

# The Question of Teaching Vocabulary: Which Words? In What Ways?

The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading vocabulary report was released on December 6, 2012. It's important to understand that the NAEP tests knowledge of vocabulary meanings *in context*. The report, consistent with a plethora of past research findings, demonstrates a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Students who excel in one area also excel in the other, and vice versa. Likewise, students with a limited vocabulary tend to score poorly in reading comprehension.

The takeaway: to read and understand, students need to know the meaning of words appropriate to the task at hand.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for college and career readiness also place an emphasis on vocabulary. Like NAEP, the CCSS focuses on the meaning of words *in context*, and of words that are used in disciplinary problem solving versus everyday speech.

Fair enough. But teaching vocabulary has always been a bit of a bugaboo for me as a teacher. Why? I think it's because the most obvious words and easiest ways to teach them lead me in the wrong direction. There are two seminal questions about teaching vocabulary that I will now take up: which words should I teach, and in what ways should I teach them?

## Which Words?

There are an estimated 250,000 different word families in English (a word family for the word *refer*, for instance, would include *reference*, *referral*, *referential*, etc.). It is also estimated that readers need a vocabulary of 75,000 individual words to be a successful adult reader. But what specific words do our students need? And what words are most worth teaching at the middle school level?

Let's say I teach lists of words, something I've done—because it's easy—despite the fact that the research does not support this practice. Research on situated cognition shows that students learning vocabulary from lists unconnected to an immediate context where the words will be used tend to mislearn the words (Brown, Collins, & DuGuid, 1989). Additionally, if I teach 10 words a week and my students remember all of those words, they would have learned only 1,080 new words throughout their middle school ELA career. This is not nearly enough given the number of words they need to know to be successful college and career-ready readers and writers.

I typically teach words in the context of reading—more justifiable, but not unproblematic. At the moment, I'm teaching the novel *Frankenstein*. The word *hecatomb* pops up in today's reading. Should I teach it? I decide not. There are possibilities here for teaching word families, but I don't think the pay-off is big enough. This term just isn't useful in terms of our reading, our inquiry into the costs and benefits of technology, or in the writing we will do about how we should regard new technologies.

In another class, we are reading *A Taste of Salt*. Today, the word "bludgeon" comes up.

I vote yes on teaching it. Why? It's essential to understanding the backstory of the book, and I think it is a powerful word students will see and use in the future; it's also related to our inquiry into the various uses of power and their consequences.

So what are the general principles I am using to select the words I will foreground and directly teach? First, the words have to be *really* important. They need to be used *a lot* in the reading, in the inquiry we are pursuing, in disciplinary work now and in the students' future. The word should be necessary for conceptual understanding related to what we are doing now and what I hope students will do in the future. And the word should be a gateway to learning other words and concepts by helping us to learn root words and the nature of morphology, thus leading to further interest in words and word study. Finally, learning and using the term should help us create a culture of word consciousness and word play in the classroom. In other words, there has to be a present and future payoff.

### In What Ways?

Another dimension of teaching vocabulary is deciding *how* to teach it. My first principle of vocabulary instruction is to *teach vocabulary in context*. The context I use in my classroom is that of inquiry (e.g., Wilhelm, 2007), which creates a compelling need to learn vocabulary and rewards the learning with an immediate "context of use" as students use the terms to discuss, problem-solve, and write about the inquiry problem.

*Inquiry creates occasions for using vocabulary.* These occasions are essential because if students don't use vocabulary, the words won't be learned. And if you can't create a context of use for a term, then the word is not worth knowing at the present moment. The new CCSS Anchor Standards for literacy in the disciplines means that every content-area teacher will need to teach vocabulary in the context of reading and writing in their discipline. These content-area teachers may very well need our help in developing instructional strategies for doing such work. Ground this as-

sistance by emphasizing that vocabulary has a two-pronged pay-off: in ELA and in the disciplines, vocabulary can be used both as a way to enter disciplinary inquiries and as a way of *doing* the discipline and achieving understanding in the context of actual learning and problem solving.

### Frontloading: Vocabulary as a Way In

Boise State Writing Project Fellow Greg Wilson is currently teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* as part of an inquiry unit framed with the essential question: Why do we treat different people differently? Greg frontloaded the unit (Wilhelm, Baker, Dube-Hackett, 2001) by asking small groups of students to differentiate and define various groups of vocabulary words: "prejudice, bias, bigotry, and partiality"; "segregation, integration, 'separate but equal', and dissolution"; "civil rights, human rights, constitutional rights, legal rights, and natural rights"; "progressive, reactionary, neoliberal, and conservative," etc. Groups first developed definitions using their own words and identified important differences between the terms. Then they did research to deepen their understanding of the terms before presenting their findings to the class.

