Words help to shape children’s development and existence. Written and spoken, they are the tools with which they engage with education and society, and it’s through them that children come to understand and negotiate the physical and mental spaces they inhabit.

How best then, do we teach words? American educator and researcher Elfrieda “Freddy” Hiebert is an acknowledged expert on how vocabulary acquisition can be fostered in schools. She has also founded a not-for-profit corporation and website which offers downloadable resources to help in the classroom. Her latest book “Teaching Words and How Words Work” offers free, downloadable content.

As a result of her research, Dr Hiebert’s new approach to vocabulary learning has a strong evidence base. The method of vocabulary instruction she proposes is generative, in that it teaches children strategies to help them understand, or “generate”, the meaning of unfamiliar words. It also puts forward a relationship-based approach to vocabulary acquisition based on the understanding that words are best learned in groups of related words rather than in isolation from one another.

THE CHALLENGE

The importance of vocabulary instruction in schools and its relationship to learning and knowledge acquisition cannot be over-estimated, particularly in the early years. Dr Hiebert explains: “The breadth and depth of people’s vocabularies influence their life experiences.”

Children acquire knowledge through texts, but texts also open the door to new concepts and experiences. Dr Hiebert adds: “The relationship between vocabulary and texts is reciprocal. Familiarity with the vocabulary of a text supports comprehension, while simultaneously texts are a primary source for gaining new vocabulary.”

However, deciding which words to teach, is no easy task given that the Oxford English Dictionary contains more than 600,000 entries.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

In the American school curriculum vocabulary instruction has for decades focused on teaching six to eight new words from a target text each week. Dr Hiebert cites the example of a text “Annies Gifts”, aimed at eight-year-olds, about an apparently non-musical child’s experience of living in a musical family.

The text contains 45 probably unfamiliar words, from which ‘except’, ‘stomped’, ‘screeching’ form the basis of that week’s vocabulary learning. Dr Hiebert says: “It’s unclear why these words have been chosen, not least as words like ‘stomped’, ‘slopped’ and ‘screaming’ can be easily explained by synonyms or demonstration.”

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Among the insights gained, Dr Hiebert

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found that the 20,000 words most frequently used in school texts can be broken down to around 5,500 families of words from the same root, for example, improve, improves, improving, improvement, unimproved. On average, these word families accounted for 95% of the language of school texts.

Deeper analysis showed that the root words of around 1,000 of these 5,500 families of words are likely to have already entered children’s vocabularies by the time they are five, and the number of words needing to be taught in school.

The findings also revealed that 1,250 of these 5,500 families of words represent concrete rather than abstract words. Concrete words are learned more easily. For example, a concrete word such as ‘frog’ can be quickly understood by using a picture, whereas an abstract concept such as ‘fate’ is more difficult. Taking a picture, whereas an abstract concept could then move on to look at figurative language and explore the metaphors used to indicate how Annie’s piano-playing sounds, for example, “like the honking of a diesel truck”.

CONCLUSION

Dr Hiebert’s new evidence-based approach to vocabulary instruction in schools represents a major shift in educational perspective. Her approach is informed by the substantial number crunching made possible by the digital revolution. However, her aim is about more than increasing the number of words students learn.

As Dr Hiebert explains: “To paraphrase the adage about the effects of teaching people to fish, teaching students a handful of the rare words in a single text may aid them in comprehending the text, but without knowledge about relationships across words, students will not be equipped to deal with unknown words in new texts.

“What is essential is to keep in mind that students’ learning vocabulary is not in itself the end goal. Instruction in the relationships among words and how words work always occurs in the service of supporting students in gaining knowledge about the world in which they live.”

For more information about Dr Hiebert’s research and the TextProject, visit www.textproject.org.