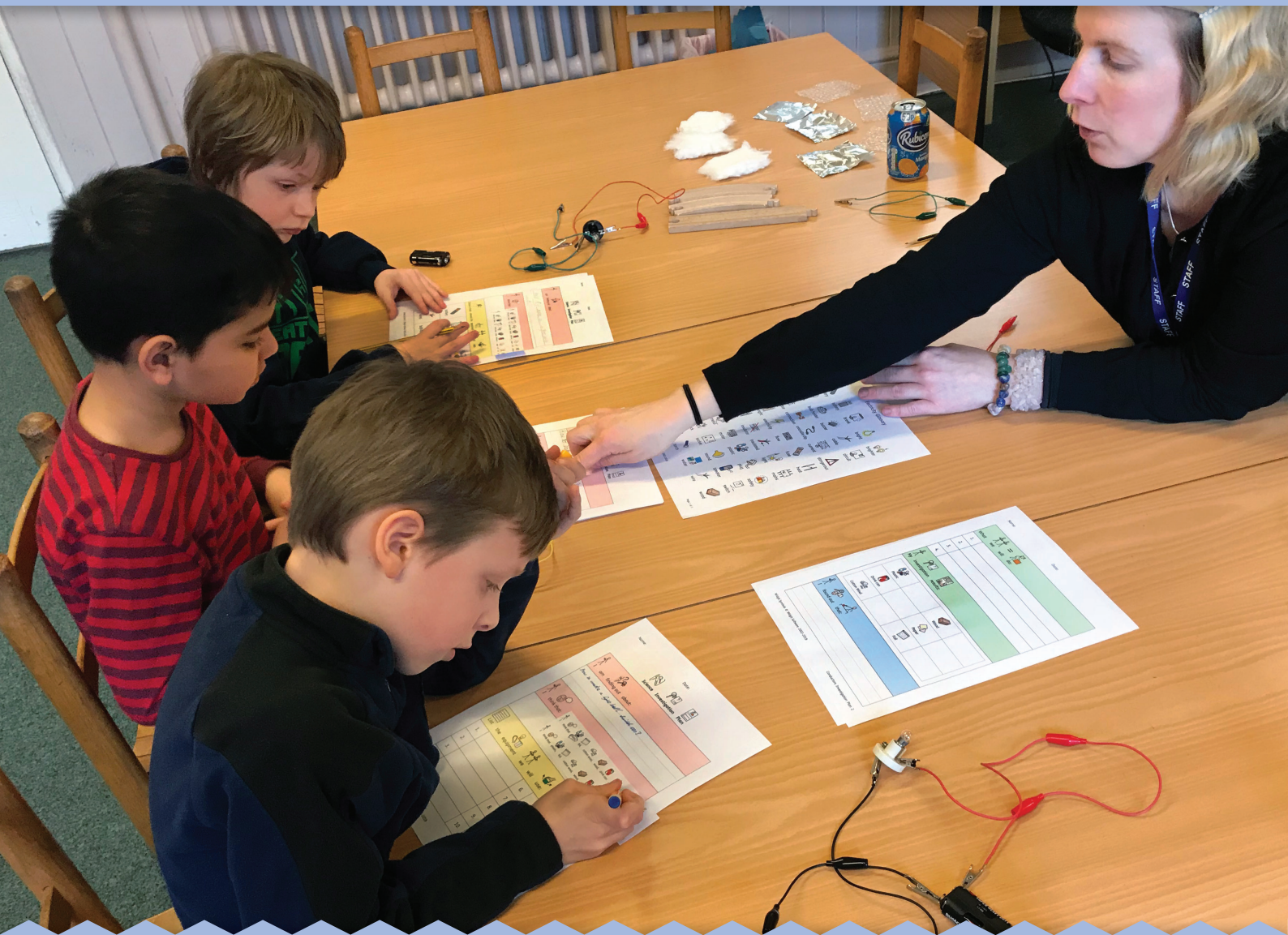


# Walking the talk

A vocabulary recovery plan for primary schools



Simple, evidence-based strategies teachers can introduce to help build pupils' vocabulary

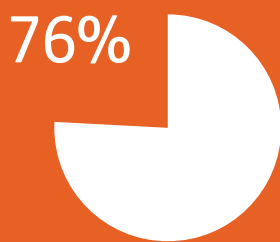
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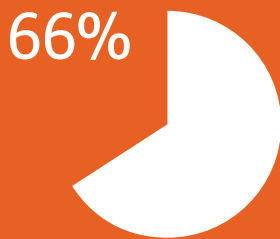
## Executive summary

Every day we see more and more children who do not have the vocabulary they need to access the curriculum and make progress in school.

