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LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

Best Practices in Vocabulary Instruction

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For many years, vocabulary instruction was like the weather: everybody talked about it, but nobody knew what to do about it! Yet parents and teachers instinctively know that learning vocabulary is essential to a student's education. Parents are constantly attending to their children's requests, "Mom, what do you call that?" or "Dad, what does this word mean?" And teachers recognize that vocabulary is an important aspect of reading instruction, a fact that is borne out by a long history of research (Davis, 1983: Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000). Yet teaching vocabulary has remained a complex and perplexing issue, mainly because there is no one, clear-cut method. Rather, research and good practice suggest seven main principles for effective vocabulary instruction.

Yet teaching vocabulary has remained a complex and perplexing issue, mainly because there is no one, clear-cut method.

1. Vocabulary learning takes place when students are immersed in words.

Just as teachers have begun to use the term "flood of books" to talk about situations in which students have many and varied opportunities to read (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988), so "flood of words" is an important issue for general vocabulary development. Children learn new words when they are read to, when they read widely themselves, and when they are involved in

discussions at school and at home (Eller, Pappas and Brown, 1988; Elley, 1988–89; Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985; Herman, et al, 1987; Stahl and Vancil, 1986; Snow, 1991). While learning through exposure does not guarantee the learning of specific vocabulary words, it does develop a wide, flexible, and useful general vocabulary. To enhance these kinds of incidental word learnings, students need "word aware" classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers take time to stop and discuss new words; they provide words,

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dictionaries, puzzles, word games, word calendars, and books on riddles and rhymes for an environment of enthusiastic word learning.

2. Vocabulary learning takes place when students are active in discovering ways in which words are related to experiences and to one another.

In a good learning situation, learners are actively engaged in constructing their own meanings. Many comparisons of instructional methodologies suggest that having learners take an active role in constructing a network of meaning for a word is critical. For example, learning new words through new experiences is one of the most durable and long lasting ways to develop a rich vocabulary. We learn new words like *thread, needle, selvage, pattern,* and *dart* naturally in the context of learning to sew. We learn the special meanings of *hit, run, base,* and fly as we learn to play baseball.

Discussion is another way to involve learners in building vocabulary. Answering questions which call on students to demonstrate word meaning is another way to become actively involved in discovering meaning (Beck and McKeown, 1983). For example, answering and explaining one's answer to the question, "Would a recluse enjoy parties?" helps students focus in on the meaning of the word recluse, "a person who chooses to be alone rather than with others."

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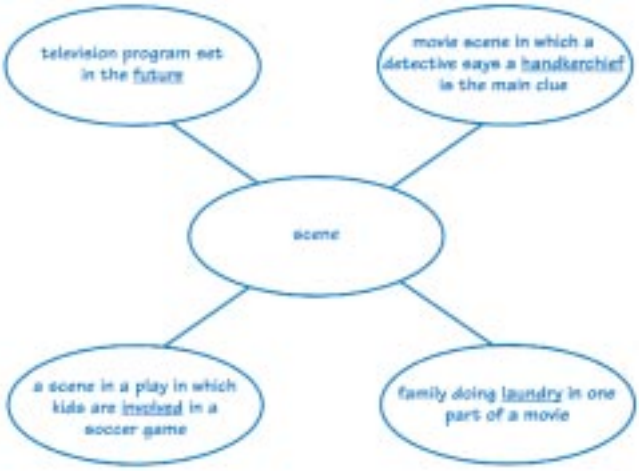
Making word meanings and relationships visible is another way to involve students actively in constructing word meaning. Semantic webs, maps, organizers, or other relational charts not only graphically display attributes of meanings, but provide a memory organizer for later use.



Many studies have shown the efficacy of putting word meaning into graphic form such as a map or web (Heimlich and Pittleman, 1986) or a semantic feature chart (Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, and Pittleman, 1982; Anders, Bos, and Filip, 1984), advanced organizer (Herber, 1978) or other graphic form. It is critical to note, however, that mere construction of such maps without discussion is not effective (Stahl and Vancil, 1986).

