Vocabulary Instruction

Three Contemporary Issues

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To write about vocabulary instruction and development in a handbook oriented towards teachers and researchers, authors have to answer the question, “What else is there to say?” Over the last three decades, numerous instructional investigations have taken place and rich summaries of research have been written. The second Handbook of Reading Research (Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal, & Pearson, 1991), contained two chapters on vocabulary, one dealing with vocabulary processes (Anderson & Nagy, 1991) and a second with vocabulary development (Beck & McKeown, 1991). These same topics were also addressed in the third Handbook of Reading Research (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Nagy & Scott, 2000) in the Handbook of Teaching the English Language Arts (Baumann & Kame’enui, 1991), and in other comprehensive reviews (Farstrup & Samuels, 2008).

Further, several educators have surveyed this landscape of research and attempted to interpret it for practitioners in application volumes focused on instruction (Baumann & Kame’enui, 2004; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2010; Graves, 2006; Hiebert & Kamil, 2005). At the same time, many articles on vocabulary have been published in instructional journals, and more than 400 dissertations on the topic of vocabulary have been abstracted in Dissertation Abstracts since the 1960s.

Rather than trying to replicate this fine historical and practical knowledge base, we will focus on the research related to three issues of current interest that are critical to advancing what we know about vocabulary instruction:

1. What does it mean to approach vocabulary comprehensively?
2. What are the dimensions of academic vocabulary?
3. What are some research-based resources to assist vocabulary selection?

What Does It Mean to Approach Vocabulary Comprehensively?

Throughout the years, theorists and researchers have studied vocabulary teaching and learning from a variety of perspectives. Key facets of study have included: the nature of vocabulary acquisition, including the wide array of information needed to truly “know” a word (Nagy & Scott, 2000), characteristics associated with effective instruction of individual word meanings (Mezynski, 1983; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986), strategies that individuals use to determine the meanings of unknown words encountered in reading and the ways they can be successfully taught (Baumann, Font, Edwards, & Boland, 2005); characteristics of words that make them easier or harder to acquire and factors influencing the selection of words to teach (Nagy & Hiebert, in press); and differences in vocabulary acquisition across students (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001; White, Graves, & Slater, 1989; Hart & Risley, 1995). All of this information, and more, has brought us to the practical implication that in order to address the complex, multi-dimensional nature of word learning, we need to approach vocabulary comprehensively (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005; Stahl & Nagy, 2006; Watts-Taffe, Fisher, & Blachowicz, 2009).

Graves (2006) has summarized a comprehensive approach as one in which four components of vocabulary instruction are firmly in place for all students:

- **Rich and varied language experiences.** Students are immersed in words through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- **Instruction in individual words.** Students are taught the meanings of individual words through both definitional and contextual information, active engagement, and multiple practice opportunities over time.
- **Instruction in strategies for independent word learning.**
Students are taught how to use context, word structure, and outside resources such as the dictionary to independently determine the meanings of unknown words.

- **Fostering word consciousness.** Students are engaged in activities that promote their interest in and awareness of words, metacognition about words, and motivation to learn words.

A comprehensive approach is one in which vocabulary instruction is not an isolated event, confined to pre-teaching comprehension words before reading a new text during the time of day set aside for reading and language arts. Rather, vocabulary instruction is dispersed—across the school day, across the curricular areas, and across the grades, from preschool through high school. Despite the fact that research and theory, taken collectively, provide strong support for a comprehensive approach, relatively few studies have directly investigated comprehensive approaches. Here, we describe two.

In a recent formative experiment in a diverse fifth-grade classroom, Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007) studied the impact of a year-long program of vocabulary instruction based on Graves’ four components. Vocabulary instruction reflecting each of the four components occurred in a variety of ways across the school day. In addition to using a multifaceted approach to instruction, the researchers took a multifaceted approach to data collection including standardized tests, student writing samples, student interviews, parent questionnaires, and lesson plans. Results showed growth in students’ use of sophisticated and challenging words, an increase in their interest and attitudes toward vocabulary learning, and demonstration of independent use of word learning strategies.

Lawrence, Snow, and White (2009) are working with the Boston Public Schools on the Word Generation Project, a comprehensive approach designed to increase middle school students’ knowledge of academic words. The project is implemented either school-wide or, minimally, grade-wide, and involves teachers across content areas who focus on the same set of weekly words. Instruction reflects characteristics of effective instruction for individual words, the word learning strategies of morphological analysis and contextual analysis, and rich and varied language experiences. Preliminary findings show significant growth in word knowledge for project participants, and a higher rate of word learning for students engaged in the project compared with students not engaged in the project.

