

Quick guide for teachers

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Understanding low vocabulary scores





Main reasons for a low vocabulary score

'Vocabulary' is the body of words that make up a language. There are four main reasons why students have low vocabulary scores on our baseline tests. They are:

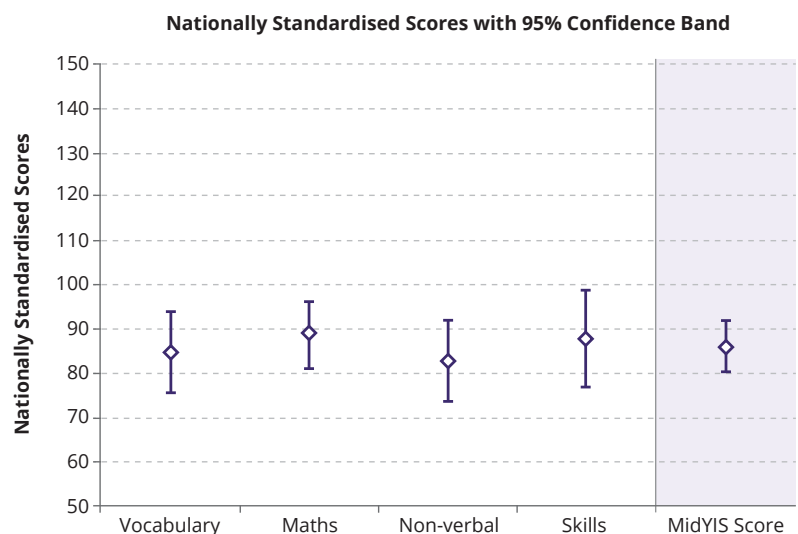
- low general ability
- low language ability
- limited exposure to vocabulary due to home or social environment
- limited exposure to vocabulary because English is an additional language.

Unfortunately, some students may have a weak vocabulary for more than one of these reasons.

Low general ability

Students of low general ability struggle to gain a good vocabulary. Even when they repeatedly encounter a rich variety of words and phrases, they find it hard to understand and master them. Typically, these students struggle to acquire other aspects of language, and also knowledge and skills in other parts of the school curriculum. Students of low general ability will usually score poorly on all or multiple sections of our baseline tests.

Here is a typical performance on MidYIS. The student's scores are well below 100 (the average score) in all sections of the test.

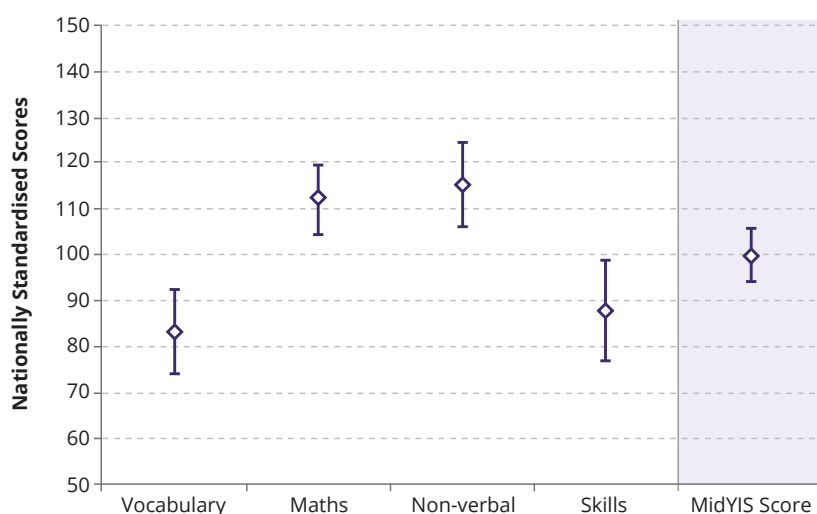


Low language ability

Some students are good at abstract and mathematical thinking but struggle much more with language. Typically, these students find it hard to acquire other aspects of language in addition to vocabulary. For example, there are five major components of reading to master: vocabulary, but also comprehension, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency¹. A student with lower language ability will struggle with all or many of these five components, plus other elements of language such as oracy (expressing themselves fluently and grammatically in speech). Here is a typical performance on MidYIS:



