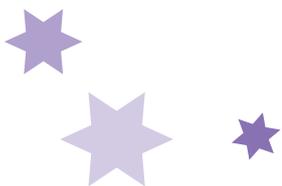


Resource 2:

Listening walk checklist



What did we hear?	Where did we hear it?
A shriek	
A shout	
A babble	
A whisper	



Session 2: Would you rather...?

You will need: a copy of *Would You Rather...* by John Burningham.

Orientating task

Read *Would You Rather...* by John Burningham to the children.

Teaching input

Discuss the hypothetical situations from the book, modelling the use of conjunctions, adjectives, and higher-order vocabulary to arrive at a decision.

'I would rather read to a bear *because* I am sure his fur would be *thick, soft* and *warm* and I would *enjoy* cuddling up to him!'

'I would rather a pig tried on my clothes, *although* I would be *anxious* that they would smell *dreadful* afterwards!'

Follow-up small-group activity

Use pictures to give children a binary choice which could be linked to a theme or topic, or to a specific interest.

'Would you rather have a tyrannosaurus rex or a velociraptor as a pet?'

'Would you rather have tea with a wicked witch or a big bad wolf?'

Encourage children to list adjectives to describe each option in order to help them to choose. These could be scribed for children, or they could list them using initial sounds or further phonemes, depending on where they are in their development as writers.

When each child has made their choice, ask them to share it with their friends, encouraging them to speak in full sentences and to use conjunctions to extend these.

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Place copies of *Would You Rather...* by John Burningham and *You Choose* by Pippa Goodhart and Nick Sharratt in the reading area.
- Place laminated images from the group activity in the sand for children to discover and use as a talk prompt.

Session 3: Make the sound

You will need: a story including a variety of characters – *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson, for example; a range of percussion instruments.

Orientating task

Read the story to the children. This could be a class focus text linked to topic or theme, or a favourite story brought in from home. The activity will work most effectively if it has a variety of characters, such as different types of animal.

Teaching input

Discuss the characters in the story with particular reference to how they move. Model the use of adventurous verbs and adverbs.

'The snake *slithered, slowly*.'

'The fox *padded, softly*.'

Introduce the different instruments to the children, and invite them to choose an instrument and a method of playing it to 'match' a chosen character. Reinforce the use of adventurous vocabulary when describing how a character moves and how this relates to the sound they have chosen.

Follow-up small-group activity

Invite one of the children to role-play moving like a character from the story, while other children guess who. Model and encourage answers in full sentences, reinforcing the use of interesting verbs and adverbs.

'I think Amer was being the Gruffalo because he was *stomping, clumsily*.'

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Place the instruments and images from the whole-class activity in the explore and investigate area for children to play independently.
- Place copies of the books and puppets or soft toys in the reading area to encourage children to retell the stories.

Session 4: Storytelling bags

You will need: four bags of different colours filled with images or objects to represent settings, characters, problems, and endings.

Orientating task

Explain to children that not all stories come from books; when we know the right language, we can use it to make up stories of our own. Model the oral telling of a simple story in three parts, with a focus on storytelling vocabulary. For example:

'Once upon a time, in a castle far, far away, lived a grumpy king. This king was so mean that he made everyone in the land unhappy. One day, a dragon found the king and tried to gobble him up. But the grumpy king tasted so terrible that the dragon spat him out! The king was so happy that he hadn't been eaten that he was never mean again, and everyone in the land lived happily ever after.'

Oral storytelling is particularly effective when told with lots of vocal and physical expression!

Teaching input

Place images or objects representing the setting of the story (the castle), the character (the king), the problem (the dragon), and the ending (happy people) in each of the four bags, differentiated by colour. Invite children to have a turn at taking objects out of each of the bags and at telling their own stories. Model, encourage, and celebrate the use of storytelling language and higher-order vocabulary.

Follow-up small-group activity

Fill each of the bags with a wider selection of images and objects to allow for lots of potential stories. Work in groups while children take it in turns to withdraw objects from the bag and tell their own stories.

Children who need additional support could work with an adult, while higher-attaining children could be encouraged to evaluate their own and one another's stories.

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Record some of the children (and other familiar adults) telling their stories, and place the recordings in the reading area, along with the storytelling bags.
- Place dressing-up clothes and role-play objects in larger versions of the storytelling bags in the role-play area to encourage children to make up and perform their stories.

Session 5: Narrating our lives

You will need: three photographs from a class event, such as a trip or Christmas party.

Orientating task

Show children the three photographs, and ask them what they remember about the event. Encourage children to share their memories, modelling and praising the use of full sentences and higher-order vocabulary.

Teaching input

Make a note of the children's memories, and then arrange the photographs in chronological order. Model narrating the event, using the photographs as a prompt and emphasising sequential language.

'First, we looked at the monkeys, who made us giggle. Next, we ate lunch on the grass because it was a beautiful day. Finally, we watched the hippos taking a bath in the thick, squelchy mud!'

Explain to children that you would like them to bring in three photographs from a significant event in their own lives, such as a birthday or other family celebration. (For children for whom this is problematic, you could take three photographs of the child's day at school.)

Follow-up small-group activity

Children use their photographs to narrate events from their own lives, using sequential language to order them. Encourage children to ask questions of the rest of their group, continuing to model and praise the use of higher-order vocabulary.

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Place enlarged photographs of different class events on a washing line in the outdoor area for children to sequence and to act as a prompt for talk.
- Place images from a favourite class text in the reading area as a prompt for retelling.
- Place sequencing storyboards in the writing area, along with images or prompts from the storytelling bags (see session 4).

Session 6: *Chicken Licken*

You will need: [Chicken Licken storytelling video](#), available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk.

Orientating task

Watch the [storytelling video](#) of *Chicken Licken*. Discuss the names of the characters in the story, focusing on the pattern of phoneme substitution. Following the same pattern, change the names of some of the children, for example, *Charlie Larlie*, *Emily Lemily*. Invite children to make their own suggestions.

Teaching input

Watch the story for a second time, encouraging children to join in with the repeated refrains. Ask children:

‘Where was Chicken Licken at the beginning of the story?’

‘Where did Chicken Licken find Hen Len?’

Emphasise the vocabulary used in the story to describe each character’s position and actions.

‘Chicken Licken, sitting under the little nut tree.’

‘Hen Len, sitting in the straw, with her little chicks, four.’

‘Cock Lock, sitting on hay, whiling the afternoon away.’

‘Duck Luck, splashing in the pool, dip-double-diving and keeping cool.’

Follow-up small-group activity

Consider which other animals Chicken Licken might have approached. What might their story name be (according to the established pattern)? With an adult as scribe, encourage children to formulate sentences based upon these new characters, following the noun–verb–adverbial phrase pattern of the story. For example:

‘Turkey Lurkey, fluffing his tail feather, enjoying the warm weather.’

‘Goose Loose, basking in the sun, dreaming of fun.’

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Place *Chicken Licken*, and *Green Eggs and Ham* and *There’s a Wocket in my Pocket* by Dr. Seuss in the reading area, along with other texts rich in phoneme substitution.
- Include character puppets and/or role-play masks in the role-play area.
- Place writing frames and word cards from the story in the writing area.

Session 7: Making *Numiconimals*

You will need: *Numicon* shapes if available, and/or [copies of Numicon shapes](http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk), available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk, paper or card; pens; pencils; paint; scissors; glue.

Orientating task

Tell children a story about an encounter with an imaginary creature – a *Numiconimal* – using higher-order vocabulary and mathematical language. For example:

‘Yesterday, I spotted a *Numiconimal* in our playground! It was a beautiful shade of *scarlet*, and, *although* it was *flat*, it had one part that stuck out. It had *five even, round* holes and *five tall, straight* ears. It took *five enormous* jumps, and then *disappeared behind* the sandpit!’

Teaching input

Model to children how to create a *Numiconimal* – by either printing with a *Numicon* shape five or cutting out a copy and sticking it onto card or paper – then add the details of five tall, straight ears, as described in the encounter.

Follow-up small-group activity

Provide *Numicon* shapes for printing – or hand out copies of the *Numicon* shapes – and support children in creating their own *Numiconimal* by printing (or cutting and sticking) and adding the corresponding number of details, for example, three legs for the three shape, four tails for four. Ask children to tell you about their *Numiconimal*, encouraging answers in full sentences and reinforcing the use of higher-order vocabulary and mathematical language. Higher-attaining children could describe an encounter such as the one modelled.

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Place *Numicon* shapes in the creative area.
- Take photographs of the children’s *Numiconimals*, cut out and laminate them, and place in the small world area to encourage children to use them to create and retell stories.

Session 8: What's in the box, Mr Fox?

You will need: a fox toy or puppet, a box, rhyming objects or images (cat/hat/rat/mat, dog/frog, house/mouse), blank sock templates (see resource 3).

Orientating task

Introduce your 'friend' Mr Fox, and explain to children that he lives in the box. Remind children of learning of rhymes from Phase One phonics lessons, and explain that Mr Fox loves rhyming words so much that he collects them to keep in his box.

Teaching input

Show children the images or objects from the box, and name each of them. Ask children to place them into rhyming pairs. (If any children or adults have names which are easy to rhyme, it is particularly engaging – and therefore effective – to include their photographs in Mr Fox's box.)

