

Vocabulary Lessons

Camille L. Z. Blachowicz and Peter Fisher

Research points to four practices that teachers can use to expand students' vocabularies and improve their reading.

Teaching vocabulary is not a hard sell. One of the longest, most clearly articulated lines of research in literacy education describes the strong connection between readers' vocabulary knowledge and their reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Educators and parents also recognize the importance of vocabulary instruction.

Developing a strong vocabulary not only promotes reading comprehension but also enables us to actively participate in our society. People often consider a strong vocabulary the hallmark of an educated person. Pick up any in-flight magazine and you will find articles and ads selling programs and books that promise to help you "increase your vocabulary" and "learn to speak like a CEO," reinforcing the importance of vocabulary in preparing students to enter the world of work.

At a recent leadership institute, we worked with a group of school curriculum directors who were looking for teacher information materials on research-based best practices for their upcoming professional development activities. Vocabulary development was on the front burner in many of their districts. But when the curriculum directors searched for information on this topic in new books on literacy, they were shocked to find that the average space devoted to vocabulary instruction in more than 20 books published since the year 2000 was two pages; many books had no index entry at all for this crucial topic. This discovery sent us first to the coffeepot for a little fuel and then back to our group to discuss vocabulary instruction and ways to update teachers' knowledge bases and instructional repertoires.

As authors and researchers on vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000, 2001, 2003), we had many ideas for teaching vocabulary—too many, according to our staff development colleagues! They wanted a streamlined set of points to help their teachers and administrators develop a shared knowledge base for vocabulary instruction. The group's discussion helped us develop the following overview of the research on vocabulary instruction and a description of what every educator should know about successful practices that improve students' vocabulary knowledge.

The Research on Vocabulary Instruction

In a study of preschoolers' development, Hart and Risley (1995) point out that many children receive little support for vocabulary growth in their daily lives. These researchers studied 3-year-old children from book-filled homes, whose educated parents love and value reading, read to their children, and patiently explain specific vocabulary to their children when they ask questions at the store, on an outing, or at home. Hart and Risley found that the average child from such a home comes to preschool with a more advanced vocabulary than that of the average child from a less education-focused family, having heard millions more words spoken at home.

The gap in vocabulary knowledge is the bad news. But research also suggests good news: Homes, schools, and teachers can make a difference. The lack of an advanced vocabulary in preschool children does not usually signify a cognitive deficit, but rather is related to experience and instruction. Snow and colleagues (1991) found that students from low-literacy homes placed in high-literacy classrooms could reverse the trend for literacy learning. Similarly, studies support the idea that good vocabulary instruction can teach students the words they need to know to learn to read (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Biemiller, 2001).

Just as a house needs a strong foundation, so reading comprehension depends on a strong base of oral language and concept development. Research suggests that oral language comprehension typically places an upper limit on

reading comprehension (Sticht & James, 1984). According to Biemiller (2001), a young student's reading vocabulary usually runs about two years behind his or her oral vocabulary. Therefore, the school curriculum should expose students to rich oral language experiences, give students scaffolded opportunities to use and get feedback on language, and engage students in word exploration.

Studies also show that exposure to concepts in books and other written materials is crucial to vocabulary development during the school years (Nagy & Herman, 1987). Books provide the grist for great vocabulary learning, and wide reading is the process that mills those books into personal vocabularies. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) estimate that 5th grade students who engage in just 10 minutes of independent reading a day read 622,000 more words each year than students who do no independent reading. Increase that reading to 20 minutes a day, and the gap widens to almost two million more words read each year.

Research-Based Practices Every Educator Can Use

On the basis of these highlights from the research, we propose four practices that educators can use to implement a comprehensive approach to vocabulary development.

Develop word awareness and love of words through word play.

You can create a positive environment for word learning by using activities, materials, and resources that enable students to play with words. In addition, you should model word learning for your students. We can all remember learning lots of new words the year we had a teacher who was an avid punster, a crossword puzzle aficionado, or a general lover of word play.

