**Vocabulary in the Classroom**

**Claire Morrow**

**Introduction**

Defining vocabulary can be a difficult task. There are many components to think about when defining vocabulary:

“general academic vocabulary, academic literacy, academic background, general academic words, domain knowledge, academic competence, linguistic knowledge, domain-specific vocabulary, content vocabulary, academic language, and academic language skills” (Baumann & Graves, 2010).

No matter how vocabulary is defined. It is plays a vital role in student reading abilities. If a student does not understand the words in a sentence, paragraph, or passage, comprehension will not happen. Vocabulary has the influence on reading comprehension (Asselin, 2002). Without comprehension, one cannot truly be literate (Block & Mangieri, 2006). Research is often conflicting about how vocabulary should be taught in the classroom. This is the reason that vocabulary often times does not get the instructional time it needs in the classroom (Block & Mangieri, 2003).

Vocabulary instruction aids students when learning the meaning of new words or words that they do not have in their listening vocabulary. The English language has a vast number of words. Given its natural and explosive expansion, students need tools to make sense of the unfamiliar words they will encounter throughout both their schooling and their lives (Asselin, 2002). This is why vocabulary instruction is important and should be a bigger part of the instructional time in a school day.

**Key Research**

According to the National Reading Panel (2001), both vocabulary development and assessment are crucial to students’ literacy success. Both Biemiller (2001) and Hirsch (2001) found that a lack of vocabulary is a key component for the failure of many students, especially those from low socioeconomic households. A strong vocabulary is critical to being successfully literate. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of reading achievement (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). As vocabulary increases, so does the ability to comprehend what is read. Vocabulary instruction needs to be engaging and motivating as research has shown that rote memorization is largely ineffective (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

**Application**

To first determine how to teach vocabulary, teachers need to define how they determine when a student really knows a word. Does defining a word really show that a student has mastered a word? Really, we need to begin in degrees. To what degree does the student understand the word? Do they have a vague idea of what it means? Can they use it appropriately in a sentence when prompted? Does the student produce the word spontaneously in conversation? Donald Graves (1987) outlined six stages of word knowledge: learning to read a known word, learning new meanings of known words, learning new words that represent known concepts, learning new words that represent new concepts, clarifying and enriching meanings of known words, and moving words from receptive (listening and reading) to expressive (speaking and writing) vocabulary (Asselin, 2002).

Most words are learned in context, but if the reader’s prior knowledge and experience does not provide them with enough information, the word may not be able to be deciphered from context. Learning a word in written context can also be harder than in an oral context because when listening, tone and gesture that can give clues to the meaning of an unknown word (Asselin, 2002). One way to increase vocabulary is through an increase in the amount of time spent reading. This exposes them to new words and can also help build background knowledge so students can add to their vocabulary. Reading allows student to construct meaning using the whole text instead of learning words in isolation (Block & Mangieri, 2006). The amount of time spent reading is directly related to increased vocabulary development and reading proficiency (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). The more a student reads the more words he/she will add to his/her vocabulary, and more words can be added through context.

When teaching vocabulary, teachers must realize that not all words are of equal importance. An interesting word may make a fun vocabulary word to teach, but unless it is imperative for comprehension of the text or a word that the student will encounter frequently, it probably should not be explicitly taught. Students will have a more complete understand of words that they can speak, write, listen, and read correctly. This is a good way to determine how well a student knows a word. An important part of having a student know the words as he/she encounters them is that the more words a student encounters in a text that he/she understands, the more positive his/her attitude will be toward reading. The words a student encounters, recognizes and understands in a text should span all parts of speech for a rounded vocabulary (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

**Development over Time**

The English language has roughly five million words. It is impossible for one person to know all the words and teachers should not be concerned with making sure students know five million words. All the words are not used regularly, and many are specific to careers. When a child enters school in kindergarten, he/she usually has between 5,000 and 6,000 words. Over the course of a school year, a student learns about 3,000 words. By the time a student finishes high school, he/she have typically increased his/her vocabulary by 50,000 words. There are about 110,000 different words in printed school materials, so teachers need to make sure that students have the background knowledge and experience to add new words to their vocabulary. It is critical for students to be able to know the words and not just memorize them, so they can generalize the words to other areas of their lives outside school (Asselin, 2002; Block & Mangieri, 2006).

From birth, babies are constantly hearing language. Their vocabularies are shaped by what they hear. That is related to the experiences students have. If a student has not been to the beach, he/she probably has little vocabulary related to the beach/ocean. Unfortunately, students who come from low SES backgrounds typically have limited experiences, which results in a limited vocabulary when compared to those from higher SES backgrounds (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

**Instructional Tasks**

Blachowicz and Fisher (2000) discovered the important aspects of effective vocabulary instruction: the students must me actively immersed in the learning, they must be able to personalize the word meanings and make them relevant to their own lives, and they learn best through repeated exposures. Asselin (2002) found that it takes at least ten exposures to a word for a student to really understand the meaning of the word.

There are many tasks that can build vocabulary knowledge in a way that fits in with the three important aspects of vocabulary instruction. In elementary school, word building is a great way for students to add multiple words to their vocabulary in a short amount of time. Students build words from parts or patterns, such as word families, prefixes, suffixes, or root words. Building words is very successful in improving new readers’ reading success (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998). It allows them to discover the meaning to unfamiliar words independently. Knowing how to build words helps with decoding and spelling (Block & Mangieri, 2006). All are components of a successful reader, but the vocabulary part is a good foundation to build on.

