



Vocabulary

Research has indicated that vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension, general reading performance (including subskills), and, therefore, overall school achievement (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, 2008). It is no wonder that vocabulary was included as one of the pillars in the National Reading Panel Report. Vocabulary is generally subdivided into four areas: oral, print, receptive, and productive. Oral vocabulary is what we use when talking with someone or when we are listening to someone read. Print vocabulary includes those words that we see when reading ourselves. Receptive vocabulary is used when someone is reading or speaking to us and productive vocabulary is used when we are writing or speaking ourselves. There is obviously some overlap in these areas, and it is important to note that, in any of these areas, it is only part of our own vocabulary if we understand the word that is encountered.

Kamil and Hiebert (2005) found that a child's productive vocabulary is more well known and used but that the receptive vocabulary is larger and plays an important role in children's reading success. Those students who have little receptive vocabulary are at-risk for comprehension and decoding problems. Additionally there are levels of how well a child actually knows a word which range from having no knowledge of the word to having a clear understanding of the word even when it is decontextualized. It is generally accepted that it is important not only for students to know a lot of words but that they should know them with clear meaning. As teachers, it is important to understand the impact that this has on our instruction. Therefore this next section will address the recommendations of the National Reading Panel Report and how this may look within our classrooms.

Encourage Wide Reading

Students generally learn new words at a rate of 2000-3000 per year. Unless you plan on spending all day, every day explicitly teaching vocabulary, word learning has to be addressed in other ways. We know that a fifth grade student who reads about an hour a day will encounter around 2,250,000 words. Of these, two to five percent will be new or around 45,000 to 112,500 words. If the student learns just 5-10% of these unknown words (which seems to be the accepted rate) this easily accounts for over 2,000 words just through wide reading. So how do we get this to occur? We need to build environments within our classrooms which encourage students to read at varying levels and for different purposes. Beyond building students' vocabularies, this type of environment is motivating and encourages students to read more.

Expose Students to High-Quality Oral Language

One of the best ways to ensure that this occurs is to read to your students and follow the reading with a rich discussion. This allows your students to be exposed to hundreds of new words per year as well as the opportunity to practice those words in a rich academic environment. Centers and activities which include storytelling and books on tape can add to this oral language exposure. It is important not to dumb down the vocabulary that the children are exposed to but rather emulate and use these rich words as often as possible.

Promote Word Consciousness

Clearly the two recommendations mentioned previously are necessary in promoting word consciousness; however most teachers indicate that adding an element of fun to the mix really helps to grab the student's attention and motivate them to notice words. For younger students this may come in the form of word play and rhyme; for older students it may be having them create or add to a book of wonderful words or glittering gems that is utilized by all students. In either case, it is again the environment that allows or denies the student the access to the spoken or written word.

Provide Explicit Instruction of Specific Words

It should be emphasized that this does not mean giving your students a list of words that they look up in the dictionary, write the definition of, and turn into you. It has been clearly shown that this practice is not efficient for the learning and retention of new vocabulary. Rather it is important that we: a) use both definitional and contextual information about word meanings which includes teaching antonyms, synonyms, rewriting definitions, providing example sentences, and having students create silly questions using word pairs; b) involve the students actively in word learning which allows students to relate new information to known information and establishing knowledge links for themselves; and c) use discussion to teach the new words and the important information about these words.

In order to determine which words should be explicitly taught, Beck & McKeown (2002, 2008) have established a three-tier system. The first tier consists of known words that don't generally have to be taught such as mom, dad, house. The second tier is made up of words that are key to comprehension and include words like curious, magnificent, droopy. The third tier includes words that are generally specific to a content and include words like proton, neutron, nucleus. These words should be taught as encountered but as indicated are generally content specific. When determining words that should be explicitly taught, it is best to select words from tier two.

Model and Instruct Students in Independent Word-Learning Strategies

These strategies should include instruction in phonics (both decoding and encoding), the use of word parts, and, when appropriate context clues as well as the use of dictionaries as a strategy. Developing a strategy such as look in (the word to determine its meaning based parts), look around (the word to determine if context can provide clues) and look up (the word if the meaning can still not be determined) can provide an overall strategy to aid students in becoming independent word learners.

Finally, in closing, it cannot be emphasized enough that your role in modeling a love for reading and words in general is the single most important factor in creating an environment that moves your students forward in their vocabulary acquisition. So share the stories and words you love with your students and provide an environment which allows them to share theirs with you.

Contributed by Chelli Smith

References

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