As children become more familiar and confident with the game, use the opportunity to introduce new objects or pictures and discuss the meaning of new words.

'Potion and sea don't rhyme, so Mr Fox won't collect them. Does anyone know another word for sea? Another word for the sea is ocean. Do potion and ocean rhyme? Yes! Look how excited Mr Fox is now!'

Follow-up small-group activity

Provide children with blank sock templates (resource 3) and discuss with them how and why socks always come in pairs. Ask children to think of a pair of rhyming words and to draw one on each sock, making a pair of socks for the box of Mr Fox!

Encourage children to write labels for their words using initial sounds or more, depending on their development as writers.

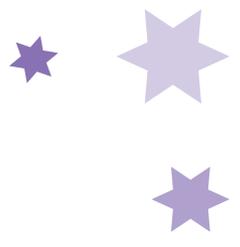
Enhancements to continuous provision

- Place rhyming dominoes/jigsaws in the explore and investigate area.
- Make *The Ox and The Yak* by Julia Donaldson from www.oxfordowl.co.uk available on the interactive whiteboard.
- Play a CD of nursery rhymes in the role-play area.
- Place poems and other rhyming texts in the reading area.

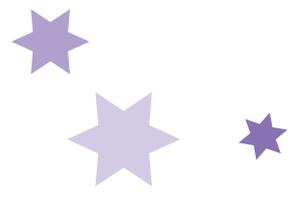
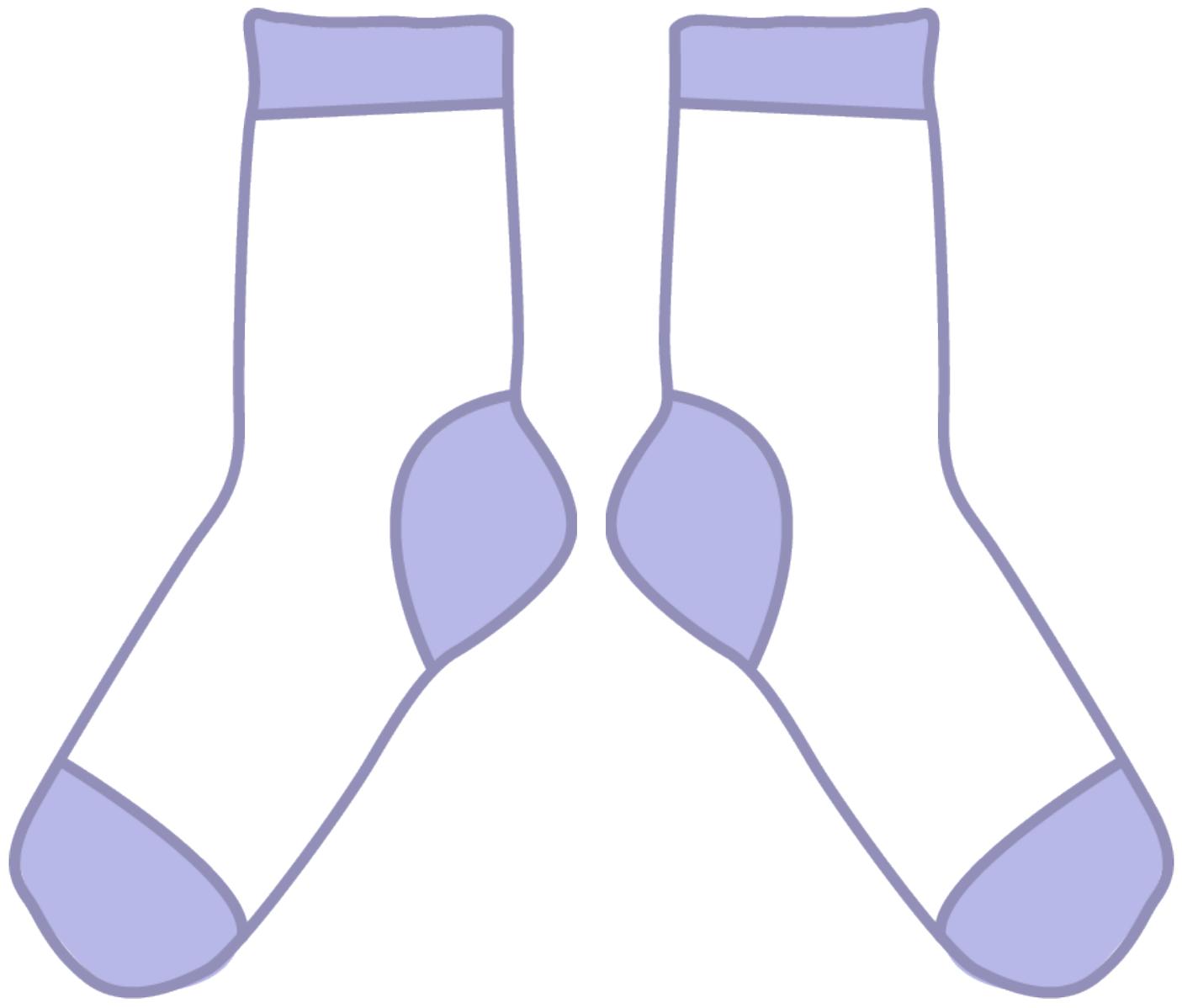
Resource 3:

A pair of socks for the box

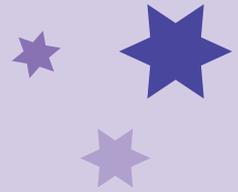
of Mr Fox



Write a rhyming word on each of these socks to make a pair.



Conversations and vocabulary games to try at home



Whatever your child's reading ability, enjoying a book together allows them to develop their understanding, as well as to learn lots of new and exciting words. Read to your child whenever you can, ask them to read to you, or take turns reading pages or chapters of a book. Public libraries are a fantastic resource for allowing children to borrow books for free (and often have storytelling sessions and other craft and activity sessions in those long school holidays!).

Talking with and listening to your child teaches them the importance of spoken language and supports them in developing their vocabulary. When chatting with your child, try to avoid asking too many questions, but let them hear your own thoughts; children need to hear language in order to use it themselves. When you do ask your child a question, it is ideal to ask an 'open' question – one that cannot be answered with a single word. For example, 'What was the best thing that happened today?' rather than 'How was school?', to which the inevitable answer is 'Fine'!

Here are some more suggestions:

- 'I felt cross today because ... What makes you feel cross? Why?'
- 'I felt happy today when ... What made you feel happy today? Why?'
- 'If you had a superpower, what would it be?'
- 'What would you take to the moon?'
- 'Which book/film/TV character would you like to meet? Why?'
- 'Let's imagine it snowed tomorrow. What would we do?'
- Play I Spy where one player says, 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with ...' and makes or names the first sound or letter at the beginning of the name of something near them. The other player(s) try to guess what it is using the first sound or letter as a clue.
You could also try 'spying' things that are different colours or textures.
- Play the game of 'I went shopping and I bought ...', where a player names an item, for example, apples, and the next player names this item and adds another, so players end up reciting a list. Play continues until a player can no longer remember all the items.



For more ideas, see:

<https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/advice-for-parents/fun-ideas-learning-at-home/>

For more information on why the word gap matters and how you can help your child to develop their vocabulary at home, see:

<https://blog.oxfordowl.co.uk/why-the-word-gap-matters-and-what-can-you-do-at-home-to-close-it/>

Key stage 1

Jo Holmes has been teaching in Birmingham primary schools for almost 20 years. She specialises in English and has taught across the key stages, from EYFS through to KS3. Jo is passionate about encouraging children to read for pleasure. Here she shares practical ideas for developing children's vocabulary and closing the word gap.



Introduction

While the games and activities below have been included to specifically address – and to begin to close – the word gap, it is important to bear in mind that vocabulary is ‘caught’ as well as ‘taught’. The role of the adults in school and at home is crucial then in helping children to develop their understanding and use of language. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may suffer from a paucity of language which places them in a less advantageous position than their peers. The importance of providing a language-rich environment for these children cannot be overestimated. Every interaction with a child provides an opportunity to extend vocabulary, model standard English, encourage the use of extended sentences, and to have fun with language – the balancing act required here can be a delicate one, but it is incredibly worthwhile.

Books are another powerful resource for vocabulary development, and a school which promotes and fosters a culture of reading for pleasure will be giving children an enormous advantage in this area. Research has shown that reading for pleasure has more impact on educational attainment than any socio-economic factors. However, it is precisely those disadvantaged children most in need that are less likely to read often, to see themselves positively as readers, and to have access to a broad range of different reading materials. It is therefore incumbent on us in school to provide children with an environment that fosters a love of reading, offering every child the benefits associated with becoming a lifelong lover of books.

Strategies to promote an ethos of reading for pleasure may include:

- Providing a well-stocked class and school library, allowing children access to a wide range of reading materials, such as picture books, poetry books, newspapers and magazines for children, information books, and ‘classic’ texts, both modern and traditional.
- Ensuring there is time, every day, for children to be read to. This allows children to access books – and language – beyond their reading ability and to begin to internalise the music of language, as well as enjoying the sheer pleasure of being immersed in a great story. Building in time to talk about the stories being read will also help to build a community of readers.

