

LISTENING VOCABULARY FOR SUCCESSFUL EARLY READING

by Janet Caruthers, Ed. S.



Most people don't know [but YOU will], that there are 4 distinct kinds of vocabulary your child will acquire. The four kinds are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. This article is about the largest, most important vocabulary for successful beginning reading, **listening vocabulary**.

You have many words in your head that you have heard over time, but have never seen, used in your own speaking, or used in your own writing. If you hear the word, you just know what it means. Maybe you've heard it before and someone explained it to you or you heard it in a context that helped you figure out the meaning yourself. These words are part of your listening vocabulary. You use your listening vocabulary everyday as you try to understand what you hear (when people talk, or when you listen to television, movies, song lyrics), but also to understand what you read. I'll explain that later.

Your child begins developing his listening vocabulary from birth. I was amazed when my almost two year old grandson understood so many things we would say to him. We'd say, "Go get your guitar," and he'd toddle into his room and sure enough bring the guitar out to us. At less than 2 years old, he already had a huge listening vocabulary. How did he get this huge listening vocabulary? People talked to him in sentences and told him what things are called. You might be doing the same thing with your child without realizing the impact you are having on developing his listening vocabulary and how the size of his listening vocabulary will impact his ability to learn how to read and understand what he reads.

Over my more than 28 years of teaching, I have helped many people learn to read, so I personally know the impact listening vocabulary has on successful reading. Believe me, the size of your child's listening vocabulary has a **huge** impact on his ability to read successfully. Let me explain. As you probably know, much of beginning reading is decoding (sounding out words). To decode successfully depends on a reader's ability to remember letter sounds and the decoding rules. If a child cannot do this **quickly**, his comprehension will suffer. Also important is the reader's ability to figure out the **unfamiliar** words that do not entirely follow the phonics rules (there are many), and he has to do this quickly as well.

Here's the good news. The ability to figure out an unfamiliar word **quickly** depends on a reader's ability to pull a word out of his head that would sound right and make sense in that passage. So that's where having a huge listening vocabulary (lots of words to pull out of his head) comes in. Your little reader WILL encounter words that he has never seen, so he can't recognize them, but if he will make the first two sounds of the word and think of what word would make sense, usually the word will pop into his mind and he will read it. It is sort of like magic! He will be able to read a word that he has never seen! BUT if the word is NOT in his listening vocabulary, he won't be able to

pull the word out of his mind, so he will probably stop reading at that point or skip the word and go on, both of which will affect his reading comprehension.

I noticed while giving a reading test to first graders about a child looking all over his house for something, that some children (the ones with very weak listening vocabularies) would stop reading and try to s-l-o-w-l-y sound out the word “closet” (c-l-o-s-e-t), while the ones with strong listening vocabularies would just barely slow down when reading the word. Why? Because those children had looked in their own closets for things and knew it was called a “closet.” Those children could read the word quickly, even though they had never seen the word. That’s what you want **your** child to be able to do – read quickly so he understands the story better.

Let’s try it: You can figure out what word would go in a sentence even if there is only part of a word showing. Try this: “The pen was broken, so he threw it in the tr____.” You know for sure that the word is “trash” because “trash” is in your *listening vocabulary*. If you had never **heard** it called “trash” you could not have figured out the word. You did not rely on your reading, speaking, or writing vocabulary to figure out the word, you used your *listening vocabulary*. See how important listening vocabulary is to reading?

This is an amazing quick demonstration of the impact of *listening vocabulary* on reading. You have probably seen this as a forwarded email from a friend. Try it.

"I cdnuolt blveiee that I cluod aulacly uesdnatnrd what I was rdanieg. Aoccdrnig to a rsearchr at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttae in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit any porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe."

You were probably amazed at the fact that you could read it, but have you ever wondered WHY? [The translation is below just in case.]

While there is controversy about whether the first and last letters being in the right place enables us to quickly figure out the words, it doesn’t really matter for our discussion. There is no possible way you could have figured out the words **if the words had not been in your listening vocabulary**. For example, you could not have figured out the word Cambridge, if you had never heard it before.

To expand your child’s listening vocabulary: Talk to him about everything. Tell him the names of everything you can think of that he encounters. Talk about things you see on outings and pictures in books. Discuss, discuss, discuss! For ideas and lists of hundreds of things you might forget to tell him, check out these two downloadable books written by a reading specialist and teacher of over 30 years, *Parts of Everyday Things and Other Stuff Children Need to Know* and *Family Learning Time*.

Parts of Everyday Things and Other Stuff Children Need to Know also contains information about what you can do now to improve your child’s reading comprehension later, why teach nursery rhymes, and other important information. For more information about these downloadable books and resources, [click here](#).

Here is the translation:

"I couldn't believe that I could actually understand what I was reading. According to a researcher at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without any problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself but the word as a whole."