

Vocabulary Instruction



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Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary exposure comes in two forms: oral and written. Children are first exposed to vocabulary at home and enter school with a wide range of language and abilities. Classrooms with strong oral language not only lay the foundation for reading but provide students with their first means of creating and demonstrating understanding through language. Students first begin communicating by using common, every day speech before advancing in their use of academic language.

The vocabulary that falls into 'every day speech' is classified as Tier 1 vocabulary. As students move through school and gain access to more complex texts, they begin to develop a formal, or academic, vocabulary. Academic vocabulary is classified as Tier 2 vocabulary. As students begin to learn academic content, they begin learning content specific terminology, or Tier 3 vocabulary.

Tier 1- Conversational Language

Tier 2- Academic Language

Tier 3- Content Specific Terminology

As students move through their academic career, they will encounter Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary across the curriculum. Many terms students learn will appear in multiple grade levels. Thus, adopting common definitions of academic and content specific terminology is essential to developing continuity and building a foundation of understanding that can be used year after year. As a school and district, you might consider creating your own glossary or selecting an existing glossary that works K-12. If you have a resource with a strong glossary, ensure that the definitions used match at each grade level. Students thrive on continuity and repetition. Keeping our definitions the same throughout a student's time with us is key to their development and success.

In addition to maintaining consistent definitions for Tier 2 and 3 vocabulary, schools should also consider the importance of teaching word parts. By understanding word parts (affixes and roots), students are able to unlock a great deal of vocabulary needed in the world of academics. If students learn our most common affixes and roots, they will be able to create meaning for more terms than if we taught terms only as they appeared.

Resources

- [Reading Rockets: "Root Words, Roots and Affixes"](#)
- [Marzano's 30 Core Content Words \(Tier 3\)](#)
- [Smarter Balanced Partial List of Tier 2 Terms](#)
- [Common Core State Standards for ELA Appendix A](#)
- [Kansas Standards for English Learners](#)
- [Jim Burke's Academic Vocabulary List](#)

Instructional Practices

Students can learn vocabulary indirectly or directly. When students engage in daily oral language, have complex texts read to them, and/or read independently, they are indirectly learning new vocabulary. However, in order to ensure learning and retention for future use, we must engage in the direct teaching of vocabulary. Here are a few things you can do to teach academic and content-specific vocabulary.

Explicit Instruction- Use the definition, context, and knowledge of word parts to teach meaning. Make sure students are actively involved in the learning task associated with the vocabulary and attempt to use the word in discussion with equal use coming from teacher and students.

You can: teach synonyms, teach antonyms, provide example sentences, rewrite the definition in student language, discuss how the word connects to previously learned terms, and/or discuss how the word can be used in various contexts.

Independent Strategies- Students may encounter new words independently. Thus, students need to have the tools to create understanding absent the teacher. Teach students how to use a dictionary, use context clues, and/or use their knowledge of word parts to construct meaning independently.

We also need to make sure that students are exposed to vocabulary multiple times and in a multitude of ways. While we want our definitions to stay consistent, we do need to support students in seeing how language can be used in vastly different ways. For example, ‘mass’ in science may be a Tier 3 word, in English, it might be used to describe a large crowd, and for some students, ‘mass’ is what they go to on Sundays. Working through these discussions with students not only facilitates vocabulary development, but it also demands that students think critically about context (a key ELA skill!).

One great way to expose students to new language is through the oral language of the classroom and the complexity of the texts selected for classroom reading. When exposing students to new and complex terms, we should use that opportunity to foster a love for learning and a curiosity for language. As we speak and provide access to vocabulary-rich readings, we must also demand that level of vocabulary be used by students not only in their writing but in their classroom discussions. We need to ensure student’s spoken language advances to the level of their written language and reading abilities.

Resources

- [Reading Rockets: Vocabulary](#)
 - [Reading Rockets: Teaching Vocabulary](#)
- [Colorin Colorado: The Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction](#)
- [“Effective Vocabulary Instruction” by Joan Sedita](#)
- [LINCS Guide to Vocabulary Instruction](#)
- [“Research Based Practices in Vocabulary Instruction”](#)
- [Official SAT Study Guide: Words in Context](#)

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