

Thoughts from the Language Literacy Lab – December 2013-2014

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Welcome to the December, 2013 edition of Thoughts from the Language Literacy Lab, a newsletter with communication tips for families of students at Barnstable Intermediate School. This edition focuses on information and tips to help your student when he/she has difficulty retrieving words. Everyone experiences difficulty retrieving specific words from time-to-time. People may even say the word is “on the tip of my tongue” as they try to retrieve it. Students and adults with language difficulties may experience this challenge more frequently, causing them to feel frustrated and impacting their ability to communicate in the classroom as well as during social interactions.

Word retrieval, also called word finding, is the ability to recall and use word labels that are stored in long-term memory. A student’s ability to retrieve words is impacted by both how well words are organized and stored in long-term memory and how efficiently he/she can retrieve them. Many factors can impact a student’s ability to retrieve specific words at any given moment. Retrieving words is much more difficult if the student is nervous, tired, or feeling anxious or embarrassed. Also, retrieving newly acquired vocabulary is more challenging than retrieving high frequency, familiar vocabulary.

Students learn and practice a variety of strategies to help them organize and efficiently retrieve vocabulary in their Language Literacy Lab sessions. Parents play an important part in providing practice as their student learns to organize and retrieve vocabulary labels more efficiently. Please remember that the goal is to retrieve vocabulary words that the student already knows and not to teach new vocabulary. Practice that insures a high level of success is best since it encourages self-confidence, cooperation and motivation.

Strategies that improve word retrieval abilities fall into two categories:

- Strategies that assist organization and storage
- Strategies that assist retrieval

Strategies that assist organization and storage:

Strengthening speed and accuracy for retrieval of words is helped by organization of words by common features and increasing the variety of features known about individual words. The strategies below can help your child improve his word finding abilities and may be used as you go about your daily routines or in more structured activities.

Categorization/Organization

Categorizing words helps your student to organize vocabulary into groups based on shared characteristics.

- Ask your student to name members of specific categories such as: fruits, animals, bugs, things that fly, musical instruments, things with motors, tools, games, drinks, movies, sports, things made of wood/plastic/metal, things that smell, clothes, etc.
- Have your student name a set of pictures and then group them into categories. Ask him to explain how he grouped them. Ask him if he can regroup the items in a different way to improve flexible thinking skills (i.e., things that fly, things that go in the water, animals, vehicles, machines).
- Name a set of items in the same category and ask your student to identify the category (i.e., inch, foot, yard, centimeter, meter are all...)
- Name four words, with two of the words related in some manner, and have your student identify and explain which two go together.

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Word Association/Elaboration

This strategy helps students to focus on identifying key attributes of words. Ask your student to identify an object you describe using a wide variety of features (i.e., visual characteristics: size, color, shape, parts; location where it is usually found; function; composition, and things that are associated with the object). You can also take turns and have your student practice describing items and you have to guess them. Below are additional activities that help develop word associations.

- Sentence completion games. (i.e., "A nursery is a place to buy plants. A supermarket is a place to buy...")
- Play games that require your student to name synonyms or antonyms. (Another word for autumn is....The opposite of outside is...) Additional games using antonyms can be
 - Question-answer format (What is the opposite of)
 - Rapid naming of pictures of opposites – the student names the pictured opposites as quickly as he can
 - Say a sentence and have the student repeat the sentence expressing the opposite of the word you used. (The water is deep. The water is ...)
- Ask the student to explain how two items are different. (What is different about a sled and a toboggan?)
- 20 questions – Encourage the student to ask questions from a wide variety of attributes (color, function, location, composition, etc.)

Strategies that assist retrieval:

There are many strategies that can be used to help a student recall and retrieve words from long-term memory. It is important to give the student time to think, but not promote frustration as he/she struggles to find a word. The cues below can be helpful in assisting recall and retrieval from long-term memory.

- Ask the student to visualize the object, or action they are attempting to recall. Older students can attempt to visualize the word in print.
- Say the beginning sound or syllable of the word.
- Use association cues (i.e. "Socks and ____."), categorization cues (i.e. "It's a type of food."), or function cues (i.e. "You use it to mix things when you are baking.").
- Ask the student to use descriptions of words that are difficult to retrieve (i.e. "You cut paper with it."). If students add gestures when describing words, that is often helpful, too.
- Use antonyms to help retrieve words with direct opposites (i.e. "The opposite of morning is ____."). Use of synonym cues can also be helpful (i.e. "Another word for cool is ____.").
- Use "cloz" sentences that provide context clues. (i.e. "To get my teeth checked and cleaned I went to the ____.")
- Offer multiple choices for your student to select the correct answer.

These are some of the strategies that your students are encouraged to use in their sessions. The goal is for them to eventually use these strategies themselves, independently to help them retrieve words more efficiently.

I also would like to take this time to thank you for all that you do to support your students. It is a pleasure to work with them at school and see them grow in skills and confidence, too!

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