Effective Vocabulary Instruction

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Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in students' ability to comprehend text, as many studies have demonstrated (Beck, McKewon, & Kuncan, 2013; Freebody & Anderson, 1983; Pearson, Hiebert, & Kamil, 2007). Research that looks at the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension suggests that the connection between the two relies, in part, on vocabulary knowledge facilitating inference making (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006).

The fact that directly teaching vocabulary has been demonstrated to increase reading comprehension has further strengthened the connection between vocabulary and comprehension (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). It is important to note, however, that many studies advocate the need for vocabulary instruction to follow specific guidelines to have an effect; for example, students need multiple exposures to target words in order to show a measurable change in vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Beck, Perfetti, & McKewon, 1982; Nagy, 1988; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986).

I. Vocabulary Instruction

When addressing explicit instruction in vocabulary, several investigators have proposed similar approaches to teaching vocabulary. For example, Marzano (2009) described a six-step method for teaching new words, which consists of 1) explaining the word using student-friendly language; 2) having students paraphrase using their own words; 3) asking students to show the word with a picture; 4) allowing students to discuss the word; 5) engaging students in refining and reflecting on their original writing of the word; and 6) applying the word through games. Beck et al. (2013) suggested a similar approach of Say, Define, [give an] Example, and Ask.

In order to provide an adequate vocabulary foundation, teachers need to directly teach between 400 and 700 words per year (Beck et al., 2013). Because instructional time is limited, a strategic approach to word selection (for example, one where teachers select words found in students' reading selections and units of study) is a key step in maximizing the educational gains of vocabulary instruction (Baumann & Graves, 2010). An adequate choice of target words ensures that students are taught words that lead to academic success. According to Beck et al. (2013), words can be sorted into three common categories for vocabulary instruction based largely on the frequency with which students encounter words:

- Everyday or Tier 1 words are simpler words that are typically learned before schooling begins;

- General academic or Tier 2 words are commonly learned in school and used by mature readers and writers;

- Domain-specific or Tier 3 words are often found in informational text focusing on specialized domains.

Selecting target vocabulary words based on their educational value must then be followed by a plan for ensuring that students develop a robust understanding of those words through effective instruction.

II. Features of Effective Vocabulary Instruction

In addition to principles common to teaching any subject matter—for example, communicating clear objectives, giving feedback, and monitoring performance—vocabulary instruction should meet additional guidelines to ensure learning and retention (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

Those guidelines can be summarized as follows: vocabulary instruction must include **spaced independent practice** with **multiple exposures** using **multiple modalities**.

- **Spaced independent practice** refers to the frequency and duration with which students practice words independently. Specifically, multiple, shorter practice sessions are more effective at promoting understanding and retention compared to sessions that are longer but less frequent (Brown et al., 2014; Willingham, 2002). In other words, practice sessions should be spaced in time rather than condensed within a short period of time. In that sense, the traditional approach of teaching a set of vocabulary words per week, where students practice the newly learned words for one week and then move on to new words without revisiting the ones already learned, does not allow for spaced independent practice (Willingham, 2002).

- **Multiple exposures** refers to the number of times students are exposed to a word. Once students visit a word a dozen or more times, they are better able to comprehend it and integrate it into their vocabulary repertoire in writing, speech, and play (McKewon, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985). Being able to experience multiple exposures to a word increases the likelihood that, cumulatively, those exposures will provide a variety of context clues and additional background knowledge that will help students to learn the word (Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Brown et al., 2014).

- **Multiple modalities** refers to implementing variation into how students interact with new words; for example, by having students read, hear, and say the words (University of Michigan, 2016). Students also benefit from exposure to the phonemic properties of words, including hearing the word while simultaneously observing the corresponding letters in the written word (Marzano, 2004) and seeing and hearing the syllabication of words (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008). Playing games that involve manipulating vocabulary words also helps students develop a metacognitive understanding of the function and role of words; for example, when students see words as entities that can be used and examined, they become more interested in words (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004).

Vocabulary A–Z™ Supports Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

The resources in Vocabulary A–Z were designed to support vocabulary development through effective instruction and practice.

- **Word Lists** include lists of vocabulary words organized by function, content area, tier, specialized sets (such as Dolch, Fry, and Marzano word lists), and connections to other resources, including those for ELL learners. Teachers can access these word lists or create their own from a pool of more than 17,000 words. Once a word list is created, its contents populate a printable 5-Day Lesson Plan to introduce and practice the words in multiple modalities, including games. The five days in these teaching plans need not be consecutive; teachers can use this plan for spaced practice.

- **Game-based practice** is a series of online activities where students apply their knowledge of new words in game-like tasks and receive immediate feedback for their answers. In this online practice, students apply their vocabulary words by matching words to definitions, context sentences or images; filling out context sentences with the correct words; and using definitions, context sentences, and cloze sentences as clues to find or spell vocabulary words. Teachers can also digitally assign game-based practice for vocabulary words from texts in Reading A–Z®, Raz-Plus®, Science A–Z®, and popular basal programs.

- **Quizzes** are printable or interactive tools that allow teachers to quickly gauge student knowledge of target words.

- **Premade Vocabulary Lessons** are 5-Day Lesson Plans that include words found in specific texts from Reading A–Z, Raz-Plus, Science A–Z, and popular basal programs. Through their connection with specific texts, these lessons help to ensure that students also have a wider context for the target words. The words in premade vocabulary lessons can be assigned digitally to students in the form of game-based practice.

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