HANDOUT 7
Preschool Learning Foundations Vocabulary Section

2.0 Vocabulary

The number of words that children learn is strongly related to later school success, because reading comprehension depends on it.[45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50] So too, is the diversity of the words they know. Children who know many names for things, for example, can be more specific in representing what they mean, in telling people what they want, and in understanding what others say to them and the meaning of language in books. Children who know names for actions and events can use their language fluently to describe the things going on around them, as well as what was and what can be. The language children develop as their vocabulary grows allows them to escape into new imaginary worlds, to solve problems with words (e.g., "How can I get the swing when Jonny is still on it?") and to predict what will happen next in a book or story. When children know literacy-related vocabulary (e.g., *word, vocabulary, pronounce, sounds, meaning, letter, sentence*), they will better understand instructional language they hear in school settings and children can better ask questions about language and literacy contexts (e.g., "What letter is that?" "Whose name is that?" "What does *extinct* mean?").

The vocabulary substrand is organized around three areas:

- Understanding and using words for objects, actions, and attributes
- Understanding and using words for categories of things and actions
- Understanding and using words for simple and complex relations between objects

Understanding and Using Words for Objects, Actions, and Attributes

Preschool children need a vault filled with common words at the start of their journey into language and literacy. That journey begins when they learn the conventional names of familiar objects, actions, and attributes. Some children may speak a dialect of English that uses different words, and others will speak a different language or communicate through sign language or an alternative system. All children need exposure to conventional words.

VIGNETTE

In response to the construction outside their classroom, the room is filled with activity as children use their plastic hammers and wrenches, tool belts, and benches. The planned curriculum includes a Construction Unit. Outside the window, the children can see the cranes move and the workers in hard hats. They hear the sound of

hammer against nail. This week the teacher reads to the class stories about construction equipment and information books about how tall buildings are made. The construction outside gives Ms. Vase an opportunity to expose children to the names of common and even not-so-common tools. Ms. Vase sent home a one-page newsletter in the languages of families represented in her classroom, telling parents about the Construction Unit and about vocabulary children are learning. She asked if any parents who are builders or carpenters would like to come to class to share their experiences.

PLANNING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

What a fun, engaging, and meaningful vocabulary experience this is for children as they watch the construction outside! Ms. Vase also found ways to connect with families. Ms. Vase tells the class the names of some of the common tools in another language children speak. She brings some tools from home to put on display, labeled in several languages.

The following interactions and strategies support preschool children:

Build on children's interests. Notice where children look and then talk about the things that are the focus of attention and action, using interesting, rich vocabulary. This simple but basic strategy makes people more sensitive listeners and children better learners. "Oh, that is a . . . (e.g., solid, heavy) truck. How are you thinking that you might use it?" Be sure to follow a child's interests. If you see a child examining a door hinge, you might ask, "I think you might be wondering what that is. It is called a *hinge,* and it attaches a door to the wall but also allows the door to move. Do you see where the hinge is attached to the door and to the wall? Yes, it's interesting to open and close the door to see how it works." After a few moments, suggest that the child find other hinges. If possible, bring an unattached hinge for the child to explore the next day. This will increase a child's understanding of how a hinge is designed and what makes it work.

What's my name? Names of things come at different levels. There are types of trucks (e.g., tow truck, dump truck, cement truck), the general **category** "truck," or the larger category, "vehicles," that includes trucks. Young preschool children know the names of categories they encounter frequently—*toys, food, clothes,* or *animals.* Many children may know those words in two languages. As preschoolers develop their understanding of things in the world, their use of categories expands: *reptiles, planets, vehicles, fruits, vegetables,* and *furniture.* As caregivers, teachers, and parents name and describe the things that children notice, children learn more names of things. Yet it is desirable for children not only to know nouns, but also to learn common names of actions (e.g., "Wow, you *run* really fast. Can you *run* even faster?") and properties too (e.g., "It looks like this brush has *stiffer* bristles than that one"). Young preschool children also use words such as *under, in,* and *different.* Older preschool children begin to use words to describe relations between objects such as *next to* and *in front of.*

Language in, language out . . . Narrate! Narration is another effective way to build children's vocabulary. Preparing for snack time is a teachable moment for the children who are near the teacher as she shares, as if to herself, "Okay, let's put the apple juice on the table and then we'll need to get eight napkins. Even "long" words, such as *herbivore,* can be a part of natural conversation if that word is used many times and across contexts. For example, a teacher may ask a class, "Did you know that the dinosaur called Apatosaurus is an *herbivore?* (said slowly). That's right—herbivores don't eat meat—only plants. Do you know any people who don't eat meat? What do we call people who don't eat meat?"

