

Reading Instructional Strategy: Vocabulary Development

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Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development begins, essentially, at birth. Infants and children are constantly picking up on what their parents say, or sometimes, what they do not say. Hart and Risley published an extensive study in 1995 about the language exposure experiences of children in 42 different families of various socioeconomic statuses. By the age of 4, children of professionals have heard nearly 32 million more words than children whose parents are on welfare. This averages out to about 1,500 more words per hour. The children on the poorer end of the socioeconomic spectrum are substantially behind their professional and working class classmates, in terms of vocabulary exposure, before they even begin kindergarten. The discrepancy does not vanish once formal education begins, and this can have some dire consequences because of the importance of vocabulary growth and development for overall academic success.

There are many keys to educational success, and even more processes in which students must become skilled in order to continue learning and growing throughout their lives. Developing good reading and literacy skills at an early age are necessary to academic achievement and educational success. Vocabulary development is one of the major areas educators need to focus on when teaching students how to read and comprehend language. The term "vocabulary development" is used to describe the strategies and instructional methods used to enhance, improve, and increase the number of words students can recognize and use in correct context. According to the Texas Education Agency (2002), "Promoting Vocabulary Development: Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction," there are several different types of vocabulary, including: listening vocabulary which is made up of the words we hear and understand; speaking vocabulary made up of the words used in everyday speech; and reading vocabulary made up of words we see in print that we recognize or figure out (p. 4).

Vocabulary development is used in all of the main curriculum areas including mathematics, science and history; and, is crucial to reading comprehension. Fran Lehr, Jean Osborn, and Dr. Elfieda H. Hierbert, authors of "A Focus on Vocabulary," are quoted: "One of the most persistent findings in reading research is that the extent of students' vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and overall academic success

(Importance of Vocabulary to Reading Comprehension section, para.1).” Lehr et al. continue, that in order “to get meaning from what they read, students need both a great many words in their vocabularies and the ability to use various strategies to establish the meanings of new words when they encounter them (Importance of Vocabulary to Reading Comprehension section, para.1).” The Texas Education Agency (2002) offers further support saying, “Although it is true that comprehension is far more than recognizing words and remembering their meanings, it is also true that if a reader does not know the meanings of a sufficient portion of the words in the text, comprehension is impossible (p. 3).” These findings by Lehr et al. and The Texas Education Agency support that not only do students need to be taught how to read and write at the basic levels, but they must also be taught various strategies that promote and enable continued improvement upon those basic foundations of reading and literacy. With good reading and literacy skills such as those that develop increased vocabulary in place, students will have the tools needed to increase their reading comprehension on their own once classroom education is over.

Instructional Approaches and Strategies

While there are many traditional instructional approaches for vocabulary development, such as looking the word up in a dictionary, using the word in a sentence, context usage, and definition memorization (Kinsella et al., 2010, What Doesn’t Work section, para. 1), these approaches to instruction have had little success and only provide minimal value to reading comprehension (TEA, 2002, p. 16). Educators need to provide students with a variety of interactive approaches and strategies to involve children throughout activities, whether the activity is in an individual or group setting. Kinsella et al. (2010) continue exploring instructional approaches and strategies stating that “vocabulary learning, like most other learning, must be based on the learner's active engagement in constructing understanding, not simply on passive re-presenting of information from a text or lecture (What Doesn’t Work section, para. 2).”

In research studies on vocabulary development strategies, Shane Templeton and John J. Pikulski, authors of “Building the Foundations of Literacy: The Importance of Vocabulary and Spelling Development,” (1999) explained effective vocabulary development instruction criteria

was based upon three components: (1) wide reading enhanced through independent word learning strategies, word structure, and dictionary use, (2) direct instruction, and (3) building an interest in words (Vocabulary Development section, para. 1).” Each of these three components is at the heart of reading and literacy, echoing the research.

