

Teaching Understanding and Use of Early Vocabulary

In 1985 Ann Locke produced a structured programme for teaching understanding and use of spoken language called *Living Language* (Locke, 1985). Part of the *Living Language* materials called the Starter Programme focuses on teaching understanding and use of the first hundred words that young children typically learn. The Starter Programme is for those pupils who know some but not all of these words and they continue on the Starter Programme until they both understand and use at least 90 words.

Teaching should proceed in concrete activities using real objects initially before progressing to photographs, pictures or toy representations. The context for learning new vocabulary is in structured play activities with the teacher encouraging pupil to listen to new words, understand the association between the words and the object or action and finally to imitate and spontaneously use the spoken word.

Designing Tests of Vocabulary

The language used by teachers in vocabulary tests has to be carefully considered. The test instructions for the pupil should be clear and give him only the information he needs to respond appropriately. With many pupils spoken instruction might be perfectly alright to use. However, for some groups of pupils, especially young pupils or pupils with very severe learning difficulties, instructions such as 'Show me ...' and 'Give me ...' or questions like 'Where's the . . . ?' might be quite confusing or not understood. It might be more appropriate to reduce the amount of spoken words and combine them with a familiar gesture – for example, the teacher might hold her hand out and say 'doll' or 'Give me the doll'.

What equipment and materials are to be used? When testing knowledge of vocabulary, a decision has to be made whether to use real objects, photographs, pictures or miniature representations. Use of toys make it possible to do testing in the context of 'small world play' but is it certain that actual objects are associated by pupils with their miniature versions? For many groups of pupils, it simply cannot be taken for granted that they associate the actual items or actions with photographs or pictures or toys. Therefore, there is much to be said for using actual objects and only objects with which the pupil is likely to be familiar. However, for some vocabulary it will be impractical to use the real thing and photos or pictures would seem to be the obvious choice.

When testing vocabulary, it may be important to have several exemplars of an object rather than just the one with which the pupil is familiar. For instance, does the pupil associate the word car only with a picture of his family's car or will he associate with a range of cars. Dogs come in many colours and sizes as do shoes, for example. When photos and pictures are used, careful cropping may be required to ensure that the pupil is focused only on the test vocabulary item: for instance, when testing for the word 'ball', it may cause confusion if the photo is of a boy kicking a ball rather than just a ball.

Certain items may be closely associated and may give clues to the correct response. For instance, the pupil may *know* that a plate is put on a table. If the pupil knows the word 'plate', it is most likely that he will put the plate on the table rather than the floor when told to do so.

However, this does not necessarily imply that the pupil knows what the word 'table' means. So care needs to be taken to ensure that associated or connected words are not tested together.

Presentation needs to be carefully controlled, especially in tests which involve the selection of one item from a choice of objects. These situations potentially allow chance responses to be correct. Faced with four items, three of which the pupil knows, makes it easy for him to correctly select the unknown item when asked to do so without knowing what its name is. Replacing tested objects with new ones should help but not allow the pupil to predict that the newly presented object is the one to which the teacher is going to require him to select. The solution is to test groups of, say, six objects but present them in groups of three or four. It becomes possible to organise the combinations in such a way that each object is presented and tested on several different occasions. To 'pass' on a particular item, the pupil might be expected to obtain a total score of, say, three out of four correct responses.

The number of items that is presented may also be significant. For instance, a pupil may fail to respond correctly because he may not have the ability to retain in mind the instruction and scan several pictures. It may be that he actually does know the vocabulary in question but still fails to score on that item. So for some pupils, it may be necessary to reduce the number of items that are presented but recognise that this increases the probability of making a correct item selection simply by chance.

Non-verbal cues of any sort are to be avoided. It is the most 'natural' thing in the world when working with a pupil to use a great deal of non-verbal communication. For instance, a teacher may combine gesture with speech and thus emphasise certain meanings. Eye pointing is quite a common occurrence; for example, the teacher might ask the pupil to 'give me the ball' and at the same time look towards the ball. Some pupils are very aware of facial expression and may notice whether the adult shows pleasure or frowns when selecting an item. So, teachers have to be careful not to offer cues by means of gesture or facial expression.

Correct responses should not be rewarded. During a test some responses will be correct and some of them will be incorrect. If a pupil is given immediate feedback about their responses, it will affect the way they respond in future. Obviously, a lack of any praise from the teacher could make a pupil feel uneasy and a suitable compromise may be to provide some form of encouragement, irrespective of whether the pupil is right or wrong. The comments should offer no feedback whatsoever.

Ideally, each pupil is to be tested individually. If testing is done with small groups the actions of other pupils may offer clues to the pupil about what to do when it is his turn.

Always make sure that the pupil is attending before giving any test instruction.

Always allow the pupil several seconds to respond. A pupil may require up to ten seconds to process the instruction and determine which item to select or indicate. Ten seconds can seem like an eternity to the teacher but it usually pays to allow the time to respond. Avoid the temptation to 'fill the gap' with a repetition or paraphrase of the instruction. It may only serve to confuse the pupil.

Teaching Talking

Living Language is now out of print but *Teaching Talking* is a screening and intervention programme for children with speech, language and communication needs developed by Ann Locke and Maggie Beech. It is intended for use in early years settings and primary schools.

It comes in two volumes. The first volume describes the development of children's understanding and use of spoken language and associated personal, social and cognitive skills and suggests profiling methods. The second volume advises on intervention strategies.

Only the detailed profiling is of relevance to teachers of children with the more severe and complex learning difficulties. There are five detailed profiles.

The Early Years Profiles, which have greater relevance to pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties, set out average development in six key areas:

1. Physical skills
2. Self-help and independence
3. Eye-hand coordination
4. Play and social development
5. Listening and understanding
6. Expressive skills

The Primary Profiles set out average development in seven key areas, including elements of the primary curriculum

1. Physical Skills
2. Personal and social skills
3. Speaking and listening
4. Reading
5. Writing
6. Mathematics
7. Scientific enquiry

A completed profile should show:

1. Relative strengths in developmental or curriculum areas.
2. The skills in each area which are well established.
3. The skills that are emergent and require further development.
4. The skills that have not yet emerged.

So the completed profile should suggest teaching objectives for each child's individual education plan. The recommended strategy is to target emergent skills that are beginning to develop, concentrating on just one or two areas at a time.

References

Locke, A. (1985) *Living Language* Windsor: NFER-Nelson.

Locke, A. and Beech, M. (2005) *Teaching Talking: Procedures Handbook* London: GL Assessment.