

Title: "The Place of Word Consciousness in a Research-Based Vocabulary Program"

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Subject(s): Vocabulary

Grade Level: Preschool, K, 1–2, 3–6, 6–8

Synopsis: After reviewing what we know about vocabulary instruction from the research, the authors focus on "word consciousness," arguing for its importance in a vocabulary program and giving ideas for activities that can be used in the classroom to promote word consciousness.

"The findings of more than 100 years of vocabulary research include the following:

- Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best indicators of verbal ability (Sternberg, 1987; Terman, 1916).
- Vocabulary difficulty strongly influences the readability of text (Klare, 1984).
- Teaching the vocabulary of a selection can improve students' comprehension of that selection (Beck et al., 1982).
- Growing up in poverty can seriously restrict the vocabulary children learn before beginning school and make attaining an adequate vocabulary a challenging task (Hart & Risley, 1995).
- Disadvantaged students are likely to have substantially smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged classmates (White, Graves, & Slater, 1990).
- Lack of vocabulary can be a crucial factor underlying the school failure of disadvantaged students (Becker, 1977)." (p. 141)

Graves (1984, 1987, 1992, 2000) has developed a vocabulary program that has 4 parts: wide reading, teaching individual words, teaching word learning strategies, and fostering word consciousness. Recent research shows that vocabulary is learned in the process of wide reading (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). When teaching individual words, "Vocabulary instruction is most effective when learners are given both definitional and contextual information, when learners actively process the new word meanings, and when they experience multiple encounters with the words." (p. 143) For teaching word learning strategies, the most useful strategy to teach is context clues. "Two recent reviews of research on teaching context clues (Fukkink & de Glopper, 1998; Kuhn & Stahl, 1998) indicate that the strategy can be taught, and we believe that carefully planned and robust instruction in using context clues should be part of a comprehensive vocabulary program." (p. 144) Other strategies to teach are using word parts and using the dictionary.

The fourth part of a vocabulary program, fostering word consciousness, is the focus on the rest of the article.

Word consciousness: awareness of and interest in words and their meanings (cognitive and affective dimensions).

“Word consciousness exists at many levels of complexity and sophistication, and it can and should be fostered among preschoolers, as well as among students in and beyond high school.” (p. 145)

Here are some ways to foster word consciousness in the classroom:

1. Model, recognize, and encourage adept diction.

“Word-a-day”: Begin with teacher-selected words. Present a word and its meaning, give context, explain why the word was chosen, give examples to relate it to students’ lives. Use pictures, gestures, concrete objects, and drama to explain the word. Allow for student questions and discussion. After awhile, turn over responsibility to students. Each day a student presents a word, defines it, and tells why it was chosen. Words can be related to a school topic or to student interests.

Literature discussion groups: Have students hunt for interesting words used in the story. Discuss why the author chose to use this word.

Sensory webs for new words, brainstorm words related to a key word: these are ways to help students improve their choice of words in their writing.

2. Word Play

Games with homophones and homographs: Fold a paper in 4 parts, write homophone pairs on the left and draw pictures on the right. Create phrases like a “towed toad,” “sail sale,” “Sunday sundae.” Play homophone bingo or homophone concentration. With homographs (words that sound and are spelled alike) play a game like the following, from Lederer’s *Get Thee to a Punnery* (1988). Write the word that means the same as the word or phrase on either end:

summit ___ ___ ___ spinning toy

Have students complete some of these and then create their own.

Talk about idioms (“a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”) and clichés (“out of the frying pan into the fire”): draw or dramatize the literal vs. figurative meaning, play around with the phrases. Play with puns.

Use books that encourage word play, such as:

Graeme Base, *Animalia*

Judith Viorst, *The Alphabet from Z to A*

Fred Gwynne, *The King Who Rained*

Andrew Clements, *Double Trouble in Walla Walla*

Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

Louis Sachar, *Holes*

3. Intensive Instruction

A program developed by Scott et al. (1994) has students read literature that has “rich, precise, interesting, and inventive use of words.” Words and phrases from the literature are posted around the room, and students are encouraged to use the words in their own writing.

A program by Beck and McKeown, and a similar program by Duin, have these steps: (1) A small set of words that are semantically related are taught each week. (2) Students work intensively with the words over a week's time, for a half hour each day. [See Beck, McKeown, & Omanson (1987) in this database for more details.] (3) Students write essays using the words and discuss their word choices.

4. Student Investigations of Word Use

Students can compare the words used in two different newspapers. Middle school students can analyze the vocabulary used in TV cartoons, or high school students can analyze the subject-specific words on television crime or hospital dramas. They can record conversations in the school cafeteria or gym, or record a younger sibling who is just learning to talk. They can collect examples of "hip" words today and ask adults for examples of "hip" words from the past. Do the words name the same concepts, or are some hip words today naming things that weren't of interest or didn't exist in the past.

Quote(s): "Some researchers believe that increasing the amount that students read is the most powerful thing we can do to increase their vocabularies." (p. 142)

"Vocabulary instruction is most effective when learners are given both definitional and contextual information, when learners actively process the new word meanings, and when they experience multiple encounters with the words." (p. 143)

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"Developing students' word consciousness is important because the task of learning words is huge; over the 12 years of elementary and secondary schooling, students must learn tens of thousands of words. . . . Given the size and complexity of this task, developing students' word consciousness so that they have both the will and the skill to improve their vocabularies is essential." (p. 160)

"Children's experiences at home profoundly influence their chances for success at school. Homes and schools are inextricably linked (see, e.g., Epstein, 1992, 1996; Goldenberg, 1993; Hess & Holloway, 1984)." (p. 221)