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Beyond the Word List: Comprehensive Vocabulary Instruction

by Nonie K. Lesaux

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 *high-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).



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.

Part 2
Word Work

Suffixes

Many English words end with a **suffix**, or a short word part. Many of these English suffixes came from Latin, Greek, or Old English. Sometimes knowing the meaning of the suffix can help you predict the meaning of the word.

This chart shows some common suffixes.

Suffix	Origin	Meaning	Example
-able	Latin	can be done	allowable, transferable
-ist	Greek	one that does	biologist, geologist
-ful	Old English	full of	useful, careful

The suffix *-ful* means *full of*. What do you think the word *thoughtful* means?

Try It Together

Read the sentences. Then answer the questions. Use the chart to help you.

Marine botanists study plant life in the ocean—from spiky sea urchins, to bountiful seaweed. They think studying plants is enjoyable and useful work.

- Look for the Latin suffix in the word *enjoyable*. What do you think *enjoyable* means?
 A not enjoyable
 B one who enjoys things
 C a fun object
 D can be enjoyed
- Look for the Greek suffix *-ist*. What do you think *botanist* means?
 A an ocean plant
 B one that studies botany
 C the study of plant life
 D a male scientist

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▲ 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 tasks—including 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.