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Podcast Transcript

Hello, my name is Sadie Wilson and today I will be discussing what the research says about vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary instruction has always been a topic I have wanted to delve further into. When the word vocabulary is thrown around, it can mean a variety of things to different teachers. Some teachers may think of a vocabulary list they require their students to memorize, other teachers may think of a word wall in their classroom, and yet others may envision a class novel and stopping along the way to ask the question: Who knows what this word means? As you might imagine, there are lots of ways in which teachers look at vocabulary instruction, but what does the research have to say?

Like with any part of literacy instruction, there are a variety of ways in which a teacher can teach vocabulary. The key is to be open to a variety of ways because it is not going to be a one size fits all with your students. As a teacher, you will need to look at the different ways in which vocabulary can be taught and apply a little bit of direct instruction and a little bit of flooding the classroom with new words.

One way to look at vocabulary instruction is trying to decide which words to teach your students. There are three current approaches to selecting vocabulary words to teach. These approaches include: word list, genre, and tier. (Graves et al., 2013, p.335) In a word list approach, teachers focus on choosing vocabulary words from a list such as Marzano, The Academic Word List, or Biemiller’s Words Worth Teaching. In a genre approach, teachers focus on words from specific genres like informational text. Finally, in a tier approach, teachers focus on using Tier Two words because they “have ‘high utility for mature language users and are found across a variety of domains’” (Graves et al., 2013, p.335).

When teachers look into selecting and teaching words that come from texts, there are four types of words to teach. These four types of words are: essential words, valuable words, accessible words, and imported words (Graves et al., 2013, p. 336). Essential words are words in which it is important for the student to know in order to understand the text. If students are unable to understand the text they are reading, they are going to miss out on being able to comprehend the story in its entirety. Valuable words are words that have “broad, general utility for students’ reading and writing and thus have enduring importance” (Graves et al., 2013, p. 336). Valuable words are all about the words that are going to be of value to the student. Accessible words are “more common or higher frequency words that are not likely to be understood by students who have limited vocabulary knowledge” (Graves et al., 2013, p. 336). Accessible words gives certain students access to the text. Finally, imported words “enhance a reader’s understanding, appreciation, or learning from a text” (Graves et al., 2013, p. 336).

When looking at a text which you will be teaching vocabulary words, you will want to place your vocabulary words into one of the four groups previously discussed. After sorting your words, start with the essential words to give your students the best opportunity to be successful with a text. Then work your way through valuable words followed by accessible words. When teaching a specific text, teachers will want to look at which words will be most beneficial to their students.

Another look at vocabulary instruction focuses on content-specific vocabulary. When looking at content-specific vocabulary it can be beneficial to take students through a learning cycle. One example of a learning cycle for vocabulary “has four phases-engage, explore, develop, and apply” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2006, p. 210). In the engage phase, students’ interests should be piqued to the point they want to learn more. For example: you might ask your students to close their eyes and guess which instrument makes the sound they are about to hear. During this initial phase, students’ background knowledge comes into play. Graphic organizers, maps, and webs can also be brought out during this initial phase. Then, during the explore phase, “students participate in hands-on exploration directly related to the question(s) raised during the engage phase” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2006, p. 211). Students are simply exploring rather than being explicitly taught. During the explore phase, teachers are watching students to see what new vocabulary development is taking place. Students may use an incorrect term in which the teacher can address in the develop phase. In the develop phase, the “teacher and students build upon and systematize the knowledge gained during exploration” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2006, p. 213). The teacher needs to “explicitly address misconceptions” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2006, p. 213). During the develop phase, the teacher can be applying new vocabulary words to the content the students are learning. Finally, in the apply phase “students use their new knowledge in a different situation” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2006, p. 214). By having students apply their new learning, they have to transfer what they know from one context to the next. For example, students that learned about sound may be asked to “invent an instrument that produces sounds that vary in pitch and volume” (Spencer & Guillaume, 2006, p. 217). Students will need to carry over their new vocabulary words in order to be successful during the apply phase. This is simply another way teachers can look at vocabulary instruction.

