APPROACH TO TEACHING AND DEVELOPING VOCABULARY

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Vocabulary was an area which was arguably neglected in foreign language teaching for a number of years, but it now seems very much back on the agenda. Vocabulary knowledge is not something that can ever be fully mastered; it is something that expands and deepens over the course of a lifetime. Instruction in vocabulary involves far more than looking up words in a dictionary and using the words in a sentence. Vocabulary is acquired incidentally through indirect exposure to words and intentionally through explicit instruction in specific words and word-learning strategies.

Key words: vocabulary development, strategy, teaching, word meaning, word formation

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Introduction

Vocabulary Teaching is clearly more than presenting new words. Of course, this may have its place but there are other issues, too. For example, students see a lot of words in the course of a week, some of them are used often, others are not. Should we teach some words and not teach other? Is there any way in which we can encourage students successful to really learn a word? Why are some students successful at vocabulary learning but others are not? If we know the answer to the question, the work of teaching and learning a word would be easy.

Vocabulary is the knowledge of words and word meanings. As Steven Stahl puts it, 'Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world'[506]. According to Michael Graves, there are four components of an effective vocabulary program:

- wide or extensive independent reading to expand word knowledge
- instruction in specific words to enhance comprehension of texts containing those words
- instruction in independent word-learning strategies, and
- word consciousness and word-play activities to motivate and enhance learning[507].

Intentional vocabulary teaching

According to the National Reading Panel, explicit instruction of vocabulary is highly effective[508]. To develop vocabulary intentionally, students should be explicitly taught both specific words and word-learning strategies. To deepen students' knowledge of word meanings, specific word instruction should be robust[509]. Seeing vocabulary in rich contexts provided by authentic texts, rather than in isolated vocabulary drills, produces robust vocabulary learning (National Reading Panel, 2000). Such instruction often does not begin with a definition, for the ability to give a

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506 Stahl, S.A. 2005. Four problems with teaching word meanings (and what to do to make vocabulary an integral part of instruction). In E.H. Hiebert and M.L. Kamil (eds.), Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

507 Graves, M.F. 2000. A vocabulary program to complement and bolster a middle-grade comprehension program. In B.M. Taylor, M.F. Graves, and P. Van Den Broek (eds.), Reading for meaning: Fostering comprehension in the middle grades. Mew York: Teachers College Press.

508 National Reading Panel. 2000. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

509 Beck, I.L., M.G. McKeown, and L. Kucan. 2002. Bringing words to life:Robust vocabulary instruction. New York: Guilford.

definition is often the result of knowing what the word means. Rich and robust vocabulary instruction goes beyond definitional knowledge; it gets students actively engaged in using and thinking about word meanings and in creating relationships among words.

Research shows that there are more words to be learned than can be directly taught in even the most ambitious program of vocabulary instruction. Explicit instruction in word-learning strategies gives students tools for independently determining the meanings of unfamiliar words that have not been explicitly introduced in class. Since students encounter so many unfamiliar words in their reading, any help provided by such strategies can be useful.

Word-learning strategies include dictionary use, morphemic analysis, and contextual analysis. For ELLs whose language shares cognates with English, cognate awareness is also an important strategy. Dictionary use teaches students about multiple word meanings, as well as the importance of choosing the appropriate definition to fit the particular context. Morphemic analysis is the process of deriving a word's meaning by analyzing its meaningful parts, or morphemes. Such word parts include root words, prefixes, and suffixes. Contextual analysis involves inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word by scrutinizing the text surrounding it. Instruction in contextual analysis generally involves teaching students to employ both generic and specific types of context clues.

Approach to Teaching and Developing Vocabulary

The amount of vocabulary that children need to acquire each year is staggering in scope, estimated to be about 3,000 words a year. Therefore, a comprehensive approach consisting of the following components needs to be in place.

- Use "instructional" read-aloud events.
- Provide direct instruction in the meanings of clusters of words and individual words.
- Systematically teach students the meaning of prefixes, suffixes, and root words.
- Link spelling instruction to reading and vocabulary instruction.
- Teach the effective, efficient, realistic use of dictionaries, thesauruses, and other reference works.
- Teach, model, and encourage the application of a word-learning strategy.
- Encourage wide reading.
- Create a keen awareness of and a deep interest in language and words.

Provide Direct Instruction in the Meanings of Words

Which words should be taught? In deciding which words to teach we have found it helpful to think about 'levels' of vocabulary.