Wide Reading

In order to teach students to read better and ultimately improve literacy levels, students must be taught to enjoy reading on his or her own. Continued practice of literacy skills through sheer reading is the best way to become an experienced reader and to increase vocabulary. Reading for pleasure or slightly more complex materials increases vocabulary development as students will add to their vocabulary when they encounter unknown words. Word learning strategies are used to teach students how to analyze these unknown words. Templeton and Pikulski (1999) suggest the following steps be modeled and taught to students in regards to an encounter of an unfamiliar word in print:

- try to pronounce the word (often finding it is a word known based on hearing it used before but have not seen written),
- think of other words that remind you of the word,
- look for familiar prefixes, base words, roots, or suffixes, which may give clues to its meaning,
- look for context clues that explain meaning,
- use a dictionary when it is still unclear (Word Learning Strategy section, para. 1).

Templeton and Pikulski (1999) expound "independent word learning strategies" to be morphological knowledge, or the understanding of morphemes (the smallest units of meaning in a language such as an individual word or a word part such as a prefix or suffix); effective use of contextual clues; application of morphological and contextual knowledge; and the role of

dictionaries and other word references (Wide Reading and Independent Learning Strategies section, para. 2) Initial and continued instruction of word knowledge and contextual usage enables and enhances the student's ability to continue learning on one's own.

Direct Instruction

Although many of the words learned come from exposure through reading (National Reading Panel, 2000, as cited in Lehr, How Many Words Do Students Need to Know section, para. 4), students still require formal instruction in vocabulary to facilitate their knowledge of words. Direct Instruction provided by an educator implements specific teaching of a pre-selected or mandated goal. Direct or explicit instruction has the determination of which words should be taught, how they are taught, and when they are taught (Templeton and Pikulski, 1999, Directly Teaching Word Meanings section, para 1). The Texas Education Agency (2002) stated explicit vocabulary instruction should be "dynamic" and should involve a "variety of techniques" (p. 16). Activities that incorporate strategies such as teaching synonyms or antonyms through practices such as list-group-label or teaching word parts assist in direct instruction that actively involves the student in learning word meaning as well as conceptual usage. While teaching word definition is important, looking words up in a dictionary may not be as effective as teaching students to recognize and use information from word parts. The Texas Education Agency (2002) reported that only twenty prefixes account for 97% of prefixed words that appear in printed school English (p. 27). The TEA (2002) further confirms these findings, stating "to use dictionary definitions, word parts, and context effectively requires awareness of words and flexible thinking—metacognitive and metalinguistic sophistication that many students do not possess. In fact, the students who are most in need of vocabulary growth are likely to be the ones least effective at using these sources of information (p. 8)."

Interest in Words

Direct Instruction of word parts not only reinforces word development through explicit instruction, but direct instruction also provides the necessary skills for independent word learning strategies and promotes an interest in words. However, learning word parts such as affixes and root words is not the only component of developing an interest in words. Templeton

and Pikulski (1999) assert that "an important part of developing an interest in words includes sharing interesting stories about where words come from and how their meanings have evolved (Developing an Interest in Words section, para. 3)." Templeton and Pikulski (1999) continue that "students' interest and curiosity about words are stimulated when they learn the logic behind word origins" (Developing an Interest in Words section, para. 6). An interest in words develops word consciousness according to Lehr et al. (Developing Word Consciousness section, para. 1). Word consciousness developed in students engages them to learn not only the origin and meaning of word roots, but also to learn ways in which are used figuratively, such as idioms and other forms of word play such as jokes, riddles, and tongue twisters (Lehr et al. 1999, Developing Word Consciousness section, para. 3).

