

# WHERE LANGUAGE FLOURISHES

BY JOHN DE MADO



## JOHN DE MADO

has been an energetic force in the field of Language Acquisition for several years. He is founder and president of John De Mado Language Seminars, Inc., an educational consulting firm devoted exclusively to language acquisition and literacy issues. John, who speaks a variety of languages, has authored several textbook programs and produced a series of music CDs/DVDs designed to help students acquire other languages. John is recognized nationally, as well as internationally, for his insightful workshops, motivating keynote addresses, and humor-filled delivery style.

**F**or students learning to read and for students learning English, the importance of vocabulary to general comprehension cannot be overstated. The breadth of a student's vocabulary is an important component of understanding increasingly difficult texts. Without an ample lexicon, reading becomes drudgery; so much so that many students choose to avoid the activity altogether.

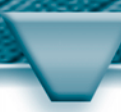
Of the five components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel, vocabulary is one that plays a role in all four language skills. Each of us has a Spoken Vocabulary, a Listening Vocabulary, a Reading Vocabulary, and a Writing Vocabulary.

Vocabulary is necessary to students' understanding of what they read. As students begin to read, they recognize that the printed words correspond to words they have encountered in spoken English. While it is not necessary that students know every word they read, as their reading level increases, so does the need for a larger vocabulary.

Writing also enhances vocabulary and plays a role in the literacy process because of the reciprocal relationship it has with reading. When writing, students use the vocabulary they have acquired plus new vocabulary that they have researched in dictionaries and other resources to express their ideas.



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**R**esearch has shown that vocabulary is learned both indirectly and directly. Direct instruction in vocabulary includes both instruction in the meaning of specific words and instruction in vocabulary learning strategies. Before students read a text, teaching specific difficult words that appear in the text can increase comprehension. Both extended instruction into word meaning and repeated exposure to the word help students “own” the word. Academic vocabulary, in particular, is learned through repeated exposure to a word in a context that explains the meaning. Vocabulary learning strategies include using dictionaries, understanding word roots and word families, and understanding affixes.

The vast majority of vocabulary, though, is learned indirectly. Students can learn vocabulary through everyday oral communication, from listening to others read to them, and by extensive reading on their own.

Research tells us that all output of language (i.e., speaking and writing) is a direct result of *comprehensible input* (i.e., what an individual actually understands). In oral discourse, an individual selects a word to acquire from what he or she understands. Meaning is built for this *self-selected* vocabulary with the help of extra-linguistic cues, such as hand gestures and facial expressions. The more oral discourse the student has, therefore, the more word meanings the student acquires and can use in speaking and writing.

The use of language is subject to the societies in which it evolves. Students bring with them a great deal of “culturally nuanced” language. Given the number of words that a student learns through oral discourse, one should consider the influences on this type of vocabulary acquisition.

**Sociological Influences:** Students interact with one another almost exclusively in an informal register. This register is different from the language of the classroom and textbooks. Our society is one that prefers sound-bytes and news capsules to a more expansive use of language. This is reflective of a society traveling at hyperspeed.

**Technological Influences:** Students spend much of their time in silence: headsets donned and wired to their personal music and video devices. Methods of communication, such as e-mail, instant messaging, and text messaging, all invite a minimalist’s approach to discourse.

**Educational Influences:** Under the weight of high stakes testing, classrooms have fallen silent, defaulting instead to the transmission of those facts destined for assessment. Budgetary concerns atrophy courses that enhance language acquisition such as World Languages, Drama, Vocal Music, and Public Speaking.

The combined impact of these influences has a direct result on vocabulary acquisition. Students who spend much of their day in silence have little opportunity to garner new, varied, and substantive vocabulary. We, as educators, must encourage and foster not only explicit instruction in academic language, but also indirect instruction through enhanced opportunity oral discourse.

In a “language-rich” schoolhouse, literacy thrives.

### References:

National Institute for Literacy, *Put Reading First National Reading Panel Report*