- Developing teachers' subject knowledge regarding high-quality children's literature, including newly published works, and keeping up to date with the reading choices of their children. This is particularly important when assessing children against the national curriculum expectations in reading, which require teachers to assess children's attitude to reading and their thoughts and opinions on a wide range of texts.
- Celebrating reading through whole-school events, such as World Book Day assemblies, author visits, and competitions.
- Modelling a love of reading and valuing different 'forms' of reading – class reading displays could incorporate images of adults and children reading different types of text in different locations.
- Providing cosy and comfortable spaces for reading which include peer recommendations for 'your next favourite book'.
- Responding to books in different ways, including those which incorporate drama and role-play, or visual art.
- Building reading relationships via paired reading across year groups, inviting parents and friends into school for regular 'reading for pleasure' sessions, or building a relationship with a published author who acts as a ['Patron of Reading'](#).

Finally, with all these wonderful new words and phrases being learned, it is important that children have some way of recording them for future reference. Working walls, word books, or vocabulary bookmarks can all be used to good effect, allowing children to collect and revisit words that they have learned before confidently using them themselves.

The activities in this section fall into two categories: quick activity ideas – ideal for registration, lining up, or for when you have a few minutes before lunch or at the end of the day – and session ideas – activities which require more time and a little more preparation. There is also a section at the end which you may wish to hand out to parents. This section comprises ideas for games and conversations at home, and useful links.

Please note that you will need to join www.oxfordowl.co.uk for free to access some of the featured resources.

Quick activity ideas

Activity 1: I say, I say

This game is ideal to play after learning synonyms for *said* (see session 2).

Agree a sentence with the children – standard or silly! Children take turns to repeat the sentence in different ways, for example, *muttering*, *bellowing* or *whining*, then invite others to guess the synonym for *said*.

This game can be adapted to relate to adverbs also – ‘she said reluctantly’.

Activity 2: True or false?

This activity is aimed at consolidating vocabulary that has been taught.

Offer children a word that has been previously taught or encountered, and then offer an accurate – or inaccurate – definition.

‘*Grateful* means thankful for something – true or false?’

Children or teams score points for correct answers.

If an inaccurate definition has been given, elicit or offer the accurate definition, and model using it in a sentence. Extra points can be awarded to children or teams who can use it accurately in a sentence of their own. Where children have used a new word inaccurately, remember to celebrate their efforts and model its correct usage.

Activity 3: Where are you?

Display a large copy of a class photograph. Ask children questions to develop their understanding and use of positional language.

‘Who is *above* and to the *right* of Isla?’

‘Who is *three places* to the *left* of Emmanuel?’

‘I am a row *above* Lucy and *two places to the left* of Mohammed. Who am I?’

‘If Tom moved *four places* to the *right*, where would he be?’ (Encourage higher attainers to answer this with ‘to the left/right of ...’, rather than just ‘next to ...’.)

Higher-attaining children could be invited to pose their own questions.

Activity 4: Choose a word

Give children a sentence with a missing word. This could be an adjective, a noun, a verb, or an adverb, according to the teaching focus. Encourage children to choose an appropriate word and say the complete sentence. Reward exciting vocabulary choices.

'The wind *blew* through the trees.'

'The wind *whistled* through the trees.'

'The wind *swept* through the trees.'

'The wind *howled* through the trees.'

Activity 5: Odd one out

Offer children three or four vocabulary options, and ask them to choose the odd one out. There does not have to be a 'correct' answer as long as children can explain their thinking.

'I think that *large* is the odd one out because *gigantic*, *enormous*, and *huge* are more powerful adjectives.'

Activity 6: Give me five!

This is a quick-fire game for children to play individually, in pairs, or in groups. Give children a category, and ask for five appropriate word choices, encouraging the use of higher-order vocabulary.

'Give me five adjectives to describe today's weather.'

'Give me five adjectives to describe how Spiderman moves.'

'Give me five synonyms for *said*.'

'Give me five nouns you find in the kitchen.'

Activity 7: New words

When they are lining up to be released at the end of the day, ask children about new words they have learned throughout the day, celebrating adventurous and exciting vocabulary. Award bonus points or stickers if children can define the word and use it in a sentence.

'Today I learned the word *captivate*. It means holding someone's attention. I was *captivated* by Holly's dancing in PE. What is the best word you have heard, learned, or used today?'

Session ideas

Session 1: Modelled reading

You will need: text extracts for teacher modelling and for children, resources 1a and 1b.

Teach

Although it is less familiar to teachers than modelled writing, modelled reading – demonstrating to children what to do when a new, unfamiliar, or unexpected word is encountered while reading – is vitally important.

Choose an extract from a class text, or an e-book such as *Space Poems*, available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk. Read the text aloud until the new word is encountered.

'Garment? That's a new word for me, and I'm not sure what it means. Let's see if I can work it out.'

Model how to read on for context, how to substitute known words, and how to look for etymological clues, such as prefixes, suffixes, or words within words. Involve children in working out a meaning and developing a definition of the word. Check the definition in a dictionary, and record the new word and its meaning on the working wall.

Practise and apply

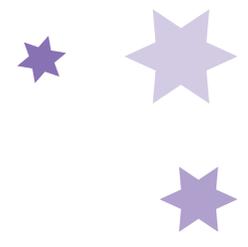
Provide children with their own text extracts, chosen for their vocabulary-mining potential, or invite them to use their own reading books. Ask them to identify new words as they read and to complete one of the two differentiated worksheets – resource 1a for lower and middle attainers or resource 1b for higher attainers. Struggling readers may need support with this activity.

Review

Collect children's vocabulary choices, and record them on the working wall. Ask a child to choose a new word and mime it / act it out for the rest of the class to guess.

Resource 1a:

What's the word?



New word:

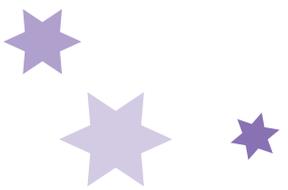
Use it in a sentence:	Draw it:
Explain what it means:	

New word:

Use it in a sentence:	Draw it:
Explain what it means:	

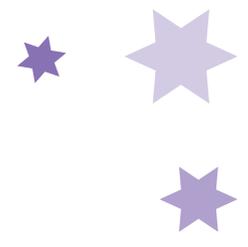
New word:

Use it in a sentence:	Draw it:
Explain what it means:	



Resource 1b:

What's the word?



New word:

Use it in a sentence:	Draw it:
Explain what it means:	
Does it have any other meanings? Can you put these in a sentence?	

New word:

Use it in a sentence:	Draw it:
Explain what it means:	
Does it have any other meanings? Can you put these in a sentence?	

New word:

Use it in a sentence:	Draw it:
Explain what it means:	
Does it have any other meanings? Can you put these in a sentence?	

Session 2: Find a friend

You will need: e-book *Finn MacCool* (available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk), enough sets of laminated word cards – cut out and shuffled – from resource 2 to provide one set per pair.

Teach

Read through the story *Finn MacCool*, recording a list of the synonyms for *said*. Ask children what is the same about each of the words, and elicit that they have the same – or a similar – meaning.

Introduce the term *synonym* and its meaning, and explain that today we are finding synonyms for given words.

‘Can anyone add any more synonyms for *said* to our list?’

Discuss the value of synonyms and how writers use them to engage their readers. Display the following sentences, and invite children to select different words from the synonym list to complete them.

‘Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman,’ _____ the giant.

‘Tidy your room,’ _____ Dad.

‘Please don’t eat me!’ _____ the princess.

Ask children how their different choices affect the meaning and impact of the sentences.

Practise and apply

Give children word cards from resource 2 and ask them to place them, face down, on the table. Explain that they will be working in pairs, taking it in turns to turn over two cards. If the words are synonyms of one another, the player can keep them. The player with the most pairs at the end of the game wins.

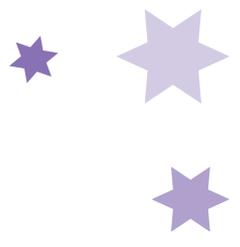
This game can be differentiated by using either the yellow and orange cards, the orange and pink cards, or both sets of pink cards, depending on year group and ability.

Review

Work as a class to collect and display as many pairs of synonyms as possible. Add to the display whenever a new word is learned.

Resource 2:

Find a friend



said	cried	declared	stated
walk	march	plod	strolled
big	large	huge	enormous
small	little	tiny	miniscule
good	great	marvellous	incredible
bad	awful	dreadful	appalling
pretty	beautiful	attractive	pleasing
yummy	tasty	delicious	mouth-watering
pleased	glad	delighted	thrilled
cross	angry	furious	livid



Session 3: *Here Come the Aliens*

You will need: a copy of *Here Come the Aliens* by Colin McNaughton, an envelope containing a set of the alien words from resource 3, a laminated cut-out of the alien image in resource 3 or an alien toy or puppet.

Teach

Read and enjoy *Here Come the Aliens* with the children. This story is a rich source of vocabulary, suitable for modelled reading (see activity 1). Once new vocabulary has been added to the working wall, turn to the page of alien language. Read the words inside the speech bubbles, and ask children what they think the aliens might be talking about. Emphasise that there is no correct answer, but allow children to share their ideas while enjoying playing with language. This is also an opportunity to consolidate any prior learning on word classes.

'I think *oompah oompah* might be a verb because it sounds like a heavy animal moving to me.'

