

# Introduction

---

*Describe It!* is a set of lesson plans designed to address the specific needs of students with language learning disabilities. A variety of activities help students develop richer elaborations of word meanings, retrieve words more efficiently, and verbally express word meanings more precisely. The purpose of *Describe It!* is to

- enrich the student's semantic knowledge and enhance the ability to organize the information;
- train the student to use facilitating strategies to overcome an impoverished word knowledge base; and
- encourage self-evaluation and monitoring of performance.

## Instructional audience

The activities in *Describe It!* are most appropriate for students in second to eighth grade who have difficulty recalling words or explaining what a word means; however, normally achieving students can learn to define words more efficiently with this program as well. We recommend adapting the lessons to fit individual needs and providing support through scaffolding when needed.

## Theory and rationale

To be successful language learners, students must be efficient at both decoding and encoding language. Decoding involves the ability to attach meaning to speech/sign and written text. Encoding involves the retrieval and formulation of ideas and concepts that will ultimately be expressed by speech/sign and written language.

One prerequisite for decoding is knowing the meanings of words and the relationships among them. Students with language learning disabilities frequently have limited vocabulary with restricted meanings. These students may display deficits in semantic organization and take little or no advantage of memory organization strategies such as categorical clustering. Deficits in word knowledge lead directly to comprehension difficulties and are likely to seriously affect later reading achievement.

To encode language for effective communication, one must have ready access to stored lexical information. Many students who have language learning disabilities have trouble with word retrieval, or recalling and expressing words in spontaneous speech.

Typical behavioral signs may be delay in retrieval, substitution of other words, overuse of nonspecific words, circumlocutions, or overuse of nonverbal communication. Researchers disagree about the underlying cause of word-finding difficulties. Some believe that the student's word knowledge is intact but just not readily accessible at that moment. Other researchers believe that the student's word-retrieval skills are compromised by limitations in word-knowledge skills.

An important tenet of schema theory is that information, in the form of ideas and concepts, is stored in the brain in categories known as schemata. According to the theory, schemata are arranged in hierarchical relationships, in which concrete concepts are identified as subordinate and more abstract concepts as superordinate. Advocates of schema theory believe that teaching activities that center on strengthening word relationships and hierarchies will enhance the student's lexical representation and foster a more elaborate structure of word knowledge. Activating prior knowledge (schemata) is seen as a vehicle for acquiring new knowledge. Semantic mapping and semantic feature analysis are teaching strategies based on schema theory.

## Developmental trends

Developmental information about how children without learning disabilities become adept at defining words should also be considered. By comparing a student's responses to established developmental trends, a clinician may evaluate the extent of a student's difficulties and project specific therapeutic objectives. When a speaker can define a word in a concise way, that is clear evidence that the person has a clear understanding of the word.

Johnson and Anglin (1995) studied definition skills in children. When students in first, third, and fifth grade were asked to tell what words mean, distinct patterns emerged. As age increased, children defined an increasing number of words accurately, and these definitions became more refined in content and form. The authors used a qualitative classification scheme to explain developmental trends. The youngest children defined words by using the word in a sentence that merely supplied a context. These types of definitions were labeled "contextualized expressed knowledge" and did not provide the semantic features (content) required for a definition. An example of this type of definition (for the word *dog*) is: "I have a *dog* named Ginger. I have to feed her."

As children got older, their definitions became more generalized and increasingly included more precise content (salient features) and a conventional form (superordinate + qualifiers). For example, the following definition exhibits both precise content and conventional form: "A dog is an animal that can be your pet. It has fur all over its body, and a tail. It barks. My favorite kind of dog is a cocker spaniel."

It is surprising that children at the lowest grade level produced some high-quality definitions; however, performance was influenced by the part of speech represented by the defined word. Definitions of uninflected nouns (i.e., closet) and compound words (i.e., toothbrush) were found to be acquired earliest, followed by inflected and derived nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

## Intervention strategies

Many cognitive psychologists now believe that efficient long-term retrieval of word knowledge is dependent upon how well the information has been encoded and thus associated and organized with prior knowledge. Recent research seems to support this belief. McGregor and Leonard (1989) have examined the effects of

training on word-retrieval skills. Elaboration and word-retrieval strategies were used separately and in combination with four subjects whose chronological age fell between 9:1 and 10:5. Elaboration strategies included associating new words with exemplars and rhyming words and noting similarities or differences with other words. The word-retrieval strategies used were associating the new word with its category, its initial phoneme, and its customary location. Results of the study suggested that word-finding skills can be facilitated. The combination of elaboration training and training in retrieval strategies was more beneficial for children with word-finding problems than either elaboration or retrieval strategies alone.

## Components of *Describe It!*

The activities and resources in *Describe It!* are arranged in lesson-plan format. They can be used to target word elaboration and definition skills in four areas:

|                                |                          |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Using the five senses          | second and third graders |
| Using your thinking skills     | second to eighth graders |
| Describing and interacting     | second to eighth graders |
| Using metacognitive strategies | fourth graders and up    |

The vocabulary items you select should reflect content that is appropriate for the student's language age. We suggest reviewing the student's current reading series or content-area texts. Based on the findings of Johnson and Anglin (1995), you should consider establishing proficiency by targeting nouns first, advancing to the more difficult verbs and adjectives.

Lesson plans in *Describe It!* include teacher support materials and homework activities. Informal pre- and post-test probes of the student's skill in describing and defining words are included in Appendix A, and data collection forms are in Appendix B. As an additional teacher resource for category development, words are listed by level and grouped by category in Appendix C.