



The Educator's Science of Reading Toolbox

By the National Center on Improving Literacy in Partnership with The Reading League Journal

EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION TO BUILD FAIR ACCESS FOR ALL LEARNERS

The best approach to beginning reading instruction for students with or at risk for literacy-related disabilities incorporates explicit instruction in five areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These are known as the “5 Big Ideas” in beginning reading. While the research is clear on *what* to teach, knowing *how* to teach these pieces can be challenging. To start, there is overwhelming evidence that in order to maximize struggling readers’ meaningful access to the 5 Big Ideas in the reading curriculum, teachers must provide systematic and explicit instruction in each area (Gersten et al., 2009). Instruction that is vague and ambiguous may prove to be confusing to struggling readers. Providing explicit instruction in each of the 5 Big Ideas ensures fair access for the range of learners in our classrooms. Put another way, not providing struggling readers explicit instructional supports to access the curriculum is unjust and unfair (Fien, Chard, & Baker, 2021). This Educator’s Toolbox provides practical ways to incorporate explicit vocabulary instruction within your classroom to ensure your vocabulary lessons are accessible to all learners.

What Is Vocabulary and Why Is It Important?

Vocabulary refers to the words we must know in order to comprehend and communicate effectively. In general, vocabulary can be described as either oral vocabulary or reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize when listening. Reading vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print. The primary way that students develop a robust vocabulary is through wide and independent reading (Stanovich, 1986). However, we must also teach students vocabulary before they learn to read, and we must continue to explicitly teach vocabulary to students who struggle to learn to read in the early grades (Beck & McKeown, 2007).

Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read. Instruction and intervention in language-based skills, including language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension, should start at the very

beginning of preschool and continue throughout the early elementary grades. This instruction is often a part of oral language activities in the early grades because emerging readers have a much more difficult time reading words that are not already part of their oral vocabulary (Fien et al., 2011). Vocabulary is also important for reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. As children learn to read more advanced texts, they must learn the meaning of new words that are not part of their oral vocabulary.

How Do Students Learn Vocabulary?

Vocabulary learning occurs in different ways (Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006). Children learn the meanings of most words incidentally, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. This indirect learning occurs in three ways: by engaging in conversations with other people—especially adults, by listening to others read to them, and by reading extensively on their own.

Although a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly, some vocabulary is also learned through direct, explicit instruction. Explicit vocabulary instruction helps students learn difficult words, such as words that represent complex concepts that are not part of the students' everyday experiences (Beck et al., 2002). Explicit vocabulary instruction relevant to a given text leads to better reading and listening comprehension (Fien et al., 2011; Marulis & Neuman, 2013). Students learn vocabulary directly when they are explicitly taught both individual words and word-learning strategies. A variety of direct and indirect methods of vocabulary instruction should occur in classrooms. This Educator's Toolbox focuses on one type of vocabulary instruction called **specific word instruction**.

Specific Word Instruction

Specific word instruction is the teaching of individual words. It can deepen knowledge of word meanings and help students understand what they are hearing or reading. It also can help them use words accurately in speaking and writing. Specific word instruction should occur before, during, and after reading. Before students read a text, it is helpful to teach them specific words they will encounter (Baker, Fien, & Baker, 2010). Teaching important vocabulary before reading can help students both learn new words and comprehend the text.

During reading, students should be provided with specific word instruction that allows them to actively engage with the words (Baker et al., 2013). The more students use new words in different contexts, the more likely they are to learn and retain the words (Santoro et al., 2016).

Infographic

The infographic attached to the end of this article illustrates how vocabulary can be introduced both before and during reading to help students identify real-life connections between a vocabulary word and how the word is used in a variety of semantic contexts, such as categories of words (e.g., do words, feel words).

Steps of Specific Word Instruction

There are four steps to providing specific word instruction in the classroom.

Step 1: Select the Word

You won't be able to directly teach your students all of the words in a text that they might not already know. You should aim to thoroughly teach perhaps eight to ten new words per week, so you need to choose these carefully.

How should you choose vocabulary words to use for specific word instruction? If you are using a core program, you will first want to look at the vocabulary selections provided in the program and evaluate them for their utility and complexity. You will want to select the words that are Tier II words, or words that are likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in written and oral language (Beck & McKeown, 2004). Ask yourself these questions when choosing vocabulary words:

- Is this word **important** for understanding a concept or the text?
- Is this word **useful** for students to learn? Are students likely to see and use the word often across different contexts?
- Is this word **difficult** for most of your students? Some types of words may be particularly difficult for students to learn, including words with multiple meanings and idiomatic expressions.

Flag the words from your core program's vocabulary list that you will use for specific word instruction. Next, look for additional words in the text you are using. Are there other words that are important, useful, or difficult? Flag any additional words that you will use for specific word instruction.

Step 2: Provide a Student-Friendly Definition

You will want to provide a student-friendly definition of each vocabulary word. For example, when explicitly teaching the meaning of the word gigantic, a student-friendly definition would be, "The word gigantic means very big."

