

Importance of Teaching Vocabulary: The Whys and Hows

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Abstract: This article focuses on providing teachers with the whys and hows to implement tier-two vocabulary instruction in PK-12 grade classrooms. The article examines what is meant by tier-two vocabulary words and the need for increased vocabulary instruction to gain word knowledge. It also offers teachers applicable texts and activities to be used when they become teachers and ways to incorporate a school-to-home connection in support of students' learning of new vocabulary words. The texts and activities are divided into three grade levels: K-2, 3-5, and 6-12. In addition, the article is divided into two sections, which outlines the whys and hows for increasing students' vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: tier-two vocabulary, word knowledge, literacy development, authentic literature

The knowledge of words and word meanings is vital for the academic success of students.

Vocabulary, is defined by Stahl (2005) as knowledge; not simply a definition but understanding of how a word fits into the world. Vocabulary word knowledge can be understood through listening and reading, known as receptive vocabulary and through words spoken and written, known as productive or expressive vocabulary. There are nearly 600,000-800,000 words in the English language; therefore, it makes learning new vocabulary an

ongoing process. The average student begins first grade with approximately 6,000 words of spoken language (Chall, 1983). Students will continue to learn roughly 3,000 more words each year. (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013). Subsequently, there are some words that require more teaching than others. The question that practitioners continue to ask is, "*How do we determine which words that need to be taught to increase vocabulary knowledge in PK-12 education*". *The Importance of Increasing Vocabulary Knowledge: The Whys*

Vocabulary is a critical skill needed to successfully comprehend through listening and reading.

One of the main skills that teachers will be expected to teach in the elementary grades is teaching a student to read and gain meaning from the text. Learning to read is a continuum and continues with secondary teachers' ability to be able to teach students how to analyze and critique what they read (Chall, 1983). Students will not be successful at comprehending *any* texts if they do not know the meaning of the words in which they are decoding. For many, lack of vocabulary knowledge could be a reason that students are not able to access the meaning of a text. With the gap in the amount of words children hear prior to PreK, preservice teachers must be equipped with strategies to attempt to close the gap. Many strategies exist that can be used during vocabulary instruction to increase student word knowledge. Even so, the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) suggest that students should learn vocabulary through a variety of methods, and no single method is optimum. If a method such as direct instruction is used, students still need to receive repeated and multiple exposure to the new vocabulary words. Given this knowledge, not only must preservice teachers be taught how to determine an appropriate strategy to teach, they must also be able to consider students' prior knowledge of words. Familiarity with students' prior word knowledge allows teachers to determine which words they need to implement in their classrooms.

Three examples of these types of activities include creating an encyclopedia with newly acquired vocabulary words, providing students the opportunity to create vocabulary packets, and the opportunity to reflect upon their vocabulary learning through the use of reflective or interactive journals. The encyclopedia consists of a notebook with each word dedicated to a page and placed in alphabetical order. On each page, the student is expected to write the word, write the definition, include a picture, and add any other pertinent information about the word. Vocabulary packets utilize a word wall with tier-one words. Under each tier-one word will be baggies with tier-two word choices, which will especially aid in including diverse vocabulary in their writing. Lastly, a reflective or interactive journal can be kept by each student to reflect upon the vocabulary word and their understanding of the word. Teachers can allow students to write a story, poetry, etc. in their journal utilizing the current vocabulary words. The three of these activities are student centered, created by individual students, and can be utilized as tools for the students, thus, creating independent learners.

The NRP (2000) suggests that multimedia is a strategy to increase students' vocabulary knowledge. As an extension to authentic literature, students can use many multimedia applications (app) and websites, outside of the classroom to provide a school-to-home connection, especially for those students in middle and high school.

Some multimedia resources include: www.flocabulary.com, Charades! (app), and www.visuwords.com. First, Flocabulary is a website designed to provide students with videos, rap songs, and activities centered on literacy and especially vocabulary. Middle school and high school students can create their own vocabulary rap song and develop a video to pair

In addition, students can peruse the Charades! app to determine how to develop a charades game based upon the vocabulary from their text. Lastly, Visuwords is a website that offers students a unique word web of their vocabulary word(s). The students will simply type their word, and the website will create a word web that displays synonyms, antonyms, parts of speech, and relationships to the target word. In addition, the student can hover the mouse over each word in the word web and the definition will appear. Each of these resources will provide students with interactive, engaging vocabulary activities.

Engaging students in high academic instruction in all subject areas will support word knowledge and vocabulary. The essential focus area for teachers must be introducing and modeling tier-two vocabulary and academic language through interactive instruction. The students will acquire additional vocabulary when the instruction is paired with authentic literature. For this reason, preservice teachers should be encouraged to use authentic literature outside of scripted curriculum to engage students and effectively increase word knowledge

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