STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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Many pre-service, novice and veteran teachers implement ineffective vocabulary instruction strategies in an attempt to save time and move quickly to more meaningful content instruction. This article describes five student-centered strategies for improving vocabulary instruction across all levels and content areas. Research and theory supporting each of the strategies is detailed and more commonly used, yet less effective, strategies are identified in an attempt to help K-12 teachers, as well as teachers in higher education classrooms to view vocabulary instruction as a means to assist students in understanding the major concepts within a discipline. The authors conclude by recommending variety and differentiation in vocabulary instruction to enhance student learning.

The following article is born of necessity. After observing student teachers, novice teachers and veterans, we have noticed that many teachers, no matter the content area, fail to stimulate and engage students when they address vocabulary concepts. Unfortunately, too many teachers resort to copying definitions as the strategy of choice in vocabulary instruction. When asked why they use this method, teachers respond that it saves time and enables them to progress to the actual content in a more efficient manner. A student-centered focus on learning would counter this response suggesting that time is actually wasted when students aren't actively and mentally engaged in language study. This article will suggest five vocabulary teaching strategies that stimulate the adolescent or child mind in a time efficient manner.

The American Federation of Teachers notes that research on vocabulary instruction consistently supports practices that include "a variety of complementary methods designed to explore the relationships among words and the relationships among word structure, origin, and meaning. (Moats, 1999, p. 8)." It can be said that *all* teachers are reading teachers and therefore it is necessary that all teachers develop the knowledge and skills in language arts

instruction to promote student learning in the content areas. The National Board Professional Teaching Standards in language arts require accomplished teachers to *strengthen student sensitivity to and proficiency in the appropriate uses of language* (NBPTS, 2006). The majority of teachers, especially at the secondary level, have not taken coursework in their teacher preparation programs that provides the background knowledge to effectively address reading and language arts in their classes (Moates, 1999).

Tried but Not True

The following strategies are presented in an effort to illustrate to teachers the less effective methods that are often used in hopes that they might recognize themselves and establish an awareness of a need to change. In essence these strategies are "well tried" but least successful or true.

1. Definition Copying

The strategy of copying definitions takes many forms. Some teachers will list the vocabulary words on the board and have students look up the definitions in the dictionary or textbook glossary. Others will list the vocabulary and definitions on the board and require students to copy these postings. Hybrid versions of this strategy include definition copying as homework or searching on-line for definitions using a website like dictionary.com or www.m-w.com.

2. Context Clues

The practice of asking students to use context clues to help them understand word meaning is a step above the definition

search strategy in that it requires engagement and questioning on the part of the student. Teachers who use this method identify a reading passage, typically part of the assigned textbook, which includes challenging vocabulary words imbedded within the reading. Students essentially guess at the meaning based on the parts of the text that they do comprehend.

Both of these widely accepted methods for helping students learn new words fail to develop relational knowledge that is necessary for true understanding of the concepts represented by the vocabulary words (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996). Each version utilizes the lowest levels of cognitive processing from the perspective of Benjamin Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Thinking and are therefore, highly unlikely to lead to true understanding, learning, or transfer to new situations.

True but Less Tried

The following "true but less tried" strategies are evidence of research-based, best practices in vocabulary instruction that go underutilized. Irvin (1990) suggests that vocabulary instruction should involve students in deep processing of words.

The following vocabulary instruction strategies require more active engagement on the part of students and higher level cognitive processing in the sense of Bloom's Taxonomy.

1. Selecting Words

Deciding which words to include as part of vocabulary instruction does not typically demand a great deal of teacher planning. Some districts identify the

vocabulary terms for specific units of study, and textbooks often list vocabulary words for a chapter or passage. More planned and thoughtful study should be taken when selecting the words students will learn (Moates, 1999). This requires that teachers themselves are sensitive to vocabulary. In being so, they can model and promote the sensitivity to words that they expect their students to have. The words must build upon prior knowledge and connect to current student understanding. Words should be selected based on their relationship to other words the students will be learning or already know. This requires the teacher to have a thorough understanding of the students with whom he or she is working. Students also benefit from having a purpose for learning, and selecting words that are central to understanding a text or reading passage helps to highlight this purpose. One strategy to connect students more closely with their vocabulary development is to have *them* identify the words they will study based on the difficulty of words they encounter in their reading.