All educators know the motivational value of play, and research bears this out. For example, in a highly controlled study of vocabulary learning in the middle grades (Beck et al., 1982), students in one classroom learned more incidental vocabulary—words that no one was attempting to teach them—than their peers in other classrooms. The researchers could not identify any instruction or materials to account for the difference in this classroom until one researcher noted a poster of interesting words on the wall. When asked about it, the teacher explained that it was the “word wall,” a place where students could write new words they encountered in reading, in conversation, on television, and in their daily experiences. In a class contest, students won points for writing a word, talking about where they heard or saw it, and then using it. With little expense, instructional time, or effort, this activity tuned students in to learning new words in a way that positively affected their learning. They became motivated word learners.

Playing with words enables students to develop a metacognitive understanding of how words work. When learning words is fun, students become interested in words and see them as objects that they can use and examine. We have found in our intake interviews with students in a summer reading program for struggling readers that these students have rarely participated in word games or word play.

Parents of struggling readers often ask us how they can help their children. Along with saying, “Read to them,” we now make sure to add, “Play word games with them.”

Deliver explicit, rich instruction to develop important vocabulary.

In our work with teachers, we often suggest the STAR model of explicit vocabulary instruction. STAR stands for Select, Teach, Activate, and Revisit.

Select. To select the best words to teach, you might use story structure or text structure (Blachowicz & Lee, 1991). Draw a story or text map for a piece of text, and then select four to six words that students would need to use to summarize that text—for example, the word “rebel” in a news article or textbook about the U.S. Civil War. You should also choose some words that are not central to the story or text but that students are likely to encounter in other

reading. For example, from the text passage “The homesick rebel cried when he thought of home,” you might select “homesick” as a related word to discuss.

Teach. Many excellent resources exist to help teachers find engaging ways to teach vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2001). For example, Stahl (1999) has suggested that teachers include definitional, contextual, and usage information when explicitly teaching words.

We find it helpful to think of the vocabulary instruction that students may need before, during, and after reading. Before reading, you should make sure that students understand the concepts essential to comprehending the selection, ones that they might not be able to guess from the context. You might explain “rebel” by giving students a few sentences from the text containing this word and asking them to talk about the possible definition. You can also ask students to use the word, then give them feedback and summarize or elaborate on the definition. During reading, you might assign each new word to an individual student, a pair of students, or a team of students and have them note when the assigned word is used, mark it with a sticky note or paper clip, and be ready to discuss how the author used it. After the reading, you can follow up with discussion of the new vocabulary words and check that students have assimilated these words.

Activate. Important words from the texts that students are reading will come up naturally in classroom discussions; you can also use writing assignments and other tasks to ensure that students hear, read, write, and use these words. You can reinforce student mastery of the selected words by connecting them to what students already know (creating synonym sets, for example); by having students demonstrate the words through acting, pantomime, and art; and by using the words in questions (“Would a homesick girl like to travel? Why or why not?”) (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

Revisit. The last step is to revisit new words through such activities as review, games, writing, and word books. For example, you might ask students to use the words “homesick” and “rebel” in a summary of the selection to cement students’ understanding of word meanings.

Build strategies for independence.

Research tells us that learning words from context is an important part of vocabulary development, but it also points out that we should not expect single contextual exposures to adequately familiarize students with word meanings (Baldwin & Schatz, 1985). Similarly, research suggests that instruction focusing on structural analysis or morphology (the learning of word parts, such as the Greek roots *tele-* and *graph*) can help students learn new words while reading, as long as a teacher encourages students to engage in independent problem solving.

You can also help students become independent readers by providing supportive instruction on how to use the dictionary—an important tool for word learning. Students do not automatically understand how dictionaries work or how to most effectively obtain information from them. Every teacher who has watched a student struggle to look up a word knows that using a dictionary can be a complex and difficult task.