As they presented, Greg made connections to the context of their inquiry and posted the terms on anchor charts in the classroom. When I spoke with Greg, he noted: "I wanted to introduce these words at the beginning of the unit because they are not typical words for kids in normal conversations, but they are useful in the unit, and give us a way in to the unit, engaging us and preparing us for success. After the frontloading, the students are equipped to use the words as concepts for talking about rights and right treatment. And throughout the unit, they will be required to use those words as concepts. They'll even be rewarded for doing so!"

### Choosing Vocabulary for Doing the Discipline

I asked Greg how he decided which words to teach? He said, "I chose words that would help us do our work." Greg asserted that teachers

have to ask themselves: “Is there a purpose behind learning the vocabulary? Is the vocab leading towards greater understanding in the context of the problem we are studying?” He also stated, “The vocabulary has to be in service of greater understanding and a stepping stone to real world applications—to talk, informal writing, formal writing, social action, and service learning.” He added, “We know that students need multiple exposures to a word to learn it. The more meaningful the context and the more the context requires and rewards students to use vocabulary referring to important concepts, the more likely they are to learn the term as a concept, and the more deeply they will learn that term, its nuances, as well as related words.”

Greg, in essence, argues that learning vocabulary is part of entering inquiry, doing inquiry, and entering into a discourse community. He argues that learning specific vocabulary is one way of acquiring the facility needed for academic functioning in terms of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as a novice but evolving disciplinary expert.

### Back to How: Vocabulary for Reading and Writing Specific Text Types

Another context for teaching vocabulary is the *type* of texts that students read and compose. For example, in *Oh Yeab? Putting an Argument to Work both in and out of School* (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2012), we explore how “reporting words” can be powerfully learned in the context of learning how to cite evidence in arguments. Since Greg’s students will write arguments, he has an opportunity to teach this kind of vocabulary as his students compose. Likewise, in *Get It Done: Writing and Analyzing Information Texts to Make Things Happen* (Wilhelm, Smith, & Fredricksen, 2012), we show how the vocabulary of comparing, grouping, differentiating, problem-solving, and the like can be taught in the context of reading and writing specific informational text types. So, for example, when Greg’s students engage in defining words and concepts, as they do

in their frontloading activity, they can also learn the language of defining.

### Types of Instruction: Incidental Learning vs. Direct Instruction

Given how important vocabulary is to reading, composing, and learning, and how different the needs of individual students are, it’s very important to use and even ritualize a variety of instructional supports to assist students. Given the limited nature of our time and energy, we need to make sure that we get two-fers and three-fers—i.e., that the vocabulary learned and *how* it is learned assist with reading, discussion, composing, and retaining.

We need to use both direct and incidental kinds of teaching, or what my mentor George Hillocks (1995) calls “environmental teaching.” That involves repeated routines in the environment that support growth, like vocabulary learning, in implicit and incidental ways. Krashen (1993) cites the most obvious kind of environmental teaching when he argues that free voluntary reading is what leads to the majority of all vocabulary growth.

Here are a few specific strategies for teaching vocabulary.

#### *Incidental/Environmental Teaching*

Strategies for highlighting and learning vocabulary (Wilhelm, 2012)

Read-alouds

Guided reading

Think-alouds

Independent reading (in literature circles or alone)

Word walls, word webs, anchor charts (especially with links to the unit)

Word hunts (Beers, 2003, pp. 190–191)—students collect and post lists of words they think are funny, like, don’t like, could use in their writing, or just don’t understand

#### *Direct Instruction*

Context clues

Word parts, morphology, roots  
 Graphic organizers (e.g., Frayer charts, semantic feature analysis)  
 Logographic cues and other alternatives; multimodal representations of meaning  
 Modeling of different word usages in context of mentor texts and informal/formal compositions  
 Teaching words that help students write specific text structures and thought patterns in the context of reading and writing these specific text structures

#### *General principles of powerful vocabulary instruction*

Serve as a model of doing the discipline and of academic discourse.  
 Make sure the cost of instruction in terms of time and energy is worth the benefits.  
 Use multiple word-learning strategies in the context of actual use.  
 Require a wide range of student listening, discussing, composing, and reading that requires and rewards disciplinary vocabulary.  
 Make sure strategies and stances of learning vocabulary are modeled, practiced, and monitored.  
 Develop occasions for use, particularly in inquiry contexts.  
 Create a culture of word play, promoting a sensitivity to and appreciation of the power of words.

## Vocabulary and Reading as a Civil Rights Issue

As has been noted in this volume, academic language is a double challenge (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) for all of our students, but particularly for ELLs and other struggling students. Therefore, we need to provide them with conscious and intentional support. Building strong vocabulary and reading comprehension skills are important

steps in breaking the cycle of underachievement, and can represent important strides in breaking the cycle of poverty. As such, teaching and learning vocabulary in a way that does both disciplinary and cultural work can be seen as integral to academic success and, equally important, to the struggle for equality and civil rights.

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