

Vocabulary on decline due to fewer books

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Professor Tom Nicholson

Young people are reading less and failing to build vocabulary amid a sea of text messaging and cyber chat, says literacy and child development specialist Professor Tom Nicholson.

Professor Nicholson, from the University's College of Education, says the vocabulary deficit is a worrying trend that threatens learning, confidence, future job prospects, relationships, and even the ability to understand jokes.

"If you want your child to be successful at school across all subjects, then building a good vocabulary is critical," he says. "In this increasingly technological world, we don't have the same opportunity to build vocabulary. Reading is coming to be seen as boring and useless, Parents are the last bastion of defence against this peer culture where kids don't

see the need to build vocabulary."

In his new book *Teaching Reading Vocabulary*, Professor Nicholson urges teachers and parents to offset linguistic "dumbing down" by encouraging children not only to [read](#) more, but to use a [dictionary](#) and a thesaurus. While these might seem old-fashioned tools in the minds of today's electronic generation, he says the dictionary remains the "holy grail" for word acquisition and knowledge of multiple meanings.

Every child should have a dictionary," Professor Nicholson says. "Just by looking up a new word, the process mentally glues it into the memory. Words are slippery customers - you need a definition and understanding of the various contexts it might be used in."

Professor Nicholson was shocked by results of his survey last year of year-four and five pupils, who were largely reluctant to use a dictionary at home or in class. He also cites New Zealand research by the National Education Monitoring Project suggesting the reading habits of the young are in decline. In 2008 only 21 per cent of year-four and 20 per cent of year-eight pupils ranked reading as one of their top three leisure activities, a 10 per cent drop from the same survey in 2000.

He says it is this resistance to reading and learning new words that teachers and parents need to actively combat by encouraging young readers to consider the dictionary and thesaurus as "their best friends". "Parents can do this by making sure their child actually has a dictionary and by modelling use of it in everyday life, such as when they hear an unknown word on television, radio or in a conversation.

"Possessing a good [vocabulary](#) enables and empowers people of all ages to be understood in social, educational and work situations. It would stop a lot of fights in the playground and in life if people had the ability to express themselves with words more competently," he says.

While readers can access online dictionaries, including the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary which defines well over half a million words, a hard copy is more user friendly and easier to pick up wherever you are, he says.

Professor Nicholson, far from being a literacy Luddite, is adapting his highly successful reading clinics Auckland to provide one-on-one tuition with distance students over the Internet using Skype. He is adamant, however, that while texting, Twitter, Facebook, blogging and other forms of cyber communication are here to stay, they cannot replicate the discipline and value of reading books and using a dictionary and thesaurus for improving verbal virtuosity.

Provided by Massey University

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