Practise and apply

Introduce Zagger the alien, who has brought some words for the children to read (see resource 3). Encourage children to use phonics to decode Zagger's words, and then ask them for suggestions as to what each word means. Celebrate examples of higher-order vocabulary.

'Rosie thinks that *kinlay* means *amazing*. I think that is an *amazing* word!'

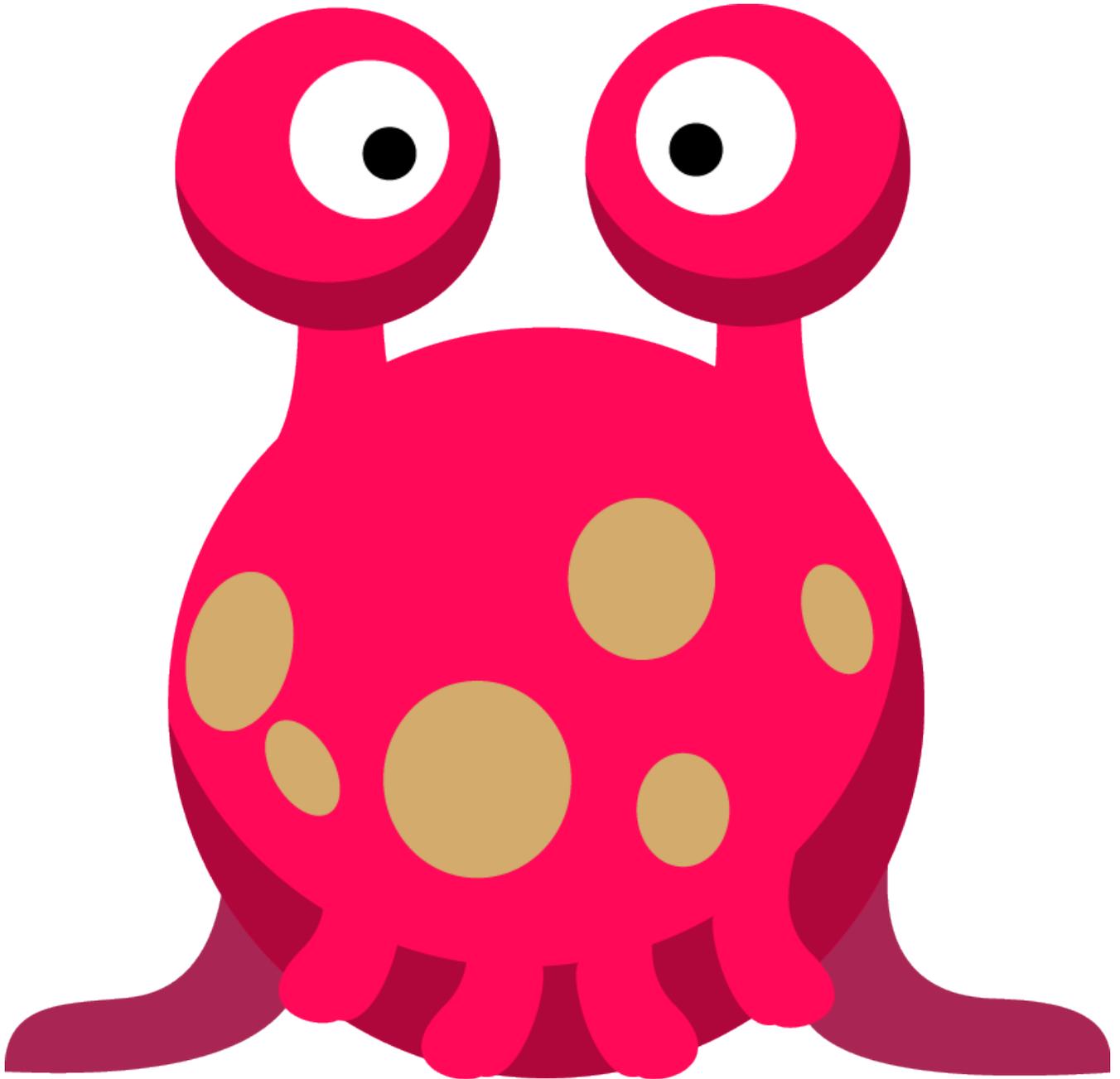
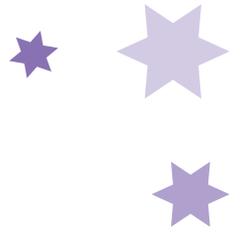
Encourage children to use the template on resource 3 to write their own alien words and meanings.

Review

Add any new (non-alien!) vocabulary to the working wall, and refer to it whenever possible. Model using new words, and reward children's use of the new vocabulary.

Resource 3:

Here Come the Aliens



Resource 3:

Here Come the Aliens



kinlay	fleb
shoop	crite
fruzz	poan
lesh	frote
jemp	powd
heth	grimp
wethless	clate
dreb	hutlut



Resource 3:

Here Come the Aliens



Now it's your turn to make up some alien words!

Alien word	Meaning

Session 4: Say what you see

You will need: a copy of *Gorilla* by Anthony Browne.

Teach

This activity is most successful when working in small groups, allowing children to look closely at the images.

Read the story aloud to the children, using the strategies from activity 1 when encountering new vocabulary. Give children time to think about and respond to the story before asking them to look at the pictures.

Practise and apply

Use a combination of questions and prompts to encourage children to talk about what they can see, with the aim of developing their visual literacy, critical thinking, and language development.

‘Tell me what you notice in the picture.’

‘Does the picture give us any clues about how Hannah is feeling?’

‘Is there anything surprising about the colours used?’

‘Do you think Hannah is awake or asleep? Why?’

Put children into pairs, and ask them to come up with a question of their own for the rest of the group. Record their questions for use in future book-sharing activities.

Review

Show the children other works by Anthony Browne, along with books by Oliver Jeffers, Allan Ahlberg, and Shaun Tan, and explain that these books are all interesting to look at and to talk about, as well as to read. Keep the books in a special basket in the reading area, and encourage children to pair up to share the books and their pictures together. Higher-attaining children could be encouraged to write down their questions to be discussed with a larger group.

Session 5: We're going on an adjective hunt

You will need: *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen, resources 4a and 4b.

Teach

Read the story with the children, enjoying the depth and breadth of vocabulary used.

'What is the mud like? It is *thick* and *oozy*.'

Explain that these words are adjectives and that they describe the mud. Discuss the purposes of adjectives – for clarity ('Pass me the *blue* crayon.') and for effect ('... the *heavy* footsteps ...').

Practise and apply

'Today, we're going on an adjective hunt! We're going to find some great ones!'

This activity could be approached in different ways. Ideally, lower and middle attainers would be paired with high attainers to complete one or all of these activities.

Using resource 4a, pairs of children should hunt for adjectives around the school, investigating corridor displays or noticeboards and even asking any adults they encounter to suggest a favourite adjective.

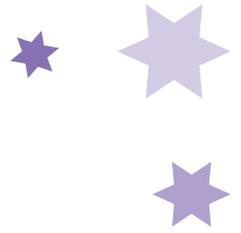
Alternatively, ensure a small selection of books or topic-related text extracts is available. Ask children to read their text and identify the adjectives, recording which are used to describe objects, places or people on resource 4b.

Review

Collate the 'best of' each group's adjectives, and display on the classroom working wall.

Resource 4a:

We're going on an adjective hunt!

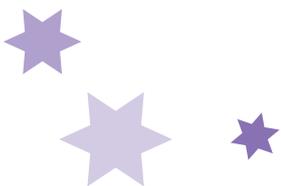


Name: _____

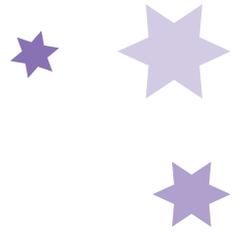
Write down all the adjectives you see (or hear!) around the school.

Our adjective hunt

A large empty rectangular box for writing down adjectives.



Resource 4b



Name: _____

Look through the text to see which adjectives you can find. What do they describe? Add them to the table below.

Objects 	Places 	People 



Session 6: Roll to write

You will need: laminated game cards (resource 5) and a six-sided dice for each pair of children.

Teach

This activity aims to consolidate teaching and learning around word classes, and to address the impact that different vocabulary choices has on the meaning of sentences.

Recap the meaning of the terms *noun*, *verb* and *adjective*. Display the following sentence on the board and ask children to identify the nouns, verbs, and adjectives:

The vicious dog bit the girl.

Ask children: 'What happens if I change the noun *dog* to *girl*? If I change the verb *bit* to *hugged*? If I change the adjective *vicious* to *friendly*?'

Work through similar examples with the children, considering the effectiveness of differing vocabulary, and referring to prior learning on synonyms (see session 2).

'Which synonym works best and why – *nice*, *friendly*, or *affectionate*?'

Practise and apply

Children work in pairs, using a laminated game card (see resource 5) and a six-sided dice between them. They take it in turns to roll the dice and add an appropriate word choice to the sentence frame on their game card. The first to complete their sentence wins.

Roll 1 to add an adjective.

Roll 2 to add an adjective.

Roll 3 to add a noun.

Roll 4 to add a verb.

Roll 5 to add more information.

Roll 6 to add punctuation.

Review

Share sentences. Consider what worked well and what was tricky. Celebrate examples of higher-order vocabulary.