One way to think about the selected words is to sort them by dividing them into three categories.

Category 1
- words that students have probably heard and probably know the meaning of

Category 2
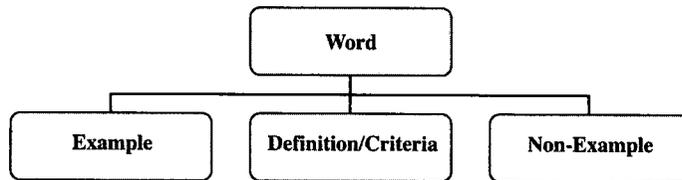- words that students have probably heard but may not know the meaning of

Category 3
- words that students have probably not heard and most likely do not know the meaning of

Since many lessons or topics of study contain many vocabulary words, doing this will help teachers prioritize words in terms of importance. This will assist them in selecting the words that may need to be taught explicitly and directly allowing students to explore the remaining words. Providing opportunities for students to explore words engages the 'deep learning' necessary for them to become more word conscious and more likely to retain the words in their working vocabularies (lexicon).

2. Graphic Organizers

A graphic organizer is a two-dimensional, visual representation that shows relationships among concepts (Rice, 1994). A typical graphic organizer or word map places the vocabulary word at the center and includes additional links or cells connected to the central word or concept. The research on the use of graphic organizers in vocabulary instruction has yielded overwhelmingly strong results. Graphic organizers facilitate higher level thinking (Clarke, 1991), they serve as retrieval cues to promote learning (Dunston, 1992), and they are especially effective in teaching technical vocabulary (Readence, Bean & Baldwin, 1989). Additional research has revealed that they may be more useful in post-reading situations and when the organizers are actually constructed by the students rather than the teacher (Moore and Readence, 1984).

Sample Graphic Organizer

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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │      Word       │
                    └─────────────────┘
        ┌───────────────────┼───────────────────┐
┌───────────────┐  ┌───────────────────┐  ┌───────────────┐
│    Example    │  │ Definition/Criteria │  │  Non-Example  │
└───────────────┘  └───────────────────┘  └───────────────┘
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There are many websites dedicated to graphic organizers for vocabulary study that teachers can access for easy downloading:

www.enchantedlearning.com/graphicorganizers/vocab

www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/GO/vocab_dev.htm

teacher.scholastic.com/reading/bestpractices/vocabulary/pdf/sr_allgo.pdf

Some students may benefit by sketching a picture of the word in one of the graphic cells. Another link may ask the student to use the word in a sentence. This encourages ownership of the word based on experiences and deeper understanding. Other cells that may be used are "definition: in your own words", "I can remember this word by". By using "word to self", "word to word" and "word to world", connections students can become more aware, or metacognitive, about language and the importance of vocabulary.

3. Logic and Prediction

Asking students to predict the meaning of words in isolation and again in context helps them to use their logical, problem solving skills to examine the roots or origins of words and find connotative and denotative meanings (Moates, 1999). Some words sound like they should mean something other than the definition. For example, one student predicted that the word germinate meant to "dip a piece of food in some sauce, take a bite, and then dip it in again. This act was to germinate the sauce." Using a graphic organizer, students can first make their predictions in isolation. Then they can read the word in context, and then revise their predictions in a "before" and "after" structure. Deep learning can be enhanced when students compare their predictions and discuss the results with peers and the teacher. The act of discussing the relational understandings of words is an important component of each of the vocabulary strategies identified (Naughton, 1993-1994). This allows students to ask questions, clarify thoughts and use vocabulary in conversation; important aspects of vocabulary learning.

4. Synonyms and Antonyms (Weighting Words)

The process of identifying synonyms and/or antonyms also builds a stronger and deeper understanding of the concepts

behind vocabulary words (Moates, 1999). Asking students to identify words that have similar or opposite meanings and place all of the words on a continuum from "weakest" to "strongest" helps students understand the subtle nuances in word choice and may even assist them in building their writing skills. How many times has a teacher said "you need a stronger word here" when helping a student edit a writing piece? Word Walls often list words by categories in a vertical format. They can also be horizontal by creating a continuum line from weakest to strongest. Students can discuss where on the line the word should be placed in relation to others. Words can be selected by the teachers or the students from vocabulary lists. They can also be incidental, rising from writing or conversation. For example, a student used the word *prattle* in her writing. While sharing her writing, the teacher took time to ask the class if they knew what it meant or what other words could be used in its place. After the words *ramble* and *babble* were generated, the words were written on post-it-notes and the class decided where each should be placed on the continuum in relation to each other. They were also encouraged to add additional words if they came across them in their reading or in other classes. This activity did a number of things. First it recognized and celebrated a student's use of a unique word. In addition, it exposed other students to the word who may not have heard it before and the discussion and the creation of word awareness that reached outside the context of that classroom helped students develop their own "word awareness".

