

Nonie K. Lesaux, Ph.D.

# Beyond the Word List: Comprehensive Vocabulary Instruction by Nonie K. Leame 

Across generations of schooling, vocabulary instruction has started with a list of words—often words from a particular story. And in many classrooms, to teach these words, a familiar scene unfolds: the teacher introduces the words and posts the list. As part of this vocabulary instruction, students might match words with their dictionary definitions, and, at some point, they might read a story containing the words and answer a set of comprehension questions. After these kinds of instructional activities, it's often time for assessment.

In this traditional scenario, the time and attention devoted to vocabulary learning are limited. But to meet the needs of today's readers, and the literacy demands that are part of today's Common Core Standards, research tells us that this instructional paradigm is going to have to shift. We need to focus more carefully on the words we're choosing to teach, reconsider the duration and overall approach to vocabulary instruction, and investigate the types of opportunities we're giving our students to learn any given word.

For all learners, vocabulary and reading comprehension have a reciprocal relationship-while greater vocabulary leads to greater comprehension, better comprehension also leads to learning more vocabulary words (Stanovich, 2008). Yet vocabulary learning is an enormous task; in order to be academically successful, students must leave high school with a working understanding of about 50,000 words. And at the core of the role of vocabulary in reading comprehension is the relationship between vocabulary and a child's knowledge about the world-their background knowledge.

Thinking about vocabulary instruction as a vehicle to building up a child's background and conceptual knowledge, though, has major implications for how we go about the instructional task (Heibert, 2005). And that means a paradigm shift-in at least four ways. We need to

- focus on the words that matter most
- use a deep, interactive approach to build word knowledge
- follow research-based routines
- build strategies for word learning.


## Focus on the words that matter most

We can't possibly teach students the roughly 50,000 words they need to know to be academically successful-we just don't have the time. So we need to make sure that we're making the absolute most of that time. That means a focus on building up students' vocabulary and background knowledge for reading success in all content areas.

As in the opening scenario, traditional vocabulary instruction practice tends to focus on low-frequency or rare words, or to focus on the concrete nouns that are part of children's everyday lives (e.g., furniture, foods) (Heibert, 2005). But these words can be relatively unimportant when we stack them up against all of the words that our students need to know. To be effective, we must more strategic about the words we are teaching as part of vocabulary instruction.

In every classroom, we can focus on the words students need to be academically successful and then use them as a platform for a number of important learning goals, including 1) increasing academic talk (e.g., dialogue, debate); 2) promoting more strategic reading of narrative and informational text; and 3) supporting students' research and inquiry-all skills that make up what we call "advanced literacy" and all key anchors of the Common Core Standards. We call these words bigh-utility, academic words (e.g., analyze, characteristic, observe) because if learned deeply, they support overall academic success, not just the comprehension of a specific text or reading lesson. They are words that show up far more in print than they do in conversation, even between educated adults.

A focus on academic words is especially important when teaching students with underdeveloped vocabularies, who need to know them in order to access the content-specific words they encounter. In Reach

for Reading, we have been very strategic about what words are taught during the precious instructional time spent on vocabulary instruction (high-utility, academic words).

## Use a deep, interactive approach to build word knowledge

Knowing a word is not an all-or-nothing affair-we all have degrees of knowledge of any given word. Degrees of knowledge range from no knowledge at all to a general sense of the word, all the way to an understanding of the abstract concept that underlies the word. As is the case for many students in today's classrooms, we might understand a word when someone else uses it in a specific context, but we don't use the word in our own writing or speaking, and we might struggle with its meaning when we come across it in print when we are reading on our own and don't have the benefit of interaction with another person. And this compromises our comprehension in that instance. But for many of our students, lack of deep word knowledge compromises not just their reading comprehension, but their academic success. These students have some understanding of a whole lot of words—but it's not accumulating for academic success.

The goal of vocabulary instruction, then, is for students to gain an understanding of the concept that a word represents, to acquire its multiple meanings, to understand its relationship to other words, and to understand how it is used figuratively or metaphorically. But getting to deep knowledge of a word takes time and a much more interactive, comprehensive approach than what has been standard in our classrooms. This means an instructional plan that builds in opportunities to learn these words over an extended period of time, providing multiple exposures across the lesson cycle, and in different ways-drawing on and developing students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Word learning must be anchored in rich content. Students need to learn how to think about language and how words work-and this takes time and multiple opportunities across different instructional contexts. It especially means the benefit of discussion and dialogue to clarify one's knowledge and grapple with new learning. And there is consensus that this deeper, more sustained approach to vocabulary instruction means focusing on fewer words. This contrasts with the more common practice of teaching a large number of words starting with a list or workbook, a practice that might get us to Friday's vocabulary test but not to deep knowledge that is maintained over the long-term.