Resource 5: Roll to write



	adjective(s)	noun	verb	more information	punctuation
Player 1 name: _____	The				
Player 2 name: _____	The				

	adjective(s)	noun	verb	more information	punctuation
Player 1 name: _____	A				
Player 2 name: _____	A				

	adjective(s)	noun	verb	more information	punctuation
Player 1 name: _____	My				
Player 2 name: _____	My				

Session 7: *Where the Wild Things Are*

You will need: a copy of *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. This book talk activity works well with any book, including non-fiction. For other suitable texts see [BookMatch on Oxford Owl](#).

Teach

Read the story to the children, and allow them quiet thinking time to reflect on the story. After a few moments, encourage them to share their first thoughts with a talking partner, expressing anything that struck them about the story. Ask them:

‘Is there anything unusual about the story that you would like to know more about?’

‘Can you think of a question you would like to ask about the book?’

Children may need to be given open-ended questions to begin with, but as they become more practised at this activity, they should aim to generate their own questions.

Practise and apply

‘Our question today is *Why was Max’s supper still hot?* There is no correct or incorrect answer – we are sharing what we think.’

Encourage children to contribute their ideas and opinions, facilitating the discussion and eliciting and celebrating language which develops creative and critical thinking skills.

‘I like Kate’s use of the word *although*, as it shows that she is thinking about different ways of looking at the question.’

Other adults that are available to participate in the discussion can play a powerful role in modelling the use of language in philosophical debate.

Review

Conclude the discussion with an opportunity for last thoughts, and allow children quiet thinking time to reflect on the discussion.

Record a list of words and phrases which were useful during the discussion, such as *because*, *although*, *but*, and *however*. Display and refer to this list during future discussions.

Session 8: Clever conjunctions

You will need: an enlarged version of the first page of resource 6, enough copies of the differentiated worksheets (resource 6a or 6b) for every child.

Teach

Display the two short texts on the resource, and read both aloud.

'What is different about these pieces of writing?'

Elicit that the second text flows better due to the use of conjunctions. Ask children to identify the conjunctions used, and record these for display on the working wall.

Explain that the conjunctions do different jobs and that it is important to choose the correct conjunction for the correct sentence.

'I took my umbrella or it was raining.'

'I took my umbrella because it was raining.'

Which conjunction works for that sentence?'

Practise and apply

Children complete differentiated worksheets, resource 6a or 6b, choosing and using appropriate conjunctions to complete sentences.

Review

Ask children to talk about what they have learned today, celebrating the use of conjunctions in their spoken language. Explain that you will secretly be listening for their use of conjunctions and will reward examples at the end of the day.

Resource 6:

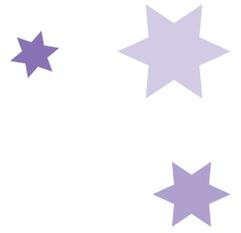
Clever conjunctions



It was a hot day. The sun was shining brightly. I wanted to go outside. My parents said no. I was furious! I had to stay inside. My friends were having fun at the park.

It was a hot day and the sun was shining brightly. I wanted to go outside but my parents said no. I was furious because I had to stay inside while my friends were having fun at the park.

Resource 6a



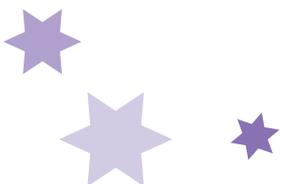
Name: _____

Choose the correct conjunction to complete each sentence below.

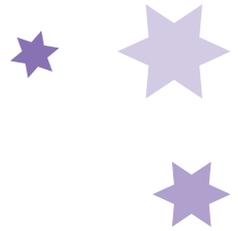
and **but** **because** **or**

1. I love dogs _____ I love cats more.
2. Will you choose an apple _____ a pear?
3. It is cold today _____ it is winter.
4. I am good at reading _____ I am good at writing.
5. I was late _____ the traffic was bad.
6. Mum said I could play football _____ go swimming.

Now write a sentence of your own. Don't forget to include a conjunction!



Resource 6b



Name: _____

Choose the correct conjunction to complete each sentence below.

and **but** **because** **or**
when **if** **that**

1. I love dogs _____ I love cats more.
2. I will be allowed to play outside _____ I put my coat on.
3. Will you choose an apple _____ a pear?
4. I have a great book _____ you will love!
5. We will play outside _____ it has stopped raining.
6. It is cold today _____ it is winter.
7. I am good at reading _____ I am good at writing.

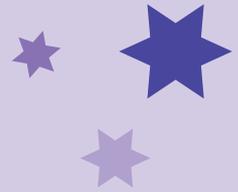
Now write two sentences of your own. Don't forget to include a conjunction!

1. _____

2. _____



Conversations and vocabulary games to try at home



Whatever your child's reading ability, enjoying a book together allows them to develop their understanding, as well as to learn lots of new and exciting words. Read to your child whenever you can, ask them to read to you, or take turns reading pages or chapters of a book. Public libraries are a fantastic resource for allowing children to borrow books for free (and often have storytelling sessions and other craft and activity sessions in those long school holidays!).

Talking with and listening to your child teaches them the importance of spoken language and supports them in developing their vocabulary. When chatting with your child, try to avoid asking too many questions, but let them hear your own thoughts; children need to hear language in order to use it themselves. When you do ask your child a question, it is ideal to ask an 'open' question – one that cannot be answered with a single word. For example, 'What was the best thing that happened today?' rather than 'How was school?', to which the inevitable answer is 'Fine'!

Here are some more suggestions:

- Introduce a new element to the game of 'I went shopping and I bought ...' (where a player names an item, for example, apples, and the next player names this item and adds another, so players end up reciting a list) by using alliteration, where two words begin with the same sound: 'I went shopping and I bought chunky chips / tasty tomatoes / bright berries,' etc.
- Play I Spy where one player says, 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with ...' and makes or names the first sound or letter at the beginning of the name of something they can see near them. The other player(s) try to guess what it is using the first sound or letter as a clue.
- Play Who am I? Take turns describing book/TV/film characters and guessing their identities.
- Play Where am I? Take turns describing a room in your house or another identifiable place, such as a familiar shop / the park / the station – anywhere you both know. The other player has to guess the place being described.
- What am I? is another good version of the above. Describe animals or objects around the house or streets.
- Play Would you rather? Would you rather fly or be invisible? Why? Would you rather be an astronaut or a deep-sea diver? Why? Would you rather there was always sun or always snow? Why?
- Play the yes/no game. Ask a series of questions to which your child is **not** allowed to reply either yes or no. Count how many they answer before slipping up, and then swap roles. It is a great way to think about different ways to reply!
- Riddles and jokes that rely on word play are a fun way to think about language in different ways. A joke of the day will help your child to realise that playing with words is fun, and riddles are good for developing critical thinking skills. There are plenty of examples online.

- Keeping a notebook or card with any new vocabulary that your child has learned will be a great resource for them to go back to, helping them to remember those fantastic new words! Decorating it with pictures or stickers will make it fun and will encourage them to use it in the future.

For more ideas, see:

<https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/advice-for-parents/fun-ideas-learning-at-home/>

For more information on why the word gap matters and how you can help your child to develop their vocabulary at home, see:

<https://blog.oxfordowl.co.uk/why-the-word-gap-matters-and-what-can-you-do-at-home-to-close-it/>

Key stage 2

Jo Holmes has been teaching in Birmingham primary schools for almost 20 years. She specialises in English and has taught across the key stages, from EYFS through to KS3. Jo is passionate about encouraging children to read for pleasure. Here she shares practical ideas for developing children's vocabulary and closing the word gap.



Introduction

Experience has shown KS2 teachers that the SATs which children sit at the end of their primary education may prove particularly challenging for those with a more limited vocabulary. The games and activities included in this pack are designed to address and to begin to close that word gap, but, as it would be impossible to explicitly teach each word that children might encounter, these activities aim to also demonstrate that playing with language is fun. When children are excited by learning new words, they will be more receptive to 'collecting' vocabulary when encountered in daily life, as well as feeling more confident when tackling the unknown words, phrases, and idioms they may meet in different contexts.

Modelling this process to children is crucial, and using and celebrating high-quality language through every interaction with children is very effective – it is important to bear in mind that vocabulary is 'caught' as well as 'taught'. This is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may suffer from a paucity of language which places them in a less advantageous position than their peers. The importance of providing a language-rich environment for these children cannot be overestimated. The balancing act required to teach new vocabulary while checking understanding in different contexts, consolidating previously taught words and phrases, and modelling grammatically correct English can be a delicate one, but it is incredibly worthwhile.

High-quality texts are another powerful resource for vocabulary development, as 'book language' is often more erudite than daily talk. A school which promotes and fosters a culture of reading for pleasure will be giving children an enormous advantage in this area. Research has shown that reading for pleasure has more impact on educational attainment than any socio-economic factors. However, it is precisely those disadvantaged children most in need that are less likely to read often, to see themselves positively as readers, and to have access to a broad range of different reading materials. It is therefore incumbent on us in school to provide children with an environment that fosters a love of reading, offering every child the benefits associated with becoming a lifelong lover of books.