Nationally Standardised Scores with 95% Confidence Band



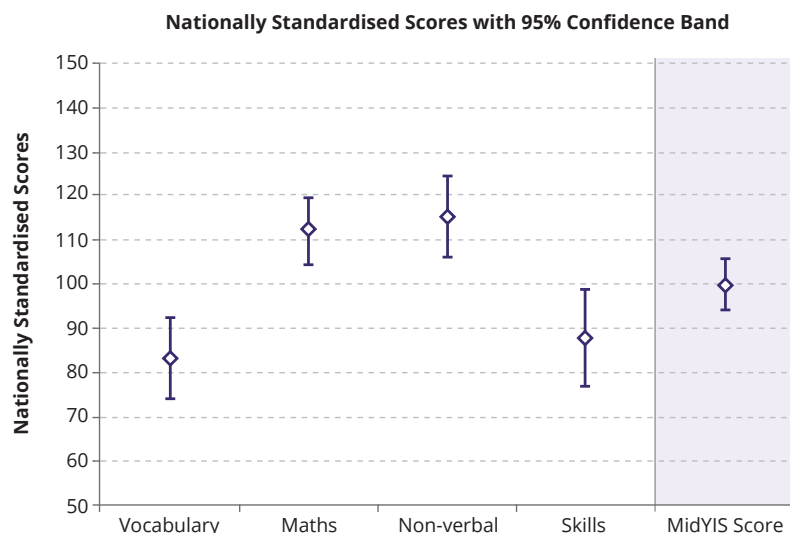
Note that the student has a low score for skills as well as a low vocabulary score. This is because aspects of language are assessed in the proofreading questions in the skills section of MidYIS. The student's scores for maths and non-verbal reasoning are noticeably higher.

Specific Language Impairment

A small proportion of students have a specific language impairment (SLI). This is a communication disorder that interferes with the development of language skills in children who have no hearing loss or intellectual disabilities. SLI can affect a student's speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is also sometimes known as developmental language disorder, language delay, or developmental dysphasia. It should be diagnosed by an expert who will use specialised tests. Our baseline tests cannot be used for this purpose. In many countries, including the UK, children are typically diagnosed with an SLI at an early age.

Limited exposure to vocabulary

Here is a typical performance on MidYIS of a student who has had limited exposure to vocabulary. This could be due to their home environment, or having English as an additional language, or for other reasons.



Note that the pattern of performance can be the same as that for a student with low language ability. Only an understanding of the student's background and wider circumstances will distinguish the causes of the pattern. It is important for teachers to understand as much as possible about this, so that they can tailor their support for the student appropriately.

Limited exposure due to home or social environment

Exposure to a rich variety of vocabulary is critical to learning it. A lot of vocabulary is learned informally and unconsciously outside of school. Students' home and social environments play an important role from a very early age. This continues throughout childhood.

In many countries, vocabulary exposure is understood to be associated with social economic status and with parental education in particular. This can be for several reasons:

- Students from poorer backgrounds do not have as many opportunities to develop the necessary background knowledge to make sense of what they see. They visit fewer places and take part in fewer different activities
- Access to books and other reading material can be a problem. Students from poorer backgrounds often have fewer books in their homes
- Students from poorer backgrounds don't hear as many words in conversations.

Researchers in the US reported that from birth to four years old, parents in professional families spoke 32 million words more to their children compared with parents in disadvantaged families.

Limited exposure due to English as an Additional Language

Another cause of limited exposure to vocabulary is having English as an Additional Language (EAL). These students tend to have less practice at refining and growing their English vocabulary at home.ⁱⁱ International schools around the world have high proportions of students with EAL. These students tend to:

- know fewer words
- have looser semantic networks between words in their vocabulariesⁱⁱⁱ (they don't connect words with similar meanings)
- have less developed knowledge about the parts of words^{iv}.

This means that students with EAL may find it harder to remember aspects of word meanings that relate to the variety of contexts in which a word might appear. Their comprehension (understanding) may therefore be slower or even prevented^v.



Supporting students with weak vocabulary

There is a lot that teachers can do to help students to improve their vocabulary. Ultimately this helps students to do better in examinations. For ideas, please see our guides on helping students to improve their vocabulary.

References

- ⁱ National Reading Panel (US) (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instructions: Reports of the subgroups. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health.
- ⁱⁱ Quigley, A. (2018). *Closing the vocabulary gap*. London and New York: Routledge.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Verhoeven L. (2011). Second language reading acquisition. In M. L. Kamil, P. D. Pearson, E. B., Moje, & P. P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. IV, p. 661-683). New York: Routledge.
- ^{iv} Kieffer, M. J., & Lesaux, N. K. (2012). Effects of academic language on relational and syntactic aspects of morphological awareness for sixth graders from linguistically diverse backgrounds. *Elementary School Journal*, 112 (3), 519-545.
- ^v Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). Bringing words to life: *Robust vocabulary instruction*. (2nd ed.). New York: Guildford Press.