Level I Words

These are words that are used over and over in everyday speech. Since they are so frequently used in a variety of contexts, virtually all children learn them. Some examples of these words would be *house*, *girl*, *cat*, *up*, *umbrella*, etc. Level I words are sometimes referred to as 'conversational speech'. Students who are learning English as a second language will sometimes make progress with this level of vocabulary but have difficulty making progress with words at levels beyond this one.

Level II Words

These are words that are likely to be learned only through reading or through instruction. They have been referred to as the vocabulary of educated persons, as 'academic vocabulary,' and as 'instructional vocabulary.' They are words that are necessary for general success in school. Words such as *perspective*, *generate*, *initiate*, *intermediate*, *calculation*, etc. are possible examples.

Level III Words

These are words associated with a particular field of study or profession. These words make up the technical vocabulary or jargon of a field. Examples of Level III words from the field of

reading instruction include the terms *digraph*, *diphthong*, *schwa*, *metacomprehension*, etc. As one might expect, some words such as *calculation* might be classified as either a Level II or Level III word or both.

Level IV Words

These are words that are interesting but so rare and esoteric that they are probably not useful even in most educational environments, and they are not associated with a field of study or profession. Examples are words that were but no longer are used: *majuscule* (a capital letter), *xanthodont* (one who has yellow teeth like a rodent), *noctuary* (an account of what happens in a night). Notice, however, that some Level IV words are useful for teaching morphological clues such as *noct* meaning 'night' and *dont* or *dent* referring to teeth. Level IV words are also helpful for creating an interest in words and language. Just by their definitions, it should be apparent that a major responsibility of teachers is to expand the Level II and Level III words of their students. Teachers of content areas have a special responsibility for teaching Level III words.

Teaching of Word Meaning

Words are labels for concepts and teaching word meaning is essentially teaching concepts for given words. There are several suggestions for teaching concepts in Nation[510]. One of these concerns the presentation of *multiple positive examples* of the concept. Positive examples are instances to which a given word truly applies. Among the positive examples of *vehicle*, for example, are cars, trucks, vans, buses, trains, etc. Giving multiple positive examples is necessary because concept learning requires the abstraction of the important features of the concept and ignoring the unimportant ones, and to do this the learner has to see several examples and needs to identify what is common to them all and what is different. The important (i.e. criterial) features of being a *person*, for example, is to be a human being and usually to be an adult. On the other hand, 'color of skin, color of hair, and age are not criterial features of *person*'[511]. If multiple examples of person (e.g. pictures of individual persons with different skin and hair colour and from different age groups) are provided, learners will be able to work out the criterial features and learn to ignore the noncriterial ones in the concept of *person* they formed[512].

Some concepts have constant reference (i.e. refer to a single entity) like earth, sun, etc. while others do not show much variance among their referents (e.g. water, orange, snow, etc.). All the examples that would be given for these concepts will be inevitably very similar to one another. It should be tested, therefore, if multiple examples are still better than one example for these words simply because they increase the exposure time. It should be useful, though, to give multiple examples in the case of words with abstract or general meanings (e.g. person, adult, vehicle, furniture, building, etc.). Nation's (1990) another recommendation is to use *negative examples* of a concept in addition to the positive examples. Negative examples are instances to which the word does not apply. The negative examples of *person*, for example, will include "things that are not persons"[513]. However, for the negative examples to be meaningful, they need to be sufficiently similar to the positive examples. Negative examples will be useful in showing the boundaries of a concept and thus, helping learners to distinguish the word from other similar concepts. For example, the word *desk* and *table* are semantically related in English. Both concepts involve a flat surface resting horizontally on vertical (usually four) axes. The two words are distinguished in English with respect to the use to which they are put. A table isused for eating from and a desk is used for study. Thus, an office desk or a home desk might be used as negative examples for the word table to help learners limit the meaning of table and to prevent

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510 Nation.I.S.P (1990). Teaching and learning vocabulary, New York Newbury House. Chapter 4.
511 Idem p.53
512 Ibid. p.53-54
513 Ibid. p.54

overgeneralisation to desks (e.g. referring to a home desk as a table). However, some caution is necessary in claming that negative examples are good since negative examples might be confusing when the learner is still wrestling with basic understanding of the core concept and has yet a shaky understanding of it. Thus, negative examples are yet to be shown to be effective.