5. Classify Words

Asking students to group or sort words according to teacher or student-directed properties builds additional connections for students (Moates, 1999). It is suggested teachers need to create an awareness for their students and provide them with multiple forms of discourse (Payne, 1996) to allow them to function effectively and communicate in different settings. Many students do not know, nor do they have the vocabulary to move from conversing with friends to conversing with those in authority to conversing in professional settings. Sorting words by those they a) know, b) have heard but don't know, or c) have not heard and do not know is one strategy to create word awareness. To create an awareness of application it would be beneficial to have them classify words by those they would use a) in conversation with friends, b) in conversations with adults or important people, or c) in specialized conversations related to a discipline science, social studies, etc. Actually practicing this is also very helpful. "How would you say this to a friend? How could you say the same thing to a teacher, a minister, or a police officer and what words would/should you change? What words could you choose?" Finally, "How might you engage a professional in this conversation and how might you change the words you used?" Any form of classification and discussion will help students build associative linkages.

Blachowicz and Fisher (2003) suggest 5 Evidenced Based Guidelines for the effective teaching of vocabulary.

Guideline 1:

The effective vocabulary teacher builds a word rich environment in which students are immersed in words for both incidental and intentional learning, and the development of "word awareness". In doing so they provide rich oral language, wide reading models, and word play.

Guideline 2:

The effective vocabulary teacher helps students develop as independent word learners. They provide opportunities for students to practice control of learning, use of context, and dictionary skills.

Guideline 3:

The effective vocabulary teacher uses instructional strategies that not only teach vocabulary but also model good word learning behaviors. Stategies such as graphic organizers, clustering, personalizing learning, and mnemonics promote these behaviors.

Guideline 4:

The effective vocabulary teachers provides explicit instruction for important content and concept vocabulary, drawing on multiple sources of meaning. They include content area vocabulary, definitional information, synonyms and antonyms, semantic maps, feature analysis, contextual information, and usage examples.

Guideline 5:

The effective vocabulary teacher uses assessment that matches the goal of instruction. They consider depth (how much is known about the word) and breadth (how words are connected to other words)

Conclusion

Some final thoughts to keep in mind come from National Center on Education and the Economy (2003). This document provides as list of things to keep in mind while working with vocabulary in the form of a "Decrease" list and an "Increase" list. It is suggested that teachers decrease:
- looking up definitions as a single source of knowledge
- writing sentences for new words before that have studied the word in-depth
- assuming all words need to be defined
- assuming that context clues are a reliable source for increasing comprehension
- assessing on single definitions

It recommends that teachers increase:
- time for reading
- opportunities for students to hear and use words
- use of graphic organizers to illustrate, define, or denote
- opportunities to use words in meaningful ways through listening, speaking, and writing
- opportunities to connect new words to known concepts
- the study of concepts that encompass multiple, related words
- explicit concept construction
- use of strategies that lead to independent word learning

- finding the word or concept that will have the greatest impact on comprehension

- focus upon inference

The strategies listed above are simply a small set of ideas for teachers to improve vocabulary instruction. It is important to keep in mind that using the same strategy repeatedly is not the way to help students develop their word knowledge. The strategy selected depends on the words, the content, and the purpose of knowing, utility and importance of each word. It is important to keep in mind that many students view vocabulary as something done to them, and often it is. They need to develop a sense of "control" and be encouraged to think more broadly and deeply about words. They need to know that these words are not necessarily left in the classroom when they leave. They should begin to see the connections of vocabulary words to themselves and the world around them. They need to see themselves as empowered and as "word collectors".

We hope that the brief articulation of these strategies will make teachers more aware of the importance of vocabulary. We hope they think more deeply about the strategies they use to address vocabulary concepts and we hope that our future observations of pre-service, novice and veteran teachers will reflect these practices.

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