The pandemic has compounded this issue further by reducing children's exposure to high quality vocabulary and intensifying the challenge pupils with limited vocabulary development face.



The Education Endowment Foundation has reported a staggering 76% of primary schools<sup>1</sup> said pupils starting school in September 2020 needed more support with communication than in previous years.



In April 2021, The Oracy All Party Parliamentary Group reported that 66% of primary teachers<sup>2</sup> have seen a detrimental effect on the spoken language development of their Pupil Premium students, crystallising in black and white the true impact of the pandemic on children's vocabulary development.

This guide gives teachers some simple, evidence-based strategies they can use straight away to help build pupils'

vocabulary as part of a broader, whole school learning recovery programme to get children back on track.

*“We need an education recovery plan that helps children of all ages to speak and understand language. Without this, how can they learn other subjects, get a job or have decent mental health and relationships?”*

Jane Harris, Chief Executive of children's communication charity, I CAN



## Lost for words

It's a typical Monday morning at Sunny Vale Primary School in Birmingham and you've got a really exciting lesson planned on the planets.

You kick off by explaining what activities the children will be taking part in and what they will be expected to learn or do as a result. The lesson gets off to a great start and the majority of children have already started their learning tasks.

But put yourself in the shoes of the child who doesn't have the vocabulary or language they need to grasp everything you've just said. They may be sitting quietly at the back of the class getting more and more anxious or could even become frustrated and disruptive as they have no idea what they should be doing.

A child like this will be on the back foot before you've even started the lesson.



There's a growing number of children in every classroom who struggle to process vocabulary or may have a far more limited bank of words to draw from than their peers - a staggering 1.5 million<sup>3</sup> according to the communication charity I CAN.

## Lost for words

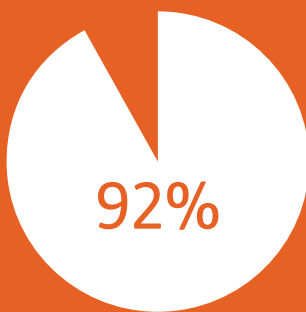
Many children lack receptive and expressive language<sup>4</sup> skills too, making it difficult for them to understand or express individual words, grammatical constructions, inference or the use of idioms. This limits a child's ability to interpret the words teachers use in the way they are intended, which can lead to low self-esteem, interruptions to lessons and risks them disengaging altogether.

Reduced vocabulary can delay a child's spoken and written language and hold back their progress in literacy. It can make social interaction and communication challenging and even have a negative impact on a child's behaviour and mental health.

Any child can be affected, regardless of their background or whether they have additional needs, but research from the University of Sheffield<sup>5</sup> has shown that the risk of delayed language development is higher for children from areas with socioeconomic disadvantage.

The study also found that without early intervention, issues can follow a pupil right the way through their education so primary schools are key to breaking this cycle and improving the life chances of these children.

Schools have seen first-hand how multiple lockdowns have only exacerbated the problems children with limited vocabulary experience.



In one study<sup>6</sup> conducted by Oxford University Press and The Centre for Education and Youth, 92% of teachers stated that school closures had contributed to a widening of the 'word gap'.

What can schools do to tackle this issue and keep pupils on track?

## How visuals help - what the research says

Once words are spoken they disappear, which means that children with limited vocabulary or restricted processing ability can easily miss what's been said. With no tangible prompts to help them recall the information they have been given verbally, there is an increased risk that the child will misunderstand,

forget instructions or shy away from completing a task entirely.

