Developing Vocabulary:
For older children

Vocabulary is important in both spoken and written forms. It impacts on a child's ability to share their ideas effectively and develop their reading skills.

If a child is struggling to develop their spoken language and is only using single words or very short phrases you might want to refer to our advice sheet on supporting vocabulary in preschool children to support them to expand their vocabulary by using strategies such as modelling, labelling and extending.

For children with severe difficulties in developing their spoken language you may need to consider other forms of visual support such as commenting boards and communication books to provide alternative ways for them to communicate either alongside or in place of spoken language.

If a child has gaps in their spoken vocabulary it is important to think about what vocabulary is most important for them on a day to day basis. For children with very limited vocabulary you might need to focus on basic everyday vocabulary first such as:

- Action words: jumping, getting, giving, playing, waving, hopping, climbing etc
- Names of people that are important to them as well as people categories such as boy, girl, man, lady, baby etc.
- Names of places that are important to them such as home, school, park, Nanny's house and more specific locations such as classroom, playground, bedroom, bathroom etc.
- Clothes/toys
- Animals
- Food
- Objects of interest to the child
- Colours

For children with more advanced language but who still struggle to access the curriculum due to specific gaps in their vocabulary, it can be difficult to identify where to start. Using the **STAR word approach** can a helpful way to identify these gaps and provide ideas to help children store and recall new vocabulary effectively.

The STAR word approach

The **'STAR'** approach is taken from Word Aware developed by Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan (2014) and is a helpful way of developing children's vocabulary by focussing on the sound and the meaning of new words.

- **S – select**:   pick the most relevant words to teach
- **T – teach:**   introduce new words to the whole class
- **A – activate**:   bring the word to life to help children remember and understand the word
- **R – review:**   transfer the word to the student's long-term memory

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Words are divided into three groups:

- **Anchor Words** – everyday words children might use

- **Goldilocks words** – words that are not too easy and not too hard (e.g. 'just right) everyday adult words

- **Step on words** – topic specific words that we might not use in our everyday language

SELECT
Traditionally in the **STAR** word approach, adults would focus on 'teaching' the goldilocks level words to the whole class.

However, for many children with difficulties with their spoken language they will also have gaps in their **Anchor** words that mean they find it difficult to access explanations in class for new vocabulary. This means they miss out on learning and become disengaged in the topic.

A useful way to approach this is to identify topic vocabulary for the next term's topic, identify any gaps in the basic vocabulary children will need to access the topic and **PRE-TEACH** these words to help the child access the topic in the classroom.
To do this you could come up with 5-10 new topic words for next term e.g. if the topic was 'Rivers', topic vocabulary for a YEAR 6 child might include words like:

- origin
- waterfall
- current
- course
- valley

- source (related to a river)
- rapids
- mouth (related to a river)
- tributary
- meander

You can then take each topic word individually and work out what words you might use to 'explain' this new vocabulary to a child. It is THIS vocabulary that you need to focus on first.

See example below. The underlined words are the original topic vocab words provided by the class teacher, the other words are all the words the child would need to understand to be able to access explanations of the topic vocabulary in class.

| Anchor words | Goldilocks words | Step on words |
Everyday language for a Year 6 pupil	Everyday language for an average adult	Not used in everyday adult language and/or particularly topic specific
water hot cold small (smaller) big (bigger) large (larger) beginning middle end start finish place fast slow river stream either side land high low fall hills between runs (related to water) large sea lake	origin riverbank slopes waterfall steep flow/flowing height dip mountains land winding curve bend part of current swiftly natural course lower valley	source (related to a river) rapids mouth (related to a river) tributary meander

Once you have created your list, you can go through all the anchor and goldilocks words with the child to identify the ones that you might want to **SELECT** to work on first.
Filling in these gaps first will help the child access the explanations in class of the new topic in the future. This also helps to identify gaps in everyday vocabulary that we might otherwise miss and assume a child can use/understand.

TEACH
Children need to learn lots of information about a word in order to remember how the word sounds and what it means. Consider the following strategies when teaching or 'pre-teaching' new vocabulary:

- Use a multi-sensory approach when teaching vocabulary – where possible enable students to 'experience' the vocabulary using as many senses as possible.

- See it - use pictures, photographs, objects and symbols

- Hear it – used in the classroom in stories and in real life situations

- Say it – on its own and in a sentence

- Read it – in texts, reading books

- Write it – on its own and in a sentence

- Create word maps to identify:

  o the function of the word (what it does)

  o location (where you might find it)

  o attributes (what it looks like)

  o sound features (what sound it starts with, how many parts/syllables the word has, words that rhyme/sound the same or are opposites)

- Use mind maps to 'Act out' the word – how could the word be represented through actions, gestures etc

- Create a song, rap or mnemonic to help children remember the word (e.g. **r**hythm **h**as **y**our **t**wo **h**ips **m**oving)

- Draw a picture in a topic vocabulary book and add all the information you have learnt about the word around it

- Create wall displays of new words

- Create Word Storms – when you think of as many words as you can that are linked with the new target word – this is a good small group activity. Record the ideas on a flip chart or paper. You could use this information later to create a mind map for the topic as well.

- Remember to think about 'multiple meanings' of the same word e.g. 'wave' could mean a 'wave' in the sea or 'waving' at someone. You can create a 'multiple meaning' tree and draw branches off the tree with different pictures for the different meanings of the word

- Use venn diagrams to link words in categories and talk about which words belong together in the same circle, which ones belong in both circles and which words belong in a different circle/group.

- When teaching more abstract words link it to a concrete example (e.g. 'dissolve': show sugar dissolving in hot water).

ACTIVATE

- Model, model, model – use the word in context throughout the day and during topic activities to help the child 'hear' and 'see' the word used correctly.

- Play word games to help consolidate learning:

  o what am I?
  o lotto games focussing upon specific categories

  o category naming games

  o What can it do? pick a word and think of 5 things it can do or it is used for

- Word association games – One player starts with a word, the next person has to say a word that is related to the first word in some way, e.g., *Egypt – mummy – dad-beard- Santa Claus- Christmas.*

- Create a topic vocabulary or category book and support the child to 'store' all their new words in the book. Support them to use/navigate through the categories or topics to find words during class topic work.

REVIEW

- A child needs to hear and use a word many times before it transfers into their long-term memory.

- Use lots of recap to help children recall and retrieve words that you have previously worked on.

- Use **mind maps** to help children pull together a range of topic words and link them together

- Use a **word pot** where you put all the new words for the topic you are working on and pull one out of the pot that you have previously taught to review and recap it.

- Provide opportunities for children to use their new words on a regular basis to support them to recall and store the words effectively.

Useful resources

- Hayden, S., and Jordan, E. (2015) *Language for Learning in the Primary School*. Routledge.
- Parsons, S., and Branagan, A. (2021) *Word Aware: Teaching vocabulary across the day*. Speechmark.
- Branagan, A., Cross, M and Parsons, S. (2020) *Language for behaviour and Emotions: A Practical Guide to working with Children and Young People*. Speechmark.
- Twinkl (2021) *Twinkl*. Available at: www.twinkl.co.uk
- Speech Link Multimedia Limited (2021) *Language Link*. Available at: www.speechandlanguage.info.