Teach the Meaning of Prefixes, Suffixes, and Root Words
The majority of English words have been created through the combination of morphemic elements, that is, prefixes and suffixes with base words and word roots. If learners understand how this combinatorial process works, they possess one of the most powerful understandings necessary for vocabulary growth. In recent years research has suggested some promising guidelines for teaching the meanings of prefixes, suffixes, and word roots as well as for the ways in which knowledge of these meaningful word parts may be applied. Word roots such as *dict*, *spect*, and *struct* are meaningful parts of words that remain after all prefixes and suffixes have been removed but that usually do not stand by themselves as words: *prediction*, *inspection*, *contract*. In the primary grades students begin to explore the effects of prefixes such as *un-*, *re-*, and *dis-* on base words. In the intermediate grades students continue to explore prefixes and an increasing number of suffixes and their effects on base words: *govern* (verb) + *-ment* = *government* (noun). Common Greek and Latin roots begin to be explored, along with the effects of prefixes and suffixes that attach to them[514]. These include, for example, *chron* ('time,' as in *chron*ology), *tele* ('distant, far' as in *tele*vision), and *fract* ('break,' as in *fract*ure). A large proportion of the vocabulary of specific content areas is built on Greek and Latin elements. As this morphological knowledge develops, teachers can model how it may be applied to determining the meanings of unfamiliar words encountered in print.

Teach the Application of a Word Learning Strategy
As noted earlier, written texts contain richer vocabulary and, therefore, more opportunities for expansion of vocabulary through reading as compared to the word challenge in oral language. There is research that shows that students can be taught strategic behaviors to improve their ability to learn the meaning of words[515]. While skills such as application of morphological clues, reference works, and spelling clues to word meanings are all useful, they become more powerful and functional when combined with the use of context clues in a deliberate strategy. These could be the steps:
Step 1: Carefully look at the word; decide how to pronounce it.
Carefully processing the letters or chunks of letters of a word and thinking about the sounds for them will leave a memory trace for the word even if it is not a word that the reader knows. At very least, it is likely that if the reader encounters the word again in future readings, there will be at least a modicum of familiarity with it.
Step 2a: Look around the word for context clues, including:
• *Look within the sentence.*
• *Reread previous sentences.*
• *Read ahead for more context clues.*
Step 2b: Look in the word for prefixes and suffixes, base words, and root words that might offer clues.
For a word with a common prefix such as *un-*, morphological clues would likely be used before the use of context clues. The hallmark of a strategic reader is the flexible application of strategies.

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514 Templeton, S. (1989). Tacit and explicit knowledge of derivational morphology: Foundations for a unified approach to spelling and vocabulary development in the intermediate grades and beyond. Reading Psychology, 10, 233–253.
515 Kuhn, M.R., and Stahl, S.A. (1998). Teaching children to learn word meanings from context: A synthesis and some questions. Journal of Literacy Research, 30, 119–138.

Step 3: Make your best guess at the word's meaning.
It is important to stress with students that natural context most often will not lead to a clear understanding of a word's meaning and that some words will not contain recognizable morphological clues. Nevertheless, it seems useful to take the step of making a best guess at the word's meaning since this further mental activity is likely to make the word more familiar the next time it is encountered—even if the student's understanding of the word has to be revised.
Step 4a: If you don't have a good idea as to the word's meaning and if the word seems important, use a dictionary or glossary.
Two touchstones for determining whether or not a word is important could be used. First, if the reader is beginning to have difficulty understanding what he or she is reading, the meaning of the word may contribute to a better understanding of what is being read. It is, therefore, important. Second, if it is a word that the reader has encountered before and still has no good idea as to its meaning, it is probably an important word since it is likely to be encountered again in the future.
 Step 4b: If you think you have figured out the meaning of the word or if the word doesn't seem important, keep reading.
Telling a reader to look up every unknown word in a dictionary it's unrealistic; mature readers don't. Therefore, it is legitimate to move on and keep reading if context and morphological clues have been somewhat helpful or if the word doesn't seem to be important for comprehension of what is being read or for adding to one's functional vocabulary. Teachers need to strategically and flexibly model and teach each of the above steps. Eventually, as students mature in their reading skills, they can and will internalize the steps in this strategy. Application of these steps then becomes much smoother and more automatic, requiring less attention. In fact, good readers usually "blend" these steps.

Conclusions
1. Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly.
2. Encountering vocabulary words often and in various ways can have a significant effect on vocabulary learning.
3. Vocabulary words that students will find useful in many contexts should be selected.
4. Restructuring tasks to be certain students fully understand the task and the components of vocabulary learning can lead to increased vocabulary learning, particularly for low-achieving and at-risk students.
5. Actively engaging students' results in larger vocabulary gains.
6. Emerging support for the use of computer technology to increase vocabulary.
7. Vocabulary words can be learned through incidental and indirect ways. Repetition, richness of context, and student motivation may add to the efficacy of incidental learning.

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