Strategies to promote an ethos of reading for pleasure may include:

- Providing a well-stocked class and school library, allowing children access to a wide range of reading materials, such as picture books, poetry books, newspapers and magazines for children, information books, and 'classic' texts, both modern and traditional.
- Ensuring there is time, every day, for children to be read to. This allows children to access books – and language – beyond their reading ability and to begin to internalise the music of language, as well as enjoying the sheer pleasure of being immersed in a great story. Building in time to talk about the stories being read will also help to build a community of readers.

- Developing teachers' subject knowledge regarding high-quality children's literature, including newly published works and keeping up to date with the reading choices of their children. This is particularly important when assessing children against the national curriculum expectations in reading, which require teachers to assess children's attitude to reading and their thoughts and opinions on a wide range of texts.
- Celebrating reading through whole-school events, such as World Book Day assemblies, author visits, and competitions.
- Modelling a love of reading and valuing different 'forms' of reading – class reading displays could incorporate images of adults and children reading different types of text in different locations.
- Providing cosy and comfortable spaces for reading, which include peer recommendations for 'your next favourite book'.
- Responding to books in different ways, including those which incorporate drama and role-play, or visual art.
- Building reading relationships via paired reading across year groups, inviting parents and friends into school for regular 'reading for pleasure' sessions, or building a relationship with a published author who acts as a '[Patron of Reading](#)'.

As with KS1, it is important that children have some way of recording all the new vocabulary they learn for future reference. Working walls, word books, or vocabulary bookmarks can all be used to good effect, allowing children to collect and revisit words that they have learned before confidently using them themselves.

The activities in this section fall into two categories: quick activity ideas – ideal for registration, lining up, or for when you have a few minutes before lunch or at the end of the day – and session ideas – activities which require more time and a little more preparation. There is also a section at the end which you may wish to hand out to parents. This section comprises ideas for games and conversations at home, and useful links.

Please note that you will need to join www.oxfordowl.co.uk for free to access some of the featured resources.

Quick activity ideas

Activity 1: Find and replace

Display a short text extract, such as that in resource 1. Ask children to find and replace all the verbs/adjectives/adverbs – depending on the current teaching focus – while keeping the meaning as close to the original text as possible. Alternatively, ask them to replace all the verbs/adjectives/adverbs with ones which will change the meaning to make it the complete opposite!

Activity 2: Challenge cards

Cut out and laminate the challenge cards from resource 2. Encourage children to access and complete them independently, whenever time allows. Invite children to write their own challenge cards and add them to the set for others to complete.

Activity 3: Find a link

Give children a pair of words, and ask them to create a link between them. There does not have to be an obvious link and neither does there have to be a correct answer, as long as children can explain their thinking.

*'Can you create a link between *stormy* and *placid*?'*

*'The lake was *placid* in the summer, but in the winter it was *stormy*.'*

When children are familiar and confident with this game, they can be challenged to offer a pair of words which are not related, while their friends try to find a link between them.

*'Can you create a link between *placid* and *intrigued*?'*

*'I was *intrigued* by what lay beneath the surface of the *placid* waters.'*

Activity 4: Fortunately/unfortunately

Some children may be familiar with this traditional word game, which can be played in pairs or as a whole class. Offer a starter sentence which begins with *Fortunately*, ... The next person has to continue with a sentence beginning with *Unfortunately*, ... and so on.

'Fortunately, I remembered to take my purse to the shops.'

'Unfortunately, it was empty.'

'Fortunately, I found £5 on the ground.'

'Unfortunately, I dropped it.'

Activity 5: Make a sentence

Ask one child to offer a noun, another an adjective, a third a verb, and a fourth an adverb. Challenge the rest of the class to create a sentence using the given words. Children will enjoy coming up with unusual vocabulary to challenge their classmates!

Activity 6: Make a pair

Display a group of words, such as those from resource 3. Invite children to find pairs of words that are most similar in meaning (synonyms) and then pairs of words that are opposite in meaning (antonyms). How quickly can they match them up? Challenge children to create their own sets of word pairs to be presented to a partner to match.

Activity 7: Idioms

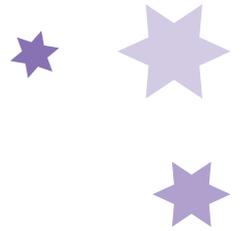
Start a collection of idioms on your working wall. Encourage children to add an idiom to the wall when they encounter one, and take time to discuss these and what they might mean. *It's raining cats and dogs*, *The elephant in the room*, *I've got cold feet*, *It cost an arm and a leg* are all good ones to start with. Once they know the real meaning, children could create pictures for display, with the meanings underneath.

Activity 8: Charades

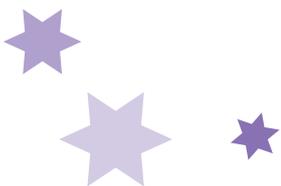
This is a quick game to consolidate vocabulary encountered throughout the day. Select a child to choose a word or phrase which has been recently added to the working wall. They mime it or act it out, and their classmates guess which word has been chosen. The child who guesses correctly gets to choose a new word or phrase. This works really well with idioms!

Resource 1:

Find and replace



It was a beautiful day, and the sun was shining gloriously. I chose to go for a long walk. Eagerly, I set off and walked all the way to the park. However, the sky grew darker and darker, and eventually it began to rain. It was torrential! I was drenched and stomped home grumpily.



Resource 2:

Challenge cards



Write an A–Z of adjectives.

Write an A–Z of adverbs.

Write an A–Z of verbs.

Write down as many synonyms for *said* as you can.

Describe the happiest day of your life. How did you feel?

Describe the most frightening thing that's ever happened to you. How did you feel?

Describe the worst villain you can imagine.

Describe your dream bedroom.

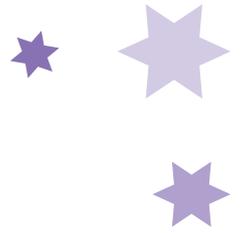
Describe your dream holiday.

Describe the plot of your favourite book or film.



Resource 3:

Make a pair



Match the synonyms.

scarlet	replicate	roam	stomp
march	nervous	inspect	placid
wander	succeed	mutter	excel
apprehensive	commence	crimson	calm
mumble	copy	examine	begin

Now match the antonyms.

sharp	orderly	inferior	truthful
moving	enlarge	descent	stationary
blunt	deceitful	hinder	graceless
superior	elegant	enemy	reduce
ascent	help	chaotic	ally

Session ideas

Session 1: 'Magpie-ing' new words and phrases

You will need: class texts, e-book or individual reading books; resource 4.

Teach

Reading high-quality texts, which introduce children to new words and phrases and enable them to encounter them in meaningful contexts, remains one of the best ways to develop children's vocabulary. As such, 'modelled reading' is a powerful tool and can demonstrate to children what to do when a new, unfamiliar, or unexpected word or phrase is encountered while reading.

Choose an extract from a class text, or an e-book such as *The Secret Garden*, available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk. Read the text aloud until the new word or phrase is encountered.

'*Confine?* That's a new word for me, and I'm not sure what it means. Let's see if I can work it out.'

Model how to read on for context, how to substitute known words, and how to look for etymological clues, such as prefixes, suffixes, or words within words. Involve children in working out a meaning and developing a definition. Check the definition in a dictionary, and record the new vocabulary and its meaning on the working wall.

Practise and apply

Provide children with their own text extracts, chosen for their vocabulary-mining potential, or invite them to use their own reading books. Ask them to identify new words and phrases as they read and to complete resource 4.

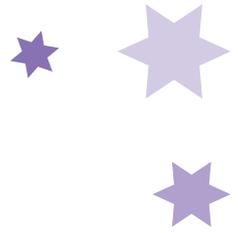
Review

Collect children's vocabulary choices, and record them on the working wall. Ask a child to choose a new word or phrase and mime it / act it out for the rest of the class to guess.

Ensure resource 4 is available for children to access independently during guided reading or free-reading time, and reward children who use it to help to build their own vocabulary.

Resource 4:

Magpie-ing



Write the word:

Define it:

Give two synonyms:

Use it in a sentence:

Write the word:

Define it:

Give two synonyms:

Use it in a sentence:

Write the word:

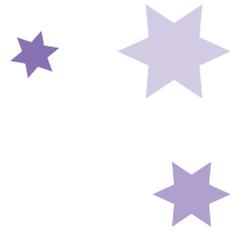
Define it:

Give two synonyms:

Use it in a sentence:

Resource 4:

Magpie-ing



Write the phrase:

Define it:

Use it in a sentence:

Use it in a different sentence:

Write the phrase:

Define it:

Use it in a sentence:

Use it in a different sentence:

Session 2: The language of Shakespeare

You will need: enlarged versions of resources 5a and 5b, a copy of resource 5c per child.

Teach

Explain to children that the most famous writer of all time, William Shakespeare, had a great love of language. He was a shameless 'magpie' but also wasn't afraid to invent new words and phrases.

Display an enlarged copy of resource 5a, and ask children which of these famous phrases they think were invented by Shakespeare. (The answer is all of them!) Pick some out – or assign a few each to pairs of children – and invite children to consider their meanings. Share ideas, and clarify where necessary.

Children might like to find more words or phrases for which we can thank Shakespeare. You could set this as a home learning activity.

Explain that, although Shakespeare is famous for his love sonnets, he is also known for his insults. Display an enlarged copy of resource 5b, and invite children to consider the meanings and then to stand and insult the rest of their class – or their teacher!