Current Research and Issues in Vocabulary Development

English Language Learners (ELLs)

Vocabulary development is extremely important to students, even more so to those learning the English Language. Camille L.Z. Blachowicz, Peter J. Fisher, and Susan Watts-Taffe, in Integrated Vocabulary Instruction: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners in Grades K-5, report that research indicates that "vocabulary knowledge is highly correlated with overall reading achievement" (p. 2) and that research also indicates "one of the biggest factors influencing the discrepancy between reading performance of native English speakers and that of English language learners is English language vocabulary knowledge (p. 3)." English Language Learners (ELLs) may have an adequate, grade-level appropriate, or extensive vocabulary in their primary language. However, it is often overlooked due to the lack of vocabulary known in English. Research also indicates that ELLs who are not proficient readers in their primary language will not be proficient readers in English (Krashen, 2004, p. 74-75). For these English Language Learners, the more words they can recognize in English will help increase their ability to read in English.

What to Teach and When to Teach

Of the current debates within vocabulary development practices today, what vocabulary to teach and when to teach it are the most prevalent. Because there are so many words in the

English language, it would be impossible to try to teach them all. Teachers are therefore given the responsibility of selecting which vocabulary words to teach their students after examining the text to determine if there are words that are crucial to understanding and appreciation of the material (Templeton and Pikulski, 1999, Which Words Should be Taught section, para.1). The words being taught, according to Blachowicz et al. (2005), should come from answering the following questions:

How important is the word to the reading selection or them of study?

How useful is the word outside of the selection or theme?

Is this a word students might learn independently, through context?

Is this a word that will heighten students' enthusiasm for word learning? (p. 6)

These words are often classified into the following categories: comprehension words, useful words, academic words, and generative words (Blachowicz, 2005, p. 6).

Not only what words should be taught, but when these words are taught are of equal deliberation. Should words be taught before reading or should they be taught after reading?

Templeton and Pikulski (1999) argue that "trying to teach all the new words prior to the students' reading is rarely necessary or effective (Teaching Vocabulary Before Reading section, para.1)". However, Templeton and Pikulski (1999) support the view that "working with vocabulary building after reading allows opportunity to reinforce new words (Teaching Vocabulary After Reading section, para.1)."

Putting Research into Practice

Simply reading and repeating words is not enough for student retention rates to be at their highest. In an article published by *The Reading Teacher* in 2009, entitled "Vocabulary Development During Read-Alouds: Primary Practices," Karen J. Kindle tackles the pros and cons of instructional ideas about reading and literacy. Kindle (2009) believes that teachers need to facilitate word learning by employing "a variety of strategies such as elaboration of student responses, naming, questioning, and labeling" in order to make the most out of literacy activities

(p. 203). Teachers and librarians need to constantly question the techniques they are using, asking if the strategy is the most effective and efficient way to build a student's vocabulary while also staying on track with curriculum goals and not detracting from the lesson itself. One effective method for educators to engage students and facilitate learning is through reading aloud. Read-aloud forces students to comprehend the story by focusing on the words and content. Teachers can pause to explain unfamiliar words or pose questions throughout the read-aloud to actively involve students in the learning process.

Kindle (2009) breaks the instructional focus of data decoding in to three categories: incidental exposure (infusing words into the discussion during read-alouds), embedded instruction (providing quick, additional information about a word, such as a synonym, during instruction) and focused instruction (planning ahead to focus on a specific part, such as word meanings, during instruction) (p. 205). By targeting the instructional focus of the lesson, educators can provide specific activities in a variety of ways in order to enhance vocabulary development. In an observation explained in Kindle's article, a study identified nine instructional strategies employed by teachers. These nine strategies are identified as: questioning; providing a definition; providing a synonym; providing examples; clarifying or correcting students' responses; extending a student-generated definition; labeling; imagery; and finally, morphemic analysis (Kindle, 2009, p. 205-206). Each of these strategies makes it possible for educators to break down the learning process and instructional focus in different ways to provide a range of methods for increased vocabulary development. By having interactive conversations and activities with students using one or many of these strategies, educators can make the most of instruction time and increase student literacy skills.

Vocabulary Development and the Library Professional

Vocabulary is developed mostly through reading, word learning strategies, and direct instruction. While most direct instruction takes place in the classroom, vocabulary can be developed in the library. There are several ways in which the library professional can incorporate vocabulary development in the library itself.