Engage students actively with a wide range of books.

Research indicates that students need to read widely to expand their reading vocabularies. Book clubs, literature circles, guided reading, independent reading, and library time are just a few ways in which teachers can ensure that students read both widely and deeply in school.

You can also expose students to literature that expands their vocabularies by reading aloud, thus giving them access to a level of literature that might be too difficult for many of the students to read independently. For older students with limited vocabularies, reading interesting informational material can introduce them to the vocabulary that they will need to learn subject-area content and can also give them a jump start to help them participate in class.

Senechal and Cornell (1993) found that reading and interacting with students, rather than reading as a performance, is more likely to build students’ vocabulary. By interacting, we do not mean stopping to ask several questions while

reading the piece, but rather defining a word that might not be accessible to students as an aside: “Oh, *stupefied*, that means he was just really surprised.” After reading, you might ask students to use these words in retelling or acting out the story, or otherwise engaging in playful word use (“Show me how you look if you are stupefied”). You might also ask now and then for a prediction or interaction to keep students engaged. Rereading the same book, story, or poem can also help cement new word meanings as a result of multiple, meaningful exposures and can give pleasure to the students who ask you to “read it again.”

The Power of Vocabulary Instruction

Research indicates that effective vocabulary instruction can make a difference. Important research-based practices include encouraging students to play with and explore words, actively teaching students new vocabulary, helping students build strategies to learn new words independently, reading to students, and encouraging students to read widely. By incorporating these practices in your curriculum and instruction, you can instill in your students an appreciation for words and motivate students to build their vocabularies, not only for their school assignments, but for the rest of their lives.

References

- Baldwin, R. S., & Schatz, E. I. (1985). Context clues are ineffective with low frequency words in naturally occurring prose. In J. A. Niles & R. V. Lalik (Eds.), *Issues in literacy: A research perspective* (pp. 132–135). Rochester, NY: National Reading Conference.
- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: Guilford.
- Beck, I. L., Perfetti, C. A., & McKeown, M. G. (1982). The effects of long-term vocabulary instruction on lexical access and reading comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *74*, 506–521.
- Biemiller, A. (2001). Teaching vocabulary: Early, direct, and sequential. *American Educator*, *25*(1), 24–28, 47.
- Blachowicz, C. L. Z., & Fisher, P. (2000). Vocabulary instruction. In R. Barr, P. Mosenthal, P. S. Pearson, & M. Kamil (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research, volume III*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Blachowicz, C. L. Z., & Fisher, P. (2001). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill/Prentice-Hall.
- Blachowicz, C. L. Z., & Fisher, P. (2003). Vocabulary instruction. In B. J. Guzzetti (Ed.), *Literacy in America: An encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Blachowicz, C. L. Z., & Lee, J. (1991). Vocabulary development in the whole literacy classroom. *Reading Teacher*, *45*, 188–195.
- Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1998, Spring/Summer). What reading does for the mind. *American Educator*, 8–17.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Brookes.
- Nagy, W. E., & Herman, P. A. (1987). Depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge: Implications for acquisition and instruction. In M. G. McKeown & M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 24–56). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Senechal, M., & Cornell, E. H. (1993). Vocabulary acquisition through shared reading experiences. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 361–374.

Snow, C. E., Barnes, W. S., Chandler, J., Goodman, I. F., & Hempill, L. (1991). *Unfulfilled expectations: Home and school influences on literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stahl, S. A. (1999). *Vocabulary development*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Sticht, T. G., & James, J. H. (1984). Listening and reading. In P. D. Pearson, R. Barr, M. Kamil, & P. Mosenthal (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 293–317). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Camille L. Z. Blachowicz (cblachowicz@nl.edu) and **Peter Fisher** (pfisher@nl.edu) are Professors of Reading and Language at the National College of Education, National-Louis University, Evanston, Illinois.

Copyright © 2004 by Camille L. Z. Blachowicz, Peter Fisher