The Importance of Vocabulary Instruction

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What is Vocabulary?

All words are pegs to hang ideas on.

- Vocabulary refers to words we need to know to communicate with others.
- There are 4 types of vocabulary: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
Why do? Vocabulary

- Knowledge of words help readers make sense of what they see in print.
- Readers must know what most of the words mean before they can understand what they are reading.
- Students need to develop rich associations between words to speed retrieval and increase knowledge of meaning.

What do mean by Vocabulary Instruction?

- Vocabulary instruction is when we give our students opportunities to explore relationships between words.
- How can we do this?
  - We should have direct and explicit teaching of vocabulary.
  - AND ...we should be sure that we provide time for wide reading in EVERY classroom to allow for the incidental learning of vocabulary words.
- Reading has the largest impact on a student’s vocabulary development.
Vocabulary and Comprehension

- There is a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and comprehension.
- Vocabulary is critical to the development of reading (Nagy and Anderson, 1984; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986; Stanovich, 2004).
- If our students do not know the meaning of the words, and if they do not know how to construct meaning for the words, then there is no way they will comprehend the text.

Sample Exercise

So What?

- Children learn 2,000 to 3,000 or more new words each year.
- This equates to 7 words per day that are learned by children.
- By the end of high school, our students could possibly have learned over 24,000 new words.
Vocabulary Growth

- This rapid rate of vocabulary growth illustrates that only a fraction of the words that are learned are through explicit vocabulary instruction where students are involved in focused vocabulary activities.
- There are simply too many words students are learning for this to occur.
- Explicit vocabulary instruction accounts for only a portion of the words learned by a student each year. Instead, much of this vocabulary growth seems to be gained naturally from reading.
- This incidental learning of vocabulary from context contributes to a large amount of each student’s vocabulary growth (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; Nagy and Scott, 2004).

The Matthew Effects

- The fact that the amount of reading contributes to vocabulary growth means that the student who is already reading well will continue to show growth in vocabulary.
- This type of phenomenon is called the Matthew Effect, which means the “rich get richer” and the “poor get poorer” (Stanovich, 2004), relates to a passage from the Bible:
  "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (XXV:29).
Bridge the Gap between the “Haves” and the “Have Nots”

- We can help bridge the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” by providing activities that help our students extend their understandings of words.
- Two conditions that can help ensure that word learning will occur from reading include (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002).
  - There must be opportunities for **wide reading** so that students can encounter a substantial number of unfamiliar words.
  - That students must have developed the skills they need to infer word meaning from the context when they are reading.

What Can We Do Differently?

- Asking students to memorize definitions is the most common approach used in the classroom.
- This approach is also the least effective in helping students retain a knowledge and understanding of what the word actually means.

**Memorizing Definitions**

Say No to Simple Memorization of Definitions
How Can We Make Vocabulary Instruction More Effective?

Effective vocabulary instruction includes these four elements (Carr & Wixon, 1986; McKeown & Beck, 2004; Nagy and Herman, 1987; Stahl, 1986):

◦ A connection to background knowledge,
◦ Provide multiple exposures to words,
◦ Provide opportunities for active involvement, and
◦ Develop elaborated word knowledge.

Why Should We Be Aware of These Elements?

• When these elements are present, then our students have the time and opportunity to develop and expand words they are learning and adding to their vocabulary.
• Students move through stages of word learning:
  • Stage 1 - Having never seen the word before,
  • Stage 2 - Hearing the word before but not knowing what it means,
  • Stage 3 - Recognizing the word in context as having something to do with another word they know,
  • Stage 4 - Knowing it well, and
  • Stage 5 - Being able to use the word in a sentence.
    (Dale, 1965; Paribakht and Wesche, 1997)
• Our goal then is to give them the time and opportunity to do this effectively.
Dale’s Cone of Experience

- Dale’s Cone of Experience is a model that incorporates several theories related to instructional design and learning processes.
- During the 1960s, Edgar Dale theorized that learners retain more information by what they “do” as opposed to what is “heard”, “read” or “observed”.
- His research led to the development of the Cone of Experience.
- Today, this “learning by doing” has become known as “experiential learning” or “action learning”.

