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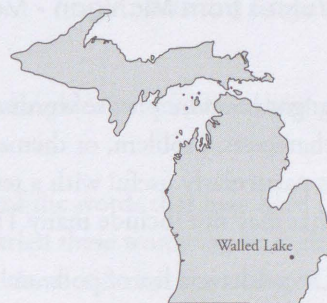
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Making Rich Vocabulary Instruction an Important Part of the Classroom Culture

by Martha Rogers



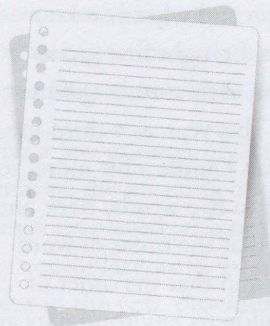
Introduction

The Common Core State Standards place an emphasis on the inclusion of vocabulary instruction as part of each child's literacy education across all grade levels. In this article, I describe how I use recommendations from the text *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) to make the learning of vocabulary an important part of daily literacy instruction.

Why Vocabulary Instruction?

"I'm perplexed, Mrs. Rogers. Could you help me, please?" It is the middle of math workshop on a sunny, bright day at the beginning of October. I smile to myself as I walk over to help my student, thinking about just how much we have learned in our short time together this school year. It is at about this time, about three weeks into our learning together, that I begin to see the impact of vocabulary instruction transforming the language of my students. It is at about this time that I begin to hear students using these words with each other, beyond the moments when we are directly studying vocabulary. It is at about this time that I know we are on our way to creating a classroom culture where students value and anticipate learning new, interesting words.

In *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, the authors explain that words are organized into three tiers, or categories. Tier One words are common, everyday words that are already part of most children's vocabulary. Tier Three words are defined as domain-specific words—words that are best learned when a need arises within the context of a subject area. For example, the word *protractor* would be taught within the context of a geometry lesson in math or when reading an informational text that included this word.



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Tier Two words are ones that can potentially be used frequently across a variety of contexts and ones that you would often find in a literate person's vocabulary. In the Common Core, these words are described as high-utility academic vocabulary: words such as *frantically*, *reluctant*, and *prompt*. Beck and colleagues (2013) explain that these words are characteristic of written text, thus critical for reading comprehension, and are found only infrequently in conversation, meaning that students are less likely to learn these words independently (p. 9). For this reason, the main focus of vocabulary instruction during read alouds of literature should be on teaching these Tier Two words.

Planning for Instruction

For these reasons, I intentionally plan vocabulary instruction for my students. Beck and colleagues et al. (2013) state how research shows that new vocabulary is best taught within context, rather than in isolation. Therefore, the first step in my planning process is selecting a text to read aloud that has interesting Tier Two vocabulary. Once I have identified the text I plan to use for that week, I read it carefully, jotting down each Tier Two word I find. In addition, I think about words I could introduce that may not be in the text itself, but ones that would fit with the story. These

might be more precise words to describe one of the characters, problem, or theme of the text. This strategy is particularly useful with a text for younger students that may not include many Tier Two words.

Once I have a list of potential vocabulary words, I work to narrow these choices down to three to five words I can teach per week. The number of words you choose depends on the grade you teach and what you know about your students. For years, I taught first grade and found three words to be an ideal number of new words to introduce per week. This year, as a third-grade teacher, I think my students can handle a bit more, so, at times, I have introduced up to five words. Beck and her colleagues (2013) explain that the order of word learning is not developmental and that the order of learning words depends on children's environments and experiences. I keep this in mind as I narrow my list to these three to five words, while also remembering the importance of selecting words that are going to build my students' vocabulary and that students will have opportunities to use frequently and find useful. I also work to choose words that I can link to a picture, as I have found that introducing new words with an image is critical in helping students remember the meaning of new words.

To find these pictures, I do an internet search in a place like Google Images. At times, I have to get a bit creative to find an image to match the word; for example, if the new word is *intriguing*, I would look for a picture showing something that my students would find intriguing. I then copy and paste these images into a document that I can print and use for a class picture dictionary my students and I will build together to track our vocabulary learning.

A final step in planning is thinking about child-friendly definitions for each vocabulary word. Although I have my students create their own definitions, I can use this definition to help me explain the words to them when I first introduce them during reading. It is important to think about child-friendly explanations ahead of time as these ideas can also be used to help guide students' thinking as they formulate a definition that helps them best explain the vocabulary in their own words.

Instruction Begins

With my words selected and images in hand, I am now ready to begin instruction. I have found it helpful and manageable to organize my vocabulary instruction with a different task for each day of the week. I plan about 10 to 15 minutes per day for these activities.

Monday: Introducing the New Words

Remembering that it is crucial that Tier Two vocabulary words are taught in context, instruction begins by reading the selected text. As I am reading and come across one of our vocabulary words, I will briefly pause to explain the word, being careful not to interrupt the flow of the story. When I taught first grade and used primarily picture books, I would read the entire book on Monday. As a third-grade teacher, I have found I can adapt this idea to a chapter book by choosing words for the week up to the point we have currently read in the book. This means when reading a chapter book, this first step in the process may take place over several days across a week, leading up to and including Monday. As I read from the chapter book daily, I will pause to briefly discuss selected vocabulary words. In both a picture book and chapter book, I flag the pages with the selected vocabulary words with sticky notes so I can easily go back and remind students of their meaning in context when we get to Tuesday's activities.

