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# Why Vocabulary Instruction Matters

*by Dr. David W. Moore*

## Lessons from the Field

**WE UNDERSTAND THAT VOCABULARY** knowledge is essential for success in reading. Students cannot understand what they read without understanding what most of the words mean. Decades of research have confirmed the important role that vocabulary plays in reading comprehension and in students' overall academic success (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005). Yet there is an alarming word-knowledge gap between students who come from economically advantaged backgrounds and those who live in poverty (Hart & Risley, 1995). The differences in vocabulary knowledge begin before children enter school and—without intervention—the gap grows even wider as students move from grade to grade.

Given the pivotal role of vocabulary, it is surprising that typically very little class time has been focused on vocabulary instruction. Researchers including Durkin (1979), Scott and Nagy (1997), and Biemiller (2005) have documented the small percent of instructional time dedicated to vocabulary teaching and the general absence of systematic, explicit vocabulary instruction. The same situation exists in programs serving English language learners (Dutro & Moran, 2003; Gersten & Baker, 2000).

In the past, vocabulary instruction was often unplanned and incidental, primarily driven by student questions and "teachable moments." When students encountered an unfamiliar word, they were directed to the glossary or a dictionary, or were given a quick oral definition. It's not surprising that this limited, on-the-fly exposure did not result in long-term word learning. Students need multiple exposures to words in multiple contexts before they understand, remember, and apply them (Nagy, 2005).

Dictionary definitions typically have been a primary vehicle for teaching words' meanings. However, even proficient adult readers often have difficulty deciphering a word's meanings from conventional dictionary definitions. By design, dictionary definitions are extremely concise and precise. The result can be so cryptic that it's difficult to grasp a word's meanings or apply those meanings in context (Beck, et al., 2002).

In addition to relying on dictionary definitions, vocabulary instruction has usually placed a great deal of emphasis on using context to figure out word meanings. Context clues do support incidental word learning, but it's important to recognize the limitations of contextual analysis. The odds of accurately predicting a word's meaning from written context is very low—ranging from 5 to 15% for both native English speakers and students who are English language learners (Beck et al., 2002; Nagy et al., 1985).

While the probability of learning a word from a single encounter is low, Swanborn and de Glopper (1999) found that students at higher grade levels and students with higher reading ability are better able to use context. Graves (2006) sums up the descriptive research on learning from context:

> **The probability of learning a word from context increases substantially with additional occurrences of the word. That is how we typically learn from context. We learn a little from the first encounter with a word and then more and more about a word's meaning as we meet it in new and different contexts.**

# Best Practices

What does effective, comprehensive vocabulary instruction look like? Graves (2006, 2000) has identified four key components:

1. Rich and varied language experiences
2. Direct teaching of individual words
3. Independent word-learning strategies
4. Fostering word consciousness

But first, we must answer one of the most fundamental questions—which words to teach? This question actually has a simple answer: we need to teach the words that matter most. In *Edge* Key Vocabulary words are those that are:

- **central to comprehension**—without knowing these words, the selection (its theme, main idea, or plot) just won't make sense
- **personally valuable**—students need the words to discuss the Essential Question
- **high-utility academic words**—words students will encounter in multiple subject areas and in life

This balanced model of vocabulary development is broad enough and intensive enough to meet the needs of students who have relatively limited vocabularies, are English learners with limited oral vocabularies in English, possess adequate but not exceptional vocabularies, or already have rich vocabularies and are ready for the challenge of deepening their word knowledge and developing increasingly sophisticated vocabularies.

## 1. Rich and Varied Language Experiences

Immersing students in rich and varied language experiences permits them to learn words through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students of all ages, including English language learners, benefit from participating in authentic give-and-take discussions in which they have the opportunity to thoughtfully discuss topics (Alvermann, 2000). From the intermediate grades on, reading becomes the principle language experience for promoting vocabulary growth. In fact, some researchers believe that increasing the amount of reading students do is the single most powerful thing that we can do to increase their vocabularies (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Stahl, 1998).

## 2. Direct Teaching of Individual Words

Explicit instruction in vocabulary has been shown to increase specific word knowledge and long-term reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Instruction is most effective when it is rich, deep, and extended and when it leads students to actively process new word meanings in multiple contexts. In this new view of robust instruction, vocabulary is introduced using a consistent, predictable routine (Beck et al., 2002):

a. **Pronounce** Teachers guide students in correctly pronouncing the word (by syllables and as a whole).

b. **Explain** Students are given a clear, student-friendly explanation of the word's meaning.

c. **Study Examples** Students study examples of the word in a variety of contexts.

d. **Encourage Elaboration** Students elaborate word meanings by generating their own examples and through practice.

e. **Assess** Teachers check student understanding through both informal, ongoing assessment and summative evaluations. In all cases, assessments go beyond simple memorization or matching, requiring students to demonstrate a deeper level of thinking and understanding.

## 3. Independent Word-Learning Strategies

Estimates of student vocabulary size vary dramatically because researchers count words in different ways. Nagy and Anderson (1984) estimated that an average twelfth grader knows about 40,000 distinct word families (e.g., *history, historian, historical* are part of one word family).

Clearly there are far more words to be learned than can be directly taught. That is why *Edge* gives students powerful tools for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words that haven't been taught in class. Word-learning strategies include using knowledge of word families and cognates, morphological analysis, contextual analysis, and consulting appropriate references. In line with research on metacognitive word-learning strategies (Lubliner & Smetana, 2005), *Edge* also teaches youth a comprehensive approach for clarifying word meanings while reading.

## 4. Fostering Word Consciousness

Another key aspect of effective vocabulary instruction is fostering word consciousness. This means developing students' interest in and awareness of words and how they can be used. It can occur throughout the instructional day with practices such

as modeling adept diction, word play, researching word origins, and examining students' and professional writers' word choices.

## ELLs and Language Development

The four-part approach outlined above has been shown to be effective with English language learners. However, instruction must address the special challenges that these students face (Graves, 2006).

- **Idioms and other non-literal language** present a particular challenge for English learners. Many texts, particularly those with an informal, colloquial tone, contain idioms and slang that must be taught.

  In addition to explicit strategy instruction on how to interpret non-literal language, every selection in *Edge* contains a feature called In Other Words, which provides students with restatements of idioms, slang, and dialect (in addition to difficult or obscure terms that may cause comprehension difficulties, but do not meet the criteria of being Key Vocabulary). These restatements are not definitions; they are designed to be seamlessly substituted into the reading so that students can continue reading.

- **Academic language** presents another challenge. As Cummins (2003) has explained, it may take at least five years for English learners to bridge the gap in academic English between themselves and their English-speaking peers. Therefore, it's vital to focus instruction on academic English. One excellent source is the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) which lists 570 word families that occur in many academic texts. Many of the Key Vocabulary words selected for direct instruction in *Edge* have been drawn from this list.

- It is also important to note that many academic terms have **cognates** in other languages. Kamil and Bernhardt (2004) estimate that from 20% to more than 30% of English words have Spanish cognates. Research has shown that teaching Spanish-speaking students to take advantage of their cognate knowledge can greatly increase reading comprehension (August et al., 2005).
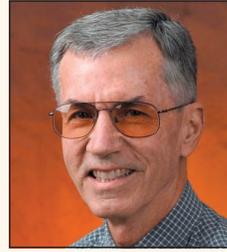
## Conclusion

Knowing the meanings of many words provides youth access to countless worlds of ideas and information. Youth deserve a comprehensive program of vocabulary instruction to gain this access. ❖

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