Visual aids can be a powerful way to help children with gaps in their vocabulary to develop and retain the language they need to engage in their learning and make progress.



### The research backs this up

One Study<sup>7</sup> published by the Vanderbilt University in the USA includes evidence that shows visualisation in vocabulary teaching helps children to better remember and recall the meanings of words when used in conjunction with written text.

The research suggests that the use of key symbolised words can significantly improve comprehension in primary school-aged children too.

A paper produced by the Eindhoven University of Technology<sup>8</sup> suggests that

visuals can encourage students to become more independent learners.

This highlights the need to introduce effective strategies to incorporate visuals into teaching and learning to support children with limited vocabulary.

However, images need to be chosen carefully. While imagery is an essential element in the delivery of multimodal teaching, simply replacing written text in the classroom or playground with photographs and drawings may not be the best way to enhance learning for every child.

*“A photograph includes too much information that’s irrelevant for understanding what’s going on.”*

Alberto Cairo, an expert in graphic communication<sup>9</sup>

## How visuals help - what the research says

For example, using an image of a beach to teach the word 'sand', might just confuse a child as they are expected to ignore the sea or sky and focus on the specific part of the picture that is meant to prompt them to recall the word 'sand' without necessarily knowing what they're supposed to be looking at.

Research<sup>10</sup> conducted by the University of Reading has suggested that the use of symbolic imagery can help young

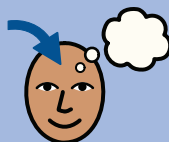
children to follow and remember routines as well as learn new or unknown vocabulary.

Symbols offer a simpler image children can focus on to help them recover and build on the vocabulary they need. They can be used to support the development of many important aspects of communication<sup>11</sup> and are quick and easy for teachers to introduce, both inside and outside the classroom.

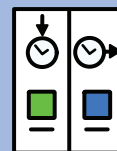
### Nine reasons to use symbols



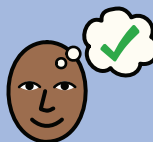
Symbols are permanent  
(Spoken words disappear)



Symbols allow time  
to process information



Symbols prepare  
children for transitions



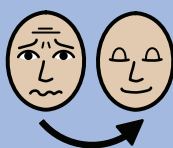
Symbols help children grasp  
the nuances of language



Symbols help  
all students



Symbols help build  
confidence and independence



Symbols help reduce  
anxiety and stress



Symbols convey  
information without tone



Symbols only include  
relevant information



# Three key strategies

## Three key strategies for using visuals to enhance pupils' vocabulary

These strategies will help to build children's vocabulary skills, better

enabling them to access the curriculum and encouraging them to make progress.



### 1. Get children ready to learn

A child with limited vocabulary is at risk of being disengaged from the get-go as they simply won't be able to make sense of information and instructions, join in group learning activities or navigate their way through the busy school day in the same way as their peers. No child in this situation will be ready to learn.

As adults, we use visual prompts such as check lists or colour coded labels all the time to function independently and organise ourselves.

There's no reason why we can't do the same for children.

The use of symbols can give children with limited vocabulary greater confidence and motivation to learn whilst helping them build key skills such as independence and personal organisation, which they will take with them throughout life.

There are a number of ways in which symbols can be used effectively to help ensure pupils with restricted vocabulary are ready to learn.





# Three key strategies: Get children ready to learn
















## Providing structure

The University of Edinburgh conducted a study<sup>12</sup> on the use of visual timetables finding they were as highly valued, and used as frequently, by pupils with and without special educational needs.

A lesson timetable that includes visual prompts for each subject gives children with limited vocabulary a quick and easy way to see what activities and learning breaks are coming up next, helping them to be more self-sufficient in school. Visual timetables also support

the development of skills such as sequencing and time awareness.

Symbols make timetables more visual, which reduces the frustration, anxiety and confusion some children experience when they are unsure of what they are supposed to be doing and when. Symbolic timetables also eliminate the pressure on children to interpret written text quickly, so they are more likely to be able to learn effectively.