More word games. Familiar games such as Simon Says can teach language. For example, "Simon Says point to the squirrel. Point to the alligator." Playing the game I Spy as in "I spy . . . a rectangle," is also language-rich. Sing songs in the home language and in English. Words accompanied by melodies are easily learned.

Understanding and Using Words for Categories of Things and Actions

Most words name categories rather than single objects; for example, *chair* can be applied to many kinds of chairs, from dining room chairs to beanbag chairs. And *chair* fits into another category called *furniture.* When we learn the names of categories, we are learning where one category begins and another ends. For example, what defines walking versus running?

VIGNETTE

"I'm gonna play the drums, the flute, and the guitar today," said Barney.

"That's great," responded the teacher. "You play a lot of instruments! Does anyone in your family also play an instrument?"

TEACHABLE MOMENT

Here the teacher responded directly to the child and offered a new category word. The teacher also took the opportunity to continue the conversation by connecting home and school. By adding to the conversation, the teacher was even able to use the new word *instrument* twice.

PLANNING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

There are many words for many different actions. Teachers can make a list of different actions they see children doing while outdoors. On another day these action words can guide a movement game for children (e.g., "Can you hop on one foot?"). In action songs at circle time, teachers can build in various large- and small-motor actions by adding more verses to those in the original songs.

Many strategies for building better vocabularies work equally well for category learning. Teachers may use categories of actions and attributes. Even though running looks very different when done by an Olympian and a toddler, both examples are called *running.* Similarly, categories for attributes such as colors or shapes contain items that look very different.

The following strategy supports preschool children:

Playing category games. Four- and five-year-olds love sorting games:

"Can you put the circles in the green box and the squares in the red box?"

"Let's put the fruit in the bowl and the vegetables in the box."

"All the children with curly hair, please wash your hands for snack."

One of the best ways to learn categories is by having a stock of books that constitute a category, such as shape books, animal books, and food books.

Understanding and Using Words for Simple and Complex Relations Between Objects

Words that describe relationships such as *in front of* and *behind* or *big* and *little* can be difficult for children. These words can also be more difficult because some of these words vary by language. For example, Korean children do not use words such as *in* and *on* but rather describe items as fitting *tightly* (e.g., an interlocking block on another interlocking block or foot in a sock) or *loosely* (e.g., apple in bowl or a book on a table).

VIGNETTE

"Okay. We need to get organized so we can take a picture. You will know your place if you listen closely as we play the Where Do I Go? game. Ying, would you please stand at the front of the line? Vang, would you please stand at the back of the line? Sayed, can you go next to Po? John, please go to the middle of the line. Ivan, please go behind Sarita."

PLANNING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Here the teacher incorporated specific language learning in a transition, making it necessary for children to listen to the words for various spatial relations. Even simple routines, such as going on a neighborhood walk, can be full of language that children need to learn. A language game allows children to learn vocabulary about spatial relations without even realizing it and have fun, too! From the child's perspective, she is getting ready to do something or to go somewhere, even though the teacher also has clear language goals in mind.

As before, vocabulary is best learned in the context of meaningful exchanges and by following children's interests. The interactions and strategies listed for vocabulary on pages 118–120 work well with a few additions:

Detective work. *Same and different:* Show three pictures of bears, two that are exactly the same and one that is different. Can children find the one that is the same? The one that is different? When children seem to understand same and different, make the game a little harder by playing it at a higher category level. An example is the category of animals. A bear and a cat are in the same category, but an airplane is in a different category.

Do the same thing with concepts, such as big and little: Three toy elephants of different heights and weights are placed side by side. "Can you find the big stuffed animal?" Or this strategy may be used with raisins: "Can you find the big (small) raisin?" Every so often, put all the plastic dishes and flatware used in the dramatic play area in the water table. Add sudsy water and provide dishcloths for children to wash and dry them. To put them back in the dramatic play area, children must notice the difference between big and little plates and type of item (e.g., glasses, knives, forks). The teacher can talk about the difference that children are noticing (e.g., "Oh, you put the big plates on the table today").

Routines: Here we go again! Daily classroom routines represents the many ways for teachers to use language over and over again to name categories and spatial and numerical relations. Simple, repetitive classroom routines, with a little forethought, can be a goldmine for children's language learning. Phrases such as, "Put the chairs *under* the table," "Make sure everyone gets the *same* number of crackers (at snack time)," and, "Who has *more*? Jorge or Chaya?" all use spatial and relational terms that children need to know.

Language opportunities in children's art. Children love to draw. As children express themselves artistically, use spatial language to engage them in telling about their drawings. "What is in the *middle* of the picture?" "Tell me about this part down here near the *bottom*." "This part up here at the top reminds me of an animal or a person. Can you tell me about this part?" By exposing preschool children to spatial terms and category names and by asking them to talk about their drawings, teachers tell children that their drawings have meaning worthy of discussion.