Tuesday: Building a Picture Dictionary

Once students have been introduced to these words within context, it is time to help students begin to understand them in a deeper way. On this day, instruction shifts from comprehension of text to vocabulary development. I conduct the following procedure for building our picture dictionary:

1. Reintroduce one vocabulary word from the text by rereading the word in context.
2. Ask the students to think about what they know about the word. I do a quick formative assessment by having the students hold up one finger if the word is not familiar to them, two fingers if they have heard the word before but do not know what it means, and three fingers if they have heard the word before and can tell what it

means. Students holding up three fingers have an opportunity to share what they know about the word. We then go back into the text to see if there are any clues there that might help us figure out what the words means. This leads to some great conversations about strategies for using context clues to infer word meanings.

3. I write the word on a new page in our class dictionary and students turn and talk to brainstorm a student-friendly definition for the word. This class dictionary is created in a half-size tablet of chart paper. After a bit of sharing, we record a student-derived definition in our dictionary, and the corresponding image is glued on as a reference to help students remember what the word means. As I insert the image, I explain how this picture can help us remember the meaning of the word.
4. I draw a line under the definition in the dictionary. Students know that this line is there for them to add tally marks whenever they say the word or write the word during the week. We spend time brainstorming ways we could use that word in our speaking. For example, when we learned the word *famished*, we thought about how we could say that word later that evening by announcing, "I am famished and can't wait for dinner!"

Steps one through four are repeated until all vocabulary words for that week have been added to the class picture dictionary. This chart is left in a prominent spot in our classroom so students remember to make tally marks as they say or write the word.

Wednesday and Thursday: Playing with Words

For the next two days, I begin each vocabulary time by asking a few students to share how they have been using our new words. Students love sharing the ways they spoke these words at home, and we all get a chuckle when hearing about some of the surprised reactions from parents upon hearing these new words. During writers' workshop, at a different point in our day, students may share how they used one of our words in

their writing. Tally marks are added to our chart during both of these share times.

We also discuss variations of the words that may have come up as children have tried these words out in their speaking and add them to the dictionary. For example, if the word we were learning was *trembled*, but a student shared an example of when they were *trembling*, that is something to point out. It is important to discuss and note the variety of ways words can be tweaked depending on how they are being used.

After a few minutes of sharing, I select a game to help reinforce the meaning of our vocabulary words. These games are played with not only this week's words but any vocabulary word we have studied up until that point in the year, providing a great way to review all words learned. The following are a few of my favorites:

- Charades: For this game, you will need all vocabulary words studied so far this year organized so students can select one to act out for the class. For younger students, I recommend making an extra copy of the picture used in the class dictionary, putting that on an index card, and then writing the word underneath it. Then all of these cards could be placed in a basket so one could be chosen at a time. For my third graders, I write the words on a large popsicle stick and have them in a cup. Students come up one at a time and select one word to act out. The students in the audience try to guess the mystery word and once someone correctly guesses, a new actor is chosen and play continues.
- Talk a Mile a Minute: Students begin by sitting back to back with a partner, with partner one and two assigned. Partner One faces the teacher, and Partner Two should be facing away from the teacher. The teacher displays the word and/or the picture that goes with the word so Partner One knows the word being used. Then, partners turn and talk, with Partner One "talking a mile a minute" to describe the chosen vocabulary word without actually saying the word. Partner Two tries to guess the word based off of Partner One's descriptions. Once Partner Two has guessed the

word, the roles reverse. The teacher displays a new word and play continues.

- Example/Non-Example (Beck et al., 2013, p. 184): Display one vocabulary word and then read several statements. If students think it is an example of the word, they say the word. If it is not an example of the word, students do not say anything. For example, if the chosen word was *careless*, you would begin by saying, "If I say something that sounds *careless*, say 'careless.' If not, don't say anything." Students should be asked why they responded as they did. The teacher begins by saying, "The boy forgot to do half of his math test." Students would respond with "careless" and discuss why. More examples and non-examples can be shared as desired. This gives students practice pronouncing the word correctly while also building meaning.

Friday: Creating A Student Reference

On this final day, students add this week's words to a resource they can use independently in other areas of our day. This may be in the form of a writers' notebook, vocabulary notebook, or readers' notebook. My students have a vocabulary section in their readers' notebooks where they record the words from the week on Friday. This page is organized so students have a space to record the word, write a student-friendly definition, give a synonym and antonym for the word, and make a sketch to define the word. These pages now are at

their fingertips for reference during writers' workshop, or any other time of our day where they may need to access one of our words. We also have a "Wondrous Word Wall" where we post previously studied words so students can reference them at a glance.

Conclusion

I have found that by taking the time to include these activities into my daily routine, students' vocabularies increase by leaps and bounds. They begin to develop a curiosity for words that spills over into other areas of our learning, well beyond the 10 to 15 minutes per day devoted to vocabulary instruction. They begin to become aware of ways to use these words appropriately in their speaking and writing. They begin to search for new words in their daily lives to build upon ones we have studied together. All of these pieces together help my students and me create a classroom culture where rich vocabulary thrives.

Reference

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction* (2nd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.

Author Biography

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