

Vocabulary – Background Information

Introduction

ALL struggling students need direct and explicit instruction in:
Vocabulary,
Comprehension, and
Motivation and Engagement.

SOME struggling students need direct and explicit instruction in:
Advanced Word Study, and
Fluency (to promote comprehension).

Good readers read more and become better readers. They are exposed to and learn more words. On the other hand, poor readers read less and are exposed to and learn fewer words. As a result, they do not become strategic readers. Stanovich (1986) termed this phenomenon the Matthew Effect—the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Struggling readers' vocabulary size and subsequent vocabulary growth are greatly affected by their inability to engage in wide reading. Thus, the gap in vocabulary development between good and struggling readers widens, affecting directly students' ability to comprehend both literary and factual text. Vocabulary growth differences appear early and worsen over time (Beck & McKeown, 1991).

The skills that are associated with vocabulary knowledge are:

- word identification (ability to decode word)
 - word analysis (understanding letters, sounds and roots, prefixes and suffixes that make up words),
 - syntactic awareness (grammatical use of a word), and
 - pragmatic awareness (how words are used to communicate)
- (Curtis, 2004)

All of these skills together constitute students' vocabulary knowledge. Word identification or recognition without comprehension of the meaning and use of a word indicates a deficiency in vocabulary knowledge.

The table below outlines several relevant characteristics of successful and struggling readers in the area of vocabulary knowledge.

Successful Readers	Struggling readers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are exposed to a breadth of vocabulary words in conversations and print at home and at school from a very early age. • Have word consciousness. • Understand most words when they are reading (at least 90%) and can make sense of unknown words to build their vocabulary knowledge. • Learn words incrementally, through multiple exposures to new words. • Have content-specific prior knowledge that helps them understand how words are used in a particular context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have limited exposure to new words. • May not enjoy reading, and therefore do not select reading as an independent activity. • May lack word consciousness, including an awareness of the complex and varied nature of words in written and oral language. • Are unable to comprehend consistently what they read or to learn new words from reading. • Lack the variety of experiences and exposures necessary to gain deep understanding of new words. • Often have limited content-specific prior knowledge that is insufficient to support word learning.

Boardman, Roberts, Vaughn, Wexler, Murray & Kosanovich (2008)

Why is teaching vocabulary important?

There is a clear consensus among researchers that accelerating vocabulary growth is a vital and often neglected component of a comprehensive reading program (Baumann & Kame'enui, 2004). In the middle years, there is a shift away from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” and there are dramatic increases in the amount of vocabulary that students need to comprehend their texts. Vocabulary development is critical if students are to acquire the content of the middle years curriculum. In content areas in which text is more technical and abstract, insufficient vocabulary knowledge can become especially problematic for students with reading difficulties.

Teachers should provide students with explicit vocabulary instruction both as part of reading and language arts classes and as part of content area subjects. Providing explicit instruction in vocabulary enables teachers to help students learn the meaning of new words and strengthen their independent skills of constructing the meaning of text (Kamil, et al., 2008).

What works in vocabulary instruction?

For word learning to occur, instruction should focus on:

- **multiple exposures** – students are more likely to retain new words they learn if they are exposed to them multiple times
- **meaningful use** – students are more likely to develop deep and lasting knowledge of new words if they use the words in meaningful contexts and think actively about what the word means and how it connects to other words...
- **multiple meanings of words** – words have multiple meanings which are often unrelated or tangentially related and these meaning should be introduced to students.
- **structural analysis** – teaching students to recognise the various elements of a word, such as prefixes and suffixes, is an effective means of expanding their vocabularies.

(White, 2010)

How do we teach vocabulary?

Vocabulary instruction can be divided into three broad areas (Boardman, Roberts, Vaughn, Wexler, Murray & Kosanovich, 2008):

Vocabulary Instruction	Description	Strategy
1. Additive vocabulary instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additive vocabulary instruction focuses on teaching specific words • Additive vocabulary instruction involves explicit instruction and guided practice of specific words. Words are taught that are important and useful for students to know. 	Which words do I teach?
2. Generative vocabulary instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generative vocabulary instruction teaches word-learning strategies, which allow for independent word learning. • Generative vocabulary instruction focuses on the relatedness of words and classes of words. Students learn to identify the meaning of new or unfamiliar words by using their existing knowledge of specific words and word parts. 	Examples and non-examples Using context to determine word meaning Teaching word parts Using context and word parts
3. Academic vocabulary instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic vocabulary instruction addresses word learning and word learning strategies in specific academic content areas. • In academic vocabulary instruction, teachers attend to the meanings of words in a specific context, usually the curriculum in content areas such as life or earth sciences, social studies, or mathematics. • Academic vocabulary instruction uses both additive and generative instructional practices. 	Pre-teach unknown vocabulary Semantic maps

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