There are other approaches that stress actively relating words to one another as well. These include clustering strategies that call for students to group words into

related sets, brainstorming, grouping and labeling (Marzano and Marzano, 1988), designing concept hierarchies (Wixson, 1986) or constructing definition maps related to concept hierarchies (Schwartz and Raphael, 1985; Bannon, Fisher, Pozzi, and Wessell, 1990), and mapping words according to their relation to story structure categories (Blachowicz, 1986). All these approaches involve students in constructing maps, graphs, charts, webs, or clusters that represent the semantic relatedness of words and concepts. Again, discussion, sharing, and use of the words are necessary components of active involvement.

3. Vocabulary learning takes place when students personalize word learning.

Learning words in the context of learning an important skill or concept is one of the most durable ways to learn words, as we personalize meanings through our experiences. Words not learned in firsthand experiences can also be personalized. Students can use their own past experiences to learn new vocabulary. In one study, researchers asked students to provide prior knowledge cues for new words with good results (Eeds and Cockrum, 1985). In another study, students were asked to construct personal cues to meaning along with

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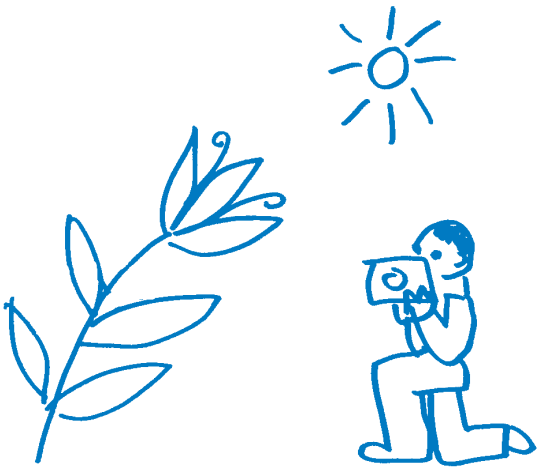
graphic and other methods (Carr and Mazur-Stewart, 1988). Acting out word meanings, (Duffelmeyer, 1980) which necessitates a personal approach, also helps students learn words.

Creating one's own mnemonic or image is a related way to personalize word meaning through associations. Mnemonic strategies, such as *ROY G BIV* for the colors of the spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet), are time-honored ways to assist memory.

Key word methods are another way to personalize meanings. This strategy involves creating a verbal connection or an image to help cement the meaning in memory. For example, to remember phototropism, which means, "the bending of plants toward light," a student created the following picture as a visual mnemonic. The verbal labels, photographer and tropical plant helped the student remember the word; bending to the light supplied a visual image to support it.



Another student created this key word sentence: A photo was taken of the plant bending toward light. When trying to remember, one student would call up the picture in her mind, the other would think of the sentence.

A significant amount of research has been done on the use of key words as a remembering technique (Pressley, Levin, and Delaney, 1983), for special education students (Scruggs, Mastropieri, and Levin, 1985),

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for second language learners and for adult learners (McCarville, 1993). While reviews of the research suggest that a key word strategy may be limited in its application,

it remains useful for remembering specific word labels, especially when combined with imagery, drawing, and other tools for personalization.

4. Vocabulary learning builds on multiple sources of information.

When students need to learn specific words, research suggests that they need multiple sources of information, along with opportunities to use the words in meaningful communication situations. Numerous studies comparing definitional instruction with incidental learning from context or with no instruction support the notion that teaching definitions results in superior word learning (Pany and Jenkins, 1978; Kameenui, et al, 1982; Stahl, 1983).

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However, instruction that combined definitional information with other active processing, such as adding contextual information (Stahl, 1983), writing (Duin and Graves, 1987), contextual discovery (Gipe, 1978–1979), or rich, manipulation of words (Beck and McKeown, 1983), all exceeded performance of students who only received definitional instruction. A comparison of different types of instruction (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986) concluded that methods which provide multiple sources of information for students result in superior word learning. In "word aware" effective classrooms, students encounter words in context as well as work to create or understand appropriate definitions, synonyms, and other word relations.

