

Effective Vocabulary Instruction

I. Vocabulary Knowledge

Learning, as a language based activity, is fundamentally and profoundly dependent on vocabulary knowledge. Learners must have access to the meanings of words that teachers, or their surrogates (e.g., other adults, books, films, etc.), use to guide them into contemplating known concepts in novel ways (i.e., to learn something new). Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, (1998)

There are roughly 88,700 word families used in books up to 12th grade. About half the words we read are the 107 words of highest frequency. Another 5,000 words account for the next 45%, so that 95% of the text we read consists of about 5,100 different words (Adams, 1990) as found in (Stahl, 1999). 300-500 words per year can reasonably be taught through direct instruction (8-10 words per week, 50 weeks per year). Most of these new words learned must come from context (Sternberg, 1987). ELL students rely more heavily on direct instruction.

Research-based Conclusions Undergirding Vocabulary Instruction

- Effective vocabulary instruction has to start early, in preschool, and continue throughout the school years (Nagy, 2005).
- Teaching vocabulary helps develop phonological awareness (Nagy, 2005) and reading comprehension (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982).
- Vocabulary instruction needs to be long-term and comprehensive (Nagy, 2005) for ELLs (Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Calderón et al., 2005).
- Command of a large vocabulary frequently sets high-achieving students apart from less successful ones (Montgomery, 2000).
- The average 6-year-old has a vocabulary of approximately 8000 words, and learns 3000-5000 more per year (Senechal & Cornell, 1993).
- Vocabulary in kindergarten and first grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Cunningham, 2005; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Chall & Dale, 1995; Denton et al. 2011

II. Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Efficacy of Direct Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary knowledge is said to be “probably the best single indicator of a person’s overall level of intelligence,” and, similarly, “intelligence is, quite simply, the ability to learn from context” (Sternberg, 1987). Acquiring vocabulary by inferring word meaning from context is not simply “knowledge,” but is a strategy that people apply on a daily basis in a world of boundless contexts that lack both definitions and explanations. It is well established that encountering new words through reading—prodigious reading—is the most common form of word acquisition, accounting for “half of annual vocabulary growth” (St. Clair Otten, 2003; Graves, 2006). Effectiveness, however, must be weighed against the time involved. Students must spend a large amount of time reading or listening in order to encounter new words often enough to understand their meanings. In “Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension,” William Nagy cites a study that finds that uninstructed students have a one in-twenty chance of incidentally learning a new

word only from context (1988). Students reading a ten-page short story that contains twenty new words, therefore, will be fortunate to fully retain one vocabulary word from the text.

However, students read much more than short stories when they leave the classroom and are swept up in a data-rich world of text messages, email, web pages, television, and countless other contexts replete with new words they can add to the estimated 3,000 words students acquire annually (Nagy, 1988). More words being recognized does yield more retained words, but classroom time is necessarily limited to teaching only the words students need to know—not what they happen to acquire through reading. Class time must be reserved and used for the teaching of specific sets of high frequency, “added value” words based on their relevance to specific subjects or their occurrence on standardized assessment tests (Bates, 2008). Natural vocabulary learning is a perpetual, extracurricular process that requires time. Used alone, incidental context learning is not a realistic tool for primary vocabulary instruction, especially since few students are willing to study vocabulary outside the classroom; however, augmenting natural learning with direct instruction increases both the speed and accuracy of natural acquisition (St. Clair Otten, 2003; Nagy, 1988; Beck, McKeown & Omanson, 1987). Researchers who prize reading tend to agree that direct vocabulary instruction is essential to any good curriculum (Nelson, 2008; Kail, 2008 ; Marzano & Pickering, 2005; Marzano, 2010). Bromley holds that direct instruction is the most important influence to comprehension, while Marzano calls systematic instruction one of the “most crucial services that teachers can provide.”

Nagy simplifies instruction to a three-part approach based on integration, repetition, and meaningful use (1988):

1. Each word should be visited multiple times—(i.e. 5-10)--throughout the introduction, discussions, exercises, reviews, tests, etc. in each lesson; Instructional practice should strive to significantly exceed the recommended bare minimum frequency of three occurrences per new word (Beck, McKeown & Omanson, 1987).
2. In addition multiple exposure opportunities connected to individual and group instructional activities, student psychology and brain research dictates “short but frequent vocabulary activities” where the words are instructed (2003; 2008).
3. “Meaningful use,” is the third element of Nagy’s approach; it is a quality concern to ensure that word meanings will be retained and recalled easily—the essence of converting vocabulary knowledge into reading comprehension (Nagy, 1988). Students should be prompted to think about meanings of words in items such as: peer and class discussions, in-context exercises, open-ended sentence completions, and inference exercises. Writing prompts in close proximity to each lesson can also provide effective opportunities for meaningful use, further ensuring that students develop not just word knowledge, but also a strategy for “figuring out something about words” (Kameenui, Dixon & Carnine, 1987).

Key ingredients of successful vocabulary development involves the teaching of specific words AND providing direct instruction in word learning strategies.

