AUTHENTIC VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Proficiency in academic language is critical for reading comprehension and overall academic success. Vocabulary is the key component in making meaning. While there is no guarantee that a strong vocabulary guarantees success, we know that a lack of vocabulary can affect academic performance and a student's ability to communicate effectively.

Vocabulary is defined as "all the words a particular individual knows and uses, and all of the words in a particular language or subject." A speaker is not expected to know all the words in a particular language, and most people do not know all the words in a particular subject. Explicitly teaching vocabulary enables students to sharpen their abilities to understand others' ideas and better express their own. As students move from grade to grade, maintaining a strong vocabulary will help them as they encounter texts and concepts of increasing complexity.

To help identify words that students use, researchers Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) developed a framework that aids educators in understanding the complex process of how we learn words. This framework is a lexicon of words likely to be useful. It consists of three tiers. Each tier is designed to set students up for success as they move across grade levels, content areas, and texts of varying complexity.

Tier One words are basic words that we learn from the time we move from babbling to speaking *cup*, *mama*, *dog*, *car*, *house*, *bicycle*. These words are often one syllable and are used to name something specific. It makes sense that these words are learned through inference or repetition. Attention to Tier One vocabulary words is critical for students whose first language is not English.

The **Tier Two** list contains words of high frequency. While highly frequent, these words tend to be more robust and abstract than Tier One. These words often require direct instruction. Tier Two words are less likely to occur in everyday communications. Sophisticated words like *accumulate*, *predict*, *misfortune*, *analysis*, and *confound* occur in various topics and contexts and across different domains. Explicit teaching of these words substantially increases a student's linguistic ability. These words are not likely to occur in conversation, but they may be used in a prepared presentation or in a text on a particular topic. They are words that are recognizable but used infrequently in casual speech. They are often used in writing. Frequency indicates how often a word appears in print compared to other words in a language. The frequency of a word in print compared to other words in a language does not necessarily reflect its difficulty or its utility when incorporated into one's personal vocabulary.

Tier Three words are those words that are low-frequency and content-specific. They have distinct meanings and distinct purposes. Tier Three words are limited to words found in specific domains. Tier Three words are often discipline/domain-specific. It is critical to learn these words if students want to participate in discipline-specific discourses. Words like *pterodactyl*, *isosceles*, *photosynthesis*, and *curmudgeon* are not often used in normal conversation. They make up a language group that enables students to have sophisticated discourse on topics that are complex. When we use a Tier Three word, there is a specific reason for doing so.

Tier Two Vocabulary Instruction

If students learn academic vocabulary as a part of a "lesson," there is a possibility that the knowledge will be retained. Vocabulary acquisition can be reinforced by reading interesting articles about a topic and memorizing the vocabulary to ensure the student has the means to carry on a conversation about the topic. Understanding a text and deepening one's insight into a particular topic are the two most important aspects of Tier Two words.

Explicit instruction is critical to learning Tier Two words. Writing word lists, keeping vocabulary notebooks, and using word flashcards are all useful tools in learning these words. Using intentional tools will emphasize the importance of these words and will enable the student to retain them longer. Schmitt notes that "the more a learner engages with a new word, the more likely they are to learn it" (2008).

Bergin writes that "[t]he general public still holds the SAT synonymous with highly advanced—some might say abstruse, arcane, or esoteric—vocabulary even though the last major test revision dispensed with question types devoted to that topic" (2020). Bergin continues to say that graphical literacy "matters more than an advanced lexicon in the 21st century." He goes on to say that "College Board and ACT both realize that they don't need to throw fancy words at students who struggle just as much with everyday terminology." He argues that "test makers focus on a sweet spot called Tier Two Vocabulary."

The test of whether a word is a Tier Two word is based on whether the word is a "useful addition" to a student's repertoire. Does the student already have a way to express the concepts represented by the words? Can the student explain what the words mean using familiar words? Adding Tier Two words to a student's vocabulary enables them to describe with more specificity and more complex forms.

Some criteria for identifying Tier Two words include the following:

- Importance and utility: Words that are characteristic of written texts and appear frequently across domains.
- Conceptual understanding: Words for which students understand the general concept but provide precision and specificity in describing the concept.
- Instructional potential: Words that are more than one-dimensional and offer a variety of contexts and uses to explore.

Some vocabulary words can be reviewed quickly and not given sustained attention. Some words represent concepts that need to be developed as a part of knowledge about topics within a specific domain. These words need to be treated as Tier Two words. Tier Two words are words that students *learn* and *use*. In choosing words as Tier Two words, the following concerns should be addressed:

- How necessary is this word in communicating the content in which it is used?
- Can students understand the text without the words?
- Is this word generally useful to students?
- Will this word be one that reappears in other texts?
- Will this word be encountered in other disciplines?
- How does this word relate to other words and concepts that students know or have been learning?

- Does this word directly relate to or build upon an idea that students have already encountered?
- Will the word be useful to students' writing and overall communication?
- Will this word enable students to express their thoughts and ideas with more clarity, conciseness, or precision?

Conclusion

The key to a successful educational language experience is a constant infusion of words into the curriculum. This is not to say that the effort needs to be conscious. In fact, students may be more likely to acquire new vocabulary words that are "found" than those that are imposed through a weekly list. A goal should be to infuse students with a genuine desire to learn more words. Introducing students to new words gives them an opportunity to recognize and add new words to their vocabularies. Inviting students to become familiar with a process where they hear words they do not know, words that are outside of their current knowledge, enables them to stretch their expectations about language and language learning. Building a language-rich environment will ultimately pay rich dividends.

References

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