Looking at vocabulary as a daily or weekly program might be another way in which to incorporate vocabulary into the classroom. Feezell (2012) explains his way of bringing in a daily vocabulary instruction into the classroom. Feezell starts by discussing how important student choice is when selecting words. Students need to have buy in if they are going to be invested in vocabulary lessons. After selecting words for the week, Feezell describes what a week of vocabulary instruction could possibly look like. On Monday, students “learn the words and the definitions” (Feezell, 2012, p.235). Tuesday requires students, along with the teacher, to write sentences for the words. This practice should take place as a class and not individually. As a teacher, you should be referencing back to the definition of the word. Wednesday and Thursday are days in which students have to complete a variety of word play activities for the chosen words. These can vary week to week. Finally, on Friday, the class is assessed on the words through a class activity. This weekly plan from Feezell gives teachers a specific way to teach student selected words in the classroom.

When discussing vocabulary instruction, there always seems to be the question of how can you help students really know and understand the words they are being taught. There are several ways in which teachers can help students’ deep processing of new word meanings. Four strategies teachers might find helpful in working on deep processing with students are: Connect Two, Two-in-One, Character Trait Writing, and Concept Word Précis Writing (Manyak et al., 2014, p. 18). These review activities will help students have a deeper understanding of new vocabulary words they are learning. In Connect Two, students find two words and find a connection between them. In Two-in-One, students write sentences that contain two of the words in one sentence. Character Trait Writing requires students to select a character trait word and write about “how it fits a character in a current or past narrative text” (Manyak et al., 2014, p. 18). Finally, with Concept Word Précis Writing, students are asked to write the meaning of a word using a limited number of words. These four different activities require students to really know what the words are and to have a deeper understanding of what the words mean.

Research also shows that different teaching strategies are beneficial when looking at vocabulary instruction. Some of these different strategies include: providing rich and varied language experiences, individual words, word-learning strategies, and fostering word consciousness. Students will learn from being immersed in a rich and varied language environment. Vocabulary instruction doesn’t have to come from just direct teaching. Teachers should provide students with the opportunity to be surround by a variety of texts. When looking at these different texts, students will gain new vocabulary words they might not of noticed before. “Research indicates that students acquire new word meanings through explicit vocabulary instruction” (Baumann et al., 2007, p.112). Teachers can’t rely on flooding a classroom with vocabulary words to be their only source of vocabulary instruction. Teachers also need to teach individual words. Teachers should be teaching students word-learning strategies such as word-parts, vocabulary rules, and context clues. Finally, teachers should be sharing an excitement of learning new vocabulary words with their students. If students gain an interest in finding new words, they will always be on the lookout for them.

Two final strategies for vocabulary instruction look at the use of a word wall. Now, a word wall can be so much more than just words up on the classroom wall. The first use of a word wall is a picture word wall. This is similar to the traditional word wall in the sense that it contains the vocabulary words of the classroom. However, it also contains a picture the class had associated with the word. “When encountering each new word in the text, pause to share the card and discuss the word’s meaning” (Gallagher & Anderson, 2016, p. 278). This creates a visual for the students to associate with each word. Another form of a word wall is to have a graffiti wall in the classroom. A “Graffiti Wall makes use of a Frayer model variation to represent a word’s meaning” (Gallagher & Anderson, 2016, p. 277). With the use of a graffiti wall, students have collaboration as they help choose the words. They are also finding antonyms, illustrations, definitions, and meanings of each word and placing them on the word’s card as well. Having a picture word wall or a graffiti word wall in the classroom is a great way to incorporate vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

As you can see, vocabulary instruction can take on many forms in the classroom. As I stated earlier, it is important that you focus on using a variety of methods instead of sticking with just one. By sticking with only one method, your students lose out on the chance to gain new vocabulary throughout their time at school.

References

Baumann, J. F., Ware, D., & Edwards, E. C. (2007). “Bumping into spicy, tasty words that catch your tongue”: A formative experiment on vocabulary instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 61*(2), 108-122.

