

Developing Academic Language: Got Words?

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The prior installment of this department (in October, 2007) introduced the idea of toolkit elements for content teachers. We asserted that one of those essential elements is the skill of enriching students' academic language. In this installment, we highlight academic vocabulary and what professional opinion and research have to say about tools for building word knowledge in the content areas. By using the expression *academic vocabulary* we are referring to word knowledge that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are valued in school (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

Pearson, Hiebert, and Kamil (2007) noted, "After a nearly 15-year absence from center stage, vocabulary has returned to a prominent place in discussions of reading, and it is alive and well in reading instruction and reading research" (p. 282). Vocabulary study and practice received new impetus with the release of the National Reading Panel's (NRP) report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000), and since then we have seen a plethora of grants and research studies devoted to the topic.

The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) reasserted the essential relationship vocabulary knowledge has to overall reading comprehension. This relationship is even more significant for content texts due to the burden they place on children to understand new and numerous technical words (Harmon, Hedrick, & Wood, 2005). Although we know students need to possess sophisticated language tools to explore information and concepts in content area materials, fundamental questions remain in the minds of many teachers. Two of the most basic questions are the following:

1. What should attention to academic vocabulary in the content areas look like?
2. Which approaches to vocabulary acquisition will have the biggest impact on children's academic achievement, especially those who are at the highest risk of failure?

The answers to these questions are found in one overarching principle to guide teachers, regardless of the specific vocabulary practices they employ: Greater attention should be paid to developing students' academic vocabularies in systematic ways.

How Important Is Systematic Vocabulary Instruction?

If one were to query upper elementary teachers about their attention to vocabulary, most would say that they do teach vocabulary to their students. Recently, Scott, Jamieson-Noel, and Asselin (2003) found, in their observations of 23 ethnically diverse classrooms, that only 6% of school time was centered on vocabulary development, and in the core academic subject areas only 1.4% of instructional time was spent developing vocabulary knowledge. As reported by the researchers, the instruction observed was too often more mentioning and assigning rather than teaching. Bolstering the argument for the apparent paucity of in-depth attention to vocabulary instruction, Walsh (2003) found that none of the most widely used basal programs provided the attention to vocabulary necessary to increase comprehension. Coupling Walsh's findings with those from Dunn, Bonner, and Huskee's (2007) report of students who placed at the 50th percentile in reading comprehension (increasing their scores by as much as 30 percentile points after having received direct and meaningful vocabulary instruction) suggests that all teachers need to examine

their vocabulary practices with special attention to systematic approaches to expanding word knowledge for children.

What Should Teachers Do?

Almost all of the studies included in the NRP report (NICHD, 2000) found that direct instructional approaches improved both vocabulary and comprehension (Kamil, 2004).

The RAND Reading Study Group Report (2002) also stressed the value of systematic vocabulary instruction for building comprehension. In spite of admonitions from research, finding time for direct and systematic instruction of large numbers of words from the content areas presents teachers with major challenges (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). What follows is a list of evidence-based recommendations for developing students' academic language in meaningful ways. We assert that these recommendations can serve as guidelines for a range of specific practices teachers can undertake to expand word learning in the content areas and consequently increase student achievement.

Be Highly Selective about Which Words to Teach. Content area terms should be selected for their use in helping children apply word learning strategies and for engendering interest in using the words as tools for meaningful communication (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000).

Provide Multiple Encounters With Targeted Words. Multiple exposures to content vocabulary can occur through the use of collaborative, active tasks and can be supported by technology (Kamil, 2004). The quality of each encounter is important, as is causing students to use writing, speaking, listening, and reading when collaborating about targeted words (Pearson et al., 2007).

Provide Students Direct Instruction on How to Infer Word Meanings. Students need to be shown how meaningful information about vocabulary words in content text can be derived through contextual analysis (Graves, 2000; Nation, 2001). Of course, the more meaningful and authentic the context a teacher uses the greater the impact on students' ownership of the targeted terms (Scott et al., 2003).

Promote In-Depth Word Knowledge. Many content terms may be better understood when students manipulate words through group activities requiring categorization, word association, or semantic analysis (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Marzano, 2005).

Provide Students With Opportunities to Extend Their Word Knowledge. Students can be shown how to use morphemic analysis, awareness of polysemy (varied meanings), and attention to derivations and origins to further their knowledge of content vocabulary and find similar features in new words (Marzano, 2004). On checking research done with English-language learners (ELLs) these approaches were found to be equally as effective in promoting vocabulary growth and improved comprehension with ELLs as with native speakers of English (Beck et al., 2002; Carlo et al., 2004; Nagy, 1997).

Finally, for those readers who have not explored the ReadWriteThink website (www.ReadWriteThink.org), a joint project of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, we urge you to do so. There are numerous examples of complete lessons that reflect current thought about how best to help students enlarge their academic vocabulary. Examples such as Using Word Storms to Explore Vocabulary and Encourage Critical Thinking allow teachers to save time, improve their teaching, and affect student achievement.

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