5. Vocabulary learning takes place when students gain control over their own learning.

Studies suggest that students learn vocabulary they select themselves. Haggard (1982) interviewed adults and secondary school learners about their memories of learning new words. She found that these learners most easily retained words that were usable in their peer groups, that is, words that were popular among peers, occurred frequently in their readings, or were popular words in the media. Her subsequent teaching studies that involved students selecting words to be learned (1985) suggested that the control offered by self-selection was an important factor in building a generalized vocabulary.

With the popularity of wide reading approaches and cooperative group models of classroom instruction, researchers examined the effects of self-selection in cooperative reading groups on word learning (Fisher, Blachowicz, and Smith 1991). The fourth-grade groups analyzed in this study were highly successful in learning a majority of the words chosen for study. In a later study with older fifth and seventh grade readers (Fisher, Blachowicz, Pozzi, and Costa, 1992), the results were repeated and new information was added. Teachers who were co-researchers in the study were not only interested in whether or not the words were learned, they were interested in whether or not the students chose challenging words for study. In all groups studied, the students consistently chose words at or above grade level for study. These studies indicate that self-selection and self-study approaches can be viable for some word study in the classroom. When combined with some words the teacher selects and instructional support, helping students learn to select words for self-study is a powerful tool for independent learning.

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6. Vocabulary learning takes place when students are aided in developing independent strategies.

The research on developing independent strategies for word learning is one of the most limited and

inconclusive areas of vocabulary research. Independent strategies include using context and using a dictionary.

While it seems supportable to say that contextual exposure to new words results in some development of general vocabulary, it is difficult to predict what words will be learned. We know that single contextual exposures to new words do not necessarily produce learning. We also know that context does not always reveal meaning and, indeed, sometimes misleads (Baldwin and Schatz, 1985; Schatz and Baldwin, 1986). Research on teaching contextual analysis is similarly complicated. Several studies have provided intensive instruction in contextual analysis (Jenkins, et al, 1989; Patberg et al, 1984; Sternberg, 1987) with mixed results. Recent instructional studies (Blachowicz and Zabroske, 1990; Buikema and Graves, 1993; White, Sowell, and Yanagihara, 1989; Nicol and Graves, 1990) suggest that students become conscious learners from context. However, instruction must involve explicit instruction with good planning, practice, and feedback. Instruction must be scaffolded so it leads to more student responsibility. It must have a metacognitive focus. Similarly, instruction focusing on structural analysis or morphology, the learning of word parts, suggests that such instruction can help students learn new words.

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Research on dictionary use has been even more provocative. Every teacher who has watched a student struggle to look 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 darndest things" aura: the student whose only meaning of sharp has to do with good looks feels vindicated by finding "acute" as one meaning for sharp in the dictionary. (That sure is acute boy in my class.) Another student, noting that erode means "eats out," produces the sentence, Since my mom went back to work, my family erodes a lot. (Miller and Gildea, 1987). Aside from providing humorous anecdotes for the teachers' room, dictionaries and dictionary use are coming under closer scrutiny by those involved in vocabulary instruction.

When the goal is to have students gain control of vocabulary to use for their own expression, students need many experiences that allow them to use words in meaningful ways.

7. Vocabulary learning is long lasting when students use words in meaningful ways.

Different types of instruction can result in different types and depths of learning. When the goal is to have students gain control of vocabulary to use for their own expression, students need many experiences that allow them to use words in meaningful ways. Using vocabulary in writing and discussions where feedback is available is essential to durable and deep learning. Creating personal word books and dictionaries is a good first step to word ownership; use of new words in many situations is a second step. Using new words in discussion, in writing, in independent projects, and in word play develop real ownership and move new words into students' personal vocabularies.

Play is also an important part of word use and word learning. Part of creating a "word aware" classroom involves having activities, games, and other resources

that allow students to play with words. Who wouldn't enjoy a few minutes each day spent figuring out a *wuzzle* or word riddle?

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

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teacher who was an avid punster, crossword puzzle aficionado, or otherwise involved in word play.

By being a good model of enthusiastic and pleasurable word learning, and by turning the seven principles into classroom action, teachers can be sure that they and their classrooms are models of best practices in word learning.

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