



BUILDING VOCABULARY IN THE EARLY GRADES

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कौन ?

चौद **प्यास** **मुस्काता**
प्रश्न **निर्मल** **इन्द्रधनुष**

अगर न होता चौद, रात में
हमको दिशा दिखाता कौन ?
अगर न होता सूरज, दिन को
सोने-सा चमकाता कौन ?
अगर न होती निर्मल नदियाँ
जग की प्यास बुझाता कौन ?
अगर न होते पर्यत, मीठे
प्ररने मला बहाता कौन ?

अगर न होते पेड़, मला फिर
हरियाली फैलाता कौन ?
अगर न होते फूल बताओ,
खिल-खिलकर मुस्काता कौन ?
अगर न होते बादल, नम में
इन्द्रधनुष रच पाता कौन ?
अगर न होते हम, तो बोलो,
ये सब प्रश्न उठाता कौन ?




शब्दार्थ

नम	= आकाश	जग	= दुनिया, संसार
पर्यत	= पहाड़	प्रश्न	= सवाल
हरियाली	= चारों ओर हरा-ही-हरा होना		
निर्मल	= बिना मेल का, स्वच्छ, साफ		

Figure 1. A poem followed by a list of vocabulary to be learnt. Chhattisgarh SCERT textbook for grade 2. pp. 31-32

We are all familiar with the way most language textbooks are organised and aim to teach vocabulary. Chapters are followed by a list of “difficult” words along with their meanings or synonyms (see Figure 1). A set of exercises revolving around these words come next, such as matching the words with their meanings, selecting the correct word to complete given sentences, or making sentences with the words. How effective, do you think, is this widespread approach in learning new words? One could say it helps familiarize students with new words. For example, if the student reads: “आसमान = नभ”, she could get familiar with

the new word, “नभः”. But, how likely is the student to retain this meaning in her mind, or to use it while speaking or writing? In a way, traditional approaches to teaching vocabulary, such as these, seem to be *acquainting* students with new words more than helping them develop a *deep ownership* over them.

Levels of Knowing Words

What do we mean by “acquaintance” and “ownership”? People usually believe that understanding words is an all-or-none phenomenon: either you know a word well or you don’t. Actually, there are different levels of knowing words, as shown in Table 1 (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002).

Table 1

Levels of Word Knowledge

Level	Criteria
Established	Rich understanding of the word; meaning is easily and rapidly recognized
Acquainted	<i>Level 2</i> - Basic meaning is recognized, after some thought <i>Level 1</i> - Have a general sense of the meaning (e.g. whether a word has positive/ negative quality)
Unknown	No knowledge of the meaning

For a simple demonstration of these levels of knowing words, please rate your knowledge of either the English or the Hindi words provided in Table 2¹.

Table 2

List of English and Hindi Words for Categorization based on Levels of Word Knowledge.

Words	Unknown	Acquainted	Established
Happy			
Complication			
Sentimental			
Unanimous			
Mendacious			

¹ Exercise adapted from Menon, S. Class Handout, M. A. Education Programme, Azim Premji University.

Words	Unknown	Acquainted	Established
किताब			
व्याकुल			
करछुल			
प्रासंगिक			
विप्लव			

Through the typical textbook approach presented earlier, a student may learn the definition or synonym of a new word but still not know how to use the word well. To be able to use new words in their own speech or writing, students need to understand the concept that the word stands for as well as how it relates to other words and known concepts. Therefore, we should plan vocabulary instruction that allows students to engage more deeply with words.

Naturally, there is no time to teach the meaning of ALL the words in the textbook with this level of intensity. And it is not required! We can make a huge contribution to students' word knowledge by *carefully selecting a few words* for instruction and encouraging students to think deeply about these words.

In this handout, we discuss how to choose words for deep learning. We also share some ways to teach selected words in early grade classrooms.

Choosing Words for Vocabulary Instruction

Which words from a chapter would you choose for further teaching? Wouldn't it be the *most difficult* words? But this may not be very useful. To understand why, let us first look at the *three tiers* of words (see Figure 2) based on the utility and role of words in a language (Beck et al., 2002, 2013).

