

Reading Expert



Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary knowledge is critical to academic success. This issue of the *CORE Reading Expert* addresses strategies for developing vocabulary across the grade levels.

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Developing Productive Vocabulary Knowledge in Elementary Classrooms

from the *Longman Elementary Dictionary and Thesaurus Pedagogical Teacher's Guide*

What Is Vocabulary Knowledge?

Defining vocabulary is more complex than meets the eye. Simply defined, vocabulary is knowledge of words and word meanings. However, words come in two distinct forms: oral and print. Oral vocabulary is comprised of words we recognize and use in everyday speaking and listening. Print vocabulary includes the body of words we recognize and use in reading and writing. In addition, word knowledge comes in two different forms: productive and receptive. Our productive vocabulary includes words that we use comfortably when we speak or write. Our receptive vocabulary is typically much larger than our productive vocabulary and includes words we recognize within a particular context or only partially understand when we see or hear them.

Vocabulary knowledge is thus not like a standard on and off light switch; it is more like a dimmer switch. Our

recognition and use of individual words fall within a continuum of understanding. We may have a confident and competent handle on many words within a challenging environmental report and a tenuous grasp on others. We may readily comprehend a multiple meaning word used by a friend sharing a recipe but become confused when we see it applied in a computer virus program manual.

Because students enter elementary classrooms with vastly different life experiences and exposure to vocabulary, teachers cannot make safe assumptions about central lesson vocabulary students "should know" or be able to use by this grade level. Students frequently claim they understand a word's meaning in lesson material when in fact they have only heard or seen it. An experienced teacher who has asked if students need an explanation of writing assignment direction terms knows that few, if



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Vocabulary Learning and Instruction: Word-Specific and Generative Strategies

Intended for elementary, middle, and secondary educators, this webinar explores research-based strategies for 1) selecting and teaching individual words and concepts for deep understanding, and 2) teaching the generative process of how meaningful word parts combine (including Greek and Latin roots) so that students generalize this understanding to the analysis and acquisition of new vocabulary in their reading and learning in all content areas.

Developing Productive Vocabulary Knowledge in Elementary Classrooms (cont.)

any, will request clarification. Yet when the teacher later reviews their off-task persuasive paragraphs, it becomes vividly apparent that these young learners had an inflated assessment of their knowledge of the critical terms *persuade*, *adequate*, and *relevant support*. Acknowledging that young language learners in the same elementary class tackle core curricula with rich, average, or impoverished receptive and productive word banks is the first step in equitable and effective vocabulary instruction.

What Is the Role of Vocabulary Knowledge in Elementary School Success?

Vocabulary knowledge contributes to reading and overall academic success in several vital ways. Numerous studies have documented the strong and reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, among them Baker et al. (1995). Children who have an impressive number of words in their oral vocabularies can more efficiently sound out, read, and understand these known words as well as comprehend the selection they are reading. If the words are not in the children's oral vocabulary, they understandably have trouble mapping sounds to words in print and comprehending (National Reading Panel, 2000). To get meaning from increasingly demanding texts and assessments, young students need large vocabularies and effective word-learning strategies. Elementary students with an extensive oral vocabulary will also tackle writing tasks with more confidence and competence. Children cannot adeptly infuse their narrative and expository prose with lively and precise words that they don't already use comfortably in speech.

How Do Young Learners Acquire New Words?

Elementary school children acquire new vocabulary in various ways. Students learn many new words incidentally from their daily interactions with family members and friends, from teachers, from television, films and the Internet, and most certainly from their reading. Regular reading of diverse texts is in fact the single most significant factor in a school-age youth's development of receptive word knowledge, the body of words they may recognize but not fully understand (Anderson & Nagy, 1991). While providing rich and efficient exposure to new



words, independent reading alone does not guarantee that a young learner will take away word meanings that are either accurate or enduring. Moreover, increasing recreational reading volume without targeted language instruction fails to equip students with the arsenal of words they need to comprehend lectures and texts, write expository essays, or perform well on high-stakes tests.

To achieve more profound levels of lasting vocabulary understanding, planned and explicit instruction is far more efficient and effective than incidental word learning through independent pleasure reading, activities, or classroom exposure. Numerous studies have documented the substantial impact of direct and systematic vocabulary instruction on both immediate word learning and subsequent comprehension of assigned readings (McKeown & Beck, 1998; Marzano, 2004).

How Does Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Differ from Vocabulary Activities?

Many well-intended teachers use an eclectic array of vocabulary activities to promote word knowledge. However, activities such as crossword puzzles, word sorts, self-paced exercise books, and creation of original sentences don't actually teach challenging new word meanings. These are silent, independent, and

unmonitored application tasks that might reasonably follow, not replace, carefully orchestrated instruction. Similarly, asking students to merely look up and copy definitions or guess from context leads to unreliable understandings and no communicative competence. A conventional classroom dictionary offers definitions that are precise and concise and neglects to provide illustrative examples within a student's experiential realm. Teaching students the word level skills to successfully exploit context is surely vital to long-term vocabulary acquisition. That said, because much academic text contains relatively few meaning clues for anything but central lesson concepts, the odds of a young reader deriving the intended meaning of a more abstract or structural word like *controversial* or *despite* is quite low. For this reason, contextual analysis should be an important skill set for young readers but not the primary or exclusive instructional strategy for classroom word learning.

