

Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary development is an important outgrowth of literature and language study. Research indicates that vocabulary knowledge increases when new words are encountered repeatedly in context through reading and listening (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986), are linked to students' prior knowledge (Johnson, 1981), and are connected with other words that are semantically related (Johnson *et al.*, 1986).

Although studies indicate that some intervention is better than none, rote memorization of words and definitions is the least effective instructional method, resulting in little long-term effect (Kameenui, Dixon and Carine, 1987; Baker, Simmons, and Kameenui, 1995). Targeted words should be drawn from authentic experiences in reading and listening, where students encounter words in the context of language (Fischer, 1994). However, the variety of contexts in which words can appropriately be used is so extensive, and the nuances in meaning so affected by context, that teaching word meanings in an abstract and decontextualized manner is essentially futile and potentially misleading (Anderson and Nagy, 1991).

Research has demonstrated that time spent reading, both inside and outside of school, is essential to developing vocabulary (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986; Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985). Although studies show that the measured amount of vocabulary learning from reading is small, but statistically significant, large scale vocabulary growth results when there is a sufficient volume of wide reading (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985). Reading many different types of material has benefits because it enables students to see words in a variety of contexts. The meanings of these words are then more readily accessible during future reading. Both students with low- and high-level literacy skills benefit from time spent reading; vocabulary is learned from context, and comprehension is improved if the difficulty of the material presented is appropriate to the current reading level (Squires, 1995).

Teachers experienced in coaching students for the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) report that a knowledge of word roots and stems helps students decipher new words, particularly if they connect the root to a word they know well. However, the memorization of long lists of roots and stems is not productive.

Vocabulary instruction in Montgomery County Public Schools middle and high schools should include the following:

1. Vocabulary instruction should be continuous and purposeful.
2. Students should spend considerable time reading a variety of texts, both silently and aloud. Students should be taught strategies for learning word meanings independently as they read.
3. Students should also be engaged in active learning of vocabulary through relevant contexts and activities. **They should study a minimum of 150 words each semester.** Targeted words may be derived from readings (compiled by student and/or teacher), SAT

word lists, or commercial vocabulary programs. Lessons should stress a constructivist approach that links students' prior knowledge with new information and creates opportunities for experiential learning. Activities should include more than one or two exposures to each word (Kolich, 1988), present both definitional and contextual information (Gipe, 1979), and require the learner to actively generate information (Beck and McKeown, 1991). Mixed method approaches, including semantic mapping¹/features analysis² (Pearson, 1986; Bos and Anders, 1990), keyword methods³ (Mastropieri, Scruggs, and Faulk, 1990), computer-assisted methods (Kolich, 1991; Baker, Simmons, and Kameenui, 1995), and writing activities (Klesius and Searls, 1991), have been shown to improve vocabulary knowledge.

4. Dictionary work that isolates word relationships and students' completion of skill-and-drill practice tasks should be minimized (Konopak and Williams, 1994).

5. Words should be taught in related sets when possible. Word relationships can be established during vocabulary instruction with semantic maps and semantic feature analysis. Semantic mapping involves establishing relationships among new and old words. A knowledge of word roots and stems can help students see relationships between related words and increase word mastery.

6. If a commercial vocabulary program is used (not the preferred method), the program should present words in the context of a literary passage or in semantically related clusters within a given topic, rather than by random list. Activities should include those listed in #3. However, use of a commercial vocabulary program should not be the exclusive method of vocabulary instruction.

¹ ***semantic mapping***: establish relationships among new and old words by having students brainstorm, categorize, label the categories, and discuss words (concepts) related to a target word.

² ***semantic feature analysis***: identify whether a class of objects have or do not have identified semantic features, e.g., whether maple, orange, and pine trees have features such as being evergreen, deciduous, coniferous, and fruit/nut bearing.

³ ***keyword method***: construct a visual image that connects the target word and a familiar, concrete word (similar auditorially) that shares some common feature. For example, in the word *carlin*, which means *old woman*, the keyword *car* might be used to have the student generate the image of an old woman driving a car. When asked to recall the meaning of *carlin*, the student retrieves *car* because of its acoustic similarity to *carlin*, and then recalls the visual image and the meaning of *carlin*.

Resources

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