Read Alouds

Literacy and vocabulary development within a school community need not be confined to the classroom. There are many opportunities for vocabulary development to occur within the library. As a matter of fact, many of the standard go-to practices of library visits already support vocabulary development in which the classroom lessons can be slightly adjusted to for maximum impact. Reading aloud has long been a typical practice of elementary school librarians. As research has shown, reading aloud helps vocabulary development by exposing students to new language in a logical contextual manner. Often, in classes though, a specific set of vocabulary words are meant to be covered usually following along a chosen theme. By collaborating and connecting with the classroom teacher, the librarian can provide additional support for the classroom lessons and read aloud books during library visits that address the selected classroom theme. The books would likely not only include vocabulary that is on the vocabulary lists, but also other vocabulary terms relevant to the selected topics. During read alouds, the library professional has an open forum to engage students in discussion. Discussion during these read alouds can be deliberately planned. For example, if the teacher is focusing on the solar system, the library professional can read books and engage students in discussion of the vocabulary words centered around the subject of the solar system. Another example of deliberately planned discussion, if there isn't a specified topic, is the library professional pre-read the book, searching for words or contextual clues that can be brought up and discussed. Discussion is very effective in reinforcing new word meaning and developing vocabulary. Discussion, however, does not have to be deliberately planned to discuss vocabulary development. Any opportunity that arises in which the library professional can reiterate word meaning or reinforce word learning strategies such as contextual clues, is an opportunity to enhance vocabulary development.

Independent Vocabulary Development through Free Reading

First and foremost, the library is the place for free independent reading. During library time, students can be given time to read a book of choice independently and become exposed to unfamiliar vocabulary in that way. The library is an ideal spot for Drop Everything and Read time as it contains such a multitude of resources. Independent learning opportunities can be expanded by providing conveniently placed dictionaries throughout the library space, so a

student has the quick access to materials that would help him or her discover the meanings behind unfamiliar words. The library professional can also be available to assist students with the utilization of the dictionary and/or provide contextual clues learning.

ELL/Direct Vocabulary Development through Signage

The library is not the place spelling tests or lists of words to define and memorize. However, more direct means of instruction in the library would not be completely out of place. Although the library is the best source of pleasure reading material, it need not be overlooked the significant resources available in the library. Such resources include reference materials, informational reading material, and often computer and internet based resources. Signage is important in all libraries. Students and patrons need to be able to quickly and easily find the resources they need. Therefore, it is standard protocol to post signs stating what areas house which resources. The signs can be more than just direction; signs can be an opportunity to promote vocabulary for both native English speaking students and ELL students. Signage can be done in both English and whatever other language(s) are present within the school or library community. There are absolutely specific terms used in relation to the library (such as: catalog, fiction, non-fiction, reference, etcetera) that are helpful to learn. By presenting the vocabulary attached to the section, a direct vocabulary lesson is occurring and it is giving ELLs the added bonus of seeing the word in its proper context, as well seeing it spelled out in both English and their native language. It also provides emergent readers the opportunity to see and learn new vocabulary. Some signage can be adapted to represent changing themes within the library throughout the year.

Specific Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan Title: *Katie Loves the Kittens* and Synonyms

Concept / Topic To Teach: Synonyms/Vocabulary

Standards Addressed: NC Standard Course of Study, Second Grade Language Arts 4.01:

“Use expanded vocabulary to generate synonyms for commonly over used words to increase clarity of written and oral communication.”

General Goal(s): To help the students further understand and feel comfortable with the concept of synonyms, through practice and identification. Increase their vocabulary by further supporting that there are many words that can mean similar things, and but some words are more specific to their intended purposes than others, therefore it is good to have a solid knowledge of many words from which to choose.

Required Materials: *Katie Loves the Kittens* by John Himmelman. The book was selected because of its relative simplicity. It contains vocabulary with which the students will likely be familiar, and therefore able to find synonyms.