 Assembly	 Register	 Break	 Lunch	 Science
 Home	 Play	 Free choice	 Circle time	 Story
 Group work	 Maths	 Literacy	 P.E.	 Creative

One way to make timetables more visual is to display symbols for all the subjects you will be covering on a whiteboard at the beginning of the day and use an arrow to indicate which one is being taught as you progress through the day.

This can boost sequencing skills while highlighting the lesson in progress and what is coming next. Individual children can be supported with subject-specific symbols for each lesson placed on their desk too, where they can be reviewed easily during the day.

## Three key strategies: Get children ready to learn

Using symbolic timetables consistently across the school will reduce the risk of a teacher's verbal prompts being missed,

boost confidence and make it easier for children with limited vocabulary development to be ready to learn.

*“It’s useful to have the picture there to remind me what I need to do. When there is lots of writing instead, I get muddled up.”*

Year 5 pupil at Charles Dickens Primary School

## Managing behaviour



The National Literacy Trust is one of many research organisations that has highlighted the strong link between language difficulties and social, emotional and mental health<sup>13</sup> issues, affecting up to 90% of children with significantly restricted oral language.

A lack of social comprehension and language can be a root cause of disruption inside and outside the classroom.

This underlines a real need for schools to build tailored strategies into vocabulary recovery programmes to support social, emotional and mental health needs whilst also helping manage issues promptly and effectively.

One relatively simple approach you can take is to add visual cues to the posters and signs displayed on walls, in corridors and in playgrounds that reinforce the school's ethos and values.



Be friendly



Share



No bullying

## Three key strategies: Get children ready to learn

Symbolic images enable all children to focus on the key messages you're trying to get across, whether that's to be kind, work hard or help others. This small step

will help children who have gaps in their vocabulary to better understand the school's expectations and enable them to play a full and active role in the school community.



But symbols don't have to be static resources. You could create a set of hand-held images too, which can simply be held up during a lesson to praise a class for sitting still without stopping what you are doing. With a set of symbols to hand you could raise a stop sign to remind a child to refrain from talking without drawing additional attention to the situation or disrupting the flow of the lesson.




# Three key strategies: Get children ready to learn






## Expressing emotion

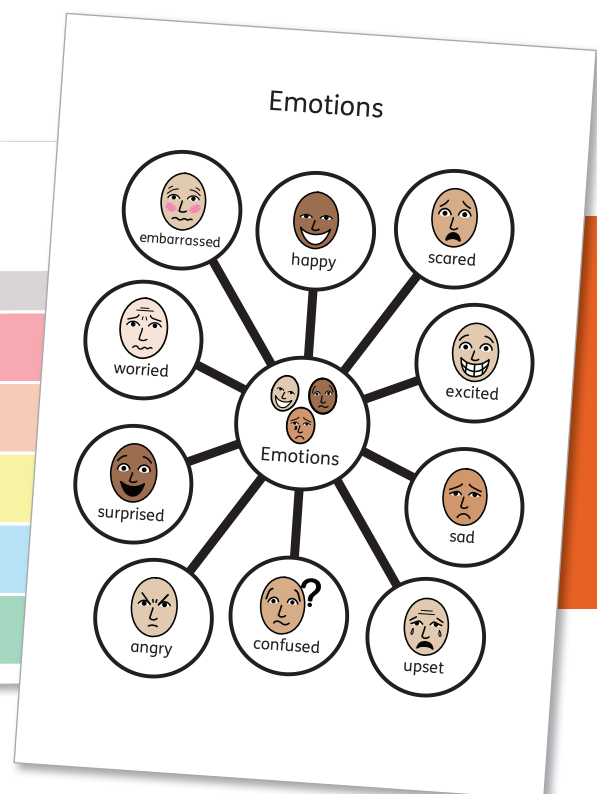
Emotion cards which include facial expressions are useful tools that pupils can use to indicate how they are feeling, and they are particularly helpful for supporting children who have limited vocabulary with communication.

Children can use them to communicate their emotions in a positive way, which could potentially stop a highly charged situation in its tracks.

Let's say you have a child whose pet has gone missing, or an argument with a sibling has happened before school. The child may not be able to communicate that they are scared or sad, but they could be encouraged to point to the relevant image providing a good opportunity for you to open up a discussion and help.