Tier 1 Words. These are the most basic words, typically used in oral conversations. Native speakers of a language hear these words frequently from a young age. This familiarity means that one need not spend a lot of time teaching their meaning at school. Examples include *look, dog, run, walk, warm, tired* (in English) and *जल्दी, दूध, दाम, बर्तन, दौड़ना, मदद, दोस्त* (in Hindi). If a child is not a native speaker of that language, we may need to attend to the teaching of these words.

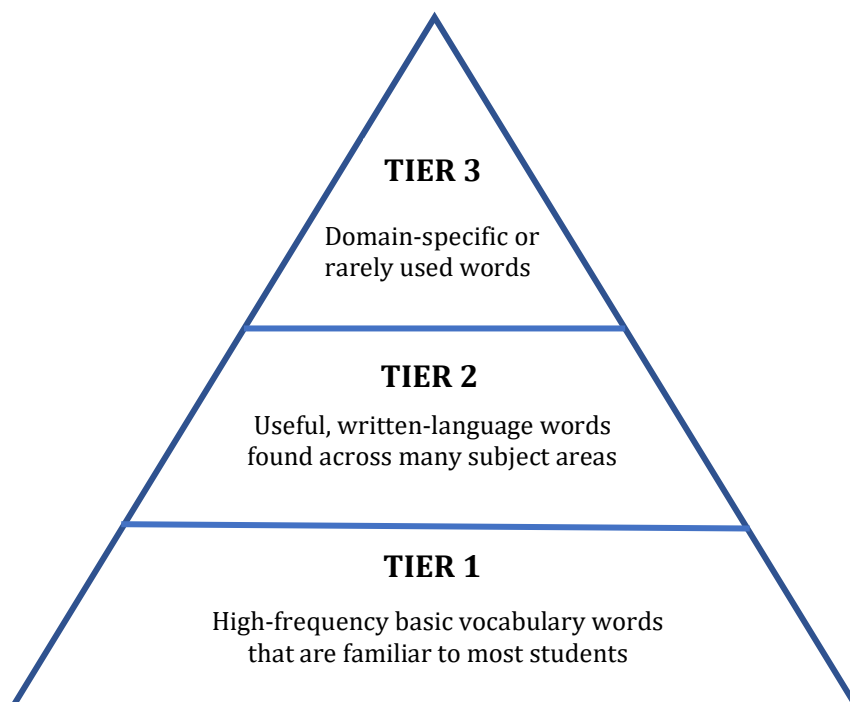


Figure 2. The three-tier framework for vocabulary instruction. Adapted from: <https://www.scholastic.com>

Tier 2 Words. These words are not very common in conversational language, and hence, students might not learn them on their own. But they are very useful in helping students increase their vocabulary, and make their speech and writing more specific and expressive. Examples include, *emerge, categorise, compulsory, sufficient, मूल्य, विरोध, पद्धति, भूमिका* and so on. Tier 2 words are words that the child already understands the concept of, but lacks a precise term for. For example, a child may understand “enough” but may not know the word “sufficient”. The same applies to “दाम” and “मूल्य”. In this case, the child goes from a known word or concept to its more specific or sophisticated version.

Tier 3 Words. These words are not used frequently, except in specific domains and topics (e.g., *enzyme, epidermis, विकिरण, अधिचर्म, सप्तक*). Or, they are so rare that students are unlikely to encounter them (e.g., *abecedarian, नभचर, छायाप्रति*). Subject-area words from science, math and social studies can be put in this tier. In general, language-learning time should not be spent on engaging deeply with these technical words.

So, what do these three Tiers imply for teaching vocabulary? Most teachers tend to pick the most difficult words for teaching. But this way of looking at words suggests that the most difficult words are not necessarily the most *useful* words for expanding students' oral and written vocabularies. Instead, it is better to *choose mainly Tier 2 words* because these words are in the child's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), i.e., they are within a child's reach, but with support. The selected words should have a wider application; learning them should improve your students' comprehension and expression².

This does not mean that you do not attend to words from other tiers at all. With Tier 3 (i.e. difficult, domain-specific or rare) words that appear in your text, quickly describe their meaning for students. For example, if a character in the story is a *paediatrician*, explain it as *doctor who specializes in treating children*, and move on. Likewise, do teach second language learners in your classroom words that might be Tier 1 words for native speakers of that language.

