Vocabulary: Five Common Misconceptions

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> **Rote memorization of word lists has never worked. To unleash the power of vocabulary instruction, focus on exploration and engaging word play.**

When young readers encounter texts that contain too many unfamiliar words, their comprehension suffers. Reading becomes slow, laborious, and frustrating, impeding their learning. That's why vocabulary knowledge is a key element in reading comprehension. To comprehend fully and learn well, all students need regular vocabulary exploration.

Unfortunately, the term *exploration* does not accurately describe most traditional word study in schools. Here are five common misconceptions that often stand in the way of effective vocabulary instruction.

Misconception 1: Definitions do the trick.

Some teachers mistakenly think students only need to know a word's definition. These teachers may identify words they believe are important and then either define these words for students or ask students to find the definitions for themselves in the dictionary.

Although knowing a word's definition is important, it's not nearly enough. To know a word well and use it appropriately and effectively, students need to be aware of its multiple dimensions (Bromley, 2012). For example, consider various dimensions of the word *cappuccino*:

- *Structure and pronunciation.* (It has four syllables—cap-uh-cheen'-o.)
- *Grammar.* (It is a noun, but not a proper noun, so it's written with a small *c*.)
- *Semantics.* (Merriam-Webster defines it as "espresso coffee mixed with frothed hot milk or cream and often flavored with cinnamon." Its origin is Italian—from the Capuchin monks of Italy, whose robes are light brown with white-lined hoods. Cappuccino also has the diminutive Italian affix *-ino*, meaning little. Literally translated, cappuccino means "little hood.")
- *Spelling.* ("Cap" for cowl with two p's and two c's.)

Most students will best learn the many dimensions of words through direct instruction that includes the definition and the etymology, or origin, of the word. In the case of *cappuccino*, for example, you might begin by showing students the word in print along with a picture or drawing. Then, connect to students' prior knowledge by asking what they know about the word or what they notice about its structure—for example, "My mom loves it," or "They're expensive," or "I see 'cap' and 'chin' in it." Provide a definition that builds on what students have supplied. Point out the word's structure and idiosyncratic spelling. Identify related words. Encourage students to use the new word in speaking. You might have student partners share sentences with each other. If students keep vocabulary notebooks, have them write the word in their notebooks and draw a picture or add a short definition for future reference.

When students see a new word in print, use it orally as they talk about it, notice its structure and grammatical function, and learn its spelling, they are well on their way to making the word their own. To get ideas for innovative and engaging vocabulary lessons, visit some of the websites listed in "Selected Online Vocabulary Resources."

Misconception 2: Weekly vocabulary lists are effective.

If you're like most adults, assigned vocabulary lists were part of your schooling. The lists were often in alphabetical order, so the words had little or no connection to curricular areas or to one another. You probably even had to "learn" words you had never encountered before. The weekly assignment would be something like, *Find and write a definition for each word*, or *Use each word in a sentence*. At the end of the week, you took a test; by the following Monday, you had forgotten the words and moved on to a new list.

Unfortunately, this age-old method of vocabulary instruction continues in many classrooms. It's no fun. It's drudgery. And such rote memorization does not support word learning (Allington, 2012; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Learning anything, including new words, involves connecting or integrating the new information with what you already know. If students have little background knowledge about new words or see no connections between what they know and what is new, they will not learn effectively.

Fortunately, different ways of organizing words for vocabulary exploration are readily available. For example, reading aloud to students offers opportunities to present new words in meaningful contexts. You might ask students to listen for important or interesting words; list these on the board, and use them for vocabulary instruction and word play. Units of content-area study invite students to expand and deepen their word knowledge. As they explore the topic of the unit, you can give students multiple opportunities to see the new words they encounter in meaningful contexts and to use them in meaningful ways.

Misconception 3: Teachers should teach all hard words, especially those printed in bold or italics.

Many teachers preteach every difficult word identified in the basal manual or highlighted in the textbook. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, students may already be familiar with some words, so teaching them is a waste of time. Second, some words are not important enough to teach because although they appear in one selection, they will not appear frequently in future readings. So, before you decide which words to teach, ask the following questions:

- Do students know the word already?
- Is the word essential to understanding the selection at hand?
- Will the word appear in future readings?

When you reduce the number of words to teach, you avoid cognitive overload (Bromley, 2007). You leave more time for students to master the words that are most important to their comprehension today and in the future. It's probably a good idea to teach no more than 3–4 new words per selection in grades 1–3 and 5–7 new words per selection in grades 4 and up.

What about bold and italicized words? Remember, they are not all created equal. Some highlighted terms absolutely need to be taught, and some should be ignored. It's also beneficial to teach students how to find the meanings of these words for themselves if they don't know them. Often, these highlighted terms appear in the glossary at the end of a book. Learning to use a glossary, including pronunciation guides, can help students become independent word learners. In online text, be sure students know that underlined words are hyperlinked to a site where they are explained.