Reach for Reading includes academic and content words that are very tightly connected to content under study-to build up background knowledge. Students using Reach for Reading gain multiple exposures to each word and are given myriad opportunities to hear, read, and use the word in reading, writing, listening and speaking.


## Follow research-based routines

In spite of the fact that gaps in reading performance are often associated with gaps in vocabulary knowledge, instruction in this area occurs infrequently and inconsistently in most classrooms across the U.S. and Canada (Foorman et al. 2001,: Lesaux et al., 2006; Scott, Jamieson-Noel, \& Asselin, 2003; Watts, 1995). Estimates suggest that in kindergarten through second grade classrooms, only between 10 percent and 28 percent of academic time focuses on explicit instruction to support oral language development; by the middle school years, this number is about 10 percent. And when it does happen, much of this vocabulary instruction is what we would call "incidental" in nature. Instruction is often not part of a long-term plan, nor does it provide students with multiple, varied opportunities.

Take, for example, what research finds to be one of the most common scenarios for vocabulary instruction: The class is gathered around for a read aloud and the teacher starts reading. As she moves through the pages, she comes across a word that she is fairly certain many of the students will not know. She stops, provides a definition (with example) for the word, in passing, and continues through the pages. In this way, the students are really only exposed to the word once, and there is just one teaching method (i.e., a verbal explanation). This instruction is not part of a long-term plan, nor does it provide students with multiple, varied opportunities as part of a comprehensive routine to build up deep knowledge. Whether deep teaching and learning has occurred is questionable, even unlikely; we know from important research on vocabulary instruction, especially that which focuses on the number of exposures, across contexts, that a child needs to learn a word, that a much more planful, comprehensive approach is needed.

Guided by a long-term plan for vocabulary learning, Reach for Reading features a weekly research-based vocabulary instructional routine. The routine recognizes the importance of repetition in deliberate and strategic ways to provide students with multiple, varied exposures to the words (and their concepts) and to practice their word learning. Across the cycle, instructional tasks draw on and develop students reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.


[^0]
## Build strategies for word learning

As mentioned earlier, we can't possibly "cover" all the words students need to learn for academic success. But while reading, students constantly come up against words that they don't know-and readers need tools to figure out the meaning these words. Therefore, as part of deep, interactive vocabulary instruction, we need to equip students with strategies to try to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word they encounter while reading. Without these tools, readers might skip the words repeatedly and potentially lose overall meaning, or they may get "stuck" on those words and lose their train of thought that is central to the meaning-making process. What the students do at a crossroads while reading depends in large part on the word-learning strategies they have in their toolkits.

To become advanced readers, students need to be able to pull apart an unfamiliar word (e.g., is there a root or suffix that might help to signal its meaning?), dig deeply enough to find a helpful context clue (e.g., does something in the prior paragraph signal what this might mean?), think of a related word that looks the same (e.g., is it a cognate?), or think about when they heard the word prior to this reading (e.g., what is the connection to background knowledge?). With direct and explicit teaching of word-learning strategies, students are better able to work through more challenging text and get closer to that goal of acquiring the thousands of words needed for academic success.

Instruction in word-learning strategies is systematic and incorporated into the instructional pathway presented in Reach for Reading. Students connect strategies to key words and have multiple opportunities to apply word-learning strategies.


Instruction and practice in word-learning strategies equip students to extend vocabulary beyond the words taught in Reach for Reading.

## Conclusion

Research finds that well-developed vocabulary knowledge-the often specialized and sophisticated language of text-is an important tool for making meaning while reading. It is also a common source of weakness for students who don't understand deeply the text they've read, even when they might have read it fluently. In fact, these same students might answer a set of literal comprehension questions accurately, but when they move to more complex literacy tasksincluding drawing inferences, producing a written composition, and engaging in academic debate and dialogue-lack of deep vocabulary knowledge impedes performance.

To equip today's readers with the advanced literacy skills that are needed for post-secondary success (and full participation in society) and that are part of today's Common Core Standards, research tells us that there are key shifts to instructional paradigm for promoting word learning. Within our literacy blocks and across classrooms, we need to focus more carefully on the words we're choosing to teach, reconsider the duration and overall approach to vocabulary instruction, and investigate the types of opportunities we're giving our students to learn any given word.


[^0]:    A My Vocabulary Notebook is a digital resource to support the Reach for Reading vocabulary routines.