Based on our discussion until now, please review the pages from Chhattisgarh's Hindi textbook for Grade 2 (Figure 1). Assume that your students are native speakers of Hindi, and:

- a. Categorise the words mentioned in the 'शब्दार्थ' section into the three tiers.
- b. If *you* had to choose 3-4 words from the poem for further teaching, which ones will they be and why?

You can discuss your responses with your colleagues.

Did you and your colleagues arrive at the same decisions? Would you have chosen different words if you were teaching a grade 2 class from a different background/school? What if you were teaching grade 3 or 4?

Decisions about which words belong to which tier are highly variable. While 'नभ' may often get slotted as a Tier 3 word for young learners, selection of 'निर्मल' and 'प्रश्न' for further instruction will depend on your students' familiarity with Hindi language, opportunities to

² Sometimes, there may not be any Tier 2 words in texts designed for young children. In such cases, introduce new words that fit the concepts and words in the text, like *enormous* for *something very, very big*. Or, offer new words to describe character's actions or intentions, like *envious* or *jealous* (Beck et al., 2013).

use the language outside school, the words they already know, and so on. Use your judgement while selecting words keeping your students' age, background and needs in mind.

Teaching Vocabulary: Some Principles

While designing your vocabulary instruction for selected words, keep the following principles in mind (Stahl, 1986) (see Figure 3).

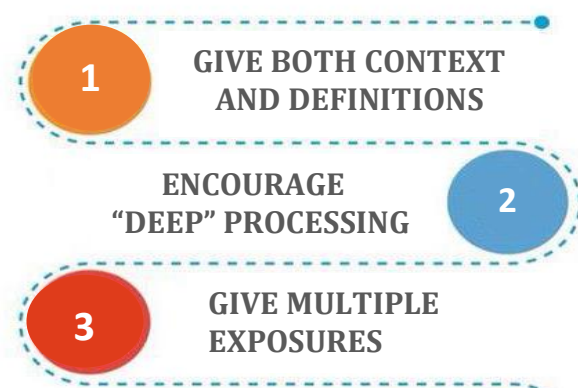


Figure 3. Key principles of effective vocabulary teaching.

Give Both Context and Definitions

Often, we provide students with a definition, but no context on how to use the words appropriately. Contextual information is very important in new word learning, especially second language learning. For example, the definition of “erode” might be given as “gradually wear away”. A child may then say, “My shoes have eroded”. But this is not a correct use of the word. Giving more information on its use – that erosion applies to soil, rock or land – would help. Plus, present several examples where a word is used correctly in different contexts, and encourage students to do the same through a variety of activities.

Encourage “Deep” Processing

If we want our students to use words effectively in reading and writing, it is important that they think *deeply* about new words. For this, give students opportunities to use them while talking and writing in a variety of ways. When we ask students to “make a sentence”, we may feel we have given them an opportunity to use it. But students often make sentences without any thought. This was seen in the LiRIL research, where a relatively high-performing student

made these sentences (Subramaniam, Menon & Kutty, 2017, p.44):

- *I have seen **pride**.*
- *I have not seen a **customer**.*
- *My friend's name is **Hole**.*

Grammatically, these sentences are correct but they don't use the new words in meaningful ways. Instead, encourage students to demonstrate clearly the words' meaning in their work. We have shared some ways of doing this in the next section.

Give Multiple Exposures

In our textbooks, the words selected for instruction are discussed *only* in the context of the chapter from which they are chosen. The focus usually shifts to new words with each chapter. Instead, plan for repeated exposure to newly learnt words through classroom routines and activities.

Teaching Vocabulary: Suggestions for the Classroom

When introducing words, offer *simple and clear explanations* to your students. For example, the dictionary definition of the word *compulsory* may be 'required by law; enforced; obligatory'. However, you could say, "When something is 'compulsory', it means you have no choice, you have to do it, like your homework". Include examples, synonyms and concepts with which students are already familiar. If possible, show photos or images that can help students understand the word. Offer several examples of the word being used in different contexts.

For these initial explanations to take root, encourage students to think deeply about the meanings using short and lively activities. We present such activities next. Most of these ideas have been adapted from Beck et al. (2002) and Yopp, Yopp and Bishop (2009). In each activity, model what you want your students to think and do, and encourage them to explain their reasoning as they attempt the task.

