



Features

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Important Dates

- **March 6:** Open House 5-6:30
- **March 13:** Field Advisory 4-4:50
- **April 17:** Field Advisory 4-4:50
- **April 26:** Open House 5-6:30
- **May 15:** Advisory Board Meeting 4:30-6

STEP=UP

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What is Vocabulary?

When you read, how do you come to comprehend what you are reading? How do we make meaning? Part of making meaning, whether we read a magazine, the newspaper, a book, a textbook, a store sales flier, is to understand the meanings of the words and ideas. The National Reading Panel (2001) has described three main areas that are crucial for good reading comprehension instruction. First, reading is a complex cognitive process and integral to it is vocabulary development. Secondly, comprehension is an active process that requires an intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text. Thirdly, the Panel suggests that teachers and teacher candidates need to develop a repertoire of reading comprehension strategies in order to help their students.

We can see that vocabulary building and instruction are of great importance, but what is vocabulary? We talked with a group of experienced special educators in Chicago Public Schools who also mentor teacher candidates; all of them provided interesting feedback and examples, some of which are discussed here.

The first point was that literacy is all around our homes, and in our everyday environments of the classroom, lunchroom, and neighborhoods. A high school English teacher, Judi Arroyo, talked about using scrapbooks (that students created) to track story plots and predict what might happen next. Aaron Brown, a mathematics high school teacher, discussed how he displays information on his bulletin boards. He teaches students to look at those for help, and more broadly as a way to learn how to gain information from their environment.

Another principle about teaching and learning vocabulary is the importance of connecting the words and meanings to students' lived experiences. Have students immediately put the word or term into a textual and social context. Morgan

Gallagher, an elementary special educator, worked with vocabulary by using graphic organizers to link related words and then link them with familiar elements. Learning words is tricky, he said, because recognizing the words and even using them in one context might not mean a student can generalize and use the words in different situations. Gladys Hampton, a resource special educator, has taken a theatrical approach, having students act out the meaning of the word, so that the feelings associated with the word are connected to its meaning.

While we often associate learning vocabulary with getting ready to read a new book, we reminded ourselves that word meaning has to be reviewed when teaching daily living skills. Jennifer Clayton talked about "writing with symbols" book that paired descriptive words about winter with pictures. Another teacher, Dave Rench, brought in examples of word cards that kids can manipulate at their desks, and can concurrently see up on a word wall. Those who cannot read and/or are non-verbal, use pictures. Students actually see and use the cards and word wall whenever they need a reminder.

So what did these teachers suggest about the study of word meanings, which we broadly call vocabulary study?

- Vocabulary can be thought of as a tool for organizing and explaining the world.
- Teachers need to expose students to varied and rich vocabulary.
- Teach the vocabulary of school subject matter, like in the study of rocks or ancient Egypt or slope.
- Key to vocabulary study is to help students understand that words and phrases are situated; that is, they take on different meanings in different contexts.

Research Corner

Vocabulary tests are regularly used to measure student comprehension of word meanings, however, studies show that while students can memorize the meaning of a word for a vocabulary test, they are often unable to correctly use the word in subsequent speech and writing. One reason may be that word comprehension is expressed not by a demonstration of memorization, but rather through correct usage within spoken and written communication. Perhaps, then, one of the most traditional ways vocabulary development is measured, with vocabulary tests, is ineffective and may in fact contribute to non-comprehension of new words. For this reason it is important to consider alternative ways of not only teaching vocabulary but also measuring comprehension.

This opinion underlies Lisbeth Dixon-Krauss' "Using Literature as a Context for Teaching Vocabulary." During traditional teacher-directed instruction students were given a list of vocabulary words that appear in a text and told to use them in their journal entries. After this they were tested through matching words and definitions as well as using the appropriate word to complete a sentence. Students scored very poorly on these tests and when the words appeared in journal entries they were very often misused. During teacher-mediated instruction, on the other hand, students were encouraged to use the words from the list but only after discussion of the story in which the teacher showed how to correctly use the words as she spoke and also put the words on index cards. How often words appeared, used correctly, increased dramatically during the four-week study. Comprehension occurs over time as vocabulary words become necessary for students to get their

ideas across.

Self-expression as a demonstration of comprehension also figures largely in an article by Foh and Alber in which they describe several action-based ways of teaching vocabulary. One method is asking students to write and perform skits using vocabulary words. Another method requires students to pantomime the definition while others guess the word and definition. Alternatively, students may be given a word and then create a video that either demonstrates examples of the word (e.g., "honesty" may be a child confessing to breaking a vase) or that portrays a scene that itself demonstrates the word meaning in a dialogue. While this is similar to writing a story or journal entry, having to represent word meaning through visual narrative allows teachers to accentuate students' varied learning styles.

While these two articles focus on different methods to teach and measure vocabulary development and comprehension skills, both agree that the process should not rely on rote memorization and passive learning. Their primary argument is instead that teaching vocabulary must involve dynamic practices which engage the whole class as well as equally engaging interactive activities that demonstrate comprehension.

Carolyn Foh and Sheila Alber. "Fun and Effective Ways to Build Your Students' Vocabulary", *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 37:3 Jan. 2002, 131-139.

Lisbeth Dixon-Krauss. "Using Literature as a Context for Teaching Vocabulary", *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 45:4 Dec. 2001/ Jan. 2001, 310-318.

Digital Corner

Writing with Symbols 2000 v2.6 lends extensive support for using written language by helping writers literally see the meaning of words. It can illustrate the differences between homonyms (saw/saw) and homophones (pear/pair) as well as many other aspects of vocabulary development where images can increase understanding.

It has two extensive sets of graphics images (symbols) to support writing: 1) colored PCS symbols from Mayer-Johnson which are ideal for younger learners and motivating early readers; and 2) Widgit Rebus symbols which are systematically constructed to enhance learning and to develop language understanding. Also, you can add your own images so that students could write a story about their home, their family, and their pets that can be told through real-life images. So here, again, we can connect school and home.

"Writing With Symbols" caters to students of all abilities, and so aids in the full integration of students who have different needs. Special educators have relied on it to provide a range of experiences to students with moderate to severe learning difficulties.

You can print a vast range of teaching and communication materials such as time tables, worksheets, communication books, and games. Cells can have single words, symbols, or symbol sentences and you can vary the layout to suit your task.

www.widgit.com/products/wws2000/index.htm