TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Doing It Differently: Tips for Teaching Vocabulary

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Every Monday, my seventh grade English teacher would have us copy a list of 25 words she'd written on the board. We'd then look up the dictionary definitions and copy those down. For homework, we'd re-write each word seven times.

Good, now you know it. Test on Friday and never for those 25 words to be seen again. *Poof.* Old school, yes. Mundane task, yes. Did it work? I don't remember. Probably not.

Copying definitions from the dictionary we would probably all agree is not an effective way to learn vocabulary. Passive learning hardly ever is. It's just often the way we learned, and as teachers, we sometimes fall back on using these ways when teaching rather than taking a good look at student data, the latest research, and then trying something new.

The truth is, and the research shows, students need multiple and various exposures to a word before they fully understand that word *and* can apply it. They need also to learn words in context, not stand alone lists that come and go each week. Of course the way we learn words in context, or implicitly, is by reading, then reading some more. (This is why every classroom should have a killer classroom library stocked full of high-interest, age appropriate books.)

Selecting Words

Ah, so many words, so little time. When choosing which words deserve special instructional time, we don't have to do it alone. One of the biggest mistakes we teachers make in vocabulary instruction is selecting all the words for the students and not giving them a say in the matter.

My first year teaching, before my tenth graders began reading *Lord of the Flies*, I went through every chapter and made lists of all the vocabulary words I thought they'd have trouble with, so that I could pre-teach them.

When I looked at those long lists, I began to freak out. How will I teach all these words, and still have class time for all the other things we need to do? First off, rather than waste my time compiling lists, I should have let the kids skim the text in chapter one and select their own words.

Then, here's what to do after the students pick their own words:

- Ask each child to create a chart where he/she writes down words of choice, and rates each one as "know it," "sort of know it," or "don't know it at all."
- Then, on the same paper, have them write a definition or "my guess on meaning" for the words they know and kind of know (No dictionaries!)

Before they turn in these pre-reading charts, be sure to emphasize this is not about "being right" but that they are providing you with information to guide next steps in class vocabulary instruction.

Read through them all and use the results as a formative assessment. This data will show you which words they know, those they have some understanding of, and those words that are completely foreign to them.

The kids have selected and rated the words, and now it's your turn.

Ranking Words

When considering which words need the most instructional attention, let's turn to Isabel Beck's practical way of categorizing vocabulary words into three tiers:

Tier One: Basic words that rarely require instructional focus (*door, house, book*).

Tier Two: Words that appear with high frequency, across a variety of domains, and are crucial when using mature, academic language (*coincidence, reluctant, analysis*).

Tier Three: Frequency of these words is quite low and often limited to specific fields of study (*isotope, Reconstruction, Buddhism*).

Beck suggests that students will benefit the most academically by focusing instruction on the tier two words (since these appear with much higher frequency than tier three words, and are used across domains). So, this is when you take a look at the pre-reading vocabulary charts your kids created and choose "kind of" and "don't know at all" words that you deem to be tier two words. Go ahead and select some content-specific words (tier three) but only those directly related to the chapter, article, short story, or whatever you are about to read.

You now have a vocabulary list. It's time to teach.

Teaching Words

If you haven't heard of him, I'd like to introduce Robert Marzano. This guy is pretty amazing, having spent countless hours observing students and teachers. An education researcher *and* teacher, he stresses that in all content areas, direct vocabulary instruction is essential and suggests six steps:

Step one: The teacher explains a new word, going beyond reciting its definition (tap into prior knowledge of students, use imagery).

Step two: Students restate or explain the new word in their own words (verbally and/or in writing).

Step three: Ask students to create a non-linguistic representation of the word (a picture, or symbolic representation).

Step four: Students engage in activities to deepen their knowledge of the new word (compare words, classify terms, write their own analogies and metaphors).

Step five: Students discuss the new word (pair-share, elbow partners).

Step six: Students periodically play games to review new vocabulary (Pyramid, Jeopardy, Telephone).

Marzano's six steps do something revolutionary to vocabulary learning: They make it fun. Students think about, talk about, apply, and play with new words. And Webster doesn't get a word in edgewise.

The Rationale

At this point, you might be thinking that there just isn't enough time for all this pre-reading word analysis, direct instruction of vocabulary, and game playing. (You have content to teach!) So, I'd like end with a few quotes for you to consider:

> *Vocabulary is the best single indicator of intellectual ability and an accurate predictor of success at school.*
> *-- W.B. Elley*

> *Because each new word has to be studied and learned on its own, the larger your vocabulary becomes, the easier it will be to connect a new word with words you already know, and thus remember its meaning. So your learning speed, or pace, should increase as your vocabulary grows.* -- Johnson O'Connor

> *We think with words, therefore to improve thinking, teach vocabulary.* -- A. Draper and G. Moeller

Resources

Books to help you focus and fine-tune your vocabulary instruction:

- Bringing Words to Life **(1)** by Isabel Beck
- Vocabulary Games for the Classroom **(2)** by Lindsey Carlton and Robert J. Marzano
- Words, Words, Words **(3)** by Janet Allen
- Teaching Basic and Advanced Vocabulary: A Framework for Direct Instruction **(4)** by Robert J. Marzano

Web sites that share effective and engaging vocabulary activities:

- ReadWriteThink **(5)**
- Just Read Now! **(6)**

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/vocabulary-instruction-teaching-tips-rebecca-alber

Links

1   http://www.guilford.com/cgi-bin/cartscript.cgi?page=pr/beck8.htm&dir=edu/lit&cart_id=357198.3810

2   www.marzanoresearch.com/products/catalog.aspx?product=59

3   www.stenhouse.com/shop/pc/viewprd.asp?idproduct=85

4   www.marzanoresearch.com/products/catalog.aspx?product=47

5   http://www.readwritethink.org/search/?
resource_type=6&sort_order=relevance&q=vocabulary&srchgo.x=0&srchgo.y=0&old_q=&srchwhere=full-site

6   www.justreadnow.com/strategies/vocabulary.htm

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