

Title: “Vocabulary Instruction”

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Subject(s): Vocabulary, ELL/ESL

Grade Level: All

Synopsis: The authors, in looking at research on vocabulary instruction over the past two decades, identify a common base of agreed-on principles for a “general theory” of vocabulary instruction:

- 1) students should be active learners (e.g., using semantic webs and context),
- 2) word learning should be personalized (e.g., using mnemonics, self-selecting which words to study),
- 3) students should be immersed in words, and
- 4) learning should be through repeated exposures. They then look at research examining practice and materials to determine if these principles have had impact on the classroom.

Self-reporting data indicate personal theory, staff-development programs, and contextual factors such as class size all play a part in vocabulary-instruction strategies. However, observational studies suggest that although teachers espouse beliefs that vocabulary instruction should be deep and interactive, teachers’ classroom instruction often appears skill-based, teacher-directed, and definitional. Teachers often depend on commercially prepared instructional materials that in some cases are inadequate. There is evidence that the words taught in commercial programs are words students already know. When words are complex or unknown, the instruction provided may not be sufficiently rich to affect comprehension.

Because of the minimal impact of past research on vocabulary instruction, the authors suggest that future research should focus on task-specific knowledge rather than general theory. They propose that research address two specific tasks:

- 1) adapting instruction for content-vocabulary learning, and
- 2) adapting instruction for students with differing characteristics (e.g., ESL students and poor readers).

In the area of content vocabulary, the difficulty for students is that they need to learn both new words and new concepts, as well as specialized meanings for familiar words. Students need to develop strategies for selecting important words to learn, as they often do not choose the same words to study as their teachers think are important. Words in the content areas need to be learned in depth and remembered, as they often are the building blocks for further learning in that field. In ESL instruction, there is evidence that ESL students need to learn a “core vocabulary” of 2,000 to 3,000 English words, and they need to develop memorization strategies for remembering the translations of these words. For poor readers, some form of explicit instruction in vocabulary is necessary, and computer-aided instruction shows promise with learning-disabled students. The authors hope that future research will be narrowed to address specific tasks in the classroom, as well as broadened to take into account the complexity of classroom conditions.

Quote(s): “We believe that the research suggests four main principles to guide instruction:

1. That students should be active in developing their understanding of words and ways to learn them.
2. That students should personalize word learning.
3. That students should be immersed in words.
4. That students should build on multiple sources of information to learn words through repeated exposures.” (p. 504)

“Involving students in grouping activities, or having them focus on semantic relatedness, encourages them to be active in their own learning. Research from the 1980s (Pittelman, Levin, & Johnson, 1985; Schewel, 1989) is conclusive in the benefit of semantic mapping for vocabulary learning.” (p. 505)

“Mnemonic strategies have proven to be very effective when students are engaged in learning new words for known concepts or when learning definitions. The keyword method has perhaps the strongest research support in this area. This strategy requires students to identify a keyword that is part of the target word and to link that keyword to the definition through the use of a visual image.” (p. 506)

“Several studies have continued the work of Haggard (1982, 1985) in demonstrating the effectiveness of allowing students to select their own words to learn as part of classroom vocabulary instruction.” (p. 507)