



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Vocabulary*

“A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged, it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and the time in which it is used.”

~ Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1918
Towne v. Eisner, 245 U.S. 425

WHAT IS VOCABULARY?

Any child who is past the first grade could give a fairly accurate definition of *vocabulary*: the words you have to know to read a story. Secondary students might define vocabulary as a list of words given by the teacher in order to comprehend a given text. An engineer might define vocabulary as a working knowledge of the words necessary to succeed in his vocation. And to a poet, vocabulary is simply the stuff of life. The National Reading Panel penned a more formal definition:

“Vocabulary is stored information about the meanings and pronunciations of words necessary for communication” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2000). Other researchers have delineated various types of vocabulary, such as

- Listening vocabulary — the words needed to understand what is heard.
- Speaking vocabulary — the words used when speaking.
- Reading vocabulary — the words needed to understand what is read.
- Writing vocabulary — the words used in writing.
- Sight vocabulary — those words that can be identified without explicit decoding during reading (International Reading Association, 2002, p. 112).

WHY IS VOCABULARY IMPORTANT?

Although the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension has been widely recognized for years, vocabulary instruction has not been in vogue

in professional literature until recently (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999, p. 336). The sudden spotlight on reading has facilitated a deeper interest in all aspects of reading, including vocabulary; and researchers are now stating the obvious: “Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension; one cannot understand text without knowing what most of the words mean” (Nagy, 2003, p. 1). The research behind that statement is a bit more comprehensive than it first appears. Anderson and Freebody, vocabulary researchers, hypothesized that there are three reasons that vocabulary knowledge is a good indicator of reading success:

1. Understanding words enables readers to understand passages.
2. Verbal aptitude underlies both word and passage comprehension.
3. Vocabulary knowledge may be related to a person’s store of background information (1981, p.115).

The bottom line? Nagy summarized Anderson and Freebody’s report, *Vocabulary Knowledge*, when he wrote: “The proportion of difficult words in text is the single most powerful predictor of text difficulty, and a reader’s general vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of how well that reader can understand text” (2003, p. 1).

RESEARCH REVIEW

Vocabulary acquisition, like reading itself, is a complex process. While many words are learned through context and everyday experiences with oral and written language, some vocabulary, particularly

technical and subject-specific words, are often learned through direct instruction. (NICHD, 2000).

Vocabulary instruction becomes even more difficult when one considers that there are levels to knowing words. While some words are very familiar to students, other words may take repeated exposure to come to know. Researchers Beck, McKeown, McCasline, and Burkes report three levels of word knowledge: unknown, acquainted and established. They also contend that it is essential for students to have frequent encounters with a word and understand the connection between words and ideas before students begin to “own” a word (Irvin, Buehl, & Kemp, 2003, pp. 115-116). It is important to note that superficial exposures to words, or looking up words in the dictionary does not provide students with the necessary connections or associations to establish words in a learner’s vocabulary storehouse.

“Definitions alone can lead to only a relatively superficial level of word knowledge. By itself, looking up words in a dictionary or memorizing definitions does not reliably improve reading comprehension” (Nagy, pp.4-5). What, then, is a teacher to do to increase vocabulary?

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT VOCABULARY

It is clear that not all instructional practices in the teaching of vocabulary are equally effective. The goal is to create a deep and lasting knowledge of words. Nagy in his book *Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension* suggests that teaching “redundancy of text” explains many past failures of vocabulary instruction. If texts contain unfamiliar words but these words do not hinder comprehension, then to spend instruction time on teaching those words would not improve comprehension. In fact, “inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words in text is itself a major avenue of vocabulary growth” (2003, p.3). Nagy cites a study by Freebody and Anderson in 1983 that found that “one content word in six could be replaced by a more difficult synonym without significantly decreasing comprehension” (p. 3). The overriding instructional practice, then, that supports the building of strong vocabularies is wide reading. Nagy goes so far as to say that what is needed to “produce vocabulary growth is not more vocabulary instruction, but more reading” (p. 3). With that premise at the forefront of all instruction, there are sound practices that provide effective vocabulary growth.

ACTIVATING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Research clearly points to the importance of making connections from known vocabulary to new vocabulary as well as activating readers’ experiential and conceptual background in vocabulary development (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999, p. 338). Facilitating discussions with students in small groups, brainstorming concepts surrounding the new words and utilizing a variety of concept and webbing maps are effective in activating and sharing knowledge. Preparing students for new information by allowing them the necessary time to access associations they already have is key in facilitating long-term and deep vocabulary knowledge.

ACTIVE PROCESS VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Although indirect instruction and wide reading is an important part of vocabulary acquisition, students must also have frequent opportunities for direct instruction.

Rupley, Logan, and Nichols, in an article titled “Vocabulary Instruction in a Balanced Reading Program” cite the following instructional guidelines from Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996; Blachowicz and Lee, 1991:

- Select words for vocabulary instruction that come from texts students will read. Help students make connections between existing knowledge and new knowledge so students can encounter new words “in a confirmatory manner rather than as an unknown word.”
- Provide students with multiple opportunities to use new words in their speaking, listening, reading and writing activities.
- Help students learn new words by building a conceptual base through utilizing analogies, language features and other relationships to known words.
- Provide a variety of instructional strategies to help students retain the word knowledge, such as visual aides, kinesthetic associations, or mental pictures (pp. 338-339).

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTIONAL TOOLS

There are a variety of instructional tools that can help students internalize words conceptually, but students should learn to use such strategies flexibly as a way to deepen vocabulary rather than as worksheets. No one tool will fit every student's need or work in every context.

- **Word Sort** — The teacher supplies a list of words to students on index cards and, in small groups, students categorize and sort words based upon known associations.
- **Concept Word Map/Web** — Students work in small groups to learn connections among words by brainstorming and organizing words according to a map that they design or a blank one that is provided by the teacher. An example might be a key-concept word in the center of the page with rays connecting related words.
- **Semantic Feature Analysis** — The teacher lists several concept words that are related and can be compared to one another. Students find characteristics or features associated with the concept words. In a chart with rows and columns, the concept words are listed on the left side of the chart, and the features and characteristics are the column headings. This creates a grid, and features can be identified for each concept by adding + or – marks.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS AND MORPHOLOGY

Morphology is analyzing words according to their pronunciation, part of speech, prefix, suffix or root. Ryder in his vocabulary research found that students can increase their vocabularies by up to 20,000 words from grades three to seven by using a “combination of context clues and morphological analysis” (Irvin, 2003, p. 117). Showing students *how* to analyze words deepens their sense of word knowledge and provides them with an additional tool for unlocking word meanings. Provide students with charts of common roots, prefixes and suffixes as a reference to help them in their word study. Point out the meanings of word parts in new words, and remind students to use their knowledge of prefixes and suffixes when encountering an unfamiliar word.

SUMMARY

The connection between a strong vocabulary and comprehension is irrefutable. Students who read widely and understand how words represent concepts have a distinct advantage over students who know few words and are unable to access word meaning. By activating background knowledge, providing frequent exposure to new words and showing students how to use vocabulary tools such as maps and webs, teachers can help students increase their vocabulary skills and knowledge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Allen, J. (1999). *Words, words, words: Teaching vocabulary in grades 4-12*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

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