Practise and apply

Identify the word class pattern of the final insult (adjective, adjective, noun), and explain to children that they are to use this pattern, and the template in resource 5c, to create their own insults.

Review

Invite children to share their insults. Award points for the most creative and the most insulting!

Resource 5a:

The language of Shakespeare



A sorry sight ...

All of a sudden ...

All that glitters is not gold ...

All's well that ends well ...

As dead as a doornail ...

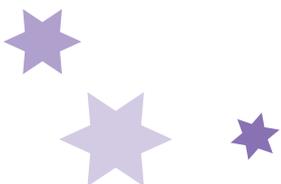
As pure as the driven snow ...

Eaten out of house and home ...

Fair play ...

Foul play ...

Forever and a day ...



Resource 5a:

The language of Shakespeare



Green-eyed monster ...

Heart's content ...

I did not sleep a wink ...

In a pickle ...

In the twinkling of an eye ...

It's all Greek to me ...

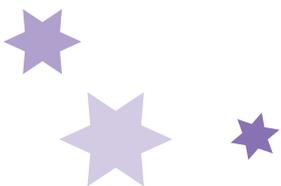
Keep your distance ...

Love is blind ...

Make your hair stand on end ...

Night owl ...

Off with his head ...



Resource 5a:

The language of Shakespeare



The be all and end all ...

The game is up ...

The Queen's English ...

There's method in my madness ...

Too much of a good thing ...

Truth will out ...

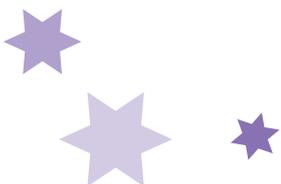
Vanish into thin air ...

Wear your heart on your sleeve ...

Wild goose chase ...

Woe is me ...

Good riddance ...



Resource 5b



'Away, you three-inch fool!' *The Taming of the Shrew* (Act 4, Scene 1)

'I am sick when I do look on thee.' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 2, Scene 1)

'I'll beat thee, but I should infect my hands.' *Timon of Athens* (Act 4, Scene 3)

'I scorn you, scurvy companion.' *Henry IV, Part 2* (Act 2, Scene 4)

'more of your conversation would infect my brain'

The Comedy of Errors (Act 2, Scene 1)

'the rankest compound of villainous smell that ever offended nostril.' *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act 3, Scene 5)

'The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes.' *Coriolanus* (Act 5, Scene 4)

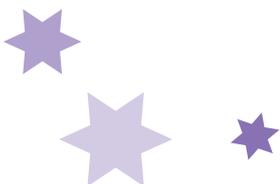
'Thou art a boil / A plague sore.' *King Lear* (Act 2, Scene 2)

'thou lump of foul deformity' *Richard III* (Act 1, Scene 2)

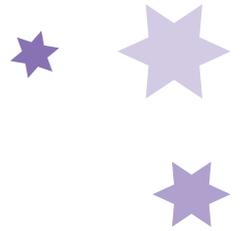
'this poisonous bunch-back'd toad' *Richard III* (Act 1, Scene 3)

'thou sodden-witted lord! Thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows'

Troilus and Cressida (Act 2, Scene 1)



Resource 5c



Name: _____

Start with 'Thou ...', add two adjectives, and complete your insult with a noun. Choose from the word banks or be like Shakespeare and make up your own!

Adjectives:

artless, bawdy, churlish, craven, dankish, droning, errant, fawning, fobbing, frothy, goatish, gorbellied, impertinent, infectious, jarring, loggerheaded, lumpish, mangled, mewling, paunchy, puking, puny, quailing, rank, reeky, roguish, spleeny, spongy, surly, tottering, unmuzzled, vain, venomous, villainous, warped, wayward, weedy, yeasty

Nouns:

barnacle, beast, bladder, boar, canker, dragon, foot-licker, haggard, harpy, lout, maggot, minnow, miscreant, villain, worm

Thou _____

Session 3: Say what you see

You will need: images of well-known paintings (see below), small magnifying glasses.

Teach

This activity is most successful when working in small groups, ideally with magnifying glasses, allowing and encouraging children to look closely at the images.

Ask children to look closely at a picture that you have chosen for its ambiguity or potential for different interpretations. Examples might include *The Yawning Apprentice* by Munkácsy, *Living Still Life* by Dalí, or *Majas on a Balcony* by Goya.

Use a combination of questions and prompts to encourage children to talk about what they can see, with the aim of developing their visual literacy, critical thinking, and language development.

‘Tell me what you can see in this image.’

‘What one word would you use to describe the feel of this painting?’

‘How did the artist intend this image to be used?’

‘Would you change this image? How? Why?’

Practise and apply

Ask children to close their eyes and imagine they have entered the painting. What can they see? What can they hear? What can they smell? How do they feel?

Encourage them to work in groups, coming up with language to describe the painting and the feelings it evokes, and recording the most evocative words on sticky notes to display with their chosen image.

Review

Share children’s responses to the painting. Are there notable differences in their responses? Is there any common vocabulary? Where children have come up with words or phrases that are new to others, can they explain their meanings? Where else might these words be useful?

Session 4: Dictionary challenge

You will need: Oxford Primary dictionaries, [worksheets](#) of your choice from www.oxfordowl.co.uk, the word list from resource 6.

Teach

Dictionaries are an invaluable tool for teaching higher-order vocabulary. Introduce children to the dictionary and, depending on their familiarity with and confidence in using dictionaries, allow children time to investigate and explore their structure and function.

Discuss why and how we use dictionaries, eliciting that they are organised alphabetically and that they give us information regarding word class and origin, as well as definitions.

Give each child a word to find from the list on resource 6. Ask children to write the correct definition for their word, along with one or two made-up definitions. Children take it in turns to listen to and try to guess the correct definition for their friend's word.

Practise and apply

Provide children with [differentiated worksheets](#) (according to the dictionaries you have and the levels of attainment within your class) to develop dictionary and language skills, available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk.

Review

Give children timed challenges to build their proficiency in dictionary usage.

'What is the third word on page 34?'

'Which word comes immediately before *calm*?'

'What is the last word in the dictionary?'

Resource 6:

Dictionary challenge



cease	horde	veto	entice	squander
broad	swell	foe	partake	hinder
scamper	tarnish	sway	suspend	avert
purchase	frail	remedy	flaw	sincere
hostile	endearing	futile	banish	merge
inhabit	recede	severe	rabble	collaborate

Session 5: Thesaurus challenge

You will need: Oxford Primary thesauruses, an enlarged version of resource 7, [worksheets](#) of your choice from www.oxfordowl.co.uk.

Teach

Like dictionaries, thesauruses are invaluable tools for teaching higher-order vocabulary, enabling children to understand and explore synonyms. Introduce children to the thesauruses and, depending on their familiarity with and confidence in using thesauruses, allow children time to investigate and explore them.

Discuss why and how we use thesauruses, eliciting that they are organised alphabetically and that they give us information regarding synonyms and antonyms.

Give each child a word to find, such as the list included in resource 7. Ask children to find two synonyms, the first being the one they feel is most appropriate, followed by a second choice. There does not have to be a 'correct' answer, but it is important for children to understand that there are shades of meaning, even with related synonyms.

Practise and apply

Provide children with [differentiated worksheets](#) (according to the thesauruses you have and the levels of attainment within your class) to develop thesaurus and language skills, available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk.

Review

Give children timed challenges to build their proficiency in thesaurus usage.

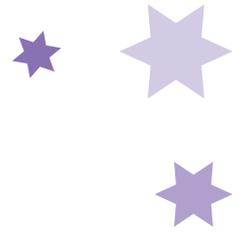
'What is the first synonym for *bad*?'

'Find an antonym for *deafening*.'

'How many synonyms are there for *big*?'

Resource 7:

Thesaurus challenge



Find the word	Find three synonyms	Rank them
sad	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
nice	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
small	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
good	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
walk	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.



Session 6: Subordinating language

You will need: an enlarged version of the first sheet of resource 8, enough copies of the second sheet to allow one for each child.

Teach

Understanding the role and use of subordinating conjunctions enables children to develop their language and thinking skills. Recap previous learning on conjunctions, and elicit that they can be used to join two main clauses to create a longer sentence, but they can also be used to join a main clause and a subordinate clause. Display the following sentence:

Please don't open your book until you have been told to do so.

Ask children to identify the main clause in this sentence. Which is the subordinate clause? What conjunction joins them?

Understanding subordinating conjunctions can be crucial when unpicking mathematical problems. Try identifying the subordinating conjunction in this word problem for year 3 or 4:

A skateboard costs £14, so how much will four skateboards cost?

or in this one for year 5 or 6:

Priya sees the same jumper in two different shops. In the first shop, the price of the jumper is £40, but in the second shop it has 30% off, although it was originally £48. Where should Priya buy her jumper and why?

Try swapping in a different subordinating conjunction to establish that conjunctions cannot be used interchangeably and that different conjunctions are appropriate in different sentences.

Display an enlarged version of the first page of resource 8, and work together to match main and subordinate clauses with the appropriate conjunction.

Practise and apply

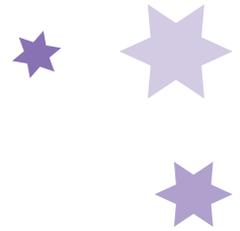
Children work independently to complete resource 8, identifying subordinating conjunctions and using them to write their own sentences. Children with additional needs may need to work with an adult.