?  **How am I feeling?**

Rating	Looks like	Feels like	I can try to . . .	
5		Out of control		
4		Some difficulties controlling myself		
3		Uncomfortable / Uneasy		
2		OK / Fine		
1		Calm / in control		



Some children respond well to a 5-point scale, including a chart to help them recognise how they are feeling on any given day.

They can add details of strategies that help them to manage strong emotions

such as anger or frustration in the appropriate column, so if they start to feel uncomfortable or out of control, they can quickly see what things they can do to deal with these emotions in their own way.



# Three key strategies: Get children ready to learn

## Building positive well-being


No child will be ready to learn if they come into the classroom anxious or distressed.

If you have a child who knocks over chairs or lashes out at their peers when they are angry or upset, things can soon escalate, putting the safety of pupils and staff at risk whilst also disrupting lessons.

























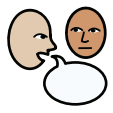





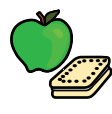





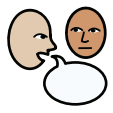





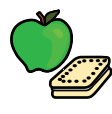





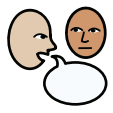





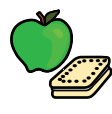


You can prevent this by putting early intervention strategies in place to help diffuse the situation sooner.


Public Health England and the NAHT<sup>14</sup> recently published a report that showed programmes designed to improve children's social and emotional learning boost academic achievement by 11%.

Symbols can be a powerful way to support emotional well-being by encouraging pupils with limited vocabulary to express how they are feeling. They can be used to embed a culture of positive well-being across the curriculum.



**Managing Emotions**

<p>    Sometimes         </p> <p>  I         </p> <p>  feel sad.         </p> <p>    Sometimes         </p> <p>  I         </p> <p>  feel angry.         </p> <p>  It's OK         </p> <p>  to         </p> <p>  feel         </p> <p>  different emotions.         </p> <p>  I can         </p> <p>  try         </p> <p>  and         </p> <p>  feel better.         </p> <p>  Activities         </p> <p>  can         </p> <p>  help         </p> <p>  me         </p> <p>  feel better         </p>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 25%;"> rest</td> <td style="width: 25%;"> squeeze</td> <td style="width: 25%;"> star jumps</td> <td style="width: 25%;"> talk</td> </tr> <tr> <td> stretch</td> <td> chill spot</td> <td> walk</td> <td> deep breaths</td> </tr> <tr> <td> music</td> <td> snack</td> <td> sing</td> <td> drink water</td> </tr> </table>	 rest	 squeeze	 star jumps	 talk	 stretch	 chill spot	 walk	 deep breaths	 music	 snack	 sing	 drink water
 rest	 squeeze	 star jumps	 talk										
 stretch	 chill spot	 walk	 deep breaths										
 music	 snack	 sing	 drink water										



# Three key strategies: Get children ready to learn

## Encouraging mindfulness

Another way you can help get children ready to learn is to incorporate mindfulness activities into the school day.

