Research Into Practice READING

Vocabulary Essentials: From Research to Practice for Improved Instruction

What should every educator know about incorporating best practices in vocabulary instruction?

Vocabulary instruction is a lot like the weather—we all talk about it, but coming to definite conclusions for the classroom has been difficult. As an author and researcher on vocabulary (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2003; 2001; 2000), and as a long-time clinical director, I have had lots of ideas for vocabulary—too many, in fact, according to my staff-development colleagues! They wanted a streamlined set of points that would help their teachers and administrators develop a shared knowledge base and shared vocabulary for talking about the issues and a set of resources for further learning. So my colleagues and I set about developing a list of the vocabulary essentials—things every teacher should know from the research (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2004). This monograph looks at "vocabulary essentials"—what every educator should know in order to connect best practices in vocabulary instruction with the research.

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Vocabulary Development Is Critical

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 ability to understand what they read (National Reading Panel, 2000). Not only teachers but parents and community members recognize its importance to the curriculum. Any airline's in-flight magazine, with its numerous articles on technology and business, only reinforces the importance of developing conceptual knowledge and vocabulary for students as they enter the world of work, a fact further borne out by the number of "increase your vocabulary" and "learn to speak like a CEO" programs and books sold in those same pages. Having a strong vocabulary is not only a school goal, it is a characteristic that allows us to participate actively in our world, and it is viewed as the hallmark of an educated person.

There Is a "Vocabulary Gap" in Our School Population

In an important study of preschoolers' development, Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) point out that little support is provided for vocabulary growth in the daily lives of many children. Even when parents are doing their best, children don't all have the same opportunities for learning. Hart and Risley found that there are "lucky" three-year-old children in book-filled homes who are read to

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by educated parents who love and value reading. These children also receive patient explanations with specific vocabulary when they ask questions at the store, on an outing, or even around the home. Hart and Risley found that these "lucky" children come to preschool with more advanced vocabularies than the *parents* of "unlucky" three-year-olds because they have heard 30 million more words than the "unlucky" children before they come to school. These observations emphasize the variability that teachers see when they meet each new class.

Oral Language and Concept Development Are Essential

Just as a house has to have a strong foundation, so reading comprehension depends on a strong base of oral language and concept development. In addition to the gap we noted earlier, research suggests that oral language comprehension typically places an upper limit on reading comprehension (Sticht and James, 1984). Exposing students to rich experiences is a first step, but giving scaffolded opportunities to use language and to get feedback on language use and word exploration should be an important part of the school curriculum (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002).

Reading aloud to children, sometimes referred to as shared storybook reading, is a productive means for giving students opportunities to develop new meaning vocabulary. Because children's books present more advanced, less familiar vocabulary than everyday speech (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998), listening to books read aloud helps students go beyond their existing oral vocabularies and presents them with new words and new concepts. Discussion after shared storybook reading also gives students opportunities to use new vocabulary in the more decontextualized setting of a book discussion (Snow, 1991).

Numerous studies have documented the fact that young students can learn word meanings incidentally from read-aloud experiences. Involving students in discussions during and after listening to a book has also produced significant word learning, especially when the teacher scaffolded this learning by asking questions, adding information, or prompting students to describe what they heard. Whitehurst and his associates have called this process "dialogic reading."

Research also suggests that this scaffolding may be more essential to those students who are less likely to learn new vocabulary easily. Children with less-rich initial vocabularies are less likely to learn new vocabulary incidentally and need a thoughtful, well-designed, scaffolded approach to maximize learning from shared storybook reading. So the research points to teacher read-alouds as a positive way to develop the oral vocabularies of young learners.

Good Vocabulary Instruction Makes a Difference

While the variance in vocabulary knowledge may seem to be the bad news, the good news is that this variance is not a sign of cognitive deficits in children but is rather related to experience and instruction. Catherine Snow and her colleagues (Snow, et al., 1991) found that students from low-literacy homes placed in high-literacy classrooms could reverse the trend for literacy learning. Similarly, studies of vocabulary instruction have supported the notion that good instruction can teach words students need to know (Biemiller, 2001; Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, 1987). So, while the challenge is real, the good news is

that homes, schools, and teachers *can* make a difference.