With increased emphasis on informational text and an emphasis on meeting state standards has come a focus on academic vocabulary required to comprehend informational texts and test passages across content areas (Marzano, 2004; Zwiers, 2008). Yet, as the term “academic vocabulary” is discussed in the literature, it is clear that there is no single, agreed-upon definition. In the next section, we examine some of the dimensions of academic vocabulary which must be an important component of any comprehensive approach to vocabulary instruction.

**What Are the Dimensions of Academic Vocabulary?**

One reason that vocabulary has become a hot issue in literacy instruction is that we know some students come to school knowing many fewer words than others (Hart & Risley, 1995), and that this has a major impact on school learning. It has been proposed that we may be able to help them succeed in school by teaching them the academic vocabulary needed to be successful (Marzano, 2004). Similarly, we know that many students, largely from low socio-economic backgrounds or non-mainstream cultural backgrounds, come to school unfamiliar with the discourse of school—school language. One dimension of school language is lexica—knowing the meaning of line up, for example, when the class is getting ready for recess. In a very broad definition of academic vocabulary, we might include these words simply because they occur in an academic setting, but it would not be what we would normally think of as being related to academic language.

Historically there has been a significant population of students who have also needed instruction in “school-based” vocabulary—English Language Learners (ELLs). To differentiate their vocabulary needs, one common term used in ELL instruction is CALP, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. Cummins (2000) who was responsible for introducing the term, contrasts it with Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), which a student may use in the playground. In this iteration, our students need to learn academic language, which is cognitively demanding and academic, and which includes school-based discourse patterns. However, within the ELL community there has been some debate about which vocabulary is academic and which is not (Aukerman, 2007). While the general distinction is clear, the particular instances of which words are academic may be contextually defined by their use in the classroom. The decision may be important to the extent that it impacts on what gets included on lists of words that should be taught as part of the curriculum—the words it is “necessary” for students to know.

Aside from the above considerations, an a priori definition of academic vocabulary would appear to be quite simple—the vocabulary of the content of a discipline, including those words that identify major concepts, such as perimeter or osmosis, and those that are related to processes within the discipline, such as classify or differentiate. It is apparent that each discipline has its own discourse, grammar, and lexicon (Yopp, Yopp, & Bishop, 2008). However, Nation (1990) suggested there may be a more general academic vocabulary—words that appear across content areas. Such a general academic vocabulary would have implications for instruction if these words have a general meaning that could be taught across disciplines (Bailey & Butler, 2007), and this has led to the generation of various word lists. These lists differ from Marzano’s list (2004), for example, which is for developing students’ background knowledge from the early grade levels. They are primarily for the use with upper elementary grade students and beyond (for example,
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Regardless of definitions, there are several approaches that educators have used to choose appropriate words for instruction and for the construction of instructional materials. Suggested approaches include picking the words that are not well established in students’ vocabularies and will be encountered frequently in the future (Beck et al., 2002), selecting words that are important to what is being read, and choosing words based on generativity, i.e., the ability to use this word or word parts to learn other words (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2009; Graves, 2006). Most educators would suggest that the words encountered most frequently in English are good candidates for learning, and that various word lists can help teachers select words appropriate to various grade levels and content areas. Hiebert and Lubliner (2008) have suggested that using content-focused materials with real-world referents can actually be more accessible to students from varying linguistic backgrounds.

Further, core reading programs, both commercial and locally constructed, have typically contained many genres of literature and have highlighted vocabulary from these selections to represent frequency, decodability, central selection content, and words needed for instruction in a particular skill or strategy (Ryder & Graves, 1994). Thus, with the exception of early literacy, when it is logical to focus on high-frequency vocabulary, the words selected for instruction may be highly variable from literature anthology to anthology, requiring a systematic appraisal by teachers to select the words most appropriate for their students (Beck...
Vocabulary researchers agree on the major principles of vocabulary instruction, so the issue has become what it should look like in schools, particularly in relation to those populations who come to school needing additional help with word learning. In this chapter we have tried to address three contemporary issues with a similar theme: a comprehensive approach to instruction; the teaching of academic vocabulary to address the needs of students who are traditionally marginalized, and in particular the concept of a general academic vocabulary; and word lists as a source of words to teach. We would like to close with two thoughts for teachers. The first is that, while word lists have their place, the choice of which words to teach may sometimes
be better contextualized in local curriculum, or even (especially in the early grades) in local classrooms. The second is that we are reminded by the researchers who analyzed texts (Fang, Schelepegrell, & Cox, 2006; Schelepegrell, 2007) and word lists (Hyland & Tse, 2007) that academic vocabulary is situated in academic discourse, and each discipline has its own linguistic and grammatical features that may be as great a source of difficulty to students as the vocabulary. However, we are encouraged by early results of studies of comprehensive programs with general academic vocabulary (Lawrence et al., 2009). Future research will need to address whether mastering a general academic vocabulary actually results in improved learning in more than one content area.

References


Lawrence, J., Snow, C. E., & White, C. (2009, April). Results from year