Step-By-Step Procedures:

1. Begin by discussing synonyms with the class. Saying I have been speaking with their teacher, and she said it was something they were talking about in class. Ask the students if someone can raise their hand and tell me what “synonym” means.
2. Tell the class we are reading the book, *Katie Loves the Kittens*. Reinforce literary vocabulary by going over the author, title, and title page.
3. Start reading the book, pausing to ask guided questions regarding synonyms that could be used in place of selected words throughout the book. Focus on words that the students are likely to know, with at least one common synonym they might be familiar with, such as: “love,” “happy”, “frightened”, “sad”, “good.”
4. Finish reading the book, then reinforce the lesson by asking if any of the students can think of any other synonyms.

Assessment Based On Objectives: Assessment will be informal. I will be looking for visible/audible signs engagement, as well as student participation.

Possible Connections To Other Subjects: The lesson is formulated to reinforce from language arts classes, while supporting general vocabulary development.

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Annotated Bibliography

Blachowicz, C., Fisher P., & Watts-Taffe, S. (2005). Integrated Vocabulary Instruction: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners in Grades K-5. Learning Point Associates. Retrieved from www.learningpt.org/pdfs/literacy/vocabulary.pdf

This booklet explores the diverse needs in instruction of vocabulary development. By examining vocabulary development through the focus of the multi-needs of the students in grades K-5, it provides explanation, instruction, and integrated instruction for differential vocabulary development. Examples are included.

Hart, B., & Risley, T.R. (c1995) *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, P.H. Brookes.

This landmark study by two psychologists followed 42 families, some professional, some working class, and some welfare, for two-and-a-half years as the infants in the families grew and developed their own ability for speech. The study's results were staggering. By the age of 4, the children of the professionals had heard approximately 32 million more words than the welfare children of the same age.

Kindle, K. (2009). Vocabulary Development During Read-Alouds: Primary Practices. *Reading Teacher*, 63(3), 202-211. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.

This document discusses the relationship between vocabulary development and reading comprehension by looking at traditional approaches to vocabulary development and providing explanations and brief examples of instructional strategies for vocabulary development supported by research.

Lehr, F., Osborn J., & Hiebert, E. (No Date). A Focus on Vocabulary. Pacific Resources for Education and Learning. Retrieved from http://prel.org/products/re_/ES0419.htm.

This booklet is part of a series of research-based practices in Early Reading. It contains a thorough overview of vocabulary development, its importance in reading comprehension,

and instruction for vocabulary development providing research-based findings and examples.

Reading Rockets. 2010. "Reading 101: Vocabulary." WETA. Retrieved from www.readingrockets.org/teaching/reading101/vocabulary

This site contains a wealth of information on all topics of reading, including vocabulary. Related articles contain in-depth explanation of the topic and/or the strategies encompassed within the topic. Related articles also provide thorough examples of strategies to be implemented in the related topic. The parent site, Readingrockets.org, is highly recommended for anyone interested in learning more about reading and its related subcategories such as vocabulary development, phonics, and so on.

Templeton, S., & Pikulski, J. (1999). Building the Foundations of Literacy: The Importance of Vocabulary and Spelling Development. Houghton Mifflin Co. Retrieved from <http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/hmsv/expert/research.html>.

This paper examines vocabulary development and spelling in relationship to reading comprehension based on research. It provides in-depth explanation, examples and suggestive instruction of vocabulary development as well as spelling.

Texas Education Agency. (2002). Promoting Vocabulary Development: Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction. Retrieved from <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/reading/practices/redbk5.pdf>

This booklet is about promoting vocabulary development teaching vocabulary, but it also contains a lot of good examples for teaching vocabulary development and explaining learning levels. It explains some of the problems and obstacles students face when learning, such as no books at home, which hinder development. Strategies and suggestions for improving comprehension through increasing vocabulary are included. This booklet makes a good case for teaching vocabulary in the classroom with ideas that correlate to library instruction.