Wide Reading Is a Necessary Part of Word Learning

Though oral language development and talk are important avenues for vocabulary development, books and other written materials are also critical, as much of vocabulary development during school years is a result of an exposure to books and concepts (Nagy & Herman, 1987). Not only do books provide a motivating source of vicarious experience, but the vocabulary level of primary books is also of a higher level than the language used in conversation by the educated parents of those "lucky" children (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). This may seem surprising, but ask yourself what most early morning parent-and-child interactions are like. "Time to get up." "Got your lunch?" "Let's go!" Compare that with these lines from Kevin Henkes's lovely book *Chrysanthemum* (1991; unpaged) in which he describes meeting a new teacher:

> That morning the students were introduced to Mrs. Twinkle, the music teacher. Her voice was like something out of a dream. . . . The students were speechless. They thought that Mrs. Twinkle was an indescribable wonder. They went out of their way to make a nice impression.

Books provide the grist for great vocabulary learning, and wide reading is the process that mills them into personal vocabularies. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) estimate that fifth-grade students who engage in just 10 minutes of independent reading a day read 622,000 more words per year than a student who does no independent reading. Increase that reading to 20 minutes a day, and the discrepancy becomes over one million more words read per year.

In sum, the research is remarkably compelling that vocabulary is an important issue for the curriculum, that teachers have a big challenge, that school instruction can make a difference, and that oral language development and reading should be a big part of the equation. Given these general findings, let's turn our attention to what the research suggests teachers can DO.

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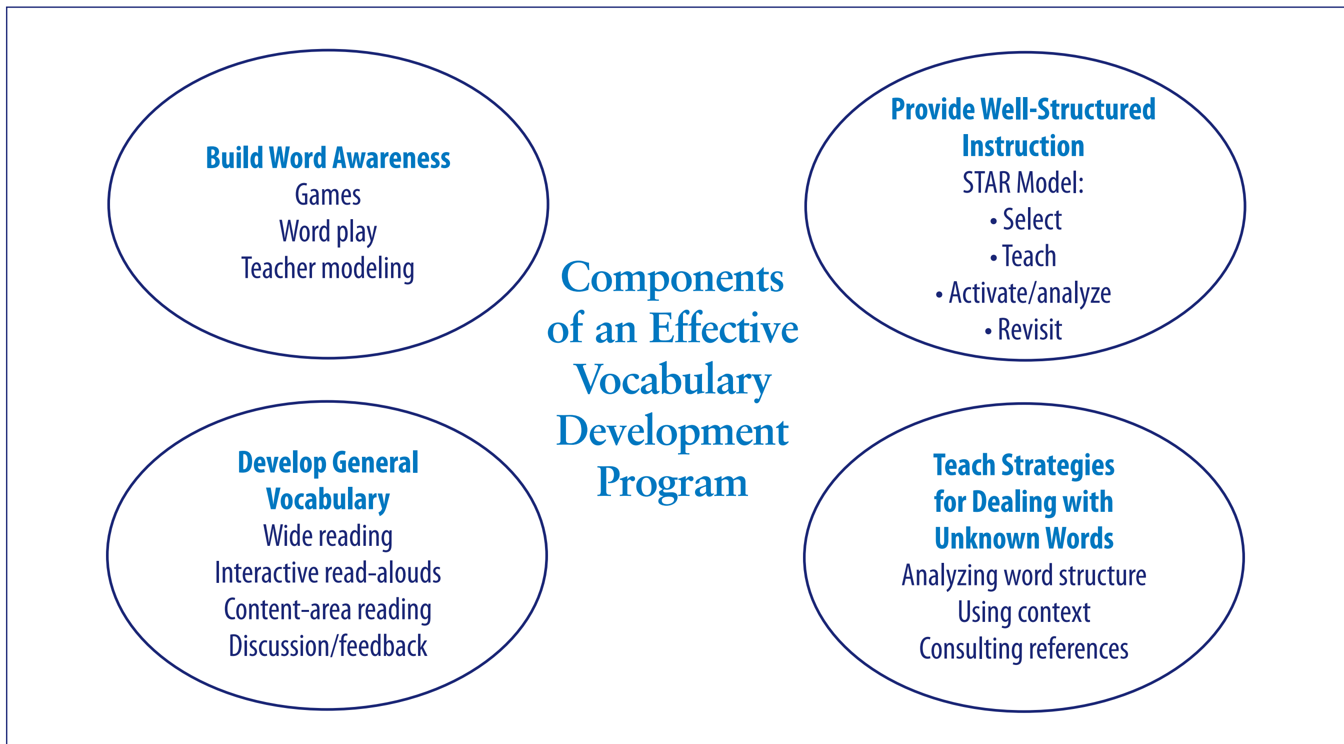
How We Can Use These Insights in the Classroom

