



Vocabulary Instruction

According to information released in a pamphlet produced by the U.S. Department of Education,¹ American children are not reading well enough—only 32 percent of the nation’s 4th-graders perform at or above the proficient level. The National Reading Panel has identified the five skills needed to ensure early reading success: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.² Because of the strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, every reading program should emphasize vocabulary.³ “Good vocabulary and good reading go hand in hand.”⁴

Starting with a lump of clay, a sculptor goes through many steps to produce a finished product: manipulating the clay by smoothing, shaping, and pinching, adding additional clay as needed. Finally, the clay must be fired or glazed to complete the project. A painter begins with a blank canvas on which to project mental images. He or she selects a variety of tools and a palette of colors to produce a final product. Writers use a different medium—words—to produce their creative projects. However, like a sculpture or a painting, each writing product is flavored by the unique experiences of the creator.⁵

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cluding vocabulary development. But to do so, he or she needs to be able to use a variety of tools and activities.

First, the teacher must understand the goals and objectives of vocabulary instruction. Second, he or she must know what kinds of vocabulary helps will equip students to communicate in a variety of contexts. Third, the teacher needs a palette of strategies from which to choose. Finally, he or she needs to create a developmental checklist to record each student’s vocabulary development.

Goals and Objectives of Vocabulary Instruction

According to Ruddell, there are three primary goals in vocabulary instruction.⁶ It must (1) “develop children’s background knowledge of concepts and word labels that enable them to comprehend narrative and expository text,” (2) “teach children how to understand new word meanings independently,” and (3) “build positive attitudes toward vocabulary learning and encourage independent word learning.” He lists the following objectives for developing new vocabulary:

- Apply active learning and comprehension strategies to expository and narrative reading material;
- Connect students’ prior knowledge to new vocabulary;
- Use the context of the story or exposition to check new vocabulary word meaning;
- Provide a variety of strategies that students can use indepen-

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dently to determine the meaning of new words; and

- Motivate students to enjoy and value reading materials and to become independent readers.

The National Reading Panel recommends the following for vocabulary instruction⁷:

- Teaching and learning of word meanings to achieve comprehension;
- Learning the meanings of words before reading a selection;
- Teaching of word meaning through a variety of direct methods (i.e., repetition, specialized computer

programs, and exposure to a variety of contexts); and

- Learning words incidentally through reading and oral language experiences.

Kinds of Vocabulary

According to Farris, Fuhler, and Walther, there are four kinds of vocabulary⁸:

Listening vocabulary: words a child hears and understands but may not use every day, which form the largest personal vocabulary. These words may be names of pets, family members,

foods, or television characters.

Speaking vocabulary: words the child hears, understands, and uses in speech. These include words that are modeled by a parent and siblings.

Reading vocabulary: words the child recognizes such as his or her name or favorite cereal. This vocabulary grows to include all the words a child can read.

Writing vocabulary: words a child is exposed to from textbooks and other sources. This vocabulary is used in writing assignments and other written communication.

Every student has a personal vocabulary with four subsets⁹: (1) listening—spoken words comprehended when heard, (2) speaking—words used in talking, (3) writing—words used in writing, and (4) reading—words recognized on sight. There is, of course, considerable overlap among the categories.

Techniques for Teaching Vocabulary

Children learn their first 6,000 words from their parents and peers, adding labels for people and objects. Based on observations of these early learning experiences, as well as the implications of research, Gunning¹⁰ points out that developing vocabulary is not simply a matter of listing 10 or

20 words and their definitions on Monday and giving a quiz at the end of the week. He offers the following principles for vocabulary development:

- *Build experiential background*—talk about experiences such as a trip to the zoo or a museum. Make the activity as concrete as possible.
- *Relate vocabulary to background*—connect new words to experiences students have had. You could introduce a word such as *compliment* by saying some nice things and then asking students to work in pairs complimenting each other.
- *Build relationships*—show how new words are related to each other by pointing out synonyms and antonyms, classifying words, and creating graphic organizers.

• *Develop depth of meaning*—help students understand words in different contexts. Definitions alone may be inadequate without a contextual setting.

• *Present several exposures*—make sure students repeatedly encounter the word. Using the word multiple times is crucial to understanding.

