

The Role of Parents and Teachers in Children's Vocabulary Development

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子どもの語彙習得における親と教師の役割

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is important for children's language development because they will read better if they have rich vocabulary in their lexicon. Children acquire words in incidental learning rather than explicit vocabulary instruction. This paper will address the role of parents and teachers for children's incidental vocabulary learning.

Key words: vocabulary development, incidental vocabulary learning, the role of parents and teachers

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抄 録

語彙の習得は子どもの言語発達に重要な役割を果たす。豊かな語彙をもつことで子どもはよりよく読めるようになるからである。子どもの語彙は正規の学習ではなく偶発的に獲得されることが多い。この論文は子どもの偶発的な語彙獲得のための親と教師の役割を論じている。

キーワード: 語彙の発達 偶発的な語彙獲得 親と教師の役割

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Introduction

Babies begin pointing at objects around them in order to learn their names. They listen to what caregivers say and add new words to their “dictionary.” Pease, Gleason, Pan (1989) point out that each child’s cognitive style lets her choose her favorite style of acquiring vocabulary using the following theories. According to **association theory**, some children learn the meanings of words by linking words with objects. When they hear a word, *kitty*, whenever it appears, they come to associate the word with the object. **Categorical or semantic theory** suggests that children learn categories of words. For example, they see dogs and cats and understand that they are in the same category of animal. In **cognitive theory**, when children begin to talk, they begin to understand the world they have been in and figure out the meanings of words spoken to them based on experiences. Finally, **prototype theory** suggests that children acquire “the best examples of the categories” they are learning. For example, they see a “robin is better than a chicken” as an example of a bird. (Rosch and Mervis, 1975, cited in Pease, Gleason, Pan, 1989). Young children integrate these techniques when they learn early words without instruction. When they begin formal schooling, they receive formal language instruction. However, Nagy and Herman (1987) suggest that school children acquire words in incidental learning rather than explicit vocabulary instruction. Some children acquire a rich vocabulary, and others do not and such individual differences probably occur resulting from their experiences with words. As school children will read better if they have rich vocabulary in their lexicon, it is essential that children acquire words to become a good reader. Therefore, it is important for parents and teachers to understand how they can help school children to acquire vocabulary.

The role of parents

An important aspect in children’s semantic development is parents’ attitudes toward children’s words. Pease, Gleason, Pan (1989) point out that feedback from adults to children about children’s speech confirms whether children are using a word correctly or not. Bloom (1998) states that “children also learn more words when their mothers respond promptly to their vocalization and also say something about the objects of their attention” (p. 333). Socioeconomic differences also affect children’s vocabulary development. Hart and Risley (1995) point out that children born in privileged families learn more words than those born in less privileged families because children from less privileged families have fewer language interactions with parents at home (as cited in Bloom, 1998). Therefore, how caregivers interact with children significantly affect children’s vocabulary development.

Oral interactions between parents and younger children can be extended to school children's vocabulary learning because "learning word meanings from oral context is obviously a major mode of vocabulary acquisition (Nagy and Herman, 1987). For example, whenever my nine-year-old niece overhears new words in adult conversations, she asks what they mean and adds these new words to her lexicon. She overheard a word, *bisymmetry*, when I asked her father if he used bisymmetrical *Kanji* characters for her name on purpose. She asked me what it meant, and I wrote her name and explained what bisymmetry meant by drawing a line in the middle of her *Kanji* characters. She was excited about the idea of bisymmetrical names and began checking her friends' names to find out who had bisymmetrical names. What she found was that not so many children had been given bisymmetrical names and she created bisymmetrical names by using bisymmetrical *Kanji* characters. Immediate and positive responses from adults to children's interest in new words are essential because it allows children to learn the meanings of new words promptly. Adults perceive a gap if children do not understand the definition, and they can give additional explanations (Nagy and Herman, 1987). This is not the case when children encounter a new word when they read alone. In that case, they must surmise the meaning of a word from the context and are subject to making mistakes.

To motivate children to learn new words by exposing them to a variety of contexts is another important parental task for children's incidental vocabulary learning as Nagy and Herman (1987) point out that children should be given opportunities to learn. For example, when parents bring their children to a science museum, children will encounter new words in this experience and parents will teach them new words in a new context. As mentioned earlier, children learn new words in meaningful oral contexts. The possible conversation between parents and children after their visit to the museum is about what they see and learn at the museum. In this conversation, parents can see how children understand a new idea or word and explain the words which they do not understand. De Villiers (1991) states that children learn new words based on "prior understanding of the concept(s) underlying the word's meaning" (p. 358). Exposure to various fields increases children's background knowledge which will help children to map a new word according to their prior knowledge.

The role of parents

In addition to these parental tasks, teachers play an important role for children's vocabulary development. It is very important for teachers to encourage children to read regularly because the most powerful incidental vocabulary learning will occur when children read (Nagy and Herman, 1987). Although written contexts will be less effective in vocabulary learning for children, because they will not supply enough information about

“the meaning of unfamiliar words,” children who read regularly gain more vocabulary than they do in vocabulary instruction (Nagy and Herman, 1987). However, how they understand the meaning of unfamiliar words which they encounter during reading remains a question. A knowledge hypothesis by Anderson and Freebody (cited in Nagy and Herman, 1987) indicates that the knowledge children have will help them to locate information with new words. This hypothesis suggests that children should read a wide variety of materials to enlarge their knowledge in general (Nagy and Herman, 1987). This knowledge acquired gradually by constant reading will help them understand new words. This approach is helpful when they read a dictionary definition because they use their background knowledge to understand the definition. Reading is an important factor for developing children’s vocabulary because new words should be taught with contextual information (Scott and Nagy, 1997). However, when children reach upper elementary grades, some children show reading difficulties. Therefore, I believe that preventing reading difficulties in younger grades is another important approach to vocabulary development.

Teachers also contribute to children’s vocabulary acquisition by teaching them knowledge about words. The study by Scott and Nagy (1997) shows that children fail to understand definitions because of their lack of knowledge about parts of speech and semantic or syntactic category. This study indicates that depending on dictionary definitions is not helpful for vocabulary acquisition. However, if children do not understand definitions in a dictionary because of lack of skill, it is necessary for teachers to teach them how to read them.

To assess whether children fully understand new words is also important. This can be done by asking children to keep a journal. Teachers can ask children to make an oral report about what they have learned. Teachers should make sure to encourage children to use the new words they have learned. By reading children’s writing and listening to their oral reports, teachers can evaluate how well children understand new words. If they have trouble with new words, teachers can provide additional information and background knowledge.

Conclusion

Bloom (1998) points out that “children do not learn words in isolation”(p. 331). They map a new word in their “dictionary” based on previous experience and knowledge they store. Cognitive, social, reading, and linguistic development will help children acquire vocabulary. Each individual creates a lexicon of her own and parents and teachers play a vital role in children’s lexicon creation. Interactions between parents and children about new words affect children’s vocabulary growth. Motivating children to learn new words by exposing them to different kinds of contexts is also important. Teachers as well as parents

should encourage children to read regularly as incidental vocabulary learning occurs when they read regularly. When children become good readers, they will be able to infer meaning in written context (De Villiers, 1991). It is also important for teachers to teach how to read definitions by teaching knowledge about words. In this way, both parents and teachers can help their children's vocabulary development.

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