

Top Ten Ways to Improve Vocabulary Learning

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A Few Reminders

1. Identify the Power Words you will explicitly tackle. Try to limit the number of words to insure real assimilation. Recall—it takes 30 meaningful encounters with a new word to begin to master it. Try 5 words per week. Team up with your colleagues to teach words in a thematic way. Tandem teaching helps if there is a connecting unit theme in several subjects.
2. Power words are best drawn from the Unit's concepts, big ideas and technical academic terms.
3. As always, start by pre-assessing students' prior knowledge.
4. Use lots of visuals to support retention.

Wisdom from the Research Field: Findings of the National Reading Panel

- Intentional instruction of vocabulary items is required for specific texts.
- Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important.
- Learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning. Vocabulary tasks should be restructured as necessary.
- Vocabulary learning should entail active engagement in learning tasks.
- Computer technology can be used effectively to help teach vocabulary.
- Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning. How vocabulary is assessed and evaluated can have differential effects on instruction.
- Dependence on a single vocabulary instructional method will not result in optimal learning.

Some Tools to Try

1. Carousel: Students travel the room in groups of 3 stopping at each posted chart where they will find a Vocabulary term that is one of the Big Unit Terms. Each group has a different color marker so we know who knows what. There, they are to write down what their small group knows about the term. You can give them more specific prompts as well to help them flush out all they know. One teacher had a chart for each of the 6 Simple Machines. For each machine term, students had to describe it and give an example. This is the equivalent to what do we know now? The charts remained and students were later asked to add new information.

2. Wordles: You can create a wordle using the key words (10) you believe students will encounter during a read, or lesson or unit. The wordle can be created best via (wordle.net). You should add known, related words too. Then, give students the question: What do you think these words have to do with-----? Students can tweet or write a short response. They could choose 3 words and respond. The wordless are a nice visual place holder to honor the words you plan to study. They can be fun too. You could make a wordle for each big word hence having 6 wordles. Then, students meet in wordle groups and become experts of their one word and closely related words. (see teaching channel.org video example, Science Teacher)
3. Adding Visuals to Word Study or Verbal and Visual Word Association (VVWA) Divide page into 4 quadrants. Each quadrant features another way to interpret the word including a Visual box where students can draw out the word's meaning. This should be used with Terms that denote big concepts such as Manifest Destiny or Mitosis.
4. Zoom in-Zoom Out: Take large concept, or persons or events or ideas endemic to your UNIT. Example: Harriet Tubman or The Theory of Evolution and then have students examine that concept from many Lenses. You can ask that they compare it with others, give details, connect it to other events etc. The zoom in & out is only one way to look at its guts (zoom in) and step back and look at it from the broader world. (Zoom out)
5. Semantic Feature Analysis: This is yet another way to help student's master terms in a unit. Words are stacked up in a grid and students have to record the feature that are associated with the word. Semantic feature analysis (Baldwin, Ford, & Readence, 1981; Johnson & Pearson, 1984) helps students discern a term's meaning by comparing its features to those of other terms that fall into the same category. When students have completed a semantic feature matrix, they have a visual reminder of how certain terms are alike or different.

How could it be used in instruction?

This strategy is very effective when examining discriminating features (e.g., when categorizing geometric shapes or numbers). This strategy can be used to engage student's thinking, as a way to collect data while students reason and communicate about word similarities and differences, or as a way to quickly assess students' knowledge. When students add terms to the matrix, they are problem solving to find a term that has certain properties but not others.

How to use it:

1. Select a general category of study.
2. Create a matrix. Along the left side, list key terms in the chosen category. Across the top of the matrix, write features (properties) that these terms might share.
3. Ask the students to use an "X" to indicate when a property applies to the term or to write in specifics about the features.
4. Encourage students to explain the rationale behind their choices.
5. As the unit progresses and understanding of each term or concept deepens, the teacher or students can add terms and features (properties) to the matrix.

Math Sample

ANALYSIS MATRIX

Property	Parallelogram	Rectangle	Rhombus	Square
Diagonals bisect each other				
Diagonals are congruent				
Each diagonal bisects a pair of opposite angles				
Diagonals form two pairs of congruent triangles				
Diagonals form four congruent triangles				
Diagonals are perpendicular to each other				

From Content Area Reading

6. Word Splash: Provide the class with 10-12 key Unit terms, which carry the big concepts and content to be learned. Group into in trios and give each Trio one cluster of related words. Then, in jigsaw-format, small groups teach each other, so they have an introduction to words to be encountered.
7. Word Sorts: Students are asked to list all the words they can think of that relate to as an example , “weather”. Then, they are to organize the words into categories and explain their thinking. This reveals gaps in understanding and will help you identify target words to teach. Word sorts can be done by individual students as well. Ask students to create their own word deck for the master list of Unit words. They start by reviewing with a partner and charting words by words --*they know well, are unsure, don't know at all*. Then, this is a reference point and a checking in place as the study progresses. They move words on the list as they master them all.
8. Structural Indexing: This is a wonderful way to review a recent Unit of study focusing on *Key words* that are the critical concepts and vocabulary terms within your Unit. Students with your help are asked to list the main terms from the Unit of study underway. The 9 most important terms are isolated in one List. (This can also be provided by the Teacher) The students will work in small groups of 3, laying out the 9 words in 3 rows of 3. (3 x 5 cards work or slips cut to size) Then students will create 3 True Statements, which reveal their understandings of the Unit’s Big Ideas. They must create statements using all 3 words in one row. Students should be encouraged to embellish the statements to increase their validity and completeness. The 3 statements should be built from 3 different rows: one diagonal, one vertical and one horizontal. Class members can rank them for accuracy and completeness or use them for the next day’s lesson. They can also be used for reflection, whereby students chose one to defend with examples and details.
9. Keywords in Researching: See “Improving Research Skills With Effective Keywords” at www.teachingchannel.org Here the teacher has students understand the power of choosing words when searching the web. They play a version of Tabu with the smartboard.
10. Kick Me: Finding Word Analogies. This teacher created word analogies using key concepts in her lessons. Then, students had a sheet on incomplete analogies and had to find the person wearing each missing word for each of 10 analogies. When they did, they had to decide if it was the right word and for which analogy. The whole class checked answers, debriefed and processed next steps. Video of Kick Me is at www.teachingchannel.org

