Research Into Practice READING

Teaching the Meanings of Specific Words

What instructional strategies can you employ to develop your students' vocabulary and increase their reading comprehension?

It should be no surprise that vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading comprehension (Anderson and Freebody, 1985; Davis, 1944). Therefore, planful attention to students' vocabulary development is an important component of an effective elementary school literacy program. Effective vocabulary instruction includes attention to teaching the meanings of specific words, teaching strategies for independent word learning (e.g., use of the dictionary, use of context clues, and use of word structure), and developing students' awareness of and interest in words and their meanings, also known as word consciousness (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000; Graves and Watts-Taffe, 2002). Each of these facets of the overall vocabulary program rests on a foundation of extensive and varied language experiences and wide reading.

This monograph focuses on the first component of vocabulary development mentioned above, instruction in the meanings of specific words. This instruction can take several forms. One of the most common contexts for such instruction takes place before reading a selection. A short list of words, likely to be unknown to students, is taught before reading in order to facilitate comprehension of the upcoming selection. However, explicit word meaning instruction can and should occur in other contexts as well. For example, as part of a discussion of a book title and cover art with a group of fifth graders, a teacher asked, "Does this book title pique your curiosity?" One of the students responded, "What does *pique* mean?" The teacher's reply, "*Pique* means to stimulate or to make something come alive. So if something piques your curiosity, it makes you curious. It makes your curiosity come alive," represents explicit instruction in the meaning of the word *pique*. Furthermore, the student's question is indicative of a classroom where an interest in and awareness of new words was cultivated, such that students felt comfortable and motivated in taking ownership of their own word learning. Whether the words taught are predetermined by the teacher, arise unexpectedly from classroom discussion, or are determined by one or more students' need to know a particular word at a particular time, research on the nature of word learning provides direction for instruction.

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Levels of Word Knowledge

Anderson and Freebody (1985) distinguish between *breadth* and *depth* as two aspects of vocabulary knowledge. Breadth of knowledge refers to the number of words a student knows, while depth of knowledge refers to how well each word is known. For example, a student may know several ways to express the state of being cold, such as *chilly, frigid,* and *cool.* This indicates a breadth of word knowledge. If this same student understands the meaning of the word *cool* in a variety of contexts (e.g., "Today will be windy and cool," as forecast on the morning news; "I like your jeans—they're really cool," as said by a classmate; and "She could tell by his cool response that her father was angry," as written in a story), she or he is exhibiting depth of word knowledge. In-depth word knowledge includes awareness of multiple meanings and figurative usages of a word, the ability to apply the correct meaning in a given context, the ability to access the meaning of a word quickly, and the ability to use a word in one's own speaking and writing (Calfee and Drum, 1986; Graves, 1986; Paul, Stallman, and O'Rourke, 1990). Depth of knowledge occurs over time, as students increase their range of experiences related to the word and its underlying concept. A perfect example of this comes from a teacher who once said, "I always thought I knew what my parents meant when they told me they loved me. But it wasn't until I had my own children that I really understood that particular meaning of the word *love."*

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Word learning is an incremental process (Nagy and Scott, 2000). For most words, it is not the case that students go from not knowing to knowing in one swift leap. Dale (1965) suggests the following continuum for word knowledge: (1) "I never saw the word before"; (2) "I know there is such a word, but I don't know what it means"; (3) "I know generally how the word may be used"; and (4) "I know the word and can use it." These stages of word learning reflect a move from receptive word knowledge to expressive word knowledge, with the appropriate use of a word in speaking and writing representing the highest level of knowledge.

A critical component of effective vocabulary instruction is the recognition and scaffolding of small steps toward full word knowledge. Many students who appear to have no knowledge of a particular word actually do possess a degree of knowledge or shades of understanding that can be shaped toward more complete knowledge.

Levels of Word Difficulty and the Nature of Instruction

The number of exposures, as well as the types of exposure, needed for complete word learning will, obviously, vary by student. For example, students in Canada will likely grasp the subtle differences among the words *cold, cool, chilly, freezing,* and *frigid* more quickly than students in Mexico. Personal experience is the strongest context for word learning. But words themselves vary in their inherent difficulty based on their conceptual complexity to students. Three very different types of word learning are: (1) an unknown word for a known concept, (2) an unknown concept for a known word, and (3) an unknown word for an unknown concept.

The most straightforward type of instruction involves teaching *an unknown word for a known concept.* While most of us are familiar with the plastic covering on the end

of a shoelace that keeps the lace from fraying, many do not know that it is called an *aglet*. The concept is familiar, but its corresponding vocabulary word is not.

A good example of teaching *an unknown concept for a known word* comes from a second grade classroom, in which the teacher spends several weeks each year helping students to understand the concept of *respect*. It is a complex concept, as illustrated in the following exchange between a student and the classroom teacher.

> **Student:** "Mrs. L., he ain't respectin' me, cause he ain't sharin'."
>
> **Teacher:** "Just because he doesn't want to share right now doesn't mean he doesn't respect you. He has a right to play by himself right now. You had a right to ask him if you could join in, and he has a right to respectfully say, 'No.' Do you know what I mean? You can choose not to share sometimes but still respect your friends."

In this example, the word *respect* is easier for the student to grasp than its underlying meaning, which takes several weeks and several experiences to become solidified.

Teaching both *an unknown word and an unknown concept* occurs frequently in pre-reading instruction for informational, content-based selections. For example, both the concept and the word *symmetry* are unknown to most primary grade students. When both the word and its underlying concept are unknown, the word-learning task (and thus, the instruction) are more involved. To teach the word *symmetry,* teachers usually engage students in physical manipulations and orientations of shapes, and even their own bodies, in order to cultivate understanding. And because the actual word itself is new, teachers are careful to use it as often as they can, point out examples of it in varied settings, and encourage their students to use the new word as well.

