

Ten Important Words Plus: A Strategy for Building Word Knowledge

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Research confirms what many teachers observe in their classrooms: Word knowledge is highly related to comprehension (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003). If students do not understand the words in a text, they have difficulty comprehending the ideas in the text. The relationship between vocabulary and comprehension is especially evident when students read informational text, which is often rich with specialized vocabulary (Chall & Conard, 1991). Vocabulary knowledge is so instrumental to reading comprehension—and to overall success in school—that it must receive focused and deliberate attention across the curriculum and throughout the school day.

The literature on vocabulary development emphasizes three primary means of enhancing students' vocabulary: wide reading, explicit instruction of words and word-learning strategies, and the establishment of an environment that promotes word consciousness. Before we briefly describe each, we address what it means to know a word. After providing this background, we share a strategy that focuses student attention on the meanings of important words in a text.

What Does It Mean to Know a Word?

Take a minute to think about your own vocabulary. Certainly, there are some words you do not know at all. There are other words you recognize when you see them in print or hear them in a conversation—you have a sense of what they mean, but you do not use them yourself. Then there are words you employ comfortably in your exchanges with friends and colleagues. As Beck and McKeown (1991) stated, knowing a word is not an all-or-nothing proposition; there are gradations of word knowledge that range from no knowledge to “rich decontextualized knowledge of a word, including its relationship to other words and its extension to metaphorical uses” (p.

792). Acquiring knowledge of a word in the richest sense is a long process that involves multiple exposures in many contexts.

Wide Reading as a Means of Acquiring New Words

Many authorities agree that oral language experiences and wide reading influence students' word knowledge and refer to this type of word learning as “incidental word learning.” In fact, they believe that the majority of new words acquired over the life span are learned incidentally (Cunningham, 2005).

As valuable as oral language experiences are, written language appears to be superior when it comes to providing students with a rich source of exposure to vocabulary. Research by Hayes and Ahrens (1988) revealed that printed texts—including children's books—contained more rare words than language used in adult and children's television programs and adult conversations. Their findings are not surprising given that oral language is embedded in a context and is accompanied by facial expressions, intonation, gestures or objects that support meaning. Because written text does not provide these kinds of support, authors are, by necessity, more specific in their language in order to convey their meanings precisely.

Thus, plentiful experiences with written language, beneficial for many reasons, play an especially important role in vocabulary development. Extensive reading presents students with exposure to rich vocabulary. Furthermore, written text typically provides multiple exposures to words (e.g., the word *bacteria* appears 22 times in the pages of Melvin Berger's 1995 book for young children, *Germs Make Me Sick!*) and the opportunity to experience words in meaningful contexts, both of which are demonstrated by research to support vocabulary growth (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005).

Explicit Instruction as a Means of Acquiring Words

A number of authorities have provided guidelines for selecting target words for instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Biemiller, 1999; Hiebert, 2005). One common guideline is that words chosen for instruction should be of sufficient frequency to be useful, yet not of such high frequency that they are likely already known, and that selected words should have instructional potential; that is, they should be “related to the selection, the content, or to a thematic unit” (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005, p. 12). Target words may be taught by explaining their meaning (e.g., “*Emaciated* means very thin”), by demonstrating their meaning (e.g., “Here’s what it looks like to *amble*”), by mapping their relationship with other words (e.g., developing a semantic map for *amphibian*), and by using various other strategies (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2006). Repeated exposures to the words in rich contexts and active engagement in learning tasks are key to vocabulary instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Explicit instruction of vocabulary also includes teaching word parts (e.g., affixes, roots) so that students can derive the meaning of unfamiliar words. For instance, knowing that the prefix in *unable* means “not” helps students understand the words *unreliable* and *unforgivable*. Likewise, learning that the Latin root *spec* means “look” supports students’ understanding of *inspect*, *spectacles*, and *spectacular*. In addition, providing explicit instruction in using context to determine word meanings supports the development of word knowledge. Students can be taught to look for language that can help readers understand new words. For example, the word *instead* in the following sentence signals the reader that *abate* is the opposite of *worsened*: “The storm did not abate; instead, it worsened.”

Establishment of an Environment That Promotes Word Consciousness

Scott and Nagy (2004) argued that the most effective vocabulary programs are those that foster in students the knowledge and dispositions that facilitate ongoing vocabulary development; that is, they advocate for vocabulary learning that is generative. Classrooms that

promote word consciousness stimulate students’ awareness of, interest in, and curiosity about words so that word learning extends beyond a particular lesson or the confines of a particular classroom. Students notice common aspects of words, explore word histories, play with words, examine expert authors’ word choices, and make some of those words their own. Throughout each day, in all content areas, attention is drawn to words and students interact with words in multiple ways and make connections among them and with their lives. The teacher models an enthusiasm for words, saying, “Ah...interesting word” when a student uses an uncommon word or “Guess what new word I learned this morning as I was reading the newspaper?” or “What was powerful about the way the author told us about this phenomenon?” Students are part of a classroom—or better, schoolwide—culture that explicitly notices and values words.