Explicit vocabulary instruction is at once intentional rather than on the fly, focused, and engaging with a clear goal of guiding students in gaining ownership of critical new words. The National Reading Panel affirms that teachers can best facilitate vocabulary acquisition with school-age

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youths using these tandem methods: 1) coaching the process of determining meaning through adept context analysis and use of vocabulary resources; and 2) playing an active, directive role in introducing pivotal lesson terms and guiding competent usage.

When teaching and guiding practice with high-priority lesson terms, teachers should employ a research-informed and familiar scaffolding approach. This consistent instructional routine must actively involve young vocabulary learners in reading, pronouncing, and repeating a target word. A new and potentially challenging word must also be introduced using a student-friendly explanation and multiple illustrative examples drawn from the children's life experiences. Ultimately, explicit, intentional vocabulary instruction must guide students in flexing their language muscles and competently using the newly-taught word in a scaffolded and engaging complete sentence. When teachers directly address critical vocabulary utilizing a familiar, interactive, and accountable routine, young scholars can devote their cognitive resources to understanding and employing new words. Dynamically expanding students' oral and written vocabularies is central to school success and increases the odds that students will develop a love of words and word learning.

SOURCE

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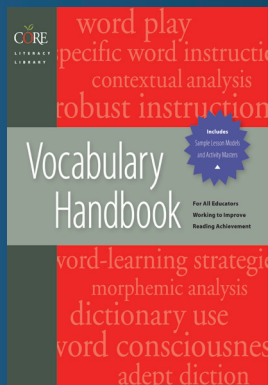
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Closing the Vocabulary Gap

by Linda Diamond

Because students enter school with wide disparities in vocabulary knowledge, it falls to the schools to close the vocabulary gap, and this requires serious vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary knowledge is a key component of reading comprehension. To be accomplished readers, students require both fluent word recognition and a sizable vocabulary. According to Biemiller (2006), "the presence of either of these accomplishments does not guarantee a high level of reading comprehension, but the absence of either word recognition or adequate vocabulary ensures a low level of reading comprehension."

Researchers recommend four components of effective vocabulary instruction:

- Wide and extensive independent reading
- Instruction in specific words with multiple exposures to those words
- Instruction in independent word-learning strategies (recognizing prefixes and suffixes, using context clues and dictionaries)
- Word-consciousness activities such as word play

As students move up through the grades, their need for even greater and more precise vocabulary knowledge grows. Students must continue to learn the meanings of many words not previously in their oral vocabularies. Much vocabulary learning occurs incidentally, as students engage in conversations with adults, while listening to books read aloud to them, and through independent reading. However, naïve readers and those seriously behind grade level simply do not read enough to gain sufficient vocabulary. Thus, all students, in particular English learners and students who enter school with impoverished vocabularies, profit from explicit, robust instruction in word meanings. In school students can directly be taught to deeply understand about 300–400 words each year, or about 8–10 words per week.

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Vocabulary Instruction in the Primary Grades

by Linda Diamond

For all students, extensive and varied reading is a crucial component of vocabulary development. However, young readers and struggling readers usually do not read enough to grow their vocabularies through reading alone. That is why, in addition to extensive independent reading, instruction in specific words is vital. According to various researchers, somewhere between 8–10 words per week is the right number to target for direct, explicit instruction. For students in the primary grades, teachers should read aloud to them and identify and teach important words that are used in a wide variety of reading materials and across content areas. Andrew Biemiller refers to these as “teachable” words, while Isabel Beck calls these “tier 2 words.” Both Biemiller and Beck have identified a similar sequence of instruction to teach the selected words explicitly after reading the story or text (see sidebar). Also, stopping briefly at the point of use and providing a quick, paraphrased, student-friendly explanation for the word is helpful.

In addition to explicitly teaching important tier 2 or teachable words, in the primary grades it is important to teach students word-learning strategies to enable them to figure out word meanings on their own. Specifically, primary grade students should learn frequently used word endings (suffixes) and how they affect meaning. These suffixes will include inflectional endings (*-ed*, *-ing*, *-es*, *-s*) and derivational endings (*-ful*, *-less*, *-ly*). Students should also learn frequently used prefixes (*un-*, *re-*) and how they affect word meaning. Young students can also learn how context clues can assist them to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

Finally, in addition to explicit teaching of carefully selected words and instruction in word-learning strategies, primary grade students also need many opportunities to practice and apply the words they are learning and to have learning words be a fun and enjoyable experience. Young children naturally enjoy playing with language and can invent words using prefixes and suffixes they know, make up rhymes with new language, and solve riddles using new vocabulary. Most important, young children profit by seeing and hearing their teachers using “big” words precisely and adeptly.