"Use the new word frequently in class. Cultivating understanding of new words is more effective when teachers use the new word as often as possible and encourage students to do the same."

Classroom Applications

Approaches to Teaching Word Meanings

Both the teaching and the learning of words like *respect* and *symmetry* take more time and energy than are required for a word like *aglet*. (Though even the word *aglet* will not be retained without practice.) Respect may be the most difficult of the three words, because in addition to being a new concept, it is abstract, rather than concrete. Unlike *symmetry,* examples of it cannot be shown visually. Considering the conceptual complexity of the word to be taught is useful in deciding how to approach instruction. Below is a sample of increasingly time-intensive approaches that can be used as needed, depending upon word complexity and student prior knowledge.

1. **Definition and context, given by the teacher and supported with a picture, example, demonstration, or dramatization, as needed.** This approach is straightforward, with the teacher controlling the type and amount of information provided.
2. **Definition and context, given by the student(s) and supported with a picture, example, demonstration, or dramatization, as needed.** This approach takes more time, as the student(s) may need prompts to provide the information and level of detail needed to be instructive to

others. The benefit of this approach is that it requires active mental processing by at least one student, and student talk is often very engaging to other students.

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3. Discussion of word by multiple students, supported with a picture, example, demonstration, or dramatization, as needed. The required involvement of more students in the active mental processing and articulation of ideas adds richness. The involvement of a variety of students in pair, small group, or whole group discussion (or some combination thereof) greatly increases the teacher's ability to tap into students' prior knowledge.

4. Semantic mapping/creating word webs. This approach adds a visual to the discussion as a way of recording ideas and stimulating thought regarding links among ideas. Semantic maps can be simple or more complex. For thematic units of study, it is useful to create a semantic map with students over time, allowing for incremental word learning and the development of deep understandings of individual words as well as the relationships among them. Here is a guide to semantic mapping at various levels of intricacy.

Choose a word central to the reading selection or topic of study. Write it in the center of the board, chart paper, or transparency.

Level 1. Have students brainstorm words that are related to the central word (Think-Pair-Share) and list them on the web. Add word(s) you wish to teach.

Level 2. Work with students to categorize and label words in thematic groups around the central word. Add a category, if necessary, to teach a specific word or words.

Level 3. Encourage students to think of words to add to existing categories and/or new categories.

At all levels, encourage students to explain words or concepts that may be new to some members of the class. Discussion is key!

5. New word/new concept procedure. This model, developed by Frayer and her colleagues (Frayer, Frederick, and Klausmeier, 1969), provides useful tips for teaching words representing new concepts. Like semantic mapping, this approach can be used over several days or weeks, in conjunction with a large unit of study or a particularly complex concept.

- Define the new concept, giving its necessary attributes. Provide a picture, model, or demonstration whenever possible.
- Distinguish between the new concept and similar but different concepts with which it might be confused.
- Give examples of the concept and explain why they are examples.
- Give non-examples of the concept and explain why they are non-examples.
- Present students with examples and non-examples and ask them to distinguish between the two.
- Have students present examples and non-examples with explanations. Provide feedback.

Teaching Each Word Well: Characteristics of Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Regardless of the specific approach used, there are at least four characteristics of specific word instruction resulting in increased comprehension (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986).

1. Provision of both definitional and contextual information. When teaching a word meaning, it is important that the teacher provide both definitional and contextual information (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986). To teach the word *ebullient,* for example, a teacher might say, "*Ebullient* means very excited; overflowing with enthusiasm. I was ebullient when I learned that I had won a prestigious award in college." Students need to know not only what the word means, but also in what contexts the word might be used.

2. Active learner involvement and mental processing. Effective vocabulary instruction involves the learner in the generation of meaning and the integration of his or her prior knowledge with that which is being taught (Elshout-Mohr and Daalen-Kapteijns, 1987; Mezynski, 1983). To continue the earlier example, the teacher might ask students to recall times when they were ebullient or to imagine a circumstance that would cause them to be ebullient. She or he might also ask students to take turns acting ebullient or to draw a picture representing their understandings of the word.

3. Activation of prior knowledge and integration of ideas. In-depth word learning occurs when students actively construct relationships between and among concepts. This begins with linking a new word meaning with word meanings that are already a part of a student's prior knowledge and extends to making links between and among interrelated new words. What other words are similar in meaning to ebullient? How does the word *ebullient* relate to the word *melancholy?*

"Meaningful practice involves multiple exposures to the target word in a variety of contexts over time."

4. Meaningful practice. Because it takes several exposures to a new word to firmly establish that word's meaning, it is important to provide students with a great deal of practice with the new word. Meaningful practice involves *multiple exposures* to the target word in a *variety of contexts over time* (Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, 1982; Mezynski, 1983; Nagy, 1988; Stahl, 1986). Do you remember what the word *aglet* means? Even a word like this, a relatively simple label for a concept with which you are already familiar, will be lost to you in the long-term if you do not hear the word and use it several times in the near future. The best practice involves ever-expanding contexts and occurs over time, rather than all in one day, or even one week.

In the last twenty-five years, we have amassed a powerful body of research on vocabulary development, resulting in an understanding of the incremental nature of word learning, ways in which words differ in conceptual complexity, and the corresponding intensity of instruction required. This knowledge, coupled with specific instructional strategies and general principles of effective instruction, will help teachers make the best use of the time devoted to vocabulary instruction in the elementary literacy program.

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