Too Little or Too Much? What Do We Know about Making Vocabulary Instruction Meaningful?

After several years of writing “The Word Market” column for this journal, I wondered what I could possibly say in the final issue of this editorship that would frame vocabulary instruction in some new, insightful way. I reread my columns and revisited the research that had informed my practice during this past decade. I talked with teachers in schools where I was doing staff development. I looked back at my own teaching journals. Finally, it occurred to me that we probably don’t need something new in research or in practice; rather, we need to put into place the research and instructional strategies that have been highlighted in professional literature during the past two decades and we need to document those practices that are successful with our students. As Baumann, Kame’enui, and Ash cite in the Handbook of Research on the Teaching of English Language Arts, “We know too much to say we know too little, and we know too little to say that we know enough. Indeed, language is difficult to put into words” (2003, p. 752).

What Do We Know?

In examining what we know about teaching vocabulary, we already know many things:

- Those who know more words are better readers.
- Increasing the volume of reading helps readers learn new words.
- We can only teach a small fraction of words that adolescents need to know.
- Knowing a word means more than knowing a definition.
- Word learning is often based on background knowledge of the concept.
- Words used in expressive vocabulary (speaking and writing) need to be known to a greater degree than those encountered in receptive vocabulary (listening and reading).
- Instruction in definitions probably won’t increase comprehension of a passage containing the word.
• Learners need vocabulary instruction that is generative so they are learning how to learn new words they encounter during independent literacy experiences.

With so many known areas available to us as educators, where do we begin to rethink instruction that is consistent with what we know from research? For me, the beginning of all instruction is increased volume and diversity of reading.

Increasing the amount of time we spend reading to and with our students and the amount of time they spend reading independently will increase their receptive and expressive vocabularies. Many researchers cite print exposure as an explanation for the differences in vocabulary growth seen in children (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). I believe the key is not only in exposing students to more print but also to increasingly richer language experiences through text choice.

**Meaningful Vocabulary Instruction**

When students develop rich independent reading lives and that is combined with thoughtful, purposeful instruction, students’ vocabularies increase exponentially. What follows are three types of practices that illustrate meaningful vocabulary instruction.

**Predicting Content**

This vocabulary instruction can occur prior to reading as a way to anticipate and predict content, as a way to support comprehension across content areas, and/or as a means of assessment. One such strategy that I have used many times is Moore and Moore’s Possible Sentences (1986). In this strategy, you give students a short list of words from a text they will soon read. Students work in groups to develop possible sentences that show how these words might be used in writing about this event. During and/or after the reading, students can return to their earlier sentences and revise them so they accurately reflect the information heard in the reading. In this way, the vocabulary words have supported students both before and during reading. Following the reading, they can use these words as a beginning word bank for writing about the event.

**Understanding across Content Areas**

While Possible Sentences gives students the opportunity to work with words that are important for a particular selection, academic vocabulary (Coxhead, 2000) helps students with specific words that might appear across content areas. Academic vocabulary refers to those words that are commonly used in textbooks across content areas. So, factor is a part of the academic vocabulary but polynomial isn’t. Essay is; prepositional phrase isn’t. Authority is; longitude isn’t. Words like polynomial, prepositional phrase, and longitude are content-specific words, and knowing their definitions helps with the specific content of algebra, English, and geography class. But those other words—factor, essay, illustrate—appear in textbooks across content areas.

Students who have a strong academic vocabulary have a head start on textbook reading. If the assignment says, “Write an essay that describes the factors affecting Rainsford’s decision,” students

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**TO LEARN MORE: VOCABULARY**


Baumann, James, & Kame’enui, Edward (Eds.). 2003. *Vocabulary Instruction: Research to Practice (Solving Problems in Teaching of Literacy).* New York: Guildford.


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who understand what an essay is and know what factors are jump right into the assignment. But students who don’t know those words can’t get to the point of the assignment because they lack the academic vocabulary to do the assignment.

One list of academic vocabulary (Coxhead, 2000) can be accessed at http://language.massey.ac.nz/staff/awl/sublists.shtml. The point is not to simply distribute the list and have students memorize definitions, but instead to consider the list and decide which words are a part of the academic vocabulary of your school and then make sure your students—especially second language learners—know what these words mean. This is more easily accomplished if all the content teachers in your school have helped decide which words are critical for which grade level. When students hear all their teachers using the words and see common definitions and examples for these words, they more quickly add them to their own word knowledge.

Assessing Understanding

Finally, I think vocabulary words can be used as a rich source of assessment. In Figure 1, Concept Circles Assessment, students are given concept circles at the end of a section of reading. These concept circles were created as an assessment tool for pages 124–183 of Dating Hamlet: Ophelia’s Story. In the two circles here, I’ve included words or phrases from these pages and asked students to describe what these words mean in relation to the text they have read. Implied in the assignment is that students would demonstrate their comprehension of the text by discussing events, characters, motivations, and literary elements. I also ask them to articulate why they think these four words/phrases fit together in the concept circle. At times when I use these, I leave one of the quadrants empty and ask students to put a word in that would fit with the other three words/phrases.

An additional tool that I use assesses word knowledge at a level beyond the definitional level. It is often easier to create assessment and evaluation through matching words and definitions, but the research is clear that definitional knowledge is insufficient to support comprehension. In trying to move away from matching words and definitions, I created a series of word questioning prompts.

- How are __________, __________, __________, and __________ related?
- What possible connection could there be between _______ and _________?
- What is the relationship between _______ and _________?
  (Choose seemingly unrelated items for this.)
- How are ________, ________, ________, and ________ all related to ________?
- If I discovered ___________, why wouldn’t I be in __________?

These question templates can be used by simply inserting new words for different texts and/or units. The possibilities for response are endless.
but students have to justify the relationships between and among words, which indicates both higher level thinking and a deeper understanding of the words/concepts.

The possibilities for energizing our vocabulary instruction and assessment are endless. The rich resources provided in professional books and the textbooks you probably have at your school can be adapted to fit a variety of texts and meet diverse instructional purposes. I find that students enjoy the unexpected when the instruction is varied in this way. As one student at the middle school where I work in California said, “We do words at the beginning of class every day. It’s like I always know we’re going to get something new!”

What? Nothing New?

So, in this final installment of The Word Market, I offer you nothing new except a reminder to use the resources that skillful educators have provided us. Use them; make them your own; write your own stories of success in teaching vocabulary in your classroom. My closing Word Market words come from Stahl’s (1999) *Vocabulary Development: From Reading Research to Practice*:

> Our knowledge of words determines how we understand texts, define ourselves for others, and define the way we see the world. A richer vocabulary does not just mean that we know more words, but that we have more complex and exact ways of talking about the world, and of understanding the ways that more complex thinkers see the world. (p. 1)

What a rich gift we give our students when we choose meaningful vocabulary instruction in all our classrooms! It has been a joy to share words with you as we have explored new ways to make words come alive for our students. It is my hope that a natural extension of the words we have shared, the words your students have learned, and the new ways of teaching you have discovered would be the sharing of your words with others. As always, teachers continue to be the best resources for other teachers.

**References**


Janet Allen was a reading/English teacher for 20 years and currently speaks throughout the nation on literacy issues. She can be reached at jallen3219@aol.com

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