### Levels of Experience

- **70%—Say and Write**
  - Simulate, model, or experience a lesson
  - Design or perform a presentation
  - Do a “real” thing

- **50%—See and Hear**
  - Participate in hands-on demonstration
  - Design collaborative lessons

- **30%—See**
  - Watch still pictures
  - Watch videos or movies
  - Attend exhibits
  - Watch a demonstration

- **20%—Hear**
  - Listen to Lecture, Hear

### Examples of Experiences

- **Describe**
- **List**
- **Explain**
- **Demonstrate**
- **Apply**
- **Practice**
- **Analyze**
- **Design**
- **Create**
- **Evaluate**
Selecting Words to Target

- **There are three tiers of words** ([Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002]):
  - **Tier One Words** — Words that are already in student’s vocabulary and do not have to be taught. Examples include the, play, clock, and baby.
  - **Tier Two Words** — Words that have a wide utility, but students do not necessarily have them in their spoken vocabularies. There are approximately 7,000 Tier Two words. Examples of Tier Two words include absurd, unique, and complex.
  - **Tier Three Words** — Specialized words that are not used outside of the disciplines they are found, so their frequency of use is low. These words are best learned during science, social studies, and math. Examples of this tier of words are peninsula, isotope, and nebula.

Focus: Tier Two or Tier Three?

Guidelines for Selecting Words

- **Usefulness of the word** — Will students encounter the word in other texts? Will it help students to describe their own experiences?
- **Relationship of the word with other words** — Does the word relate to other topics studied in the classroom? How does the word relate to what the students have been learning?
- **Role of the word** — What role does the word play in helping to determine the meaning of the context that it is used? What does the word bring to the text or situation? ([Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002])
Important to Remember

- The words selected should be ones that are challenging and will help students comprehend the story/text (McKeown & Beck, 2004).
- These words can be selected from a variety of sources, such as from:
  - grade level textbooks (i.e., math, science, social studies, reading, etc.),
  - classroom events,
  - newspapers,
  - magazines, and
  - television.
- The goal is to extend each student’s understanding of the many ways that the words can be used.

When Should Vocabulary Instruction be Addressed?

- Vocabulary words can be explicitly addressed either:
  - before reading,
  - during reading, or
  - after reading.
- It will depend on the text, the activity, and the individual needs of your student.
Before Reading

It is necessary to provide vocabulary instruction prior to reading, if...
- Students are second language learners, have a learning disability, or have difficulty during reading.
- Students do not have the background knowledge necessary to be able to construct meaning of the text.
- The text has concepts that are too difficult for students to understand.

During Reading

- **Model** for students how to underline, highlight, or take notes to help them as they construct meaning and recall important information.
- **Teach** students to continually ask themselves, “Do I understand what this means? Does this make sense?”
- **Show** students how the titles of chapters, subheadings, captions, and bold-face or colored print can help them get the big idea about a concept.
- **Discuss** with your students how to examine charts, tables, illustrations, glossaries, and other access features that are shown in a text.
After Reading

- Use after reading activities to focus on clarifying and expanding word knowledge.
- If students have any questions about particular vocabulary words, this is the time for those words to be discussed.
- It is also a good time to look at the author’s use of language by referring back to the words in the text, and then discuss with your students what the author is trying to communicate by using such descriptive language.

Goal of Vocabulary Instruction

- A major goal of vocabulary instruction is to help students explore relationships between words. As they read, students gain meaning through their understanding of words.
- There is a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and comprehension.
- If we help our students develop vocabulary knowledge, then this can positively impact comprehension.
Things to Remember in Vocabulary Instruction

- Select words carefully and thoughtfully
- Situate vocabulary in a real context
- Connect to background knowledge
- Encourage student friendly definitions
- Support meaningful discussions about words
- Use a variety of strategies
- Teach words at a conceptual level
- Recognize that students will know and use new words at various levels of knowing
- Provide multiple exposures to words

References