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Strategies for Vocabulary Development

Sequence of instruction to teach selected words explicitly after reading a story or text:

1 Use the word as it was used in the text.

2 Have students pronounce the word with you.

3 Provide a student-friendly explanation in language the students know for the word.

4 Use the word again in a new sentence.

5 Engage students to actively process the word and demonstrate their understanding.

6 Have students pronounce the word again.



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A Middle School Intervention to Improve Vocabulary

by Nicole Sherman-Brewer

Converging research details the critical role of vocabulary and background knowledge in passage comprehension learning (NICHD 2000; RAND 2002). It has been suggested that students with gaps in their vocabulary learning are unable to fully access their grade-level curriculum, and this becomes increasingly difficult as children progress through their school years (Biemiller 2007; Stanovich 1986). While interventions for students in the early elementary grades seem to be abundant, or at least accessible, there have been far fewer options available to address the needs of struggling adolescent readers.



One potentially promising way to address the vocabulary deficits of adolescent learners is currently in development and being piloted in middle schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. The program underway is entitled Content-Rich Vocabulary (CRV) and is designed to augment a standard English course for 7th and 8th grade students who are behind their peers in reading. CRV aggressively targets students' deficits in vocabulary and background knowledge in order to provide greater access to passage comprehension. This unprecedented approach utilized federal grant funds to use social studies passages as a framework for teaching new words to students in two-week cycles. Over the course of the curriculum students are introduced to a total of 450 specific words; a set of prefixes, suffixes, and roots; a set of context clue strategies called STARS; and an integrated vocabulary strategy that combines context clues with morphemic analysis. The CRV program also provides students with practice reading and engaging in comprehension activities around the four historical text passages found in each unit. A distinction of the CRV program is that it is fast paced, activity based, highly engaging, and designed to promote students' word consciousness.

Preliminary findings from the pilot studies thus far have indicated student growth on the vocabulary tests from an average of 46% correct on the pretest to 63% correct on the post-test. On the tests of reading comprehension, student scores improved from 48% correct on the pretest to 55% correct on the post-test. These gains were statistically significant for students in grade 7 and in grade 8. In addition to the student outcomes, teachers reported the curriculum was easy to deliver and engaging for students.

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Vocabulary Instruction for Older Students

by Linda Diamond



In social studies, science, and math, grade 4–6 students will encounter domain-specific vocabulary and academic language that will render the texts they must read ever more challenging. Teachers should continue providing students the meanings of new words during reading and other content instruction, as well as strategies for figuring out word meanings independently. Selecting specific target words to teach becomes a critical first step in assuring upper-grade students can comprehend their content-area texts. The table that follows highlights ways to select and teach specific words, recommendations for ways to teach word-learning strategies, and recommendations for vocabulary development in specific academic content areas.

Approach	Method	Example
Selecting specific words	<p>Three-tiered method (Beck & McKeown 1985)</p> <p>Recommendation: Focus on tier 2 words.</p> <p>Preteach words that are important to the text understanding, that activate students' prior knowledge, that have multiple meanings, and that provide opportunities to further enhance conceptual understanding.</p>	<p>Tier 1: Basic words</p> <p>Tier 2: Words that are useful across many domains and academic words across the curriculum (<i>observe, analyze</i>)</p> <p>Tier 3: Specialized content-specific words, low-frequency words but necessary to a particular text or concept</p>
Teaching the specific words	<p>Start by providing a student-friendly definition. Then read a contextualized usage of the word and discuss examples and nonexamples, all with the goal of providing multiple exposures to the word and actively engaging students.</p>	<p>Example: A <i>route</i> is the way you travel to get from one place to another.</p> <p>Example: My dad found the shortest <i>route</i> to take to get to the campground.</p>
Teaching word-learning strategies	<p>Teach students about new words by having them use their prior knowledge about similar words and word parts. In addition, focus on affixes—prefixes, suffixes, and roots—coupled with contextual cues to aid students in figuring out the meanings of unfamiliar words.</p>	<p>Example: You already know the word <i>portable</i>. What do you think <i>transport</i> means? What word part is similar?</p>
Teaching about words in specific academic content	<p>Teach students an important corpus of academic words directly for the specific content. The words chosen should be selected from the social studies, science, and mathematics texts students use. Prior to reading the text, students can be taught critical words through direct definition, examples and nonexamples, semantic maps, and computer resources. They also can be taught specific affixes, roots, and suffixes that have generalizable meaning to the content.</p>	<p>For example, the suffix <i>-ology</i> is useful in science. Number prefixes are useful in science and math (e.g., <i>tri-</i>, <i>bi-</i>).</p>