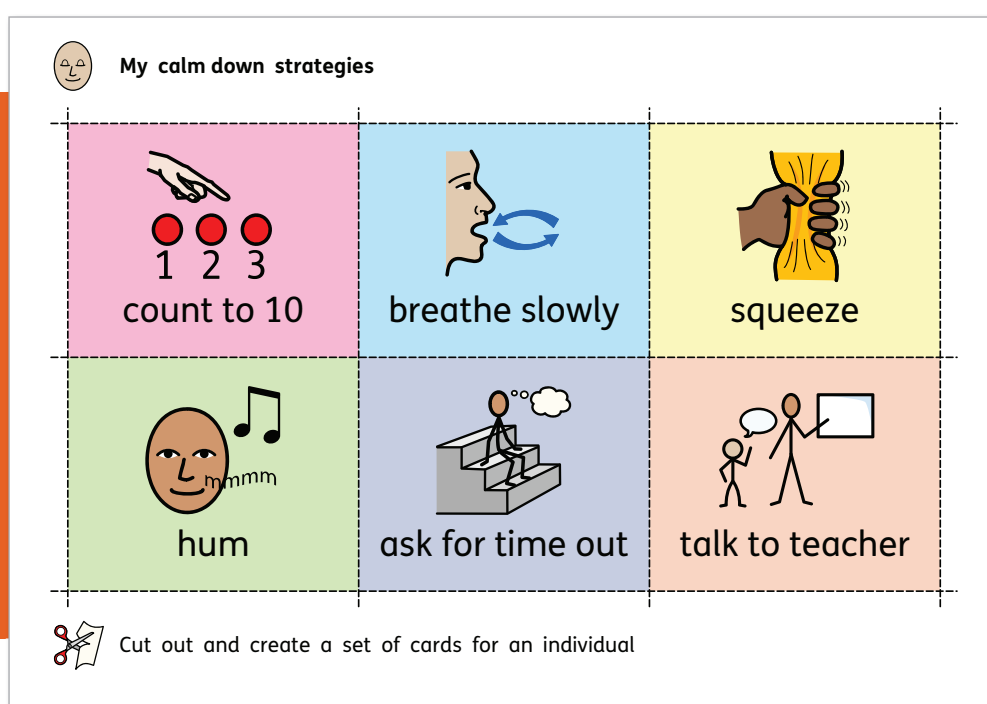
A study<sup>15</sup> conducted by RMIT University in Melbourne found that activities based on mindfulness have a positive impact on the whole child. The children involved said they not only enjoyed the activities, they also found mindfulness helped them regulate their emotions, made them more empathic towards others and even increased their ability to focus while they were learning.

The study also found a link between mindfulness and improved academic performance.

Setting up a dedicated mindfulness area in the classroom gives pupils somewhere they can go to learn self-calming techniques such as deep breathing or counting to ten when they are stressed or anxious.

Designing the space using symbols will automatically make it more accessible for children with limited vocabulary as the relaxation activities are displayed in a very visual way.

This will support well-being, help children develop resilience and encourage them to gain the important skills they need to get the most from their time in school.



# Three key strategies



## 2. Teaching vocabulary

Using symbols in vocabulary teaching has been shown to boost children's oral recollection.

A study<sup>16</sup> published by the Language For Life Partnership UK and the University of Sheffield showed children taught in this way made significantly more progress in vocabulary than when other methodologies were used.

This suggests that some simple adjustments to lesson planning and delivery could make all the difference to children with limited vocabulary.

Let's look at the areas where symbols could support vocabulary teaching.

Vocabulary is subdivided into three tiers.

1

Tier 1 includes common everyday conversational words that do not typically need to be taught.

2

Tier 2 are medium frequency words which are cross-curricular in nature and include high quality vocabulary found in literacy texts. These words support reading, writing and attainment and should form the main focus of instruction in schools, ideally on a daily basis, using direct teaching rather than relying on incidental word encounters.

3

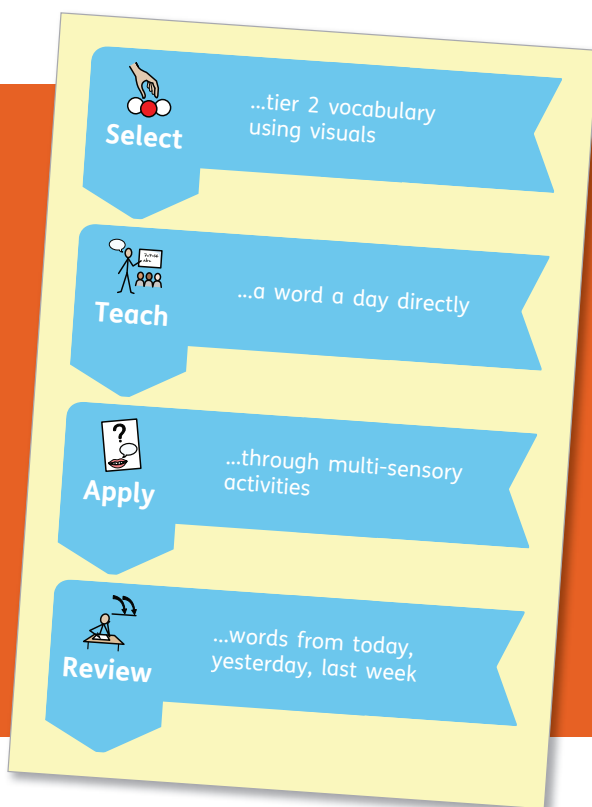
Tier 3 words are lower in frequency and limited to a specific subject or topic. Research<sup>17</sup> has shown that pre-teaching these words in advance of the lesson gives pupils a good general understanding of the vocabulary and allows them to process the lesson more easily.