Ten Important Words Plus

Elsewhere, we describe a strategy we call Ten Important Words (Yopp & Yopp, 2003). In this strategy, students identify the 10 (or 5 or 3, depending on the length of the selection) most important words in a text as they read an informational selection. Students focus on the meaning of the passage in order to determine which words are most important and which words are not as important. As the students read and reread, they independently choose 10 words and record each word on a separate self-adhesive note. After the students have made their selections, the teacher asks them to post their selections on a class bar graph, building columns of common words. Discussion about the word choices ensues, prompted by questions such as “What words were selected by many students? Why do you think these words were selected? What do these words have to do with the topic of the text?” and “Identify some words that were selected by only a few students. Why do you think these words were selected? What do they contribute to the text content?” Then the students write a one-sentence summary of the passage. Although not required to, they typically use several of the words from the graph.

The strategy requires students to analyze text for big ideas, to focus on words that carry important meanings, and to think about how those words are connected to the ideas in the text. The opportunity to talk about words encourages use of the words, enrich-

es students' understanding of the words and the content, and provides students with insights into peers' perspectives about the text.

As an extension of this strategy (the “plus”), we have provided students with colored cards that contain prompts that ask them to think about and use in various ways words that appear on the class bar graph. These prompts are designed to further students' active engagement with the words in ways that promote word learning. Students think about relationships among words, use words in different contexts, explore word parts, link words to their own experiences, and so forth. For example, some students receive a pink card that says, “List synonyms or words highly related in meaning.” Others receive a green card that says, “Generate several sentences in which you use the word. Make your sentences as different from one another as possible. One sentence should be directly related to the topic of the text. Other sentences should use the word in a different context.” And, the remaining students receive a yellow card that says, “Think of as many other forms of the word as you can. For instance, other forms of the word *happy* include *happiness*, *happier*, and *unhappy*.”

The students' task is to meet with several others who have the same color card (three or four is a reasonable group size) and, given a target word selected by the teacher from the bar graph, work with one another to respond to the prompt. After sufficient opportunity for students to talk with their group mates, the teacher asks the groups to share their task and several responses. All of the groups with the same color card share first (i.e., all the pink groups share, one after the other), followed by groups with a different color. For example, given the word *communicate* selected from a graph developed while reading Mary Wallace's *The Inuksuk Book* (1999), students with the pink (synonyms/highly related words) card might share the words *talk*, *discuss*, *converse*, *write*, *chat*, *draw*, and *graph*. Students with the green (sentences) card might say, “Inuksuit communicate information to travelers,” “She doesn't communicate well,” and “I use e-mail to communicate with my out-of-state relatives.” Students with the yellow (other forms) card might respond with *communication*, *communicator*, *communicating*, and *uncommunicative*. Students' responses to the prompts provide the teacher with valuable information about their understanding of the words and their use. For instance, if students misuse the target word in a sentence

they have generated, the teacher can clarify the word's meaning and appropriate use immediately.

The teacher identifies another word from the graph and the students again discuss their prompt with peers. After giving the students several opportunities with the same prompt, the teacher tells them to exchange their card for one of another color. Students then engage in their new task as the teacher selects words. Thus, students have the opportunity to build some competence in their original task before experiencing other tasks. Some words will be more difficult than others, but allowing the students to discover this and work with one another provides an interesting opportunity to talk about words. Words with multiple meanings (e.g., *band*, *sign*) or Greek or Latin roots (e.g., *astronomer*, *symphony*) provide the students with more sophisticated insights about the language and should be selected if they are found in the text, even if they are not included on the graph.

Other prompts we have used include

- Identify where you might expect to see or hear this word. Be specific. For example, you might expect to find the word *serene* in a travel brochure advertising a remote island hotel. Where else?
- List antonyms (or close opposites) of the word.
- Draw at least two pictures that depict the meaning of this word.
- Create a semantic map and show this word in relation to other words of your choice.
- Act out the word.
- Return to the text and find one or more sentences in which the word is used. Explain the meaning of the sentence(s) you find. Comment on any support the author provided readers to illuminate the meaning of the word.

Because the students have experienced the words in a meaningful context (i.e., through reading the book) and have participated in rich conversations with peers about the meanings of these words (i.e., through the discussion of word choices that accompanies the graphing activity), the students are likely to have acquired sufficient understanding of the words to be successful responding to the prompts. Engagement with the tasks on the cards and follow-up clarifying conversations will further develop their word knowledge.

Ten Important Words Plus prompts students to actively engage with the ideas and language of a text selection as they read. Students use context to identify important words, see the word choices of peers, talk about words, write a summary, and then extend their understanding by thinking about the words flexibly as they respond to prompts. The words have instructional potential in that they are related to the content of the text. Students have multiple exposures to the words—reading them, recording them, talking about them, using them in their written summaries, and thinking about them in alternative ways. In addition, because words are the focus of attention and exploration, the teacher is promoting word consciousness. Based on principles of effective vocabulary instruction, Ten Important Words Plus can be used to build and enrich students' understandings of words in any subject area, which in turn will support their comprehension of the content.

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