

# Building Vocabulary Through Learning the Language

Categories: Teaching Tips, ELL, Professional Development, Words in Action, Implementation

Children are constantly learning language, learning through language, learning about language.

M. A. K. Halliday

Children learn to create meaning and comprehend events from their social interactions with others. Rich and varied language experiences provide a child with models for language learning and opportunities for practice in interpreting and understanding language. For English Language Learners (ELLs), participating in engaging instruction coupled with opportunities for conversation becomes the cornerstone for successful language development.

Children grow in their cognitive understanding of the world at large when vocabulary learning is connected to their experiences. Children more readily remember and use the new words they encounter when they are meaningfully connected to concepts and ideas (Harris, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek 2011). A wide and extensive vocabulary that is used with ease and flexibility is an outward sign of successful oral language development. Teaching vocabulary in integrated and meaningful contexts enriches and deepens children's background knowledge and builds their store of words, their mental lexicons.

Words in Action is a classroom resource that uses meaningful contexts to support building vocabulary for students, especially supporting language development for ELLs. Students participate in 15-20 minute lessons that build academic vocabulary by using authentic texts that are read aloud. The students learn the meaning of words by hearing them in context and then using them with a partner. Synonyms, antonyms, multiple meanings, idioms, and shades of meaning are a few examples of the word-study focus of this program. Likewise, the social and emotional development of the students builds as they develop caring and respectful relationships, which creates a safe and supportive classroom environment that is conducive to students' sharing their thinking.

Below are links to the research cited above to support your thinking and practice around vocabulary instruction and language acquisition. Please share your thoughts or suggestions for additional resources and articles in the comments below.

- Halliday, M. A. K. 1978. *Language as social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Harris, J., Golinkoff, R., and Hirsh-Pasek, K. 2011. Lessons from the crib for the classroom: How children really learn vocabulary. Appears in Neuman, S. B and Dickinson, D. K., eds. 2011. *Handbook of early literacy research, volume 3*(pp. 49-65). New York: The Guilford Press.