VOCABULARY: THE MISSING LINK
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Transcript

I'm Andrew Biemiller. I was a Professor of Education for 36 years at the University of Toronto.

There are a lot of children who can read fairly well by the time they are in grade three or four but don't understand the text they read. That's why I call vocabulary the missing link.

Can children really learn enough words in school if they have a small vocabulary to begin with? I think the answer is yes. They need to add about 10 words a week. In fact, children can learn 10 words a week if teachers teach 25 words a week while reading stories several times and explaining words in the stories.

It's often said that children will learn a lot of the vocabulary they need just by figuring out word meanings from the stories they hear. Children that come in with lower vocabulary simply don't infer new words very well. The fact is, that children with smaller vocabularies really need to have the words taught directly, explained. We need to do more teaching of word meanings.

How do teachers decide which words to teach? I think the best way to do that is to simply look at words that are known by children with large vocabularies, but not known by children with small vocabularies. Those become really good words to teach. I've done a lot of work on this and I've identified some 1,600 words that fit that description.

How can teachers use the show MARTHA SPEAKS to help children acquire vocabulary? There are two kinds of things they can do. One is to encourage children to watch MARTHA SPEAKS. MARTHA SPEAKS contains many of the words children need to learn. In addition, some teachers may use MARTHA SPEAKS as part of their program. Have the children watch MARTHA SPEAKS at school and then work with the children using the words that are taught in MARTHA SPEAKS. Then, they can build on the words outside of the show; have children use them, put them in stories, things like that. And that will really make sure they've covered a lot of the words that are useful for children.