Include the Important Research-based Elements in Your Curriculum Design.

Having a solid conceptual framework for your curriculum helps you focus on what you need to do in the classroom. To have a comprehensive approach to vocabulary development, you need to

- build word awareness through games and word play;
- provide intentional explicit, well-structured vocabulary instruction;
- teach strategies for independence; and
- develop general vocabulary by allowing time for wide reading and interactive read-alouds.

We've already touched on some of these earlier, but let's focus on each in turn.



1. Build word awareness and love of words through word play.

Part of creating a "positive environment for word learning" involves having activities, materials, and resources that allow students to play with words. One necessary requirement is that teachers are models of word learning. We can all remember the year we learned lots of new words in school, when we had a teacher who was an avid punster, crossword puzzle aficionado, or otherwise involved in word play.

All teachers know the motivational value of play. Things we enjoy and view as sources of pleasure stay with us throughout our lives. Research bears out this belief in many ways as well; the studies relating motivation to learning are too numerous to mention. For example, in one highly controlled study of vocabulary learning in the middle grades (Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, 1982), a curious phenomenon surfaced. Out of all the classrooms involved in the research project, students in one classroom learned more incidental vocabulary—words *no one* was attempting to teach. When trying to locate the source of this learning, researchers were unable to come up with any instruction or materials that could account for the difference. Then one researcher noticed a poster of interesting words in the classroom. When the teacher was asked about it, she explained that it was the "word wall," a place where students could write new words they encountered in reading, in conversation, on TV, and in their daily experiences. If they could write the word, talk about where they heard or saw it, and use it, they received points in a class contest. Very little expense, effort, or instructional time was involved, but the students became tuned in to learning new words in a way that positively affected their learning. They actively watched and listened for new words and shared them with their peers. They were motivated word learners who had become "word aware" and listened and watched for new words in their world.

Playing with and manipulating words allows students to develop a metacognitive understanding of how words work. When learning words is fun, children become interested in them, but also see them as objects to be used and examined. We have found that students in a summer reading program 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."

2. Provide intentional, explicit, well-structured instruction of important vocabulary.

In our work with teachers, we often suggest the STAR model of explicit vocabulary instruction. STAR stands for

- Select
- Teach
- Activate
- Revisit

For good instruction, the teacher's first task is to **select** the best words to receive instructional attention. One way to select the words to teach is to use story structure or text structure to analyze the selection (Blachowicz and Lee, 1991). Draw a story or text map and then select the 4–6 words that you can't retell or summarize the selection without. In a selection, news article, or textbook about the Civil War, this might be a word like *rebel.* Then when these words are chosen, look for some words that might not be central to the selection but that have a likelihood of being encountered some other time in reading. For example, "The homesick rebel cried when he thought of home." *Homesick* might be a related word to receive attention.

The second part of the STAR model is **teach,** and we find it helpful to think of the teaching to be done before, during, and after reading. Before reading, the teacher has to make accessible any concepts that are essential to understanding what is to be read and that are not well explained by context. So the teacher might choose to explain *rebel* by giving a few context sentences containing information, asking students to be active in generating some aspects of a definition, giving feedback while asking them to use the word, and finishing with a summary or elaborative definition. Stahl has suggested that definitional, contextual, and usage information should all be shared when words are explicitly taught (Stahl, 1999), and there are many excellent resources of teaching ideas to help teachers find engaging ways to do so (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2001).