# Three key strategies: Teaching vocabulary

## Direct teaching of Tier 2 vocabulary

Symbols can support the direct teaching of Tier 2 vocabulary using the STAR approach (Select, Teach, Apply, Review) as featured in the Word Aware<sup>18</sup> programme developed by speech and language practitioners Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan.

Using this approach Tier 2 words, such as 'crept' or 'scaled', are drawn from high-quality children's texts. Symbols can then be created for each word to form a vocabulary mat that can be used to support children's understanding and retention of the words and phrases selected, as in the example below.



A short activity based on the Tier 2 vocabulary is set daily, along with opportunities to practice and review the learning. Direct vocabulary teaching in this way is highly effective in terms of helping children to learn specific vocabulary.

To extend the activity further, you could ask the children to suggest alternative words to the ones they have learned. You can then get pupils to create a written piece of their own using a range of Tier 2 words to bring their stories to life.



# Three key strategies: Teaching vocabulary

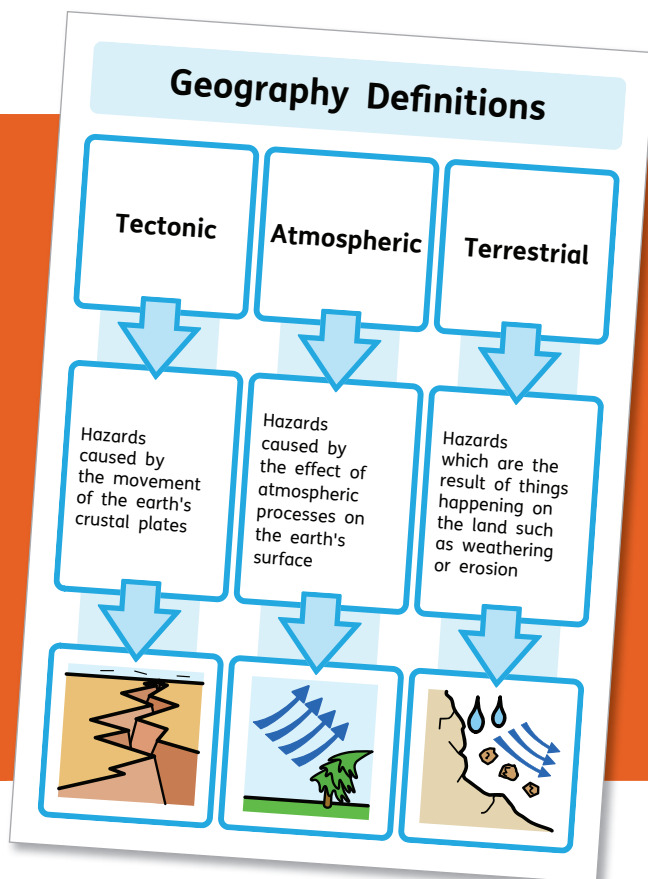
## Pre-teaching Tier 3 vocabulary

Using symbols to teach Tier 3 vocabulary or the topic-based terminology used in subjects such as geography, science and maths can help all children to build the language they need to continue to learn as they move through their schooling.

Words such as 'tectonic', 'atmospheric' or 'terrestrial' could be displayed alongside symbols and be briefly taught prior to a geography lesson. Teaching Tier 3 words in advance will give children a firm grasp of the more technical

language they will encounter in many areas of the curriculum and free up lesson time that will be better spent deepening their knowledge of the topics being covered.