Review

Ensure that a list of subordinating conjunctions is available on the working wall. In maths lessons, highlight the use of subordinating conjunctions, and remind children of their function.

Resource 8:

Subordinating conjunctions



Match the main clause, the subordinate clause, and the appropriate conjunction.

He pushed to the front of the queue

although

watching kittens on YouTube.

She had to practise the piano

because

I really prefer pears.

He was worried

so

she could watch television.

I chose an apple to be polite

if

he could get his lunch first.

She laughed out loud

before

I save enough birthday money.

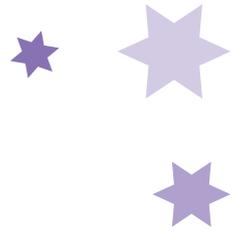
I'm going to buy some new trainers

when

he was late again.



Name: _____



Circle the subordinating conjunction in each sentence below.

1. I took my umbrella because rain was forecast.
2. She read six pages of her book while waiting for the dentist.
3. Although I can see both sides, I agree with Jake.
4. We went to the cinema after we went out for lunch.
5. Once they had lined up, the children had to wait for their teacher.
6. You must have been hungry before that snack.
7. I'm allowed to sleep over if I've done all my homework.
8. We must keep trying until the referee blows the whistle.
9. Since you asked so politely, I'll agree.
10. It's my turn to wash the dishes as it's Sunday.

Now choose four conjunctions to write some sentences of your own.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Session 7: Problem-solving

You will need: a copy of resources 9a and 9b for each child.

Teach

'It costs £7.25 to jump at the trampoline park during the week. At the weekend the cost is increased by another £3.50. How much does it cost to jump on Saturday?'

Write this sentence on the board, and give children time to think about and 'play' with the problem. Emphasise that, when solving problems, it is important to give oneself time to test ideas, make mistakes, get stuck, take risks, and adjust thinking. (For more on this, see 'Teaching for Mastery' at www.oxfordowl.co.uk)

Encourage children to talk about how to solve the problem, praising those that focus on a method, rather than rushing to find a solution. Display these four calculations:

- a) $£7.25 - £3.50$
- b) $£7.25 + £3.50$
- c) $£7.25 \times £3.50$
- d) $£7.25 \div £3.50$

'Which of these calculations would we use to solve the problem?'

'How do you know? Can you identify the vocabulary which indicates the operation needed?'

'If we changed the wording to *decreased by*, which calculation would we use then?'

Practise and apply

Distribute a copy of resource 9a to each child, and ask them to cut it up to create four cards. On the back of each card, children should record key words and phrases which relate to the mathematical operation shown.

These could include:

- *addition, add, all together, combined, increase by, more than, plus, sum, total*
- *subtraction, subtract, decrease by, difference, fewer than, less than, minus, remaining*
- *multiplication, double, multiplied by, per, product, times, triple, array*
- *division, divided, groups, half, how many each, out of, quarter, factor.*

Once children have completed their vocabulary cards, encourage them to use them when completing resource 9b: matching problems to the calculations necessary to solve them.

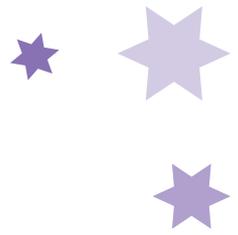
Review

Recap the vocabulary used to understand and solve word problems, and record on the maths working wall. Encourage children to retain their vocabulary cards as a future resource when working on problem-solving.

Offer children a calculation, and ask them to use their cards and key words to write a problem which matches the calculation.

Resource 9a:

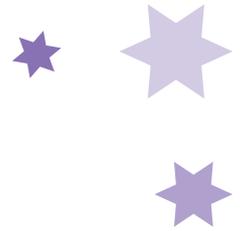
Problem-solving



$+$	$-$
\times	\div



Resource 9b

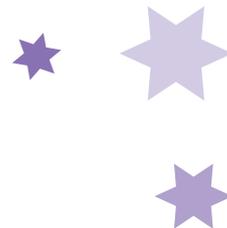


Name: _____

Highlight the key words or phrases in each word problem, and then circle the correct calculation needed to solve it.

Jaspreet has £11.50 saved, but Zac has £5 less than him. How much money does Zac have?	a) $£11.50 - £5 = £6.50$ b) $£11.50 + £5 = £16.50$ c) $£11.50 \div £5 = £2.30$
A teacher needs 3 coloured pencils per child in her class. There are 30 children in her class, but 2 are absent. How many pencils does she need in total?	a) $3 + 30 + 2 = 35$ b) $30 - 2 = 28$ $28 \times 3 = 84$ c) $3 \times 30 = 90$ $90 - 2 = 88$
A school of 600 children is grouped into classes of 30. How many classes are there?	a) $600 - 30 = 570$ b) $600 \div 30 = 20$ c) $600 \times 30 = 18\,000$
A pair of trainers costs £45, but there is a third off in the sale. How much are the trainers in the sale?	a) $45 - 3 = 42$ b) $45 \div 3 = 15$ c) $45 \div 3 = 15$ $45 - 15 = 30$
Shannon is allowed 60 minutes of video game time each week. On Monday she plays for 18 minutes and on Wednesday she plays for 15 minutes. What is the combined time she has spent so far this week? How much time does she have remaining?	a) $60 \div 15 = 4$ $4 \times 18 = 72$ b) $60 + 18 + 15 = 93$ c) $18 + 15 = 33$ $60 - 33 = 27$
Annie has scored 7 goals for her football team. Aleesha has scored triple that, plus 2 more. How many goals has Aleesha scored?	a) $7 \times 3 = 21$ $21 + 2 = 23$ b) $7 + 2 + 3 = 12$ c) $7 \times 3 = 21$ $21 \times 2 = 42$

Can you write your own maths problem for a partner to solve? Don't forget to include the correct and incorrect calculations!





Session 8: Poetry, please!

You will need: a copy of 'Bush Fire' by Jackie Kay, enough copies of resource 10 to provide one for each child.

Teach

Poetry is a very powerful tool in developing vocabulary and teaching children that playing with words is fun! Exploring the devices which poets use for effect enables children to understand and use these devices in their own writing. 'Liar' by Rachel Rooney is a wonderful poem to explore metaphor, 'The Midnight Skaters' by Roger McGough uses alliteration, personification, and word play and 'Bush Fire' by Jackie Kay is ideal for examining similes.

Display a copy of 'Bush Fire', and read aloud to the children, emphasising the repetition and rhythm of the language. Allow children some thinking time, and then encourage initial responses to the poem.

Introduce or recap the term *simile*, and explain that a simile compares a subject to something else, using *as* or *like*. Identify examples of similes in the first verse of the poem.

Practise and apply

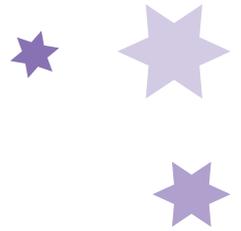
Model to children how to complete resource 10, using synonyms and adjectives to enrich the simile.

Review

Share examples of children's similes, celebrating examples of exciting vocabulary.

Resource 10:

Similes



Name: _____

Can you complete the similes below? If you're up for a challenge, use synonyms and add adjectives for interest. The first has been done this way for you.

1. Quick

As swift as a sure-footed fox

2. Sad

3. Tired

4. Interested

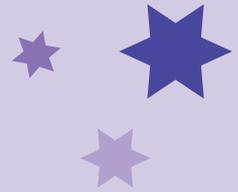
5. Old

6. Clever

7. Slow

8. Mischievous

Conversations and vocabulary games to try at home



Although your child is older, shared reading remains extremely important for developing their vocabulary. Read with your child whenever you can, ask them to read to you, or take turns reading pages or chapters of a book. Public libraries are a fantastic resource for allowing children to borrow books for free.

Talking with and listening to your child teaches them the importance of spoken language and supports them in developing their vocabulary. When chatting with your child, try to avoid asking too many questions, but let them hear your own thoughts; children need to hear language in order to use it themselves. When you do ask your child a question, it is ideal to ask an 'open' question – one that cannot be answered with a single word. For example, 'What was the best thing that happened today?' rather than 'How was school?', to which the inevitable answer is 'Fine!'

Here are some more suggestions:

- 'If you had three wishes, what would they be?'
- 'Is it better to be a child or an adult? Why?'
- 'Should we treat animals as we treat humans?'
- 'Is school uniform a good idea?'
- 'Should children have unlimited screen time?'
- 'Can one person change the world?'
- Give children three connected words, and ask them to name the connection and come up with a fourth, for example: *bungalow, flat, maisonette ...?*
- Play Would you rather? For example, would you rather visit the Arctic or the jungle? Why?
- Play Who am I? by choosing a famous person whom children have to guess by asking questions which have only a yes/no answer.
- Riddles are good for developing critical thinking skills. There are plenty of examples online, for example: *What can you catch but not throw? Answer: a cold.*
- Puzzles such as word searches and crosswords are great for developing vocabulary and helping children to spot patterns within language.

For more ideas, see:

<https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/advice-for-parents/fun-ideas-learning-at-home/>

For more information on why the word gap matters and how you can help your child to develop their vocabulary at home, see:

<https://blog.oxfordowl.co.uk/why-the-word-gap-matters-and-what-can-you-do-at-home-to-close-it/>

For further information

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