Students need to be active in learning. To **activate** their uses of the new vocabulary, use the critical words first in discussion for comprehension. Because the words have been chosen as essential to understanding the text, they will come up naturally in discussion. During reading, we find it useful to assign each new word to a student, a pair of students, or a team. Their role is to find that word when it is used, mark it with a post-it or paper clip, and be ready to read how the author used it. After reading, students answer questions, discuss the selection, write, talk about vocabulary, and engage in other activities; this will ensure that the words are heard, read, written, and used. The critical words and the "good to know" words can then be connected to what students already know (by creating synonym sets, for example); demonstrated through acting,

pantomime, and art; used to answer decision questions ("Would a homesick girl like to travel or stay home? Why or why not?" See Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002); used in new contexts; and practiced for usage with usage stems ("Someone who is homesick would ___").

The last step is to **revisit** the new words through review, games, writing, word books, and in countless other ways.

3. Teach strategies for independence.

Research tells us that learning words from context is an important part of vocabulary development, but research also points out that it is unreasonable to expect single contextual exposures to do the job (Baldwin and Schatz, 1987). Similarly, instruction focusing on structural analysis or morphology (the learning of word parts, such as the Greek word parts *tele-* and *graph*) can be helpful in learning new words while reading, as long as the teacher emphasizes problem solving.

Students also need supportive instruction to learn how to use a dictionary—an important word-learning tool. Every teacher who has watched a student struggle looking up a word knows that using a dictionary can be a complex and difficult task. Stories of dictionary use often take on a "kids say the darnedest things" nature: the student whose only meaning of *sharp* has to do with good looks feels vindicated by finding "acute" as one meaning for *sharp* in a dictionary ("That sure is acute boy in my class."). Aside from providing humorous anecdotes for the teacher's room, dictionaries and dictionary use are coming under closer scrutiny by those involved in instruction. Students don't automatically understand how dictionaries work or how they can most effectively take information from them.

4. Develop general vocabulary through wide reading, interactive read-alouds, and content-area reading.

Earlier in this monograph, we noted the research that calls for wide reading. Book clubs, literature circles, guided reading, independent reading, and library time are just a few ways in which teachers ensure that students read both widely and deeply in school. Further, "read to children" is like a mantra that all educators know, repeat, and share. Research can suggest a few ways to expand this idea. First, the selection of what to read is important. In read-aloud time, students are removed from the constraints of decoding, so you can read things more difficult than they could read by themselves. Biemiller (2000) suggests that a young student's oral vocabulary is about two years ahead of his or her reading vocabulary. So pick something to read that will interest and stimulate and challenge their learning. Paratore (2001) talks about the various levels of reading students do: *easy, just right,* and *community,* the last being a level that might be too hard for many of the students to read themselves but that can provide a shared experience for the development of conceptual and vocabulary knowledge relevant to the materials they will read later. For older students with limited vocabularies, reading interesting informational material can introduce them to the vocabulary they will need for content-area learning and give them a jump start so they can participate with classmates.

Next, think about reading interactively. By this, we don't mean stopping to ask questions all through the piece, but just throwing in a word meaning as an aside ("Oh, *stupefied,* that means he was just really surprised.") to make available a few of the words that might not be accessible to the students. Also, in a read-aloud, it's fine to ask for a prediction or interaction now and then to keep students engaged. Senechal and Cornell (1993) found that reading interactively rather than as a performance was more likely to build student's vocabularies. Teachers can highlight and support the learning of new words in a read-aloud without interrupting the flow of meaningful reading and listening. Then, after reading, students can use these words in retelling, acting out, or other playful word use ("Show me how you look if you are stupefied."). Rereading the same book, story, or poem can also help cement those meanings with multiple, meaningful exposures as well as give great pleasure to the students who ask you to "read it again."

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A Final Word

The good news about vocabulary development is that research supports the best practices that teachers implement in effective literacy classrooms. Having students actively instructed and engaged with new words in classrooms where they are read to, where they read widely, and where they play with and explore the new words they encounter—this describes what our best teachers already do. They are real-world examples of the ways in which best practices and best research intersect.

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