Content area vocabulary is important for students to understand content areas thoroughly. The students need to remain actively engaged in the learning to cement the words into their vocabulary. The Vocabulary Self-Awareness Chart helps students identify words that they need to know. It also provides evidence of how they use the words in context. This can show if they really understand the word to varying degrees. Contextual Redefinition is another strategy that helps the students figure out the definition. This strategy relies on using context to determine meaning. Semantic Feature Analysis lets students compare and contrast features of words. This strategy in particular is beneficial for math, science, and social studies (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

An often overlooked part of vocabulary is figurative language. Idioms and homophones often cause trouble for students, so direct instruction is need in how to decipher the true meaning of the words. Generative activities, or activities that require the student the generate connections between prior knowledge and the new word, are particularly important for figurative language because more and more figurative language appears as a student progresses through school. Creating visual images is the best way for students to really connect to figurative language. Drawing the literal and figurative meaning can help the student see the difference and understand what the author is trying to convey. By bringing figurative language to students’ attention, it shows them to they need to increase their attention to not only what is being said, but also what the author really means. The increased attention will in turn aid comprehension (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

When considering vocabulary to be taught, the teacher needs to be discerning about the words he/she chooses. The words that are chosen should be related to others that the student will encounter so they student will be able to expand their language themselves. To determine which words to teach explicitly, the teacher should sort the words into four categories: high-frequency words, domain-specific technical vocabulary, low-frequency words, and high-utility words. The important words to teach are the ones that are crucial for understanding the text. Those words may come at one of three tiers. Tier one are basic words that a student will encounter on a routine basis (*school, red, cold, hat, etc)*. Once a student understands these words, he/she will be able to access most conversations and texts. Tier two words are high-utility words that are seen in a variety of texts, so explicit instruction is necessary (*convenient, general, compromise, etc)*. These words can also be generalized across many contexts both inside and outside of school. Tier three words are content (domain) specific words, such as *fibula, tibia,* and *femur.* These words are essential for understanding a topic, but cannot be generalized across different settings. Having students complete an Example and Non-example chart can help students get a clear understand of what a word does and does not mean. This works well for Tier two and Tier three. Teachers need to keep in mind that while the meanings of many words can be learned through reading, speaking, and listening, students who struggle with vocabulary need direct, explicit instruction in an engaging way (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

Some words are more challenging than others and will need to be taught in isolation. When teaching words in isolation, there are many ways to go about this. There are six main steps for teaching a word in isolation, though the exact method is teacher dependent. The first step is to define the new concept. Then, the concept needs to be distinguished from similar ones; examples and non-examples of the concepts need to be given. After the teacher has demonstrated those steps, the student needs to be given the responsibility to do it for himself/herself. These steps can be work intensive, but for big concepts where individual words are important to learn, it can be necessary (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

**Strengths and Weaknesses**

The benefit of teaching vocabulary is that it helps students understand what they are learning. It allows them to build on the knowledge they have and let their minds grow. If vocabulary is not taught, many concepts will not be understood, even in the lower grades. However, teaching vocabulary can be overwhelming because there are so many words in the English language that one cannot possibly learn them all. Many times, vocabulary is specific to a subject, so the student might not use the word generally. Even though the student might not use the word outside of the world of science, it is still important to teach the vocabulary because it helps the student understand concepts and build background knowledge. When the student builds background knowledge, it sets the student up to be able to understand more complex ideas, which will appear as he/she continues his/her education.

Another weakness is that vocabulary is incredibly hard to assess. Other components of reading can easily be tested, but it is impossible to test a student for every work he/she knows. Tests do not measure the degree to which a student knows a word. A student may have an understanding of the word that is not being tested. Multiple meaning words can also be difficult to assess, particularly with a multiple choice test. A student may know one or two definition of the word, but if one of those is not a choice, the student will not get the correct answer. Many tests that are scored for vocabulary are often times more appropriate for comprehension or decoding. Timed vocabulary tests penalize students who are slow readers, which is not always an indication of a reading problem. Testing vocabulary also does not result in any diagnostic information that will help the student improve his/her vocabulary. While testing vocabulary formally can be difficult, that does not mean it should not be a part of the instructional day (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

While formal testing of vocabulary can be difficult, there are informal ways a teacher can assess vocabulary quickly in the classroom. Many of the strategies mentioned previously can be used as an informal way of checking student vocabulary, particularly the Semantic Feature Analysis. Rubrics, checklists, interviews, and observations are also good ways of informally gathering information about student vocabulary. These methods can be as simple as the teacher makes them, so it can be quick. Many times informal assessment can be more valuable than formal, and can be done quickly and efficiently by the teacher in the classroom. Understanding to what degree a student comprehends a word or concept is helpful when it is time for a teacher to select an assessing tool (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

**Conclusion**

Vocabulary is an essential part of teaching reading in the classroom. It can be overwhelming to consider how many words a student needs to know, but through purposeful instruction, students can increase their vocabulary. When their vocabulary is increased, their reading skills and comprehension skills are also increased. While vocabulary instruction is not the only way to increase comprehension, it does play a vital role and should be included in daily instruction in the classroom.

Teachers that empower students to learn vocabulary in a meaningful way are preparing students to success beyond the classroom. Having a strong written and spoken vocabulary will allow students to be fully immersed in society and allow them to be contributing members- which is the goal of education.

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