The authors discuss four different teaching strategies for vocabulary instruction including: providing rich and varied language experiences, individual words, word-learning strategies, and fostering word consciousness. Teaching techniques for the previous listed strategies include: Word Finder Think Marks, which are a way for students to record vocabulary words from their novels; using graphic organizers for specific words; and looking for context and word-part clues.

Manyak, P. C., Gunten, H. V., Autenrieth, D., Gillis, C., Mastre-O'farrell, J., Irvine

Mcdermott, E., . . . Blachowicz, C. L. (2014). Four Practical Principles for

Enhancing Vocabulary Instruction.*The Reading Teacher,68*(1), 13-23.

The authors found that there are four principles that enhance vocabulary instruction in the classroom. The first principle is establishing efficient yet rich routines for introducing target words. Introducing target words shouldn’t take a long length of time but instead be quick and to the point. The second principle is to provide review experiences that promote deep processing of target words. The authors came up with four review activities that help students gain a deeper understanding of words which included: Connect Two, Two-in-One, Character Trait Writing, and Concept Word Precis Writing. The third principle is to respond directly to student confusion by using anchor experiences. The fourth principle is to foster universal participation and accountability.

Feezell, G. (2012). Robust Vocabulary Instruction In A Readers' Workshop. *The Reading Teacher,* *66*(3), 233-237.

The author takes the reader through a weekly vocabulary instruction time in his classroom. The author starts by discussing the importance of having students contribute to the words being taught in the vocabulary instruction. This allows them to have ownership in their learning. On Monday, the words and their definitions are introduced to the class. On Tuesday, using a shared writing technique, sentences are written for each word. Wednesday and Thursday focus on activities that reinforce the definitions taught earlier in the week. On Friday, a class activity is used to access student understanding of the words and their definitions.

Gallagher, M. A., & Anderson, B. E. (2016). Get All “Jazzed Up” for Vocabulary Instruction: Strategies That Engage. *The Reading Teacher*.

The authors discuss two strategies to get students engaged in their vocabulary instruction. Both strategies take on a different approach to a word wall. The first strategy is a graffiti wall. Using this strategy, a teacher finds words in a read aloud text and records them down. Then students draw pictures, write antonyms, and find a definition for each word. The second strategy is a picture word wall. In this approach, the teacher introduces a word during a read aloud and then students discuss the definition. Later, students find a picture to represent the word; which is displayed in the classroom. In both strategies, the idea is for students to see the teacher modeling the choosing of words from the text and then students start to find words in the text for the class to use.

Spencer, B. H., & Guillaume, A. M. (2006). Integrating curriculum through the learning cycle: Content-based reading and vocabulary instruction.*The Reading Teacher, 60*(3), 206-219

The authors write about the learning cycle in teaching students content related vocabulary. There are four phases to the learning cycle. Phase one is engage. This is where students are introduced to a word through pictures, discussions, or graphic organizers. The second phase is the explore phase. During this phase, students record facts, ideas, and answers to student questions. During the third phase, which is develop, students go back to their engage work and see if misconceptions can be corrected and if they can add new knowledge. The final phase, apple, is where students use their words in other areas in the classroom such as poems, presentations, or songs.

Graves, M. F., Baumann, J. F., Blachowicz, C. L., Manyak, P., Bates, A., Cieply, C., . . . Gunten, H. V. (2013). Words, Words Everywhere, But Which Ones Do We Teach? *The Reading Teacher,* *67*(5), 333-346.

When teachers sit down to look and plan which vocabulary words they want to teach their students, they can become overwhelmed by the number of words that are available to teach. The authors discuss how to go about selecting which words to teach. There are four different types of unknown words students may encounter including: essential, valuable, accessible, and imported. After identifying which words to teach, there are three ways in teaching those words including: powerful instruction, brief explanations, and infer meanings. Teachers should use a variety of word types and based on the word types decide which strategy would be best to teach the word.