Deep-processing Questions

Instead of simply asking students for definitions or synonyms, ask questions that get them to think more deeply about the word meanings. Examples include:

- किन चीजों के होने से कोई यात्रा रोमांचक बन सकती है?
- What is closer to the meaning of *fabulous* – great or okay? Why?
- Factors that might contribute to *longevity* include _____.

Or, ask these simple questions about the newly learned words:

- When might you...? (e.g. When might you *praise* someone? Describe the situation)
- How might you...?
- Why might you...?
- Have you ever...?

Word Associations

Take a group of 4-5 newly learned words and ask students to match one of those words with a given phrase or word, explaining their reasons.

Examples of Word Association

(I) Target words: *accomplice, philanthropist, virtuoso* and *novice*

- Which word goes with *crook*? (*accomplice*)
- Which word goes with “gift to build a new hospital”? (*philanthropist*)
- Which word goes with piano? (*virtuoso*).
- Which word goes with kindergartner (*novice*)

(Beck et al., 2002, pages 44-46)

(II) Target words: *मूल्य, दयालु, अपराधी, कौशल*

- “नौकर को नए कपड़े दिलवाना” के साथ कौन-सा शब्द जुड़ेगा? (*दयालु*)
- “जेल” के साथ कौन-सा शब्द जुड़ेगा? (*अपराधी*)
- “रंजना संगीत की परीक्षा में फर्स्ट आई” के साथ कौन-सा शब्द जुड़ेगा? (*कौशल*)
- “नानी अपने ज़ेवर अलमारी में बंद रखती हैं” के साथ कौन-सा शब्द जुड़ेगा? (*मूल्य*)

These associations are neither synonyms nor definitions; rather, the student must develop a relationship between a known word/ situation with a newly learned word. For example, one possible explanation for the *crook-accomplice* connection is that crooks want accomplices in their wrongdoing. Students may offer different reasons. Accept them as long as they make sense.

Meaningful Sentence Generation

This is a common task requiring students to use target words in a sentence. We discussed that students could come up with sentences like “She/ He is ...”, “I saw a ...”, “It was ...” without really engaging with the word’s meaning. To avoid this, ask them to include answers to *Who, What, Where, Why, When, How* questions in their sentences (Archer, n.d.). For example, “We played in a *tournament*” becomes “We played in a basketball *tournament* in the school stadium” or “We played in a basketball *tournament* in the school stadium to find out the best team” (p. 19). Or, present sentence stems that require students to think about the word meaning to explain a situation (Beck et al., 2002). For example:

- “वह मालिक **दयालु** है क्योंकि उसने अपने नौकर को _____।”
- “गांववालों ने पेड़ों के काटने के **विरोध** में _____ किया।”

Word Maps

We discussed earlier that word learning is actually learning about concepts. Visual structures or “maps” are very helpful in exploring concepts more deeply. *Frayer’s four square model* is an example. It allows students to consider a word’s definition and come up with its key characteristics, examples, and non-examples (see Figure 4).

<p>DEFINITION</p> <p>If something is compulsory, you must do it because of a rule</p>	<p>CHARACTERISTICS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No choice - you have to do it • Based on a rule • May be punished for not doing it
<p>COMPULSORY</p>	
<p>EXAMPLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching school on time • Taking exams or doing homework • Wearing helmet while riding a scooter 	<p>NON-EXAMPLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping a friend • Buying sweets at the market • Going out to play

Figure 4. Frayer’s Model for the word *compulsory*.

Word Sorts

Give your students a set of carefully selected, 10-12, previously learned words and ask them to sort them into meaningful groups. Each group should have at least two words. They have to explain to partners or teachers their reasons for grouping words in a certain way. This not only helps in reviewing those words but also gets students thinking about connections between the words in interesting ways. Another option is to give them the categories for sorting the words, as Figure 5 shows.



Figure 5. Word sorts worksheet. Source: www.greatschools.com



Figure 6. A student matching words with picture cards at Gubbachi Learning Community, Bangalore.

Word Games

You can use interesting games to reinforce students' word knowledge. We share some examples:

- Call out some newly learned words, and ask students to act them out quickly.
- Ask them to match words with their corresponding picture cards, as shown in Figure 6.
- You could have *Word Jars*, from which students choose words written on slips of paper and form meaningful sentences with them, individually or as a group.
- In a timed task, ask students questions like “How do *gregarious* and *hermit* go together?”