• *Create an interest in words*—choose motivating activities that inspire vocabulary development. For example, students can work toward gaining points for a Word Wizard Chart by recording instances of seeing, hearing, or using the words.

• *Teach students how to learn new words*—promote independent word-learning skills. Many strategies such as morphemic analysis, dictionary skills, etc., may be used.

The National Reading Panel examined more than 20,000 research citations to determine how vocabulary can best be taught and related to the reading comprehension process. Its findings were as follows¹¹:

• Optimal learning results from the use of a combination of methods (both direct and indirect);

• Learning vocabulary can be incidental in the context of storybook reading or in listening to others;

• Students benefit from being exposed to words before reading a text;

• Substituting easy words for more difficult words can help low-achieving students;

• Vocabulary acquisition is enhanced when students learn in rich contexts, have repeated exposure to text, and use computers;

• Teaching methods must be appropriate to the age and ability of the reader, and actively engage the student.

Other researchers¹² also report significant gains in students' comprehension when they are taught new vocabulary terms before reading a selection. Reinforcing what is taught over a period of time will also enhance comprehension. Sight words should be built from words students already comprehend. Other recommended activities:

- *Repeated Readings*: A student

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re-reads a text several times to improve his or her fluency and to decrease the number of errors.¹³

- *Readers Theatre*: A student has “the opportunity to read a selection several times in preparation for a performance. The performance consists of students standing or sitting in a row at the front of the room and reading aloud from a script, usually adapted from a book. There are typically no props, scenery, or staging because emphasis is placed on oral interpretation of the text.” Free downloadable scripts for a range of grade levels can be

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found on the Website <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt>.¹⁴

- *Choral Reading*: “[S]everal individuals simultaneously reading the same text aloud. The teacher first models fluent reading of the text, and

then students read and reread it together until they are satisfied that they have read it in a fluent, natural, and pleasing manner.”¹⁵

- *Word Walls*: Students and teachers choose words to display on large sheets of paper posted in the classroom. Students refer to the word wall during word-study activities and when they are writing.¹⁶

- *Semantic Maps*: Students create a diagram or graphic organizer that shows how words are related in meaning to one another.¹⁷

- *Read-Alouds*: When teachers read aloud, this provides a model for fluent reading, correct pronunciation of new words, introduction of words in a



A variety of Internet resources are available. Listed below are some useful Websites:

<http://www.manatee.k12.fl.us/sites/elementary/palmasola/rcompindex.htm>. Worksheets and games that focus on vocabulary builders, antonyms, synonyms, homophones, multiple-meaning words, compound words, contractions, word analogies, prefixes, suffixes, base words, syllabic rules.

http://people.bu.edu/jpettig/Articles_and_Presentations/Vocabulary.htm. Two Dozen Tips and Techniques for teaching vocabulary.

<http://www.m-w.com>. An online dictionary that provides a daily word as well as many other resources.

<http://www.vocabulary.com>. Leveled puzzles that utilize words based on a given definition and a common root word.

meaningful context, and clarification of word meanings.¹⁸

• *Vocabulary Self-Selection Strategy*: “[A] group activity in which each student, and the teacher as well, is responsible for bringing two words to the attention of the group Students place their words on the board. . . . Each pupil . . . talks about his or her word, where it was encountered, what it might mean, and why he or she thinks it is important for the class to know. . . . the class narrows the list to a predetermined number (five to eight words per week is typical). . . . Students then enter the words in their vocabulary logs and practice using the words in activities ranging from cross-words to research word histories to

creating a class assessment. The cycle starts again the next week.”¹⁹

• *Developing Vocabulary Knowledge Through Literature*: Literature expands students’ vocabulary knowledge and provides them with experiences that cannot be re-created in the classroom.²⁰

Diagnostic Checklist

Rubin²¹ has developed a helpful diagnostic checklist for vocabulary development that primary and intermediate teachers can use to record student progress. (See below and on page 37.)



