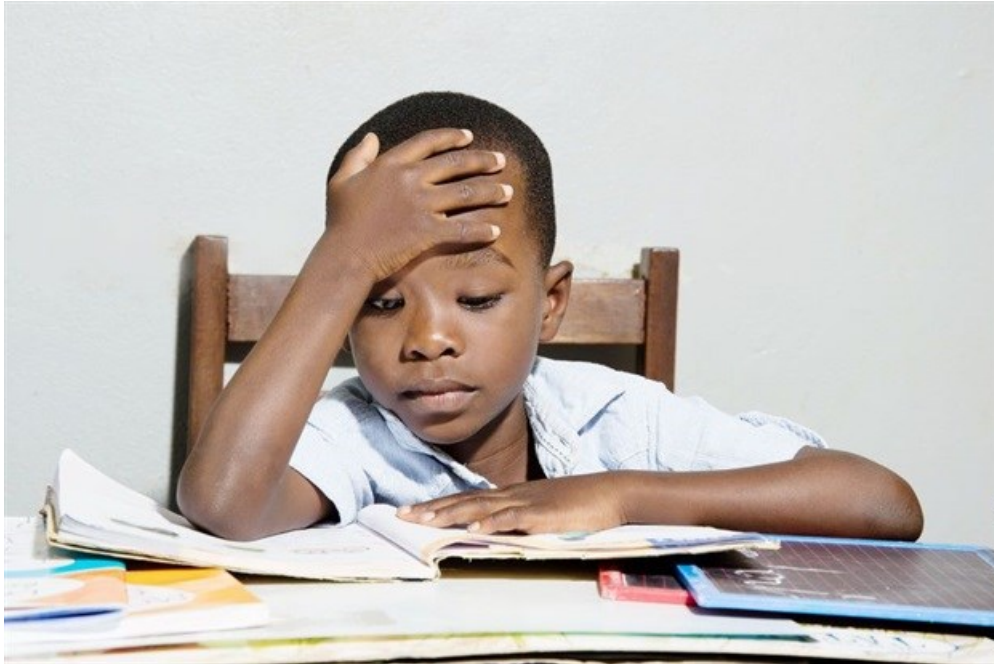


Why vocabulary still matters and how to help children expand theirs...

By [Dr Lieb Liebenberg](#)

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At the beginning of each year, many parents wonder if there is something they can do to ensure that their kids will be successful in school, as they want to ensure that their children succeed in life. They know their best chance of achieving this is to obtain a post-school qualification or skill.



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If parents were to look for that one magical element, that one simple technique they could teach their children that would have the best chance to set them up for success – what would that be?

Obviously, there is never a simple answer to a question like this because success at school and at post-school institutions is dependent on several factors. Cognitive science has taught us that if students possess proper foundational knowledge, we have gone a long way towards setting them up for success. In a similar vein, I have recently read a couple of books that focus on the importance of vocabulary for ultimate academic success on a tertiary and post-school level, and it got me thinking about the obvious link between a good vocabulary and a student's foundational knowledge.

But why would these two issues be important in the context of the fourth industrial revolution? Why is it even necessary for us to think about them?

Critical thinking and creativity

These days, it is almost accepted as a universal truth among educators and employers that in order to be successful the 21st-century workforce will need to be proficient problem solvers – which, in turn, requires critical thinking and creativity. When educators first started focussing on these skills, many did so to the detriment of giving attention to proper foundational subject knowledge. Students were required to do project-based learning without the necessary subject knowledge being in place. Although this approach did indeed lead to students being engaged, we know from cognitive science and what it teaches us about how learning works, that the actual value of such approaches is limited. Because students did not have the necessary foundational knowledge, the new material simply did not “stick” or they were unable to

come up with truly creative projects.

What we have learned from all of this is that there is no shortcut to acquiring the necessary 21st-century skills unless students have the necessary foundational knowledge. Without this, they were simply unable to gain value from projects, maker-spaces and other “hands-on” approaches that they needed in order to prepare them for the challenges ahead. In other words, there is no substitute for good old-fashioned study and proper mastery of subject content – no matter how “unpopular” and out of favour it seems to be. You cannot be a critical or creative thinker with an “empty head” so to speak...

To be successful at university, students typically need to have mastery of about 55,000 English words

When I first came across that number in Alex Quigley’s book, I was quite taken aback and was reluctant to attach too much value to it since it felt a bit counterintuitive. I remember wondering if I knew that many words when I got to varsity? However, when this number was also mentioned by the cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, I thought I probably had to take note. If one considers that most universities in South Africa teach in English and that for most students English is not their home language, this number seems daunting. If you consider that children generally attend school for 12 years, the implication is that they need to learn about 5,000 new words every year. Surely this is not possible in a typical school context?



Dr Lieb Liebenberg

The key to building a comprehensive vocabulary

Unsurprisingly, the key to building such a comprehensive vocabulary is to get children to read and keep reading at home from as early an age as possible. They need to become lifelong readers. Yes, as Quigley shows, there is a lot that educators and schools can and should do to ensure that students develop a comprehensive academic vocabulary. However, realistically approached, the primary responsibility in terms of reading must be at home. One of the most important roles that parents can play in the long-term success of their children is to start reading to them as early as possible and to keep reading to them during their first couple of years at school – ideally as long as they “allow” you to, hopefully, because they start reading on their own. Reading introduces you to words that you will not encounter in daily life, it forces you to think about their meaning and it exposes you to the same word in different contexts and different times, all of which ultimately contributes to a comprehensive vocabulary which will play a significant part in your ability to be a creative or critical thinker. The last thing one wants to happen to students is to be hampered at varsity because of a limited vocabulary, having to spend precious working memory to try to figure out the “normal” meaning of words while they should be concentrating on mastering subject-specific academic concepts.

What the research also indicates is that up to about grade 3, children should ideally not read or be read to on digital devices, because it is not quite as effective in helping them develop vocabulary and laying the groundwork for their own reading abilities as print is. Also, parents should not be fooled into thinking that watching shows on TV or digital devices develop vocabulary at anywhere near the same rate as is the case when children are being read to or read themselves. Especially at an early age, it is almost impossible for children to make the link between the sounds they hear in a digital story and the words/letters that represent them. They cannot quite make the distinction between a digital storybook and an animation or show watched on the same device, and this hampers the development of their reading ability because a digital book becomes just another “show”. As a result, they have trouble realising that reading requires more effort from them than is the case with watching a series. What we learn from Maryanne Wolf is that when reading from print this is different because of the pace (which is also regulated to some extent by having to page), the fact that it is tangible, and that the words can be pointed out and talked about without distraction. In situations like these, children have much more time to start making the links between the letters/words on pages and the concepts they represent.

Conclusion

In an era dominated by technology where both parents often work long hours, it is understandable that there is less and less time for bedtime stories. Also understandable is the tendency to use digital devices as pacifiers from an early age. However, by not making the time and the effort to properly sit down and read to children daily until they are 7 – 8 years old, parents are ignoring one of the most profound ways of preparing their children for the future. In addition, they are missing out on one of the most meaningful ways to spend quality time with them as well as enrich their lives. It may feel or sound old-fashioned, but the research does not lie, and in a world where parents increasingly feel ill-equipped to contribute to their children's education, reading remains a powerful intervention for which each parent is already well equipped.

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