Misconception 4: The study of Latin and Greek roots is too hard for young learners.

More than 60 percent of academic words have word parts (also called *morphemes* or *roots*) that always carry the same meaning (Nagy, Anderson, Schommer, Scott, & Stallman, 1989). Knowing that words can be broken down into meaning units is a powerful strategy for vocabulary development (Ayers, 1986; Baumann, Kameenui, & Ash, 2003; Harmon, Hedrick, & Wood, 2005).

Until recently, teaching Latin and Greek word roots occurred only in upper-grade or content-area classrooms. But a growing body of research tells us that this strategy should be introduced in the primary grades (Mountain, 2005; Rasinski, Padak, Newton, & Newton, 2011).

Roots have two features that make them easy to teach: They represent simple, familiar concepts, and their meaning is stable —for instance, *port* means "to carry" and *graph* means "to write." Once students understand the linguistic principle that words with the same roots are related in meaning, they can use words they know to unlock the meaning of new words.

For example, if students know that the base *trac-* means "pull, draw, or drag," they can connect words they already know (like *tractor*) with words they may not know (like *extraction*) (Rasinski, Padak, Newton, & Newton, 2008). One of the most commonly encountered roots in the English language is the Latin base *mov- / mot-*, which means "to move." Even the youngest learners know words like *motor, motorcycle*, or *move*. When they meet cognate academic words like *promotion* or *motivate*, students can apply the concept of movement to figure out the new words.

Teaching the meaning of prefixes is especially helpful because a few prefixes are used in a large number of words. When the prefix *re-* appears in *return, replace*, and *refund*, for example, it always means "back." Figure 1 presents roots that can easily be taught in the primary grades.

Misconception 5: Word learning can't be fun.

For many (perhaps most) students, learning words is not enjoyable. Writing words multiple times, copying definitions, completing worksheets, drilling with flash cards, and taking weekly tests—students and most teachers consider this drudgery. As a result, students may come to abhor vocabulary study.

Fortunately, word learning doesn't have to be that way; it can be fun and engaging. Think about the games your family plays at home. Many of them probably involve words. Scrabble, Boggle, Balderdash, Buzzword, Pictionary, crossword puzzles, and word jumbles are just a few of the many games involving words that individuals and families have played and enjoyed for years.

In our own work with students and teachers in classrooms and reading clinics, we have found gamelike activities to be a wonderful way to inspire interest in and develop knowledge about words. Many great word games can easily be integrated

into a word study curriculum. Just a few of the many online resources for word games and puzzles are

- MindFun
- Gamequarium
- Funschool.com
- Vocabulary.co.il
- MyVocabulary

Have you ever noticed that when you play a word game for a while, you get better at it? That's learning! And when students engage with word games in the classroom, they too will improve their word knowledge.

A New Approach

When we challenge these five common misconceptions, we realize that memorizing definitions alone does not lead to word learning. Students need multiple opportunities to see, write, and use new words. Consequently, teaching fewer words and connecting these new words with familiar words or concepts will facilitate learning.

Focusing at least some vocabulary instruction on roots, especially those deriving from Latin and Greek provides students with tools they can use to unlock the meaning of unfamiliar words. And finally, word study can—and should—be interesting, interactive, and fun!

Selected Online Vocabulary Resources

Ohio Resource Center for Math, Science, and Reading: Search the English/Language Arts section for hundreds of vocabulary lessons suitable for students of all ages.

Making and Writing Words: Read this article to learn about an innovative word study and wordplay activity for elementary students.

ReadWriteThink: Gain access to hundreds of language arts lesson plans at this site, cosponsored by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Search for "vocabulary"; narrow your search by selecting a grade-level band.

Word Central: Maintained by Merriam-Webster, this site has activities and information for students, as well as resources (including lesson plans) for teachers. You can even build your own dictionary.

Figure 1. A Beginning List of Roots

Prefixes

co-, con-	with, together
de-	own, off of
ex-	out
in-	not
pre-	before
re-	back, again
sub-	under, below
un-	not

Bases

audi-, audit-	hear, listen
graph-, gram-	write, draw
mov-, mot-, mobil-	move

port-	carry
vid-, vis-	see
bi-	two
tri-	three
Suffixes	
-able, -ible	can, able to be done
-er	more
-est	most
-ful	full of
-less	without

Source: Adapted from "Getting to the Root of Word Study: Teaching Latin and Greek Word Roots in the Elementary and Middle Grades," by N. Padak, E. Newton, T. Rasinski, & R. Newton, in *What Research Has to Say About Vocabulary Instruction* (pp. 6–31), edited by A. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels, 2008. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

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