Step 3: Illustrate the Word

It is important to illustrate the word with examples and non-examples to provide multiple contexts for the word. You can illustrate vocabulary words in different ways:

- draw pictures
- act out the word
- write novel sentences using the word
- share sentences from read-aloud texts containing the vocabulary word
- share sentences from student texts containing the vocabulary word

Visual presentations of words are very powerful for students. For example, posting each vocabulary word in a classroom with a student-friendly definition and an anchor picture (a picture of the word that serves as a representation of that word) is an excellent way to help students reference previously learned words. Picture sorting can also be used to support vocabulary development (Diamond, L. & Gutlohn, 2006). For example, students can sort vocabulary picture cards to gain a sense of how words and concepts either relate or don't relate to one another.

Step 4: Check Student Understanding

Finally, check students' understanding of each vocabulary word taught. Ask the students questions that will prompt answers that demonstrate complete understanding of the use of the vocabulary word or its meaning. Ask students to generate examples or nonexamples to show that they understand the correct use of the vocabulary word. In addition, ask students to generate a sentence that includes the vocabulary word (Coyne et al., 2010).

Sample Vocabulary Routine

The following is an example of an instructional routine for specific word instruction (Center on Teaching and Learning, University of Oregon, 2013; Fien et al., 2015). In this sample, **bold text** provides teachers with the specific language of the instructional routine, including introducing the task (“**You’re going to learn the meaning of new vocabulary words...**”), reading and defining the word for the students (“**This word is...**”), distributing practice to students (“**What word?**”), and conducting checks for understanding. The routine also provides specific information for the teacher about how to provide examples and correct student errors. As you gauge students’ understanding, provide consistent and specific feedback to support their learning.

Vocabulary: Specific Word Routine

Materials: Vocabulary words with student-friendly definition to display for all students to see (e.g., written on cards, chart paper, sentence strips, displayed on white board and so forth).

Explain: You’re going to learn the meaning of new vocabulary words, and you will practice using those words in sentences.

Practice for students only: Use the routine for each vocabulary word. *Have students sitting by their talk partners. Your turn.

*Routine for each vocabulary word

1. **This word is [vocabulary word].** Introduce the new vocabulary word.
2. **What word?** Have the students repeat the vocabulary word.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2 for difficult-to-pronounce words.
4. **[Vocabulary word] means [student-friendly definition].** Tell students the student-friendly definition for the word. Have students repeat the student-friendly definition with you (as you point to the words).
5. **What word?** Have the student repeat the vocabulary word again.
6. **Provide Examples** of the vocabulary word that will help your students understand the word. Here are some options:
 - a. Pictures
 - b. Acting out the word
 - c. Novel sentences using the word
 - d. Sentences from read-aloud texts containing the vocabulary word
 - e. Sentences from student texts that contain the vocabulary word
7. **Check for understanding** by asking students questions where they will have to use the vocabulary word correctly in their answers. Choose one to two of these options for the vocabulary word. Provide a sentence frame for student responses. For example:
 - a. Ask the students questions that will prompt a complete understanding of the use of the vocabulary word or its meaning.
 - b. Ask students to generate examples or nonexamples to show that they understand the correct use of the vocabulary word.
8. Ask students to say a sentence that uses the vocabulary word. Use steps 1 through 7 for each vocabulary word.



Correcting Student Errors

- **My turn.** [Vocabulary word] means [student-friendly definition].
- Provide necessary scaffolds to guide the student to develop a sentence that is the correct use of the vocabulary word.
- If the student is still struggling or nonresponsive, give them a sentence example and have them repeat it. Use a lot of positive reinforcement to encourage the student to take risks when trying to use vocabulary.
- **Your turn. Now you tell me the sentence using the word.** Make sure the student uses the sentence frame and answers in a complete sentence.

Adapted From Enhanced Core Reading Instruction © 2013 by The Center on Teaching and Learning

Summary

Vocabulary plays a critical piece in both learning to read and comprehending what we read. Readers must know what most of the words mean in a text before they can understand what they are reading. Vocabulary can be developed incidentally when students engage daily in oral language, listen to others read to them, and read extensively on their own. However, some vocabulary words need to be taught directly. Specific word instruction is one way to explicitly teach individual vocabulary words that are important, useful, and difficult for students to learn. It also provides fair access to the reading curriculum for our most vulnerable children. For more information about evidence-based reading instruction and resources you can use in your classroom, please visit the National Center on Improving Literacy at <https://improvingliteracy.org>.

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Example Vocabulary Lesson



Before Teacher

The title of this book is *The Grouchy Ladybug*. **Grouchy** means grumpy or angry. Someone who is grouchy is not happy.

Prompts

- What does grouchy mean?
- Show me with your face what grouchy looks like.
- Look at the book cover again. How would you describe the ladybug on the cover?



During Teacher

When discussing story elements, like the main character, use the target word to describe the ladybug.

Example

"The grouchy ladybug is grouchy, mean, and not polite."



Prompts like the following can be used to promote additional discussion and interaction.

Teacher Prompt

"Take a moment and share with your partner about a time when you felt grouchy. Now, who can tell me a time when you felt grouchy?"

"When you're grouchy, you're in a grumpy, bad mood. Tell me how that feels."

"If someone is grouchy, how are they acting? What do they do? What do their face and body look like?"

Encourage students to use the target word and to use full sentences in their responses.

Student Response



"I felt grouchy this morning when my sister woke me up."



"When I'm being grouchy, it feels like I'm not happy about anything."



"Grouchy people never smile, and they just sit there all slouchy."