Pre-teaching Tier 3 words reduces the demand on their working memory during the lesson and helps them to process the teacher's lesson more easily. This allows them to focus on actively using higher level vocabulary in both their speaking and writing.



## Three key strategies



### 3. Embed visuals across your school

There is a growing body of evidence to show that memory consists of two separate channels – visual and verbal. A piece of research published by the University of Western Ontario<sup>19</sup> backs this up underlining that the visual channel in a child’s brain will automatically prompt the verbal channel when they learn, and vice versa.

What this means is that it’s not only children with additional needs or EAL who can be supported with the use of visual stimulation such as symbols in vocabulary teaching. Every child will benefit.

Vocabulary recovery strategies incorporating visuals should be open to every class in every year group, not just confined to the nursery or used only with children who are listed on the school’s SEND register.

There are many ways to embed visuals across your school for the benefit of all.

#### Signs and directions

Symbolic signage will help pupils and visitors to find their way around the school quickly and easily. For example, you could use a symbol of a book to represent the school library on signposts or perhaps a dinner plate to symbolise the lunch hall.

Symbols chosen can be used to help children collect and return learning resources or sports equipment to where they belong, encouraging independence and enabling children to be responsible members of the school community.

#### At lunch times

Adding symbols to the school lunch menu is a great way to encourage shy or non-verbal students to make meal choices independently, preventing them from feeling isolated from their peers.

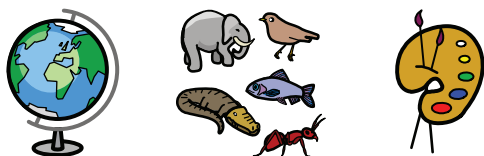


# Three key strategies: Embed visuals across your school

## In the library

Symbols are a great addition to the school library, where they can help children to see what types of books are on offer.

For example, where non-fiction library books are categorised by a visual symbol, it can make it easier for pupils to find and return books to the appropriate sections.



## Support for homework

Symbols such as calendars and clock faces can be used to help children to manage homework and deadlines, encouraging them to complete tasks independently and on time.



## Expand best practice

Strategies to incorporate visual prompts can be regularly reviewed in the same way whole-school teaching practices are to ensure they continue to meet pupils' needs.

You can explore different ways to identify and replicate best practice in using symbols across the school.

One option is to add guidance and information on using symbols in the induction procedure for new staff.

Another route is to ensure teachers have regular opportunities to discuss and share effective ways of using symbols to support teaching and learning.

A mentoring programme led by a team of visual learning champions will help newer staff or those less confident to make good use of symbols in their lesson planning and teaching.

*“Without a good vocabulary, children struggle to understand what they are taught, to express how they feel, to manage social situations and resolve conflicts.”*

Jean Gross CBE – excerpt from the foreword of *Word Aware*

## Conclusion

There is a pressing need for primary schools to put successful, evidence-based strategies in place that will support vocabulary recovery in the wake of Covid-19 and beyond.

Incorporating symbols across your school will benefit every child, not just those in the early years, with special needs or who speak English as an additional language.

Children learn both visually and verbally, so symbols should never replace the written or spoken word. When used in conjunction with text, symbols support the understanding of a word, and its meaning is amplified with a clarity beyond what might be gleaned from a standard photograph or image.

When used well, symbols can boost learning and achievement, enhance

memory and help children to build the vocabulary they need to speak, read and write confidently and accurately throughout the school years.

Whether you want to introduce the use of symbols in simple stages or you prefer to take a big bang approach, the time is right to take the next step.

With a school-wide approach to visual learning using symbols deeply embedded into your school's pandemic recovery plans, you will improve your pupils' vocabulary development and close the word gap so that no child is singled out or left behind.

All the resources included in this guide have been created by a team of education experts and are designed to support schools in building pupils' vocabulary.

Sign up today for a free 21-day trial of Widgit symbols and support visual teaching and learning across your school.

For more information:

Email: [info@widgit.com](mailto:info@widgit.com)

Phone: **01926 333680**



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