Students should be provided extensive opportunities for reading wide and reading volume with accountability. Teachers should Pre-view texts to determine which words to teach; Pre-teach meaningful words and phrases; and Provide direct instruction and multiple exposures of the vocabulary in reading, writing, listening and speaking.

With effective vocabulary instruction, students:

- Learn words directly
- Receive explicit vocabulary instruction
- Construct definitions

- Analyze word structure
- Explore word relationships
- Receive multiple exposures and examples of words
- Engage high reading volume and are exposed to a high volume of language

Additionally, students learn indirectly through

- Listening to stories
- Teacher language
- Independent reading
- Listening to adult talk

Vocabulary instruction is NOT just:

- Teaching Dolch sight words
- Teaching decoding
- Having students guess the meaning of a word in a sentence on a quiz or test

Effective Vocabulary Instruction Encompasses

A. Word-Learning Strategies, such as

- Word Structure
- Context Clues
- Word Consciousness
- Independent Reading Strategies
- Structural Analysis

Explicit Strategy Instruction should include:

- Direct explanation
- Modeled Instruction
- Guided practice
- Feedback
- Application

B. Specific, Direct Word Instruction-Methods of teaching include:

- Direct Definitions
- Analogies
- Mapping
- Categorizing and Classifying
- Synonyms, Antonyms, & Homonyms
- Multiple Meaning Words
- Peer and group discussion

Direct Word Instruct should include:

- Modeling of decoding strategies
- Teaching of student friendly definitions

- Use of sentence stems and critical thinking questions
- Facilitation of students making personal connections
- Modeling of context clues in text
- Integration of multiple exposures to word
- Progress monitoring and feedback

III. Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction

- Wide reading
- High level and quality oral language
- Word consciousness
- Direct teaching of specific words
- Teaching and modeling independent vocabulary strategies

Least Effective Vocabulary Instructional Strategies, include

- copying definitions
- writing sentences
- memorizing definitions from a vocabulary study sheet
- asking students to use context for unknown words when there is little contextual support

Most Effective Vocabulary Instructional Strategies, include

- direct, explicit instruction of words in context
- using simple conceptual maps
- teaching specific context clues
- selecting meaningful words to teach
- increasing independent reading
- directly teaching word learning strategies
- connecting new concepts/meanings to existing knowledge base

Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2002)

In *Building Academic Vocabulary*, Marzano and Pickering (2005) advocate for a six-step process for vocabulary development:

Step 1: Teacher presents the term in "student-friendly" language (including descriptions, examples, and nonlinguistic representations of the term).

Step 2: Students restate the term in their own words (linking the new word to known experiences and background knowledge).

Step 3: Students represent the term in graphic form (reinforcing and deepening understanding through processing in a second modality).

Step 4: Students use the term in other contexts (deepening meaning by applying the term in new situations, through writing or conversation).

Step 5: Students discuss the term with peers (building understanding as a class, and augmenting this knowledge with new discoveries about the word).

Step 6: Vocabulary games give students more exposure to the term (serving as continued review in ways that engage multiple modalities for learning).

IV. Tiers of Vocabulary

Tier 1 – (Basic and General)-These are known, very common words

E.g., clock, baby, stop, run, the, happy, talk, cold

- Sight words, such as: Dolch Sight Words
- Clearly important- especially for ELLs and very naïve learners
- Easy, decodable and already familiar
- Connected with prior knowledge

Tier 2-(Abstract, Descriptive, & Academic) Words to Teach that are High Frequency, High Utility, and Often have Multiple Meanings

E.g., vary, relative, innovation, accumulate, surface, layer, avoid, fortunate, industrious

- Play a large role in verbal functioning across a variety of domains
- Necessary to understanding...GENERALIZABLE
- Goal for instruction – aim to teach 300-500 words per year

Tier 3-(Precision) Low Frequency Words; Context Specific; Technical Words-highly specialized and subject-specific; low occurrences in texts; lacking generalization

E.g., lava, aorta, legislature, circumference, isotope

- Low frequency
- Often specific to domains
- Instruct when need arises

Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is “not unique to a particular discipline, and, as a result, is not the clear responsibility of a particular content area teacher. What is more, many Tier Two words are far less well defined by contextual clues in the texts in which they appear and are far less likely to be defined explicitly within a text than are Tier Three words. Yet, Tier Two words are frequently encountered in complex written texts and are particularly powerful because of their wide applicability to many sorts of reading. Teachers thus need to be alert to the presence of Tier Two words and determine which ones need careful attention” (Common Core State Standards (English Language Arts, Appendix A).

Why are Academic Vocabulary Words of Particular Importance

- They are critical to understanding academic texts.
- They appear in all sorts of texts.
- They require deliberate effort to learn, unlike Tier 1 words.
- They are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech.
- They often represent subtle or precise ways to say otherwise relatively simple things.
- They are seldom heavily scaffolded by authors or teachers, unlike Tier 3 words.

Common Core State Standards, Appendix A, page 33