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2. National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000), pp. 13-15.
3. Arthur W. Heilman, Timothy R. Blair, and William H. Rupley, *Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading*, Tenth Edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 207.
4. Dorothy Rubin, *Diagnosis and Correction in Reading Instruction*, Fourth Edition (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), p. 330.
5. Pamela J. Farris, Carol J. Fuhler, and Maria P. Walther, *Teaching Reading: A Balanced Approach for Today’s Classrooms* (New York: Mc-

Diagnostic Checklist for Vocabulary Development (Primary Grades)	Yes	No
1. The child shows vocabulary consciousness by recognizing that some words have more than one meaning.		
2. The child uses context clues to figure out word meanings.		
3. The child can state the opposite of words such as <i>stop, tall, fat, long, happy, big</i> .		
4. The child can provide synonyms for words such as <i>big, heavy, thin, mean, fast, hit</i> .		
5. The child can give meanings for homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different meanings based on their use in a sentence). Examples: I did not <i>state</i> what <i>state</i> I live in. Do not <i>roll</i> the <i>roll</i> on the floor. <i>Train</i> your dog not to bark when he hears a <i>train</i> .		
6. The child has developed a sense vocabulary to describe various sounds, smells, signs, tastes, and touches.		
7. The child is expanding his or her vocabulary by combining words to form compounds such as <i>grandfather, bedroom, cupcake, backyard, toothpick, buttercup, firefighter</i> .		
8. The child is expanding his or her vocabulary by combining roots of words with prefixes and suffixes. Examples: <i>return, friendly, unhappy, disagree, dirty, precook, unfriendly</i> .		
9. The child is able to give the answer to a number of word riddles.		
10. The child is able to create a number of word riddles.		
11. The child is able to classify various objects such as fruits, animals, colors, pets, and so on.		
12. The child is able to give words that are associated with certain objects and ideas. Example: <i>hospital—nurse, doctor, beds, sick persons, medicine</i> , and so on.		
13. The child is able to complete some analogies, such as <i>Happy is to sad as fat is to _____</i> .		
14. The child shows that he or she is developing vocabulary consciousness by using the dictionary to look up unknown words.		

Diagnostic Checklist for Vocabulary Development (Intermediate Grades)	Yes	No
1. The student recognizes that many words have more than one meaning.		
2. The student uses context clues to figure out the meaning.		
3. The student can give synonyms for words such as <i>similar, secluded, passive, brief, old, cryptic, anxious</i> .		
4. The student can give antonyms for words such as <i>prior, most, less, best, optimist, rash, humble, content</i> .		
5. The student can identify different meanings for homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different meanings based on their use in a sentence). For example: It is against the law to <i>litter</i> the streets. The man was placed on the <i>litter</i> in the ambulance. My dog gave birth to a <i>litter</i> of puppies.		
6. The student is able to use word parts to figure out word meanings.		
7. The student is able to use word parts to build words.		
8. The student is able to complete analogy statements or proportions.		
9. The student is able to give the connotative meaning of a number of words.		
10. The student is able to work with word categories.		
11. The student is able to answer a number of word riddles.		
12. The student is able to create a number of word riddles.		
13. The student uses the dictionary to find word meanings.		

Graw-Hill, 2004), pp. 379-380.

6. Robert B. Ruddell, *Teaching Children to Read and Write: Becoming an Effective Literacy Teacher*, Third Edition (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), p. 153.

7. National Reading Panel, p. 14.

8. Farris, Fuhler, and Walther, pp. 381, 382.

9. Rhonda Holt Atkinson and Debbie Guice Longman, *Vocabulary for College and Beyond* (St. Paul, Minn.: West, 1990), p. 44.

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11. National Reading Panel, pp. 13-15.

12. Betty D. Roe, Sandy H. Smith, and Paul C. Burns, *Teaching Reading in Today's Elementary Schools*, Ninth Edition (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 131.

13. Gail E. Tompkins, *Literacy for the Twenty-first Century: A Balanced Approach* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), p. 179.

14. Ruth H. Yopp and Hallie K. Yopp, "Time With Text," *Reading Teacher* 57:3 (November 2003), p. 285.

15. *Ibid*, p. 285.

16. Tompkins, p. 190.

17. Roe, Smith, and Burns, p. 152.

18. Frank B. May, *Teaching Reading Creatively: Reading and Writing as Communication*, Seventh Edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2006), pp. 154-156.

19. Camille Blachowicz and Peter Fisher, *Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms*, Second Edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education, 2002), pp. 32, 33.

20. Donald J. Leu, Jr., and Charles K. Kinzer, *Effective Literacy Instruction, K-8*, Fourth Edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1999), p. 116.

21. Rubin, pp. 341, 342.

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