(“*बातूनी* और *सन्यासी* में क्या सम्बन्ध हो सकता है?”) (Beck et al., 2013). Like word sorts, accept

students' responses as long as they offer sensible connections between words. For example, one answer could be that a *hermit* (*सन्यासी*) may not want to be with people whereas a *gregarious* (*बातूनी*) person would want to be around people to talk to them.

Linear Array

Linear arrays are very useful when students are learning words (e.g. adjectives and adverbs) for which there are gradations or degrees. Arrays help to link the learnt word with related words that refer to more or less of that quality. Take the example of the word *tepid* (Yopp et al., 2009, p. 149). Introducing the word, you can tell students that *tepid* means neither too hot nor cold, like *lukewarm*, and is often used for liquids. Ask if they like to have tepid milk, why or why not. To reinforce their learning, ask students to arrange the words *tepid*, *cool*, *warm*, *hot* and *cold* in order of low to high temperature (see Figure 9). Your focus should be on the reasons they offer for their order. This opportunity to think about words in the context of related words gives students a better sense of the word meanings.



Figure 7. Shows an example of a linear array

In addition to all these deep-processing activities, remember to *draw students' attention to newly learnt words in new contexts*—they might appear in another chapter, storybook or subject-area instruction. Help them to add more information and connections to what they already know about those words. It's also important for you to *apply these words in suitable situations that present themselves*. That is, when you're reading out books or discussing students' oral or written responses, highlight instances where the new words could be better alternatives to what they have read, said or written (Beck et al., 2002).

You can also try *Word Wizards* practice to motivate students to notice and use the newly learned words outside the classroom (Beck et al., 2002). Here, students earn points by describing the contexts in which they see, hear or use those words outside the classroom. This can be on TV, radio, elsewhere in school, on the street, or at home. Tally the points every few

weeks against students' names on a chart. The child with the highest score is the *Word Wizard*.

It is also important to teach students to *use reference material* for them to be able to learn word meanings on their own. Teach them to look up words in dictionaries and glossaries at the end of books. You can start with child-friendly picture dictionaries (see Figure 8). Other sources of information are word logs, word maps, picture-dictionary charts displayed in class. They can also ask teachers or older students for help. Whichever source they use, encourage them to plug the possible meaning back into the text and check if it makes sense based on what they have read so far.

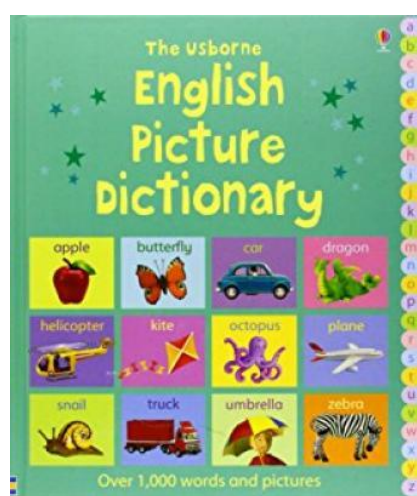


Figure 8. Shows an example of a picture-dictionary for children. Source: www.books4kids.net

This handout focused on teaching vocabulary in early grades. With older students, you could also focus on teaching word parts (roots, affixes, suffixes, etc.) and the use of context clues to help them work out the meaning of unknown words on their own.

Conclusion

For students to be able to use new words effectively, they need to become deeply familiar with those words. Deep engagement with words takes time and effort. So, choose a few words for vocabulary teaching that will be highly useful for your students across several domains. In teaching these words, share several examples of how they are used in different contexts, rather than just giving students their definitions and synonyms. Encourage them to interact more actively and frequently with those words through different classroom activities we discussed. Talk to students about these words and help them connect new information to

what they already know. Equally important, create an excitement for words and relationships between them. If you do this successfully, students will be motivated to look for meanings, connections and applications themselves.

In this handout, we may have given you the impression that children learn new words only through direct instruction. But like all language learning, they are constantly learning new words and their usage as they have authentic interactions with language and literature in general. So, engage your students in oral language activities, read-alouds, discussions around books/ stories, and writing about their experiences, and encourage them to attend to the use of words during these activities.

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