The Kindergarten Chronicles

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Vocabulary Development and Background Knowledge

In Marzano's book, Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement, he discusses the research which demonstrates the impact of academic background knowledge. He not only discusses the impact of background knowledge and how it influences student achievement, but also the significant relationship academic information has as it relates to "the achievement of a higher status occupation and/or the ability to earn an average or higher level income."

He goes on to state, "given the relationship between academic background knowledge and academic achievement, one can make a case that it should be at the top of any list of interventions intended to enhance student achievement."

So what does this mean for kindergarten? Let's focus on vocabulary development. With research stating that students learn anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 new words per year, it does cause us to be thoughtful about the vocabulary we teach, the various methods we use to teach it, and the expectations we have for learning vocabulary.

Choosing what vocabulary to teach in-depth is crucial. To reference the CEF and standards in each subject area, and to be thoughtful in what students need to know when they leave kindergarten, is as important as how we teach important vocabulary.
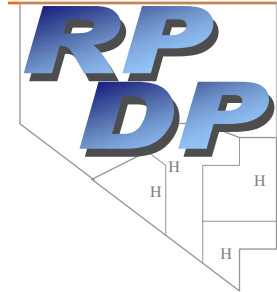
We cannot overlook the impact that reading has on the incidental learning of vocabulary. This is just another reason why reading everyday and throughout the day is vital to all classrooms.

The remainder of this month's chronicle will focus on two methods for developing vocabulary and background knowledge with your students.

Academic Vocabulary Development

As a school, grade level, or individually, choose 20 words from each subject area that your students will be expected to own by first grade. Teach 3-4 terms each week. Keep a class academic journal as a record of these words. In his book, Building Academic Vocabulary, the companion to Building Background Knowledge, Marzano discusses the use of games. He states, "Games are one of the most underused instructional tools in education." Below are a few games to get you started.

Free Association

- Announce "it is free-association time"
- Call out a term
- Students take turns, as a class, saying any word they think of related to the target term
- After a few seconds say "stop"
- The last person to say a word must explain how that word is related to the target term

Talk a Mile a Minute

- The teacher (talker) uses a list of terms that have been organized into a category (such as shapes)
- The talker tries to get the class to say each target term by quickly describing it. The talker can say anything, but cannot say a word in the category title or any rhyming words
- Be sure guessers have their back to the terms
- The talker begins giving clues. When one minute is up, stop and count the points. Give one point per term guessed
- Try to beat the number of terms guessed each time you play

Shapes	Oviparous Animals	Weather types
Square	Chicken	Sunny
Circle	Snake	Rain
Rectangle	Frog	Windy
Triangle	Duck	Snow
Right Triangle	Shark	Cloudy

Structured Sentences

Using structured sentences is a wonderful way to strengthen background knowledge with young learners. This is especially effective when paired with a content unit of study. These structured sentences can be used in pocket charts, individual make-a-books, or class books. Below are ideas for using structured sentences along with a unit on Bugs.
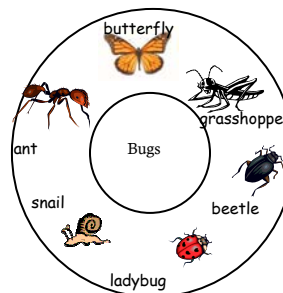
Brainstorm your topic

Possible structured sentences
You can use pictures or word cards in the spaces,

snails _____ here, _____ ladybugs _____ there,
ants _____ ,beetles _____ everywhere!

....

I see _____ in the garden.
I see _____ in the garden.
I see _____ in the garden.
But I don't see_____.

....

Oviparous
A _____ is oviparous.
An _____ is oviparous.
A _____ is oviparous.
An _____ is oviparous.
A _____ is oviparous.
But a _____ is not oviparous.
But an_____ is not oviparous.

My snail can _____ and _____,
But it can't_____.

....

What could you do with a ladybug?
You could_____
And you could_____
It would be fun to _____
And_____
This is what you could do with a ladybug.

....

I like ants!
_____ant, _____ants
_____,_____,_____ants
Any kind of ants
I like ants!