

Determining Vocabulary Importance

When teaching vocabulary, it is helpful to keep in mind that, “word knowledge is not an all or nothing proposition” (Janet Allen, 1999). Research suggests that there are three levels of word knowledge: **verbal association, partial concept knowledge, and full concept knowledge.** Vocabulary instruction should vary depending on the level of knowledge necessary for student understanding. Before introducing vocabulary, teachers need to determine the importance of the term being learned and then use a vocabulary strategy suited for that level of understanding. Some vocabulary strategies are designed to facilitate word recognition (many pre-reading/pre-viewing strategies). These activities will support reading comprehension and can be used with as many as 20 new words. Other strategies focus on vocabulary acquisition; they encourage students to examine the words in various contexts and connect them to their own experiences. These activities are designed to help students internalize the new term and should be used with no more than 5 or 7 words at a time.

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	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Type of word	Core content	Important	Nice to know
What the word does	Concepts or ideas that lay the foundation for entire units of study or disciplines.	Concepts, events, people, or places that deepen understanding and facilitate connections between content.	Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, specialized vocabulary, etc., that enrich language but are not central to understanding.
Suggested time spent mastering words	Anywhere from one week to several months, depending on the centrality and importance of the concept	From fifteen minutes to a couple of class periods, depending on importance.	From one to ten minutes, depending on student comprehension speed

Questions to determine word level

1. Which words are most important to understanding the text?
2. How much prior knowledge will students have about this word or its related concept?
3. Is the word encountered frequently?
4. Does the word have multiple meanings?
5. Is the concept significant and does it therefore require preteaching?
6. Which words can be figured out from the context?
7. Are there words that could be grouped together to enhance understanding a concept?
8. What strategies could I employ to help students integrate the concept (and related words) into their lives?
9. How can I make repeated exposures to the word/concept productive and enjoyable?

10. How can I help students use the word/concept in meaningful ways in multiple contexts?